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# INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ITALY

*Grundtvig Partnership  
The Living Heritage  
2013-2015*



## A brief report about fields of ICH in Sicily

This brief report describes areas of Intangible Cultural Heritage which the local focus group has found relevant for the project.

Events, feasts and festivals – both pop and religious - are very numerous and very popular in Sicily during the year.

They are described with a particular attention to the ones held near the area of Mazara del Vallo.

ICH

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## OPERA OF THE PUPPETS

### Marionette theatrical representations

The Opera dei Pupi (Opera of the Puppets) is a marionette theatrical representation of Frankish romantic poems such as the Song of Roland or Orlando Furioso that is one of the characteristic cultural traditions of Sicily. The sides of donkey carts were decorated with intricate, painted scenes; these same tales are enacted in traditional puppet theaters featuring hand-made marionettes of wood. The opera of the puppets is rooted in the Provençal troubadour tradition in Sicily during the reign of Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, in the first half of the 13th century. A great place to see this marionette art is the puppet theatres of Palermo, Sicily.

The Sicilian marionette theater Opera dei pupi was proclaimed in 2001 and inscribed in 2008 in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

Today, there are only a few troupes that maintain the tradition. They often perform for tourists. However, there are no longer the great historical families of marionettists.



In the photo: Mimmo Cuticchio, the most famous marionettist in Palermo









## CHRISTMAS and THE CRIB

December  
Christmas season

### THE NATIVITY SCENE

Saint Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first nativity scene in 1223 (a "living" one) at Greccio, Italy, intending thereby to cultivate the worship of Christ in an attempt to place the emphasis of Christmas upon the worship of Christ rather than upon secular materialism and gift giving.

A **nativity scene** or crèche (also known as a **manger scene**, or **crib**) is the special exhibition, particularly during the Christmas season, of art objects representing the scene of the birth of Jesus.

Nativity scenes exhibit figures representing the infant Jesus, his mother Mary and Joseph. Other characters from the nativity story such as shepherds and sheep, and angels may be displayed near the manger in a barn (or cave) intended to accommodate farm animals. A donkey and an ox are typically depicted in the scene, as well as the Magi and camels belonging to the Magi. Several cultures add other characters and objects that may be Biblical or not.

In each family, in Sicily, there is a crib prepared and fit out by 8th December and kept until 6th January.

The Sicilian crib has strong naturalistic features.

"Living nativity scenes" in which real humans and animals participate are very numerous in Sicily. One of the most famous is in Custonaci.









## Living Nativity Scene in Custonaci







# THE EPIPHANY

6th January

## The Feast of the Epiphany

In Italian folklore, **Befana** is an old woman who delivers gifts to children throughout Italy on Epiphany Eve (the night of January 5) in a similar way to Sinterklaas or Santa Claus. But children get both gifts from Santa Claus and the Befana.

The character may have originated in central Italy, then spread as a tradition to the rest of Italy.

A popular belief is that her name derives from the Feast of Epiphany or in Italian, "La Festa dell'Epifania". Epiphania (Epiphany in English) is a Latin word with Greek origins. Epiphany means either the *Feast of the Epiphany* (January 6) or "manifestation" (of the divinity).

In popular folklore Befana visits all the children of Italy on the eve of the Feast of the Epiphany to fill their socks with candy and presents if they are good or a lump of coal or dark candy if they are bad. Being a good housekeeper, many say she will sweep the floor before she leaves. To some the sweeping meant the sweeping away of the problems of the year.

She is usually portrayed as an ugly old lady riding a broomstick through the air wearing a black shawl and is covered in soot because she

enters the children's houses through the chimney. She is often smiling and carries a bag or hamper filled with candy and gifts.

Very often an aged relative decides to wear the Befana's clothes for the joy of the babies in the family.





