

Divertimento insieme, e sollievo del popolo:
The Coccagna as a manifestation of Benevolent Despotism in Ancien Régime Malta

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The gradual increase in the variety and elaboration of public entertainment in Malta reached its climax – as was the case with most of early-modern Europe – during the course of the eighteenth century.¹ In an age of mass illiteracy, entertainment, like the visual arts, constituted a highly effective vehicle for the outward demonstration of wealth and power by those who held either one or the other, or as was more common, a combination of both.² Among the new occasions for public spectacles which evolved on the island during the period one finds the *calendimaggio* and *compleannos del magistero* festivities, both of which were state-created and sponsored affairs, aimed directly towards the glorification of the grand master cum *sultan*. The two festivities became an annual and increasingly sophisticated public relations exercise between the sovereign and his subjects of diverse social backgrounds. The social elite, made up of the Order's members and the Maltese upper classes were wooed by being admitted to the *baciamano* ceremony as well as by theatrical representations, outdoor serenades and banquets. The *basso popolo*, the *plebbe* and the *maltesi casalotti* were, in turn, provided with the *coccagna* spectacle which would moreover result in the acquisition of exquisite and mostly undreamed-of foodstuffs for the few who were brave or lucky enough to fight their way through the multitude and manage to climb up the *coccagna* pole and grab some prizes without serious mishap. All this, of course, provided added thrill to the privileged classes looking down from the equally crowded balconies and windows surrounding the square where the *coccagna* was held. As long as the spectacle did not degenerate into an uncontrollable rabble on the loose, the *coccagna* was unrivalled as a public demonstration of the *sultan*'s magnanimity towards all his subjects.

Besides new forms of mass entertainment, older ones assumed a much wider appeal during the eighteenth century. The most notable example of this was undoubtedly the way in which the celebration of Carnival evolved during the period. Throughout much of early modern Catholic Europe, Carnival provided 'an occasion for public gatherings and [one which] supplied a ritual vocabulary and syntax for communicating ideas'.³ Carnival celebrations, which had been taking place on the island as far back as the late Middle Ages, assumed a much more mundane character with the regular and increasingly sophisticated use of decorated floats, theatrical representations, masks and various forms of street entertainment. The concept of Carnival itself moreover broke away from its Church-sanctioned boundaries, and 'Carnivals' started to be held with increasing frequency whenever there was an event deemed worthy of mass celebration. The inauguration of Malta's first purposely-built public theatre in January 1732 did not signify the start of theatrical activity on the island since this went back to at least a century before. The new theatre did however greatly augment the role of theatrical spectacles whether in the form of serious or comic opera, plays and balls, as a means of public entertainment. Such spectacles in turn became

¹ For an example of this from southern, Catholic Europe see Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, *La Festa Barocca*, Rome 1997.

² On the use of visual media in eighteenth-century Malta see William Zammit, 'The Communicative Role of Visual Media in Malta, 1700-1798', in *Melitensium Amor: Festschrift in honour of Dun Gwann Azzopardi*, Toni Cortis, Thomas Freller and Lino Bugeja eds., Malta 2002, 325-358.

³ Edward Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge New Approaches to European History series, Cambridge 1997, 86.

increasingly a constituent and prominent element of the *compleannos* and Carnival festivities.⁴

Calendimaggio and its coccagna

It was the celebration of the coming of May which gave rise to the *coccagna* on the island, the popularity of which was subsequently to result in its inclusion in Carnival and in many other non-regularly-held public celebrations. *Calendimaggio* is also particularly revealing since one can trace its evolution from the second half of the seventeenth century down to the end of the following one. Since at least the rule of Grand Master Nicola Cotoner (1663-1680), the festivity had already assumed the character of a popular and purely secular celebration, extolling the virtues of the reigning grand master and lacking any religious connotations. This is confirmed by Giovanni Francesco Buonamico's well-known poem *Mejju giè bl'Uuard u Zahar*. The work, written around the year 1672, consisted of adulatory praise towards Cotoner, comparing the latter with the arrival of spring. According to de Soldanis, the poem was composed specifically to be read during the *calendimaggio* festivity.⁵ Significantly Buonamico's eulogy was written in Maltese, even if translated from the original French and this may indicate that the *calendimaggio* celebrations had already acquired a popular appeal even at such an early phase.⁶ By the first decade of the eighteenth century *calendimaggio* had assumed its salient features which were then added upon during the following decades. These were its celebration in the square facing the grand master's palace, the ruler's physical presence, his donation of money and foodstuffs to the populace and the performance of a serenade in the *sultan's* honour as a fitting conclusion to the event.⁷

The custom whereby the grand master had foodstuffs distributed to the crowd attending the *calendimaggio* festivities is known to have preceded 1706 since in that year the practice was described as being a standard one.⁸ References to *calendimaggio* prior to 1715, while referring to the participation of large crowds made up of Maltese and knights, do not mention the *coccagna* spectacle as such.⁹ It is, however, documented that the *calendimaggio* celebrations of 1715 did include – possibly for the first time – the use of the *coccagna*. A description of the event was written by Inquisitor d'Elci for his superiors in Rome:

On the evening preceding the first day of May the grand master and many grand crosses enjoyed the spectacle from the balcony of the palace. Many sailors, consisting of both men and youths and divided into groups

⁴ On the communicative role of the local theatre both before and after 1732 see Zammit 2002, 348-354.

⁵ NLM Lib. MS. 144, p. 107, de Soldanis' footnote referring to Buonamico's poem: 'presentato al primo del mese di maggio al Gran Maestro.'

⁶ Buonamico's poem is known through two transcriptions, one by de Soldanis and the other by Levanzin. De Soldanis gives two versions of the poem, one in Buonamico's own Maltese orthography and the other in his own; see NLM Lib. MS. 144, 108-9. On the Levanzin transcription see Olvin Vella, 'Buonamico skond De Soldanis u Levanzin', *Il-Ġens*, 31.7.2004 and 7.8.2004, pp.30 and 22 respectively. On Buonamico and the significance of his literary and scientific works see Godfrey Wettinger, Michael Fsadni, *L-Għanja ta' Pietru Caxaru: poeżija bil-Malti medjevali*, Malta 1983, 42-43; Giovanni Mangion, 'Baroque Literature', in *Maltese Baroque: proceedings of a seminar on 'The Baroque Route in Malta' held at the Ministry of Education, Beltissebħ, Malta, on 3rd June, 1989*, Giovanni Mangion, ed., Malta 1989, 85, 92 and Arnold Cassola, *The Literature of Malta: an example of Unity in Diversity*, Malta 2000, 18-25.

⁷ While the earliest reference to a cantata in *calendimaggio* festivities goes back to 1706, the earliest surviving cantata text is dated 1713. For a bibliography of *calendimaggio* cantatas see Vincenzo Laurenza, 'Calendimaggio settecentesco a Malta', *Archivum Melitense*, iii, Malta 1913, 187-203.

⁸ ASV SS Malta 58, f. 107, Inquisitor Spinola-SS, dated 1.5.1706, 'Ieri ultimo d'Aprile nella Pubblica Piazza fu dato alla Plebbe il solito Regalo di vari comestibili.'

