



Origin and custom of the Röllelibutzen

Are these carnival antics a centuries-old tradition or the result of a revival? “Fasnacht, Fastnacht, Fasching, Karneval” is also known as the fifth season. There are various sources that can be cited for explanations of carnival such as celebrations of the Romans, fertility rites of our ancestors or traditions from the Middle Ages. Sometimes it is believed that this “mad” behavior at carnival can be traced back to the Catholic Church and how they attempted to educate the people during the Middle Ages. What is actually meant to be shown during carnival is our world as it is not supposed to be: namely the sinful Civitas Diaboli (the “devil’s state”) after the two state model by Augustinus, one of the fathers of the church. Until Ash Wednesday the people are allowed to look at the sinful life that they should not be leading. Once a year they re-enact this other world wearing masks. So, is carnival actually just a big - “thou shalt not live like this”- show?

Devils and demons may have developed as early carnival figures from this way of thinking. Another central figure of the carnival at that time was the jester, who embodied fugacity, remoteness from God and death. Even though researchers believed up until the 1980’s that carnival had a non-Christian origin, they now agree that the existence of the church was an essential requirement for the development of carnival. It is also certain the authorities and the church were often criticized at carnival, which often led to carnival bans.

Thus a change of roles, the “rites of status-reversal”, was prevalent at all times and in all societies. In those days, every year the discrepancies between upper class and lower class, rich and poor, men and women were turned upside down for a certain period of time. Men dressed up as women, beggars as rich merchants, children as kings. Afterwards everyone returned to their assigned role. Later on, those rites of reversal, disguises and ways of entertainment before the strict fasting period – which were probably already in existence – were seen as a fixed component and squeezed into “three days of madness” before Ash Wednesday. Thus, carnival was fitted into the calculations of the ecclesiastical year.

Like the Rhine carnival, the Swabian-Alemanic carnival has its origin in festivals whose purpose was to use up all perishable food before lent. Such events have been verified for entire Central Europe as early as the 13th century. However, they cannot be compared to today’s carnival and differed immensely from region to region.

In addition, to the excessive food consumption, customs such as dances, parades or



carnival plays started to become a common practice from the 14th century onwards. Again, food played a central role, for example in the “Schembartläufen”, the carnival parades of the Nürnberger guilds, which gained popularity in the late 15th century and the early 16th century. In other cities, butchers’ dances have been documented in which dancing butchers held on to sausage rings for the round dance.

Until then, the face of carnival was characterized by relatively simple costumes. With the rise of the Baroque era, carnival figures experienced a considerable revaluation and refinement in the 17th century. This is especially true for the masks which were now carved out of wood and not made out of clay or paper as before. In addition, there was a significant Italian influence, based on the Commedia dell’arte.

With a dispute between the two religious denominations (Catholics and Protestants) about carnival, we have encountered the first written records of the carnival in Altstätten. We find this reference in a volume of “Manuscripts of the reformed chapter of the Rhine Valley”. On April 9, 1617, the Protestant church community asked its Catholic fellow citizens, “...may the unnecessary, brazen, pagan character of carnival, namely the ‘Mummerei’ [mummery] and ‘Butzenwerk’ [the actions and behavior of the ‘Butzen’], which give rise to all sorts of evil, as well as the lighting of torches and bonfires, the breaking of windows and similar things, which are often the cause of discord and blasphemy, be forbidden by the authorities...”. On April 19, 1617, they received the answer, which states: “...the mayor and council give no one the permission to dress up as a ‘Butz’.”

After the first mention of “Mummerei and Butzenwerk”, there was a long period without any mention of these words. Only in the middle of the 19th century (in the year 1857 in the “Allgemeiner Anzeiger”), another ban, issued by the town council, was published. Further bans which, as time went by, became only warnings and restrictions, were issued for certain alleys and town squares. Among the restrictions was the “bettelhafte Maskengehen” [begging by masked children], probably Heischebrauch, and walking around disguised was limited to the last 14 days of carnival. “Butzengehen” [walking around disguised as a “Butz”] must have had much more violent manifestations, for in the above mentioned bans, there is talk of indecent mask wearing, splashing people and buildings, as well as using mallets with bladders (probably “Blaternbutzen”). Based on the recurring bans, the last one of which was issued in 1911, the conclusion can be drawn that such an old and deeply rooted custom cannot be banned easily.