# ALMOND BLOSSOM FESTIVAL

1st week of February

## The Almond Blossom Festival in Agrigento

The Almond Blossom Festival is a popular tradition that takes place every year in Agrigento, a town 150 km. far from Mazara del Vallo, in the first week of February, to celebrate the advance of the spring with the blossoming of the almond tree and celebrate the return of life. Numerous folk groups arrive in Agrigento from all over the world to take part in it. In fact, over the years, the festival has maintained its cultural meaning of peace among all peoples of the Earth.

The event begins with the lighting of the torch of friendship in front of the temple of Concord, following a very impressive walk at sunset, in the Valley of the Temples. The highlight of the festival is the closure, which takes place the following Sunday, when the folk groups and Sicilian carts parade with marching bands go from the city of Agrigento to the Valley of the Temples.







## CARNIVAL

Immediately before Lent

### Carnival and the popular celebrations

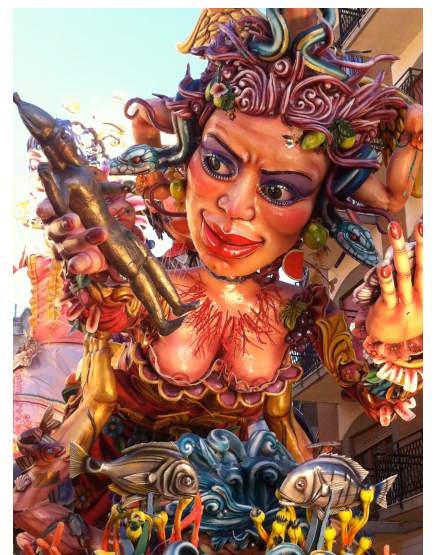
**Carnival** is a festive season which occurs immediately before Lent; the main events are usually during February. Carnival typically involves a public celebration or parade combining some elements of a circus, mask and public street party. People often dress up or masquerade during the celebrations, which mark an overturning of daily life.

The Lenten period of the Liturgical year Church calendar, being the six weeks directly before Easter, was marked by fasting and other pious or penitential practices. Traditionally during Lent, no parties or other celebrations were held, and people refrained from eating rich foods, such as meat, dairy, fats and sugar. The forty days of Lent, recalling the Gospel accounts of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, serve to mark an annual time of turning. In the days before Lent, all rich food and drink had to be disposed of. The consumption of this, in a giant party that involved the whole community, is thought to be the origin of Carnival.

In Sicily the Carnival parades in Acireale and Sciacca are the most famous (Sciacca is 55 km. far from Mazara).











## ST. JOSEPH'S DAY

19th March

### St. Joseph's Day and the tradition of the altars of decorative bread

**Saint Joseph's Day**, March 19, the **Feast of St. Joseph** is in Western Christianity the principal feast day of St. Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He is also the step-father of Jesus of Nazareth/Jesus Christ.

In Sicily, where St. Joseph is regarded by many as their Patron men thanks are given to St. Joseph for preventing a famine in Sicily during the Middle Ages. According to legend, there was a severe drought at the time, and the people prayed for their patron saint to bring them rain. They promised that if he answered their prayers, they would prepare a large feast to honor him. The rain did come, and the people of Sicily prepared a large banquet for their patron saint. Giving food to the needy is a St. Joseph's Day custom.

Upon a typical St. Joseph's Day altar, people place flowers, limes, candles and specially prepared cakes, breads, and cookies. Because the feast occurs during Lent, traditionally no meat was allowed on the celebration table.

In Salemi, a small town near Mazara del Vallo, the altars made with decorative bread are real masterpieces.

In Italy March 19 is also Father's Day.







# PALM SUNDAY

The Sunday before Easter

## Palm Sunday and palms braided into different shapes

**Palm Sunday** is a Christian moveable feast that falls on the Sunday before Easter. The feast commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, an event mentioned in all four canonical Gospels.

In many Christian churches, Palm Sunday includes a procession of the assembled worshippers carrying palms, representing the palm branches the crowd scattered in front of Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem. The difficulty of procuring palms in unfavorable climates led to their substitution with branches of native trees, including box, yew, willow and olive.