⁹ Eg. ASV SS Malta 63, f. 103, Inquisitor d'Elci-SS, dated 6.5.1713, 'Vi fu gran concorso di Cavalieri, e di Maltesi.'

attempted to climb a thick and high pole at the top of which there was the prize. This was eventually reached and taken following many attempts and after night had descended.¹⁰

The detail in which d'Elci describes the event, coupled with the fact that he does not mention the *coccagna* in any of his previous accounts of the *calendimaggio* celebrations indicate that the 1715 *coccagna* was a novelty. Interestingly d'Elci, who might have witnessed the festivity himself, states that the assault on the *coccagna* was done primarily, if not exclusively, by sailors. At such an early phase, therefore, the *coccagna* may have been intended as a public show of dexterity on the part of the Order's naval personnel rather than as an opportunity available to all who wished to participate. The description also confirms that the *coccagna* spectacle was followed by the singing of the cantata and this sequence continued to be adhered to during the following decades. Once the *coccagna* spectacle was over, the masses would presumably leave the square free for their social superiors to enjoy the cantata. Mostly consisting of adaptations of classical mythological themes in Italian, the cantata appealed to the more restricted educated elite. The average printruns of 400 copies for the locally-printed *serenate* between 1757 and the early 1770s and which were distributed during the occasion provide an indication as to size of their audience.¹¹ By the end of Perellos' magistracy the celebration of *calendimaggio* had definitely become an annual public festivity, probably with the *coccagna*, like the *serenata*, becoming a standard feature of the celebration.¹²

A painting depicting Palace Square in the time of Grand Master Zondadari (1720-22) and showing the *coccagna* in place not only proves that it had become a regular feature of *calendimaggio* but also provides the earliest as yet known contemporary visual depiction of that form of entertainment. The fact that the use of the *coccagna* during Carnival is documented only from the end of Grand Master de Vilhena's rule (1722-36) indicates that the painting depicts a *calendimaggio* rather than a Carnival scene, since the *coccagna* bears the flag and arms of Zondadari. The still gathering crowds in the square, the presence of spectators on rooftops, the foodstuffs still hanging from the *coccagna* and the blue sky all indicate that the *coccagna* spectacle as depicted was still to commence. The *coccagna* itself is shown in detail: a tapering mast towering well over the buildings surrounding the square, surmounted by a large hoop held with ropes and from which foodstuffs were hanged. At the very top flew the grand master's flag, while his coat of arms was fixed in the middle of the mast. Beneath the grand master's arms a smaller escutcheon is shown, probably that of the *capitano della città* who was responsible for the organisation of the event. Latin inscriptions extolling the grand master's virtues were at times affixed above and below the coat of arms and a couple of these have been recorded for posterity by the Maltese patriot and diarist Ignazio Saverio Mifsud.¹³ The *coccagna* is shown being situated perilously close to the fountain in the centre of the square. Ominously, the painting does not show the use of cushioning material, such as straw, at the base of the mast.¹⁴

¹⁰ ASV SS Malta 64, f. 142, Inquisitor d'Elci-SS, dated 11.5.1715.

¹¹ On the locally-printed *serenate di calendimaggio* see William Zammit, 'Printing and its Cultural Role in Malta during the Rule of the Order of St John', unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Malta, 1995, 179-80. See also Laurenza 1913 and Joseph Vella Bondin, 'Maltese Composers of *calendimaggio* Cantatas', in *The Sunday Times* (Malta), 15.5.1994, 28-29 and 29.5.1994, 28-29.

¹² ASV SS Malta 65, ff. 448v-9, Pro-Inquisitor Napulone-SS, dated 30.4.1718, 'Oggi il Signor Gran Maestro lasciò vedere nel balcone suo si siede in compagnia delli altri Signori Gran Croci per infino che finì la solita funzione dell'ultimo giorno d'Aprile, vigilia del primo Maggio.' By April 1718 Perellos was already in a precarious state of health.

¹³ NLM Lib. MS. 9, p. 225 and MS. 3, p. 510, dating from Despuig's and Pinto's rules respectively.

¹⁴ This painting, which is in a private collection, is reproduced in *Palace of the Grand Masters in Valletta*, Albert Ganado consultant ed., Malta 2001, jacket illustration and 49. On page 50 another painting is reproduced which is similar but not identical to the one discussed here.

This visual description is complemented by a contemporary written one provided by de Soldanis. The latter also gives an account of the actual spectacle taking place:

During daytime of the 30th of April a high mast is placed in front of the magistral palace. It is surmounted by a circle from which are hanged fowls of every species together with other foodstuffs. The wood is left bare for the courageous youths who, given the strength of their arms, often manage to climb it in their first attempt. Once climbed, the valiant youth starts distributing whatever he finds attached to it, throwing everything to the ground. He then makes his way down, loaded with whatever he can carry in the full view of all the people. He is finally rewarded by the Prince of Malta with an amount of cash. This spectacle is held every year.¹⁵

The traced contemporary descriptions of *calendimaggio* during the later years of de Vilhena's rule and that of his successor Despuig (1736-41) confirm the increasing popularity of the festivity. The assaults on the *coccagna* for the years 1736, 1738 and 1740 were all witnessed by a large crowd of spectators. The *calendimaggio* and its *coccagna* had, by that time, definitely become a major regular celebration which appealed to the masses. The physical presence of the *sultan* and particularly his sponsoring of the *coccagna* transformed the occasion from simply one of adulation towards the ruler to one which demonstrated the latter's paternal munificence towards his plebeian subjects.¹⁶

As in the case of Carnival, *calendimaggio* reached its maximum elaboration and mass appeal under Grand Master Pinto (1741-73). The trend reflected the growing exploitation of spectacle for the glorification of power in absolutist Europe in general, a trend which neatly dovetailed in Pinto's own pretensions where the sovereignty of Malta was concerned. The popular nature of the event reached new and unprecedented levels from the 1740s onwards, as is confirmed by contemporary descriptions. Different inquisitors described the occasion as a *fiesta popolare del Maggio*, a *funzione popolare* thronged by an *infinito popolo* trailing to Valletta from the outlying villages.¹⁷ The *sultan*'s readiness to provide abundant and lavish prizes to the participants certainly contributed to this increased popularity. The description of the 1751 *coccagna*, while typical of the period, does not go down particularly well with modern susceptibilities where animal treatment is concerned:

The Maypole, given the characteristic generosity of the grand master, was abundantly decked with every sort of foodstuffs: salted meats, cheeses, hams, poultry, pigeons and other live animals, namely piglets, lambs and kids.¹⁸

¹⁵ NLM Lib. MS. 144, p. 107, preceding the Buonamico sonnet: 'Avanti il palazzo magistrale nell'ultimo di Aprile di giorno si colloca un alto albero, termina con un cerchio, da cui pendono volatili d'ogni specie, e cose comestibili, si lascia il legno nudo a discrezione de' valorosi giovani, che spesse volte al primo attacco lo salgono a forza delle braccia, indi salito sù distribuisce il valoroso giovane quanto di sopra ritrova attaccato, buttandoci in terra ogni cosa, vi cala scende carico quanto più gli è premiato dal Principe di Malta con buona mancia in danajo. Il che praticarsi ogn'anno.' For a published description of the *calendimaggio coccagna* of the late eighteenth century see Saint Priest, *Malte par un voyageur françois*, Malta 1791, 57-58.

