

Books Received

***Documentary Sources on the Maltese Eighteenth Century Carnival:
Il-Ballo del Battito or Parata***

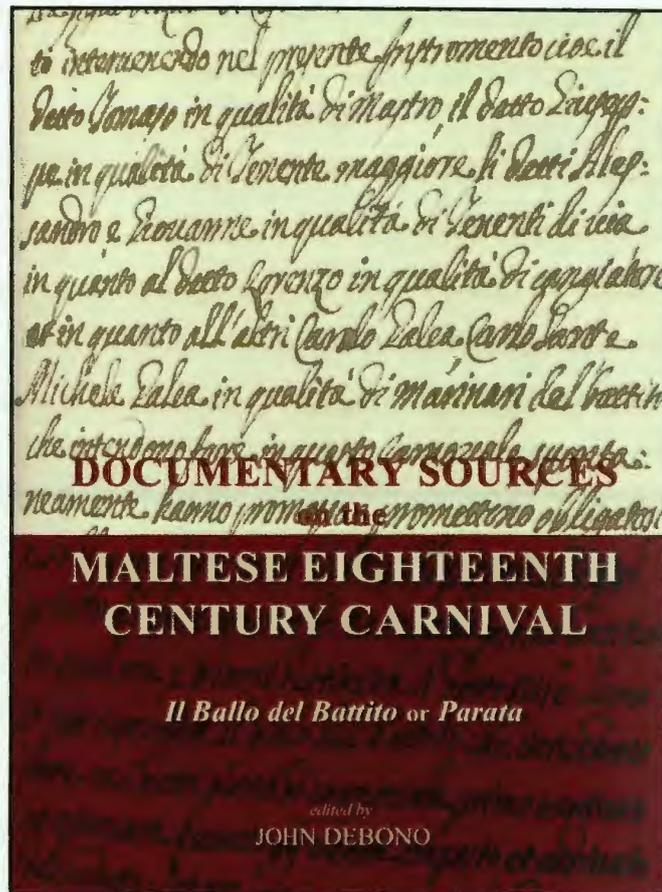
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Carnival festivities have been celebrated at Malta at least since the late Middle Ages and compare reasonably well with European traditions. Mock sword dancing was associated with European popular festivals since medieval times but declined in popularity during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not least owing to the upheaval resulting from the Protestant Reformation, though in fervently Catholic Spain and Portugal this type of popular entertainment continued to be performed. The approximate date/s of the introduction of mock sword dancing in Malta is unknown though Giacomo Bosio, the historian of the Order of St John, vaguely asserts that a sword dance was included in the Knights' dance repertoire.

In late sixteenth century Neapolitan carnival festivities, 'armed' combatants challenged one another to a duel in what was known as the *Ballo di Sfessania* which had originated at Malta. Whether similar dancing was also present at Malta in the seventeenth



century is unknown but troupe sword dancing during the eighteenth century was certainly very present as is evinced from a sizeable number of documents, a total of 106, that Dr John Debono has culled from the notarial archives. These dances are the forerunners of the modern *parata* which pits Knights against Turks in a mock fight but which was introduced during the British domination. Such mock fighting during the eighteenth century did not allude to Knights and Turks and the dancers had to dress in similar attire.

As just stated, unlike the modern *parata*, these sword dances did not commemorate the great siege of 1565. Similar to the *parata*, there was the inclusion of a girl, the bride, who actually used to be a boy in female attire who was lifted on the entwined swords of the troupe members before the end of the dance. References to the *maestro*, the head of the dancing troupe, together with the playing of a violin and a guitar abound in the documents. It is quite clear that these dances had become well-established as a type of street entertainment by the

first years of the eighteenth century. Their presentation was intended for prominent places in Valletta, the Three cities of the Cottonera area and the villages, presumably the larger ones and the home village of the troupe. To quote but one example, in 1764 a troupe was formed '*per fare il ballo del battito di che si darà la licenza per fare tal ballo tanto per i Casali, come per queste Quattro Città Valetta, Vittoriosa, Senglea, e Burmola sin'all'ultimo giorno del prossimo Carnovale ...*' (Document 66).

Although it seems that a sizeable number of participants hailed from Valletta, their number included men from all over the island as is evident from this alphabetical list that shows their provenance and which is culled from the documentation presented in this publication: Attard; Birkirkara; Cospicua (*Burmola*); Dingli; Floriana; Gharghur; Ghaxaq; Luqa; Mqabba; Naxxar; Qormi (*Città Pinto*); Qrendi; Rabat (or *Borgo di Notabile*); Senglea; Siggiewi; Vittoriosa; Żabbar; Żebbuġ (*Città Rohan*); Żejtun; Żurrieq. Worthy of mention is the formation of a dancing troupe organised by a large group of soldiers, sailors and drummers serving on board the *San Giovanni*, one of the Order's ships-of-the-line, in January 1765. The troupe's aim was to participate '*in tutte le funzioni private, e pubbliche, che si faranno nell'imminente Carnovale nè giochi di Spada...*' (Document 69). The author also includes two similar documents dated December 1808 and December 1809 which indicate that this type of merry-making was continued during the British domination, at least during the first decade/s.

The number of dancers taking part, all males (females were excluded) over the age of eighteen years, was usually between twelve and sixteen, including the *maestro*, or leader of the troupe. During the second half of December or in early January, the members bound themselves by means of a notarial deed to rehearse and take part during the next Carnival festivities, usually held in February or early March, on the last days before the onset of Lent. The dancers would be accompanied by at least one musical instrument and a violinist was normally engaged for the rehearsals. He could then be joined by other musicians for the actual performances. Unfortunately, the type of

minuet played is unknown.

The dancers had to provide for their own attire, accoutrements and any props that were needed. Some documents provide specifications such as the following example: the dancers (hailing from Ghaxaq) for a 1787 presentation had to perform mock combats with a shield and a sword measuring 7 *punti* and were bound to personally provide long and ordinary short swords. The *maestro* was to be provided with a pair of shoes, and occasionally two pairs. The members were contractually bound to attend rehearsals and take part in the Carnival festivities, failing which they would be fined with the money normally being directed towards the local church funds, usually those allocated for the Souls of Purgatory. Other details specified in the contract included the place and delivery of instruction, information regarding the musicians and their duties and the division of the money collected from the people who watched their performances on the Carnival days.

The author has written an extensive 33-page very well-written introduction which is indispensable reading to fully appreciate the information contained in the documentation. On the other hand, the documents (written in Italian) are all preceded by a full explanation in English and include all the relevant information regarding the dates, the notaries and the volume numbers and page/s containing the documents. I feel that Dr Debono has produced another noteworthy and valuable publication which goes a long way to help the reader comprehend more fully the social history of our island.

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