In Italy palm leaves are used along with small olive branches, readily available in the Mediterranean climate. These are placed at the entrance of houses to last until the following year's Palm Sunday. For this reason, usually palm leaves are not used whole, due to their size; instead, leaf stripes are braided into smaller shapes. Small olive branches are also often used to decorate traditional Easter cakes, along with other symbols of birth, like eggs.







# HOLY WEEK

The week before Easter

## The Holy Week and the Procession of the Mysteries of Trapani

The **Processione dei Misteri di Trapani** or simply the **Misteri di Trapani** (the *Procession of the Mysteries of Trapani* or the *Mysteries of Trapani*) is a day long passion procession featuring twenty floats of lifelike wood, canvas and glue sculptures of individual scenes of the events of the Passion, played during the Holy Week in Trapani (a town 50 Km. far from Mazara del Vallo).

The *Misteri* are amongst the oldest continuously running religious events in Europe, having been played every Good Friday since before the Easter of 1612, and running for at least 16 continuous hours, but occasionally well beyond the 24 hours, are the longest religious festival in Sicily and in Italy.

The 'Misteri' are an artistic representation of the Passion and Death of Jesus through twenty sculptural groups, including two statues of the Dead Jesus and of the Lady of Sorrows. They were granted in trust, by deeds, by the Brotherhood of St. Michael the Archangel, which instituted the rite in the late 16th century, to the members of the local Guilds in exchange of the promise to carry them during the passion procession every Good Friday.