¹⁶ ASV SS Malta 78, f. 98, Inquisitor Durini-SS, dated 12.5.1736, 'Nel giro di martedì scorso fu fatto il solito publico giuco dell' Arbore per il nuovo Maggio, inalzato avanti il Palazzo di questo Eminentissimo Gran Maestro, il quale fu a goderlo con altri Signori Gran Croci, e cavalieri nelle sue finestre, essendovi anco concorso del gran Popolo per vedere la lestezza di quello, che guadagno il solito premio di diversi comestibili, ed il regalo d'un zecchino datogli da Sua Eminenza.'; ASV SS Malta 79, f. 115r-v, Inquisitor Durini-SS, dated 3.5.1738, 'Nel dopo pranzo di Mercoledì l' Eminentissimo Gran Maestro dal gran balcone del suo Palazzo si trattenne ad osservare con piacere il saccheggiamiento del Arbore di Maggio, che si fece nella pubblica Piazza detta dei Cavalieri.'; NLM Lib. MS. 9, pp. 221, 225, dated 30.4. and 1.5.1740 respectively. See also ASV SS Malta 107, f. 51v, Inquisitor Gualtieri-SS, dated 30.4.1740.

¹⁷ ASV SS Malta 108, f. 124, Inquisitor Gualtieri-SS, dated 1.5.1742; 117, f. 123v, Inquisitor Passionei-SS, dated 2.5.1750; 130, f. 85v, Inquisitor Mancinforte-SS, dated 27.4.1767.

¹⁸ ASV SS Malta 118, f. 93, Inquisitor Passionei-SS, dated 1.5.1751.

The winning team for that year was made up of sailors from the Order's warships, while during the previous one it was a lad of thirteen or fourteen years, similarly employed on the Order's galley squadron, that carried the day.¹⁹ While incidents were not unknown, the *calendimaggio coccagna* seems to have been a well-managed affair and no major mishaps are known to have taken place. In 1761 a scuffle among the sailors assailing the *coccagna* resulted in one of them being mortally wounded. During the following year one of the climbers fell down but was saved since his fall was cushioned by the multitude of people around the mast.²⁰

As in practically every other public occasion in which the local stakeholders to power were present, *calendimaggio* provided the possibility for an assessment of the current political climate. During Pinto's rule, both bishop and inquisitor started to be invited to enjoy the spectacle from the palace balcony alongside the grand master. In 1768, however, Inquisitor Mancinforte did not attend in order to publicly demonstrate his disapproval of the Pinto's conduct in the Jesuit issue. In 1772, the public was surprised seeing that Bishop Pellerano had given over his place in the palace balcony next to the grand master to the inquisitor.²¹

The *calendimaggio* celebration and the inclusion of the *coccagna* remained a standard practice under Grand Masters Ximenes (1773-1775) and de Rohan (1775-1797). The first *calendimaggio* festivity under Ximenes was ominously marked by a series of incidents, with assailants falling from the summit and scuffles in the crowd.²² While under de Rohan the adulatory *serenata* seems to have suffered a gradual eclipse, with the last one to be printed being dated 1777, the *coccagna* was held regularly down to the very end of his magistracy, with the last spectacle taking place on 30 April 1797, just over two months before his death. Forty scudi were given year in year out to the assailant who successfully managed to grab the grand master's standard from the summit.²³ The May *coccagna* spectacle, however, survived down to the first decades of British rule, as is confirmed by a watercolour by Charles Frederick Brocktorff. The watercolour depicts a man halfway up the *coccagna* mast in Palace Square, which is thronged by spectators wearing early nineteenth-century costumes.²⁴ The depiction of the Doric façade of the Main Guard attributed to George Whitmore and constructed around 1812 places the event after that year.²⁵ Although possibly depicting a Carnival rather than a Coming of May festivity, the *coccagna* as shown in the Brocktorff watercolour has nothing in common with the vastly larger and more elaborate Carnival

¹⁹ ASV SS Malta 117, f. 123v, Inquisitor Passionei-SS, dated 2.5.1750, 'Fu questo salito, e preso da un ragazzo di soli tredici in quattordici anni, la cui destrezza e vivacità fu riconosciuta dal Signor Gran Maestro, che diedegli per mancia quattro zecchini di più oltre li cinque scudi soliti a dargli a chi salisce l'Albero. Ed essendo questo figliuolo Pruiere sopra la squadra delle galere, sarà quanto prima avanzato, attesa le sue abilità, e lestezza.'

²⁰ NLM Lib. MS. 13, p. 525, dated 30.4.1761; p.786, dated 30.4.1762.

²¹ ASV SS Malta 131, f. 103, Inquisitor Mancinforte-SS, dated 30.4.1768, 'Si fece la solita serenata del maggio innanzi al Palazzo di Sua Eminenza, alla quale non intervenne l'Inquisitore secondo il costume, per dare un pubblico attestato della sua disapprovazione della condotta sull'affare de'Gesuiti.'; NLM Lib. MS. 1146/II, diary of Giuseppe Agius, p. 187, entry dated 30.4.1772, 'Si è preso il Maggio al solito, e però si vidde una decisione non piccola, che di quanto è la Religione a Malta non si vidde mai, ed è che il Vescovo Pellerano abbi ceduto in Palazzo del Gran Maestro il primo luogo dopo il Gran Maestro all'Inquisitore Lante nella Galleria.'

²² NLM Lib. MS. 1146/II, p. 237, entry dated 30.4.1773, 'Cadendo il giorno dello Spettacolo di Maggio posto al solito verso la mattina preparandolo l'uomo solito, cadde dal Maggio chi era steso sopra il Corpo di Guardia; al giorno poi dopo una battaglia di schiaffi e pugni che darà la bassa gente, salì sopra uno per in sino li taglioli e cadde in terra sopra due uomini, essendo stato questo uomo nella falanga coll'Unzione 8 giorni fa. In tanto si è fatta la Serenata solita, ed uno incomincia a salire e calò di bel nuovoabasso senza prenderlo.'

²³ AOM 1068 to 1088, consisting of de Rohan's household accounts which provide details on both the *calendimaggio* and the Carnival *coccagna* between 1775 and 1797.

²⁴ This watercolour has been reproduced by Nicholas de Piro, see 'Carnival and Festivals in the time of the Knights', *Malta This Month, February 2006*, 41.

²⁵ M. Ellul, *Giorgio Pullicino, 1779-1851: Architect and Painter*, Malta 1989, 62.

coccagna of the eighteenth century. Moreover in 1804, Boisgelin stated that the Carnival *coccagna* was no longer held.

