AP European History
2000 Student Samples

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Rituals and festivals played a crucial role in traditional European life. Rituals, such as charivari ("riding the stags"), allowed for the community to join together and have fun, teach lessons, and even make political statements. Festivals such as Carnival and that on Midsummer Night's Eve allowed for the community to relax, release their burdens, join together, learn from one another and, to the dismay of some, also served as a medium of propagating vices.

Rituals were very important to the traditional European life, in some cases rituals linked people to ancient Greece and Rome—rituals were long standing. One of the earlier rituals, described by Brother Giovanni di Carlo delineates sons going through the streets acting as their fathers, who were the leaders of the city. Brother Giovanni describes the magnificence in which the sons performed and the enjoyment shared by the citizens, and, obviously, by himself. The Brother may have enjoyed these caricatures because of the animosity between the political leaders and the clergy in the fifteenth century.

Another ritual, more frequent in the nineteenth century was charivari, or "riding the stags." This ritual was apparently popular because of the uses in England.
and in France. In charivari, a
"hen-pecking" woman is made to
"ride stang." The community assembles
as the woman is made to ride the
horse backwards and cheers, sings, and
hang pots in merriment. This event is
clearly described as so by Mrs. Elizabeth
Gaskell. Her point-of-view is quite
interesting as she is a married woman
and supports this event she requires
the humiliation of other married women.
Mrs. Gaskell is also quick to point
out that the celebrations are never
too disorderly and no one seeks
redress. Women such as Mrs. Gaskell
may see this event as one of
putting women in control. In the
"stang song" from Lincolnshire
describes a man beating his wife
and the wife returns throwing
him out of the house and taking
"his skin to the tanners." Other
purposes were also forwarded at these
events. For example, in France
a police report notes the beginning
of the Easter Rebellion and cites the
charivari as the cause of the excitement.
His perspective is logical because he works
for the government and would not wish
to place the blame on them. Another example of ritual is the humiliation of criminals. In Russia, for example, when a woman picked berries from the communal berry patch too early, she was sentenced to walk through the streets with her basket on her neck. There were also reportedly no complaints from the woman concerning her humiliation. However, this may have likely been omitted.

Festivals also had many purposes. The celebration of midsummer night was a festival of fun, honesty, and openness. In it, servants and masters conversed and everyone is told their faults; however, no offense was taken—the celebration brought the community of Stilly Island together, as Henry Bourne, an outsider, perceived it. Baltasar Rixon, a Lutheran pastor, commented on the drinking disorder, whoring, killing and dreadful idolatry that took place on a saint's feast day. Rixon may have taken the holiday more seriously than others because he obviously was a religious man, and may have exaggerated: however, vices tend to be displayed on holidays. This idea is clearly depicted in Brueghel’s “Battle Between Carnival and Lent,” in which a man
on a keg faces off against a nun. Bruegel comments on the irreverence and disregard for the meaning of Lent. The "unmannerly manners" of Carnival are also discussed by John Taylor, an English writer in the early 1600s. He points out the destruction caused by these events. R. Lassels, a Frenchman, justifies Italian Carnival celebrations as a way to vent. Lassels, however, is French and also celebrates Carnival and may be inclined to justify the Italians in a way, justify his own actions.

Rituals and festivals, both in general, had their purposes in creating a community. Some rituals were intended to dignify, while others to humiliate. Some were used for political purposes while others were just for fun. Festivals were seen as a way to celebrate and vent the sorrows of everyday life through vices, while others drew the community together through honesty and openness.
Rituals and festivals played an important part in the lives of Europeans. There were many festivals. Such gatherings were usually rather large and often attended by a wide variety of people. However, the purpose of these festivals was not so much to express religious devotion or for another very noble cause. Most festivals were celebrated to have good times and let loose; often times, unique rituals were incorporated into these festivals as a way to punish wrong-doers in a jovial manner.

Life was rough for many Europeans. They had to work extremely hard. For peasants, life was even worse because there was little chance for an improvement in social standing. According to R. Lassels, Italians broke their backs for a year and used Carnival to soothe their sores and repair their broken spirits (Doc. 5). A simple traveler, R. Lassels could see that it was painfully obvious that people used festivals to relax and put their problems behind them. Pieter Brueghel paints a fabulous scene from a Carnival wherein the people celebrate fully and the whole town appears to be alive and partying (Doc. 3). Indeed, even the domestic servants and other low-social-class peoples relished the days of jollity. Henry Bourne says that servant and master seemed to be equals on days of festivals and formed a deaf ear to their differences (Doc. 6). Surely festivals were used for recreational purposes; Baltasar Rusco reports...
that despite the drunken disorder, a seemingly
crunchy joy spread like fire through the
entire country (Doc. 2)!
The rituals of Europeans appear to be used
to light-handedly punish minor criminals
in a way that could be mixed with
the frivolity of the Festivals. According to a
Russian official, once when a women picked
berries from a forbidden patch, she was
paraded through town to be laughed and
gabled at with those same berry baskets
bound around her neck (Doc. 10). A variant
of a stong song seems to encourage the
happy-go-lucky attitude of a festival by
encouraging women to team up and teach
an abusive husband a lesson (Doc. 9). Surely
these songs were born in an atmosphere
where as Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell tells us, a woman
who was believed to have acted inappropriately
would be bound to a horse with her
face towards its rump to be mocked by
screaming masses (Doc. 8).
Even the ensuing damage and wrecklessness
was socially acceptable in the name of good
times. John Taylor praises the damaging behavior
with the defense that destruction leads to
employment for those that can make repairs
(Doc. 4). A report from the police inspector
reveals that as prosecutions of people involved
in large amounts of loud drinking increased, the number and types of people participating increased. It was the obvious will of the masses that they wanted to party. What more did some people really have to look forward to? Even if festivals served more of a purpose than reckless drunkenness at one time, surely the trend shifted by the time these documents were published. Perhaps Brother Giovanni di Carlo's statement about how the focus of one procession seemed to be the imitation and celebration of city officials, is of the last remnants of the more "purposeful" use of festivals (Doc. 1).

All in all, people used festivals as a means of escaping reality to let loose and be gay. Crude forms of relatively harmless punishment seeped their way into festivals and these rituals seemed to affirm the festive no-troubles mindset of celebrations. Europeans worked hard, and they partied hard. Damage was overlooked in the name of fun because honestly, with the lifestyles some people led with abuses such that could corrode spirits quickly, relief in the form of ritual and celebrated festivity was a necessity.