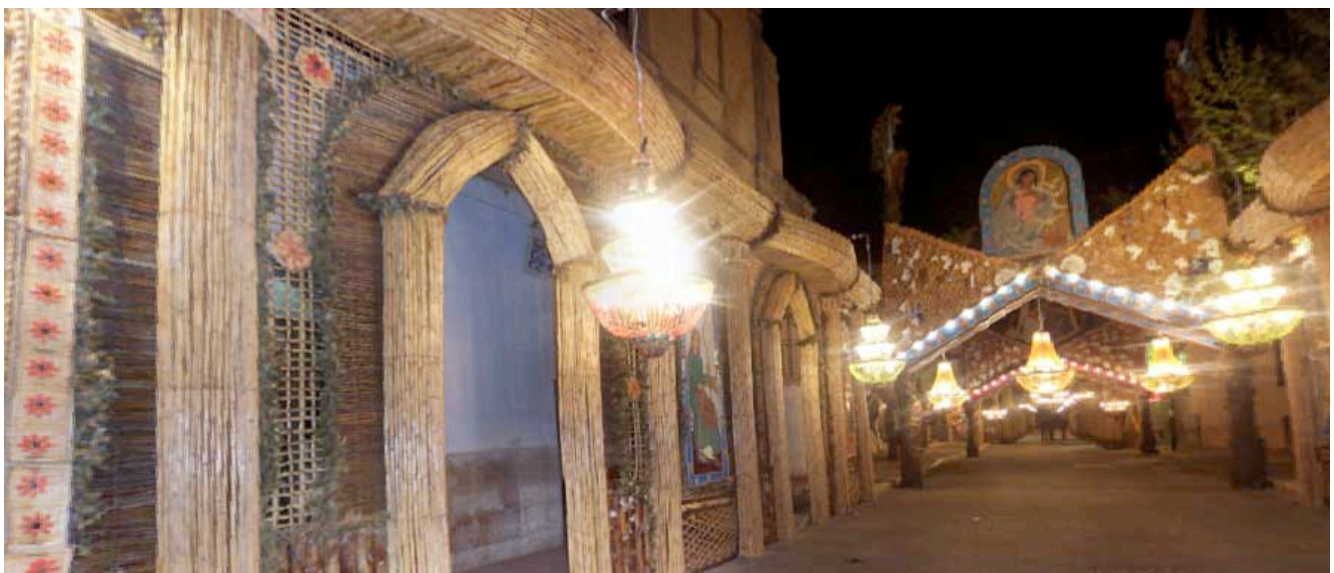


## EASTER ARCHES

Easter season

### The Easter Arches in San Biagio Platani

This ritual that takes its origins from the cult of the Virgin and Christ, has its roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this tradition there was the birth of the two brotherhoods, “Madunnara” and “Signurara”, which so passionately renewed from year to year this wonderful event. This division of the country into two fraternities did not give origin to the rise of a violent antagonism, but a lively and exciting competition which ends on Holy Saturday night, when each brotherhood organizes its own part of the main road of the town. The preparation, which begins a few months before Easter, requires a great deal of material, all strictly granted by nature. The most widely used are the cane, willow, asparagus, bay leaf, rosemary, cereals, dates, and bread, each of which is packed with a high symbolic significance. The most important part is constituted by the central arches, the historical origin of the event, in which on Sunday morning the risen Jesus encounters the Virgin Mary.







# EASTER

First Sunday following the first full moon of Spring

## Easter, the Resurrection Day

**Easter**, also called **Resurrection Day**, is a holiday. Among Christians, it is a celebration of Jesus Christ returning from the dead. Christians believe that it is the holiest day in the year.

Easter is not held on the same date every year. Currently all Christian churches agree on how the date is calculated. Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday, following the first full moon, after the Spring Equinox. In 2014 Easter will be on 20 April and in 2015 it will be on 5 April.

**Easter eggs** are special eggs that are often given to celebrate Easter or springtime. As such, Easter eggs are common during the season of Eastertide. The oldest tradition is to use dyed and painted chicken eggs, but a modern custom is to substitute chocolate eggs, filled with a gift.

Eggs, in general, were a traditional symbol of fertility, and rebirth. In Christianity, for the celebration of Eastertide, Easter eggs symbolize the empty tomb of Jesus though an egg appears to be like the stone of a tomb, a bird hatches from it with life; similarly, the Easter egg, for Christians, is a reminder that Jesus rose, and that those who believe will also experience eternal life.







## FLOWER FESTIVAL

3rd Sunday of May

### The Flower Festival in Noto

The Flower Festival is an event consisting in making carpets by means of flowers or parts of them, especially petals.

Since 1980, the third Sunday in May, Noto greets spring with this event. It takes place in Nicolaci Street, lined with splendid Baroque palaces. On Sunday morning, the atmosphere in Nicolaci Street is suggestive for the effect of chromatic floral mosaics, coupled with a dramatic and theatrical effect.

**Noto** is a city in the Province of Syracuse, Sicily. In 2002 Noto and its churches were declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its churches and historical buildings are masterpieces of Sicilian Baroque, characterized by a soft tufa stone, which under sunlight assumes a typical honey tonality.







# CLASSICAL PERFORMANCES

May - June

## Classical performances at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse

Every year, during the months of May and June, in Syracuse, a town on the east side of Sicily INDA (the National Institute of Ancient Drama) organizes a cycle of classical performances at the Greek theater of Syracuse, Tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles Euripides, Aristophanes are generally performed.

The theatre was built in the V century B.C.

In 2014 the 50th edition of the performances will come.







# FERRAGOSTO

15 August

## Mid-August Holiday and the Assumption of the Virgin Mary

**Ferragosto** is an Italian public holiday celebrated on 15 August.

The term Ferragosto is derived from the Latin expression *Feriae Augusti* (Augustus' rest), which is a celebration introduced by the emperor Augustus in 18 B.C. This was an addition to already extant ancient Roman festivals which fell in the same month which celebrated the harvest and the end of a long period of intense agricultural labor. The ancient Ferragosto, in addition to obvious self-celebratory political purposes, had the purpose of linking the main August festivities to provide a longer period of rest, called *Augustali*, which was felt necessary after the hard labour of the previous weeks.

The present Italian name of the holiday derives from its original Latin name, *Feriae Augusti* ("Festivals [Holidays] of the Emperor Augustus").

During these celebrations, horse races were organised across the Empire, and beasts of burden were released from their work duties and decorated with flowers. Such ancient traditions are still alive today, virtually unchanged in their form and level of participation during the Palio dell'Assunta which takes place on 16 August in Siena – Tuscany. Indeed the name "Palio"

comes from the *pallium*, a piece of precious fabric which was the usual prize given to winners of the horse races in ancient Rome.