The evolution of the Carnival *coccagna*

To an even greater extent than in the case of *calendimaggio*, the *coccagna* held on Carnival Monday was soon to assume immense popularity and become the major attraction for the masses. It soon moreover became a common feature in the ‘extraordinary Carnivals’ held periodically celebrating royal births and accessions to the throne, among other. One such occasion was provided by the birth of the French dauphin in 1729. An ‘extraordinary Carnival’ held on the island for the occasion lasted eight days and included the setting up of a contraption in the form of a pyramid loaded with foodstuffs which was ransacked by the crowd.²⁶ In a period of intermittent famine, the exquisite foods hung from the *coccagna* were indeed highly tempting for those who could only nourish themselves on cheap grain at the best of times.²⁷ The dangerous show of daring in which injuries and fatalities were far from unknown provided, in turn, entertainment for the vast crowd of watchers as for members of the Order and the Maltese upper classes. While the latter’s social status effectively prevented their participation, at the other end of the scale the participation of foreigners, slaves and *buonavoglie* was prohibited by decree, even if such a prohibition seems to have been flaunted.²⁸ Carnival was thus brought to a close in a frenzied climax, a surreal setting in which the desperate gambled with their life while the unfree, the less courageous, and the better-off relished the spectacle, all being provided for, indeed orchestrated by the *sultan*, whose command from the palace balcony initiated the whole debacle. While the educated Maltese elite sought recognition, respect for the ‘nation’ and the preservation of ancient ‘rights’ from their foreign, imposed *sultan*, it was mostly lack of famine, paternalism and generosity that won over the masses. The ritual projection of generosity and of a reign of plenty and abundance through such spectacles as coin-throwing and the *coccagna* rewarded the ruler with what was generally described as being the love of the populace. While the *sultan*’s position and power were not in the slightest way dependent upon such sentiments, the latter were worth cultivating if only to keep at bay the spectre of rebellion.

Similar to that of *calendimaggio*, the Carnival *coccagna* consisted of an large mast erected in *piazza dei cavalieri* (Now Republic Square) adjacent to the magistral palace.²⁹ It seems that it was Grand Master Zondadari, who, in his first Carnival as *sultan*, that of 1720, introduced the novel means of Carnival entertainment:

The grand master in this first year of his magistracy desired to introduce a novelty to Carnival. This has consisted of three carts, one for each day starting Sunday. On that day he ordered a most elaborate horse-drawn cart with music being played on it to go around the whole of Valletta. Finally the cart came to a halt beneath the palace, where it entertained the distinguished audience enjoying Carnival from the balconies. On Monday another cart emerged, loaded with poultry, game, lambs, calves, hams and every other sort of food. Guarding the cart were many soldiers dressed up in magnificent attire, some even in Turkish costume. On arriving at the palace square and immediately following the signal given by His Eminence the crowd ransacked the cart. On

²⁶ ASV SS Malta 72, ff. 360 and 409, Inquisitor Serbelloni-SS, dated 22.11.1729 and 3.12.1729 respectively.

²⁷ ASV SS Malta 116, f. 42, Inquisitor Passionei-SS, dated 22.2.1749, ‘Lunedì penultimo giorno di Carnevale fece secondo il solito dalla sua generosità preparare il Signor Gran Maestro abbondevolissimamente la Cuccagna a divertimento insieme, e sollievo del Popolo.’

²⁸ NLM Lib. MS. 9, I.S. Mifsud’s diary, p. 409, dated 8.2.1741, referring to the *Bando* issued on that day prohibiting the participation of slaves and *buonavoglie* in the assailing of the *coccagna*. See also Boisgelin, 89.

²⁹ For a late eighteenth-century published description of the Carnival *coccagna* see L. de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, vol. 1, London 1804, 88-90.

Tuesday, the third day of Carnival another cart made its appearance, carrying on it the pages of His Eminence wearing masks.³⁰

This important description not only indicates the year in which an early form of the Carnival *coccagna* was first introduced, but it moreover points out to an evolution of the spectacle, namely from the straightforward ransacking of a cart to the more time-consuming, potentially dangerous and hence thrilling scaling of a high mast. Possibly adopted in 1721, the latter form of the *coccagna* was already a familiar and yearned-for characteristic of Carnival by the time Pinto made it a standard feature from his first Carnival down to the mid 1760s. Elected Grand Master just a few weeks before Carnival, Pinto was determined to launch his rule with an impressive demonstration of benevolent munificence. Thus he utilised the oncoming Carnival through the re-introduction of an unparalleled *coccagna* following a lapse of six years. Ignazio Saverio Mifsud's detailed contemporary description of the 1741 Carnival *coccagna* confirms the extent to which the newly-elected *sultan* left a favourable impression on his subjects:

At four in the evening of that day [Carnival Monday] the assault on the *coccagna* took place. This was erected in front of the *Conservatoria* and reached up almost to the height of the grand master's palace, while it was also quite large. It was bedecked with flowers, among which were large quantities of meat, bread, oranges, lard, piglets, doves, poultry, sausages and some calves, all hanging from the *coccagna* which was also surrounded by pieces of paper with crosses of the Order, of Malta and moons depicted on them. For greater security the *coccagna* was supported from all sides by strong ropes while the base was surrounded by straw to avoid accidents. Between two and four in the afternoon the *coccagna* was ringed by the grand master's soldiers. Then at the said hour, when the grand master, the council and the inquisitor were in the palace balcony, the assault on the *coccagna* started. Immediately a Maltese sailor on the Order's squadron possessing great agility managed to grab the standard at the very summit of the *coccagna*, from where he shouted out loudly 'Long Live Grand Master Pinto' several times. The sailor then descended and presented the standard to His Eminence who awarded him not only with four zecchini but also with an increase of six tari to his monthly salary. For the past six years the *coccagna* was not held due to accidents which had even resulted in fatalities. Thanks Heavens no such accidents occurred this time even though the *coccagna* ended up almost broken in half, with some five hundred persons, comprising sailors, *buonavoglie* and Maltese villagers perched on it. It is also worth noting that this year's *coccagna* was by far bigger than the previous ones. It is indeed rumoured that it has cost the newly-elected grand master at least five hundred scudi. So as not to cause pain the soldiers guarding the *coccagna* used only branches covered with leaves in order to keep away the children who attempted to assail the *coccagna* prior to the appointed time. The grand master had in fact ordered the soldiers not to dare beat up or in any way mistreat the populace, whether men or children and with this they complied, using only their branches and kind words to keep the people away. Truly, the signs of a loving grand master.³¹

The public relations exercise could hardly have proved more successful. Not only did it enhance the *sultan*'s image with the masses, but the doses of generosity and humane treatment similarly impressed the Maltese educated class. For the next twenty years or so the Carnival *coccagna*, ever more elaborate and popular, continued to proclaim to one and all the *sultan*'s affection towards his subjects. The traced descriptions leave no doubt as to the nature of the whole exercise: the *coccagna* was nothing less than a bountiful gift graciously conceded annually to his subjects by a generous *sultan*. In this theatrical setting the latter occupied the central position, visible to all in the palace balcony and watched upon by thousands of subjects as they anxiously waited for the only thing which allowed them to initiate the ransack: the *sultan*'s customary signal. So long as the *popolaccio*³² acknowledged the rules of the game and went along with it, the exercise fulfilled its function.

³⁰ ASV SS Malta 67, f. 54r-v, Pro-Inquisitor Napulone-SS, dated 17.2.1720.

³¹ NLM Lib. MS. 9, I.S. Mifsud's diary, pp. 418-419, dated 13.2.1741.

³² NLM Lib. MS. 13, I.S. Mifsud's diary, p. 747, dated 21.2.1762, 'per dar campo al popolaccio di mangiare la robba, e carne della Coccagna.'