As of 1864, attempts were made to “cultivate” the Altstätten carnival, by having a “refined show carnival” in contrast to the “people’s carnival” that was portrayed by the Röllelibutzen at the time. Parades with more than 1000 participants have been documented for that period of time until the beginning of the new century. The “Battle of the Stoss Performances” may also have contributed to the high number of participants.





Consequently, the Röllelibutzen may have gone through a short time of “transformation” and participated – at least to a certain extent – in such parades.

In 1919, another council ban was announced. Despite this ban, another Röllelibutzen parade took place, especially since the Röllelibutzen society had just recently been founded. In this newly founded society, order and discipline were held very high. Even then, the Röllelibutzen society's declared goal was to entertain the population with carnival parades and performances. The most striking item of the Röllelibutzen costume is the hat. It is constructed like a helmet and richly decorated with glass balls, colorful ribbons, flowers and feathers. Over the course of time, the hat has undergone the biggest transformation. If we compare the hats from 1900 with the ones of the present time, we can see that they used to be much smaller and decorated with much larger flowers and balls (partly even with Christmas tree baubles). Originally it was probably just a simple felt hat that was decorated especially for carnival with colorful ribbons, baubles, flowers, etc. A certain competition concerning the “prettiest” hat probably led to the way the hat looks today. Moreover, a standardization took place, once the hats were no longer made by each individual, but its manufacture was taken over by only 2-3 women.

The costume of the Röllelibutzen consists of a dark jacket, white trousers, a red or dark-colored vest, black boots and the breast sashes in the colors of the Altstätten and St. Gallen coat of arms. Under the jacket, the Röllelibutz wears a wide belt with small bells on one side (“Geröll”) and a colorful tassel on the other side.

To complete this costume there is a skin-colored wire mask and a water gun. The Röllelibutzen use the water gun to chase and hunt girls and acquaintances during the parade or after the polonaise. Shooting a water gun may even be the original element of the Altstätten carnival.

The custom of the Röllelibutzen portrays not so much the dreadful, demonic elements, but rather themes of gift giving and fertility, promising a bright future. The flesh-colored mask, which embodies youth, and the water-filled gun, a symbol of live-giving water, – an old cleaning and fertility spell – are to be interpreted thus.

The tradition of the Butzen also includes symbols of legal customs. The feathers of the hat remind us of the medieval jurisdiction. In those days, the condemned was tied to a pole of shame before serving his sentence, and the passers-by often spat in his face or verbally harassed him. In case of an appeal, the condemned was given a sprig of pinewood as a symbol of pardon or lessening the sentence.



The elaborate flower decorations on the hat remind us of the so-called spring festivals. It can be seen as a symbol of the reawakening of nature after a hard winter. The ribbons and the ears of grain on the hat symbolize the harvest festivals on the Kornberg [literal translation: grain mountain]. This mountain got its name because, due to the infertility of the Rhine plateau, the grain had to be planted on the mountain. The name Kornberg refers also to the duty to give their tithes to the monastery in St. Gallen, historically named in the tithe book volume of the year 1200-1300.

Ears of grain have always been a symbol of blessing and moreover a symbol of fruitful labor. The pearls or glass balls symbolize the solstice on March 21./22. and the transition from winter to spring. The white trousers, black boots and dark vest point to the fact that the Röllelibutzen appeared as a guild. The belt with the bells attached that make a sound while jumping up and down are seen as a symbol to expel the evil. Our ancestors believed that with a lot of noise you could keep the evil spirits away from house and barn.

Carnival parades are concluded with a polonaise (actually a celebrative Polish dance, performed at a solemn walk) on the "Breite". The polonaise consists of four different round dances, each of which forms another "picture". It was probably only at the beginning of the 20th century that the polonaise was included into the repertoire of the Röllelibutzen (with the advent of the cultivated carnival).

In conclusion, here are some remarks concerning the name of the "Röllelibutzen". They are referred to as Röllelibutz because the participants wear a "Rölleliband" [a belt with Rölleli, or small bells] around their loins. This Rölleliband used to be a "Pferdegeröll" [a belt with bells worn around a horse's neck] with many gently ringing bells, (jingle bells) which are also used in sleigh rides, etc.

A "Butz" – sometimes also incorrectly written as "Putz" – is a person that is masked or has covered up the face in some manner. In a German dictionary of 1860 a "Butz" (Schreckensgespenst, verlarvtes Wesen) is described as a "terrifying ghost, mummified creature" and the "Butzenmann" (Scheusal und Kinderschreck) as a scary monster who frightens young and old alike".