The Catholic Church celebrates this date as a Holy Day of Obligation to commemorate the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary— what they believe to be the actual physical elevation of her sinless soul and incorruptible body into Heaven.

In Mazara del Vallo, bonfires and picnics are organized on the beach on the Eve of 15th August.





# ALL SAINTS' DAY and ALL SOULS' DAY

1st and 2nd November

## All Saints' Day and the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed

**All Saints' Day** is a solemnity celebrated on 1 November in honour of all the saints, known and unknown.

**All Souls' Day**, also known as the **Commemoration of All Faithful Departed**, is observed principally in the Catholic Church and annually occurs on November 2.

In Italy people take flowers to the graves of dead relatives and light candles in the graves.

The festival is traditionally celebrated in the families and children believe that the family Dead come and bring gifts to them during the night while they are sleeping (of course parents provide the gifts).



Special cookies and cakes are prepared by the families: the "martorana fruit" made of almonds and sugar and the "sugar puppets" representing the French paladins.







# IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

8th December

## Feast of the Immaculate Conception

The **Feast of the Immaculate Conception** celebrates belief in the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is universally celebrated on December 8, nine months before the feast of the Natiity of Mary, which is celebrated on September 8.

The feast is often celebrated with Holy Mass, parades, fireworks, processions, ethnic foods, and cultural festivities in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and is generally considered a "family day".

In the calendar of events December 8 is an important date because, in addition to being the feast of the Immaculate Conception, it is a kind of preparation to Christmas season. In fact, from the first Sunday after December 8, the countdown to the much awaited Christmas begins.

For the Sicilians December 8 is the right mix of sacred and profane.

If by chance you decide to spend the day of the feast in a typical Sicilian family, do not be surprised if the house is full of friends and relatives (from the 90 year-old grandmother to the little baby of the family), if you eat a lot of food and if you are forced to play cards late into the night!

On the evening of December 7, the eve of the Immaculate Conception, the Christmas holidays officially begin and long evenings are spent around a table playing with the traditional Christmas games. Families get together for a hearty dinner.

By the 8 December the crib is ready in each house and typical traditional Christmas cookies are prepared.







# ST. LUCY'S DAY

13th December

## Traditions between the sacred and the profane

**Lucia of Syracuse** (283–304), also known as **Saint Lucy**, or **Saint Lucia** (Italian *Santa Lucia*), was a young Christian martyr who died during the Diocletianic Persecution. She is venerated as a saint by the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and Orthodox Churches. Her feast day, known as Saint Lucy's Day, is celebrated on 13 December.

Many miracles are attributed to the young Christian martyr. The most famous dates back to May 13, 1646. During a severe famine, the Holy St. Lucy, relied upon by the starving population, made the miracle: a ship loaded with wheat arrived in the port. The people considered that ship as an answer to their prayers. The people exhausted by hunger did not bother to grind wheat, boiled it and ate it with a little oil, thus creating the "cuccia".

Since then, on the day of Saint Lucy in many parts of Sicily devotion and tradition have banned pasta, bread and dairy products and only wheat and rice are cooked.

The famous Sicilian "*arancini*" are balls made with rice, with Italian ragout and peas inside.





The “sagra” is a celebration with an antique flavor that involves all generations with a series of events. The core, the heart of the festival is a freshly made and also economic good dish to taste. The name “sagra” comes from the Latin sacrum, as it took place on holidays. The festivities were both religious and related to agriculture. They were celebrated in front of the church at various times of the year such as the arrival of winter and spring, the harvest, etc. Popular festivals are spread everywhere in Sicily: those of the mushrooms, chestnuts, grapes, honey, sausage, kous-kous, ricotta cheese, oranges, sparrow-grass, prickly pears, and many many others.... The “sagra” is usually accompanied by cultural events.

## SAGRA

October

### The Festival of Prickly Pears in St. Margherita of the Belice