Traced Descriptions of the Carnival *Coccagna*: Zondadari to Pinto

Year	Summary of Description	Source
1720	Featuring of a cart for ransack.	ASV SS Malta 67, 17.2.1720.
1721	Introduction of the <i>coccagna</i> in the form of a high mast.	J. Cassar-Pullicino, <i>Studies in Maltese Folklore</i> , Malta 1976, 24.
1735-40	The <i>coccagna</i> was not held for fear of injuries and fatalities as had occurred.	NLM Lib. MS. 9, 13.2.1741.
1741	First <i>coccagna</i> held by Pinto. More sumptuous than ever before.	NLM Lib. MS. 9, 13.2.1741; ASV SS Malta 80, 14.2.1741.
1742	<i>Coccagna</i> at the Grand Master's expense, for the benefit of the people.	ASV SS Malta 109, 6.2.1742.
1743	Bountiful <i>coccagna</i> , ransacked by a multitude of people.	ASV SS Malta 110, 26.2.1743.
1744	Magnificent <i>coccagna</i> , with various sorts of animals, poultry and foods.	ASV SS Malta 111, 22.2.1744.
1745	Richly endowed <i>coccagna</i> , ransacked without any incident.	ASV SS Malta 112, 6.3.1745.
1746	Usual <i>coccagna</i> , containing various foodstuffs.	ASV SS Malta 113, dated 26.2.1746.
1747	Usual entertainment for the people in the form of the <i>coccagna</i> . Incidents.	ASV SS Malta 114, 18.2.1747.
1748	Incredibly rich <i>coccagna</i> , ransacked without incidents.	ASV SS Malta 115, 2.3.1748.
1749	Pinto's <i>coccagna</i> ransacked before his signal to his great consternation.	ASV SS Malta 116, 22.2.1749.
1750	Grandiose <i>coccagna</i> for the common people, ransacked without incidents.	ASV SS Malta 117, 14.2.1750.
1751	Richer than usual <i>coccagna</i> . Incidents and a fire.	ASV SS Malta 118, 20.2.1751, 13.3.1751.
1752	Very bountiful <i>coccagna</i> .	ASV SS Malta 119, 4.3.1752.
1754	Preparations for the <i>Coccagna</i> , which was ransacked before the Grand Master's signal.	NLM Lib. MS. 11, 20.2.1754, 25.2.1754, 26.2.1754.
1755	Bountiful <i>coccagna</i> guarded by a larger number of soldiers with fixed bayonet. Ransacked without incidents.	NLM Lib. MS. 11, 10.2.1755.
1756	Usual <i>coccagna</i> .	NLM Lib. MS. 12, 29.2.1756.
1758	Usual <i>coccagna</i> , attended by a multitude of people.	NLM Lib. MS. 12, 20.2.1758.
1759	Usual <i>coccagna</i> .	NLM Lib. MS. 13, 26.2.1759.
1760	Usual <i>coccagna</i> .	NLM Lib. MS. 13, 17.2.1760.

1761	Usual <i>coccagna</i> .	NLM Lib. MS. 13, 2.2.1761.
1762	Bountiful <i>coccagna</i> , held on Sunday instead of Monday due to fasting precept.	NLM Lib. MS. 13, 21.2.1762.
1763	Bountiful <i>coccagna</i> ransacked before the Grand Master's signal. The soldiers attack the crowd, resulting in injuries and fatalities.	NLM Lib. MS. 14, 14.2.1763, 15.2.1763, 24.2.1763,2.3.1763.
1764	<i>Coccagna</i> not held for fear of popular disturbances.	NLM Lib. MS. 14, 5.3.1764.
1765	<i>Coccagna</i> not held.	NLM Lib. MS. 14, 18.2.1765.

Contemporary descriptions of the Carnival *coccagna* between the 1740s and the early 1760s thus confirm the grand master's personal determination to provide an increasingly costly and richly-endowed *machina* for the populace to sack, while concurrently providing a spectacle to the social elite. That of 1746, for instance, was

prepared, as a result of the grand master's renowned generosity, with an abundance of food of every sort: live calves, mutton, goats and pigs, accompanied by fireworks and with an equal abundance of roasted, salted and every other type of pork meat, bread and cheeses. The entertainment kept the populace merry throughout the day, especially since no incident occurred as often happened during previous years.³³

In 1750 the *coccagna* also included peacocks, while that of the following year comprised, among other foodstuffs, no less than four bulls and many pigs all of which had been quartered and hung up, together with sixty live mutton and sheep.³⁴

While on his part, the *sultan* followed the rules of his own game by providing ever more lavish prizes, an increasingly famished population during the 1750s and 1760s was fast losing patience with the ritualistic trappings and *déjà vu*. By the mid eighteenth century a steadily increasing population, mismanagement of the *Università* funds as well as the withholding of food supplies from Sicily for political reasons or at times indeed due to bad harvests were resulting in a situation of almost endemic famine on the island. This is attested by contemporary observations as well as by instances of bread riots.³⁵

While certainly far from unknown during previous decades, the *coccagna* incidents occurring during the mid-eighteenth century were in part the result of an increasingly critical situation where the supply of food was concerned. In 1747 two assailants of the *coccagna* fell from its summit, one dying on the spot while the other was carried away in a critical condition. The social betters characteristically ascribed such fatalities to the rapacity of the populace in wanting more than its fair share of the spoils.³⁶ Other incidents took place in

³³ ASV SS Malta 113, f. 44, Inquisitor Passionei-SS, dated 26.2.1746.

³⁴ ASV SS Malta 118, f. 35, Inquisitor Passionei-SS, dated 20.2.1751.

³⁵ ASV SS Malta 122, f. 207, Inquisitor Salviati-SS, dated 7.7.1755, 'Pare che sempre debba esser soggetta quest'Isola a penuriare in qualche genere.'; ASV SS Malta 130, ff. 198-9, Inquisitor Mancinforte-SS, dated 31.8.1767, 'E stato questa mattina ai maggazzeni un tumulto di circa 300 donne dei casali, perche veniva loro impedito di accostarsi a comprar l'orzo, non pagavano alle due sentinelle, che ivi assistivano un tari di mancia. Portati poi la medesima nella maggior parte al Palazzo Magistrale furono arrestati li soldati, e data ad esse quella quantità di orzo, che dalle angustie veniva permesso. La piazza è molto esausta di tal genere [...] i clamori popolari sono infiniti, ma tuttora non si rimedia.' These are just two examples of various others referring to the critical food situation on the island during much of the period.

³⁶ ASV SS Malta 114, ff. 40v-41, Inquisitor Passionei-SS, dated 18.2.1747, 'Disgrazie, che accadono unicamente per le gore del Popolo, che vuol più del compa suo approfittarsi.'

1751 when, besides the fall of a man from the summit, the *coccagna* caught fire as a result of the fireworks being let off around it.³⁷

On at least three separate instances the *coccagna* was assailed prior to the grand master's signal, with the last and most serious of these resulting in the prohibition of the Carnival *coccagna* for many years. In 1749 a grand cross gave the signal to commence the onslaught by waving a white handkerchief from the palace balcony on the pretext of using it.³⁸ A few years later it was the inclement weather which seems to have caused a repetition of this:

Second day of Carnival with continous rain, frost and wind, resulting in only a few masks going around. The *coccagna* was still held, but this was assailed prior to the customary signal and with neither the grand master nor the inquisitor being in the palace balcony yet. The soldiers guarding the *coccagna* could not resist the fury of the people who, waiting impatiently in the rain, commenced the assault with great fury.³⁹

Pinto's consternation at the fact that his subjects were repeatedly ignoring his central role in the entire spectacle poignantly resulted in the placing of more soldiers around the *coccagna*. The branches and kind words used by the *coccagna* guard in 1741 had, by 1755, metamorphosised into muskets with fixed bayonets.⁴⁰ It was not to take long before the latter were grimly put to the test.

The great *coccagna* massacre of 1763

A repeat performance of what had happened in 1749 and 1754 was to result in one of the bloodiest albeit overlooked episodes of state-sanctioned violence against the local population during the Order's rule. As in 1754 bad weather seems to have been the primary motivation for the premature assault on the *coccagna* that took place on Carnival Monday, 14 February 1763. The guards around the *coccagna* were ordered to confront the assailants and a bloodbath ensued. Using their musket butts and bayonets about a hundred soldiers confronted the crowd, killing and injuring scores of *coccagna* assailants as well as onlookers. Some seventeen individuals were killed on the spot, while a further thirty-seven seem to have died during the following days in the Order's hospital as a result of the injuries they sustained. What had started off as a public relations exercise exalting the generosity of the *sultan* thus ended ironically in an unparalleled display of state violence, the victims of which seem to have consisted primarily of *casalotti* who had flocked to Valletta to participate in, or simply witness the *coccagna*. The two major sources describing the 1763 massacre, namely Ignazio Saverio Mifsud and Vittorio Gristi⁴¹ both refer to the deep resentment of the Maltese

³⁷ ASV SS Malta 118, f. 59, Inquisitor Passionei-SS, dated 13.3.1751.

³⁸ ASV SS Malta 116, f. 42r-v, Inquisitor Passionei-SS, dated 22.2.1749, 'Lunedì penultimo giorno di Carnevale fece secondo il solito della sua generosità preparare il signor Gran Maestro abbondevolissimamente la Cuccagna a divertimento insieme, e sollievo del popolo, ma in luogo di prenderne piacere l'Eminenza Sua ne riportò disgustotale, che si esprese di non volerla più fare in avvenire; poichè mentre stavagli aspettando l'arrivo di M. Inquisitore secondo il solito invitato a vederla, ne seguì l'assalto, senz'averne dato il segno l'Eminenza Sua, come suol costumarsi, cosicchè all'arrivo dell'Inquisitore era già seguita la funzione, giacche in un batter d'occhi, come suol dirsi, venne interamente spogliata la gran machina. Quello che maggiormente ha dato disgusto all'Eminenza Sua in questo fatto, è stato per quanto dicesi, che un Gran Croce, che per altro pubblicamente non nominosi, di suo capriccio desse il segno all'assalto col fazzoletto bianco che a bella posta mostrò fuori del balcone di Sua Eminenza, sotto preteso di servirsene: di che per altro consapevole l'Eminenza Sua prudentemente lo disiniulò, attribuendo l'accidente all'avidia della gentaglia, e come d'inaspettato accidente ne fece le scuse all'Inquisitore al suo arrivo.'

³⁹ NLM Lib. MS. 11, I.S. Mifsud's diary, p. 341, entry dated 25.2.1754.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 503-504, entry dated 10.2.1755.

⁴¹ NLM Lib. MS. 14, I.S. Mifsud's diary, pp. 28-30, entry dated 14.2.1763, 'Fu un tempo molto turbato con vento, e freddo ... Fu la Coccagna abbondatissima di carne, caccia, e pane. Ma successe un accidente per il quale il pubblico si restò privo di tanta robba: poichè ritornato Sua Altezza da San Giovanni in Palazzo dopo la

following the episode, serious enough to instil fears of popular rebellion. It was such fears in fact, that motivated the withholding of the Carnival *coccagna* during the rest of Pinto's rule and beyond.⁴² A strongly-worded denunciation of the Order and particularly of Pinto, Vittorio Gristi's contemporary account of this momentous incident moreover constitutes an important patriotic statement and deserves to be reproduced in full (see appendix, below). The author thus describes the event as one in which the entire Maltese nation was hurt and shamed and that it was only for the lack of leadership that the Maltese did not avenge themselves for the violence and dishonour they had suffered.⁴³ While contemporary sources confirm that the Carnival *coccagna* was not held in the following two years, the lack of references to it for the years 1766 to 1776 point out towards its suspension during that period. In the grim political and economic situation of the early 1770's, the real dangers of popular rebellion would have rendered such 'organized' mass gatherings in Valletta an extremely risky and foolhardy enterprise.⁴⁴

Restoring a relation turned sour: the revival of the Carnival *Coccagna*

The 1763 slaughter had destroyed – indeed inverted – the whole concept behind the *coccagna* spectacle. Grand Master de Rohan's attempts at ingratiating the Order with the Maltese, however, included the re-introduction of the Carnival *coccagna*. The spectacle is known to have been held regularly between 1776 and 1792. The only exception was the year 1783, when the entire Carnival celebrations were put off as a sign of mourning for the victims of the series of earthquakes that shook Calabria. On that occasion de Rohan issued instructions for the equivalent *coccagna* expense to be distributed to the poor.⁴⁵ Highly detailed records of the expenses for the Carnival *coccagna* have survived, giving an average annual expense

benedizione in atto in cui si aspettava M. Inquisitore fu dato improvvisamente l'assalto alla Coccagna con una furia tale che i soldati dispiacuti che si da l'assalto senza il solito segno, e senza esser stato presente Sua Altezza in balcone, messi in furia con i loro schiozzi bastonano a più potere tutti quei che gli erano avanti a tal segno, che restano ferite quaranta sei persone portate tutte nello spedale, e Sua Eminenza non diede il solito premio a quello che prese il primo lo stendardo, anzi ordinò di sequestrare tutta la robba della Coccagna, come fu subito eseguito e poi mandarla molta quantità di carne viva e morta, cascio e cascio cavallo alli Minori Osservanti Capuccini, alli poveri della Floriana e Conservatorio. Ordinò di darsi nota in Castellania di tutti quelli ch'erano feriti nello spedale e furono anche catturati quei ch'erano già i primi saliti per la Coccagna per vedere forse chi fu il motore di tal improvviso assalto. Era quasi nel fine dell'assalto quando giunse M. Inquisitore nel Palazzo di Sua Altezza. Coll'occasione che vi fu mal tempo e già piovicchiaiava furono impazienti quei che diedono l'assalto; ed infatti finita la Coccagna fece una grandissima pioggia che dura quasi per tutta la notte.'; p. 30, entry dated 15.2.1763, 'Vi fu un pubblico susurro per il fatto delli soldati magistrali, considerando ciascuno che poteva succedere qualche sollevazione in detto giorno della Coccagna.'; p. 32, entry dated 24.2.1763, 'Sino detto giorno erano morti nello spedale moltissimi di quei della Coccagna e nella campagna vi è più cresciuta il mormorio popolare specialmente perche uno di detti morti era andato per vedere la Coccagna ed avendo visto il bisbiglio andar a cercare la moglie ch'era un po lontana da lui ed in quell'atto confusasi tra tanto popolo fu colto da un soldato col ceppo dell'azzarino e stordito cadde in terra ovi seguivono altri soldati a dargli che restò semi vivo, tutte l'ossa rotte e portato nello spedale.'; p. 33, entry dated 2.3.1763, 'Morirono parecchi altri della Coccagna.' For Gristi's account see appendix, below.

⁴² Ibid., p. 253, entry dated 5.3.1764, 'Non fù Coccagna per non dar motivo di unire la gente di campagna forse irritata per il fatto dell'anno antecedente contro i soldati Magistrali, e fù lodata la risoluzione.' See also Gristi's account in the appendix, below.

⁴³ For a study on Gristi and the evolution of Maltese patriotism during the period see William Zammit, *Il Naufragio di San Paolo in Malta ossia la conversione di San Publio e dell'Isola, opera morale 1748: A Maltese Eighteenth-Century Play by Vittorio Gristi*, Malta 2004. Gristi's double error in attributing the episode to 1764 instead than to 1763 indicates that his description was written some time after the event had taken place.

⁴⁴ See, for example, NLM Lib. MS. 1146/II, p. 217, 'timore di ribellione civile delli Contadini' as a marginal note for entries covering early January 1773.

⁴⁵ AOM 1075, p. 19, dated 28.2.1783.

of around 1,100 scudi, of which some 900 went for foodstuffs.⁴⁶ Such sums indicate a *coccagna* at least as richly endowed as anything Pinto had ever offered. From an logistical perspective the revived *coccagna* appears to have been much better managed affair. The spectacle was moved from *Piazza dei Cavalieri* to Palace Square and the ransacking was controlled by the *Gran Visconte*, under whom responsibility for maintaining public order fell. The officer was accompanied by his officials as well as by a reserve guard. Boisgelin's detailed description of the event not only refers to the discipline and order which was maintained, but also tallies with the information provided on the spectacle in de Rohan's registers of accounts.⁴⁷ In an attempt to prevent mishaps, rope-ladders were added for use by the climbers and hidden beneath the branches covering the *coccagna*. Moreover, while the grand master retained the custom of giving the sign for the assault to begin, a method was adopted with which this was communicated to the enthusiastic participants in an unambiguous way, preventing the harrowing incidents of Pinto's time.⁴⁸

An additional important source describing de Rohan's *coccagna* consists of a watercolour drawing by the Maltese Saverio Satariano⁴⁹ The drawing shows a richly bedecked *coccagna*, surrounded by straw and a railing. The square is clear of spectators except for a handful of crowd entertainers, and all spectators are depicted as viewing the spectacle from rooftops and open windows. The assailants are shown in position resting on the outer side of the railing, while the *Gran Visconte* is clearly in firm control of the whole operation, having just given the sign to the assailants on his right side to proceed. The figure of Fame topping the *coccagna* is shown still holding the grand master's flag, while the large linen globe or *colombaia* has been burst open and a large flock of pigeons is flying out from it. The *colombaia*, like the statue representing Fame, was a new addition to the *coccagna* from the first years of de Rohan's rule, it being recorded to have been painted in February 1780.⁵⁰ Satariano's drawing moreover depicts the grand master's pages Carnival cart. A new cart is known to have been produced for the 1784 Carnival and, given certain similarities, it is possible that it was the cart depicted in the Satariano drawing.⁵¹

The Demise of the *Coccagna*

⁴⁶ AOM 1068 to 1088. Volumes 1085 to 1088, covering the years 1793 to 1797 make no reference to *coccagna* expenses, indicating that it ceased to be held after Carnival 1792.

⁴⁷ AOM 1068 to 1088, covering the entire period of de Rohan's rule. For Boisgelin's description see appendix, below.

⁴⁸ The descriptions of de Rohan's *coccagna* thus invariably include the payment of 1 scudo and 6 tari for 'il segno dell'assalto'. What form this took is not clear.

⁴⁹ This watercolour is to be found in the Museum of the Order of St John in London and was described in Stella Dyer, *Malta Views: A Catalogue of Topographical drawings of Malta in the Museum of the Order of St. John*, London 1984, 51-2. The drawing measures 42.6 by 62 cm and is signed: *Saverio Satariano fecit. Malta Strade [sic] Reale No 265*. The original description of the watercolour runs as follows: *Veduta originale della così detta Cuccagna Divertimento solito darai nella Valletta Malta – in temp. dell'Ordine de Gran Maestri dedicato a Sua Eccellenza Lord Frer* [John Hookham Frere, who resided in Malta between 1821 and his death in 1846]. It has been reproduced in colour in Nicholas de Piro, *The International Dictionary of Artists who Painted Malta*, Malta first ed., 1988, 173, and by the same author in 'Carnivals and Festivals in the times of the Knights', 44. Satariano was a gold and silversmith by profession and is known to have produced gold medals for distribution by de Rohan, among other works.

⁵⁰ AOM 1072, p.21, dated 17.2.1780, 'scudi 3 e tari 4 per dipingere la colombaia.'

⁵¹ AOM 1076, p. 26, dated 25.1.1784, 'scudi 127, tari 6 e grani 10 pagati all'infrascritti come segue; cioè scudi 85 al Maestro falegname Gio. Batta. Agius, ed alli suoi lavoranti per il travaglio dalli medesimi fatto in un carro nuovo col suo traino, che deve servire per li Paggi di Sua Eminenza nei tre giorni di Carnevale, compreso il prezzo della seguente legname, cioè 12 tavole bianche di bolli 4 l'una, 2 fusi, ed un tratto d'olmo di levante, scudi 35 al pittore Carlo Darmanin per diverso travaglio da lui fatto nel riferito carro, compresa la spesa dei colori, e scudi 7, tari 6 e grani 10 al tintore Silvestro Borg per aver dato doppiamente il colore rosso, e giallo al sudetto traino compresa pure la spesa dei colori.'

While the *coccagna* held as part of *Calendimaggio* survived down to at least 1797, the more grandiose Carnival one is not mentioned any more in the de Rohan accounts registers following 1792. The financial difficulties faced by the Order following the confiscation of its landed property by the French revolutionary government in September 1792 may have resulted in the suspension of the *coccagna* as an economic measure.⁵² The execution of Louis XVI on 23 January 1793 may also have brought about a reduction of Carnival festivities of a few weeks later to a bare minimum. It thus seems that the great Maltese Carnival *coccagna*, born in the heyday of the *Ancien Régime* and inspired by its political philosophy, came to an end at its momentous collapse.

Appendix

Document I

Vittorio Gristi's description of the 1763 *Coccagna* massacre

[title in margin: *Coccagna 1764*¹]

L'epoche più notabili dell'avvilimento della Nazione Maltese seguirono tutte sotto il Magistero di Pinto. Era questo Gran Maestro poco amante del paese e dei sudditi, capriccioso, e cocciuto. Aveva per primo ministro il vice-cancelliere Balì Guedes, di genio tutto opposto alla Nazione. Il Magistero fù lunghissimo, le aperture di attentare furono varie, e la Nazione, con le violenze, con il disprezzo, con la miseria, con togliere qualunque amministrazione, ed aria di autorità, si portò all'estremo dell'abiettismo. Questo Gran Maestro al quale piacevano le feste popolari, il Lunedì di carnevale regalava il popolo con la coccagna. Questa coccagna alcuni Gran Maestri la facevano, alcuni no, Pinto la fece tutti gli anni. L'anno 1764² si prese la coccagna dal popolo senza segno, e prima che il Gran Maestro fosse nel suo balcone. Il Gran Maestro corse al grande schiamazzo, e visto che la coccagna era presa senza ordine, fece il segno al Comandante Vighier [Viguier], che con i suoi soldati erano osservatori nella pubblica piazza. Il Comandante comprese [*l'ordine following comprese* crossed out] il cenno, riordinò i suoi soldati cinge la coccagna, fece mettere bajonetta in canna, [*ed ordinò following canna* crossed out] e comandò che si percuotesse senza riguardo il popolo occupato all'assalto poco [*si cura dell'ordine following poco* crossed out] badò a ciò seguiva in piazza, e continuò a dare il sacco. Gli soldati però percuotevano parte con ceppi, parte con bajonetta, chiunque trovavano avanti. Molti del popolo erano spettatori, e non avevano parte alcuna nel caso, ed in quella buglia non potendo fuggire, e colti all'improvviso non avendo consapendo che schemirsi, rimasero invilluppati nella disgrazia commune. Si contarono morti in quel giorno da 17 e dei feriti mortalmente fino al postdomani muorirono trenta sette. Tra feriti vi fù qualche persona civile, varie donne spettatrici nella pubblica piazza, o con strette, o con la pace va partorirono. In somma quella parte del popolo, che fù invitata dal Principe per essere regalata della coccagna, parte fù uccisa, parte ferita, la maggior parte intimidata, e bastonata. L'altra parte del popolo, che fù invitata a godere di una festa popolare, ed ammirare la generosità del Principe, assistette ad una luttuosa scena, e restò sorpresa a tanta crudeltà. Ogniuno si ritirò in sua casa, chi piangente, chi ferito, chi intimidato, ed ogniuno lamentandosi dell'eccesso. L'indomani

⁵² Following repeated attacks on the Order in the French National Assembly, the latter issued, on 19 September 1792, the decree known as *Le Loi Spoliateur*. This decree effectively confiscated all of the Order's property held in France. For a detailed study of relations between the order and Revolutionary France see F.W. Ryan, *The House of the Temple: A Study of Malta and its Knights in the French Revolution*, London 1930.

¹ Gristi wrongly gives the year as 1764.

² See previous note.

considerando la cosa a sangue freddo si vergognavano dell'eccesso, vollero negare il numero dei morti e feriti, in varie maniere cuoprivano l'affare, gli chirurghi, e medici dell'Ospedale avevano gli feriti in mano, ed ogni uno era persuaso dell'ordine.

Passati alcuni giorni quel primo moto di pietà, che gli più assennati della Religione mostrarono, si convertì poi in disprezzo contro la nazione. Si fece riflessione, che 10,000 campagnoli si lasciarono malmenare da cento cattivi soldati che alcuno ajutò il suo parente in quella circostanza, ma ogni uno attese a fuggire. Si concluse che la nazione era vile, che non era più da temere di essa, che gli villani dentro la Città perdevano il loro vigore, in somma che la nazione in alcuna maniera era da temersi. Sù tali riflessioni di dispreggio, in ogni occorrenza incominciarono a maltrattarla. La nazione non avendo capo, mai mostrò del risentimento. La nazione però [vedendo l' following però crossed out] accorgendosi di sua viltà, illuminata da Preti, ed altri comprese l'errore, fece doglianze, e minacce che in un altr'anno non si lascierebbe così sorprendere. Questa minaccia fù cagione, che la coccagna non si fece più. Prima di Pasqua essendo andato in casal Bircharchara uno dei soldati del Gran Maestro per suo affare, sebene non aveva uniforme, fù conosciuto, e se le gambe non l'avessero ben servito, sarebbe il protomartire di sua truppa, mentre all'improvviso si vide inondato da una pioggia di pietre. Questo piccolo affare fece conoscere in Valletta, che la nazione era risentita.

Bolliva ancora un grande impegno delle tre Lingue di Francia, contro il Gran Maestro, sopra il taglio dei Boschi. Il Principe di Conti come Gran Priore di Francia, era opposto al Gran Maestro. Da Malta si scrisse l'affare, il Principe di Conti pubblicò in Corte la tirannia del Gran Maestro, ognuno la disapprovò, in occasione che il Principe invitava il popolo ad una festa, ed il Ministro Scuesculle [Choiseul] scrisse in Malta a M. des Pennes, per essere schiarito dell'affare. In quel tempo M. des Pennes non aveva motivo di essere contento del Gran Maestro, ma considerando lo svantaggio che ridonderebbe alla Religione non negò il fatto, ma lo coprì con buttare la colpa sù l'uffiziale di guardia, e l'affare passò senza conseguenza.

Source: A[rchive of the] C[athedral] M[alta] Misc. 153, ff. 101-102

Document II

Louis de Boisgelin's description of the Carnival *Cocagna* during de Rohan's Rule

An entertainment was formerly given on Shrove-Tuesday, by the grand-master to the people, in the great square of the city Valetta. Long beams were fixed against the guard-house opposite to the palace, and between each were fastened rope-ladders, the whole covered over by branches of trees in leaf: to which were tied, from top to bottom, live animals, baskets of eggs, hams, sausages, wreaths of oranges; in short, all kinds of provisions. This edifice was called *Cocagna*, and was crowned by a globe composed of linen cloth, on which stood the figure of Fame *in rilievo*, holding a flag with the grand-master's arms. The people were assembled in the great square, and were prevented by one man, with a wand in his hand, from attacking the *Cocagna*, till the grand-master gave the signal. The man with the wand is entitled the *Gran Visconti*, and the administration of the police is committed to his care. The Maltese people were so obedient, and stood in such complete awe of this officer of justice, that one day, on a false signal being given, they had already begun to attack the *Cocagna*, but

on being called back, the crowd, though half way up the ladders, immediately descended in silence.

The Maltese never allowed either foreigners or soldiers to share the profits of this festival, but resented very seriously any attempt at participation. The provisions of the *Cocagna* became the property of those who, having seized them, were able to carry them off in safety through the crowd. This caused furious battles, the combatants assailing each other, attacking and defending with great violence. To the first who reached the figure of Fame was allotted some pecuniary remuneration, and on the standard's being taken to be returned to the grand-master, the cloth globe, composed of two parts, burst open, and out came a flight of pigeons.

Happily the repeated shouts of the populace prevented the cries of the miserable animals hung to the *Cocagna* being heard, though these victims were pulled to pieces from the branches and eaten up, whilst still alive. The people were particularly delighted with this entertainment, which had been suppressed for some time, but was re-established once more during the reign of the grand-master Rohan.

Source: Louis de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, vol. 1, London 1804, 88-90.