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Sant'Antonio

(St. Anthony)

The feast of Sant'Antonio is celebrated every year on the 17th of January, and it dates back to ancient times as a propitiatory rite to encourage the fertility of the fields. In the past, it was one of the main events for the rural communities of the country.

Nowadays, it continues to be very important and in Sardinia it is celebrated especially in the rural areas and in the villages, where customs are more deep-rooted than in the towns.

In Mamoiada it's an authentic popular festival, undoubtedly the most awaited by the population.

Origins and legend.

Saint Anthony the Great, also known as Saint Anthony of Egypt, Saint Anthony the Abbot, Saint Anthony of the Desert, Saint Anthony the Anchorite or Saint Anthony of Thebes, was an Egyptian hermit considered the initiator of Christian monasticism and the first abbot. In popular culture, he was represented with a little pig, in order to make a distinction with the other Anthony, who is commonly known as Saint Anthony of Padua (and was actually from Lisbon). Saint Anthony the Great was often depicted with tongues of fire at his feet and holding a stick with a little bell hung at its end. A T-shaped Egyptian cross, the Tau, stood out in his habit and it was a symbol of life and victory over epidemics. The bell, which was used to communicate the arrival of people with infectious diseases, has probably the same meaning. Saint Anthony was a real person and we know much about his life thanks to the biography written by his disciple Saint Athanasius of Alexandria.



He was born in 251 AD to Christian parents in the city of Coma, in Upper Egypt, and died as a centenarian in 356 AD. When he was twenty, his parents died, he divided the family estate with his sister and gave his part to the poor. In Saint Anthony's life there is nothing which could connect him to agriculture and rural life. Anything but that. He led a solitary life as the anchorites did in the deserts near his town, and lived in prayer, poverty and chastity. It's said that one day the saint had a vision of a hermit like him who spent his days praying and waiving a string. The vision helped him understand that, besides praying, people should devote themselves to a concrete activity: this became the motto *Ora et Labora* (Pray and work) of the Rule of St. Benedict.

Therefore, he lived a retired life, using the fruits of his work to provide his own food and to give to charity. During these years, strong temptations and doubts about this lifestyle troubled him. Other hermits encouraged him to persevere and suggested that he detach himself from the earthly world even more radically. Consequently, wearing only a

rough cloth, he moved to a tomb dug in a rock, near the village of Coma, and closed the door on himself. There, the devil attacked and beat him. Anthony was found unconscious by the people who went to the tomb to bring him food and was carried to the village's church, where he recovered. After that, in 285 AD, the saint moved towards the Red Sea, to a mountain called Pispir, where there was an



abandoned Roman fortress with a spring. He spent twenty years of his life there, eating only the bread people brought him twice a year. In this place, Anthony followed his search of total purification, although according to the legend the devil harshly tormented him. Subsequently, many people wanted to stay close to him and, after demolishing the fortress's walls, they freed Anthony from his shelter. Afterwards, the saint dedicated himself to care for the suffering by working "healings" and exorcisms – as dictated by tradition. He's considered the protector against some diseases, both in humans and in animals: swineherds invoke him to protect their livestock, butchers were devotees of him, and he was the patron saint of grocers, bakers and weavers. Saint Anthony was invoked also to extinguish fires. It is not a coincidence that his name is connected to a form of herpes (herpes zoster) known as "St. Anthony's fire" or "holy fire", whose epidemic broke repeatedly in Europe between the 10th and 16th centuries. It was exactly in this period when the belief in his powers against diseases spread and his "feast" was included in the Roman calendar.

Nowadays, St. Anthony fire is still a common disease. In Mamoiada and in its area, people continue the tradition according to which, in order to recover from this plague, a Holy Mass in honour to the saint is needed. In order to celebrate this mass, the infected person's neighbours and acquaintances made a small collection and gave this money as an offering to the priest. People would willingly give a little money, and neither the congregation nor the priest saw the amount of each offering. In 1095, Pope Urban II approved the Order of Saint Anthony, who later would have the task of providing help and assistance to these sick people. There is another Pagan legend, also connected to fire, according to which Saint Anthony was the one who succeeded in stealing the fire from the devils to give it to the humans. This is probably the reason why, in the Christian tradition, Saint Anthony is included among the most powerful saints against the devil, his name appears in one of the exorcisms and he is often invoked. Therefore, the feast of Sant'Antonio boasts very ancient origins: celebrating every year means, triggering positive forces and, thanks to the apotropaic element of fire, defeating the evil and potential diseases.

Celebrating Sant'Antonio in Mamoiada

Like in the past, this is a joyful feast which augurs well for the future. In every district of Mamoiada, people collaborate to gather the wood necessary for their own bonfire. No trees are cut down, because the huge fire is made with the enormous roots of old trees that were cut down in the previous years, with prior authorization from the competent authorities. The real celebrations start in the afternoon of



The pastries for the occasion: *papassinos*, *coccone hin mele*

the 16th of January (called *Sa die de su Pesperu* in Sardinian language) with the lighting and the benediction of the fire in honour of the saint that is made outside the parish church. Both the priest and the devotees walk in procession around the fire while reciting the Creed. They turn around it three times symbolising the Trinity, which people, despite the expressions of popular devotion, consider the foundation of Christian faith. According to the tradition, every district lights their own bonfire with a firebrand of this blessed fire. In all the districts, people gather around the big

votive fires. This is one of the events the entire population participates in and that also involves foreign visitors, who are offered good wine and the typical desserts of that period, and find accommodation in the families from Mamoiada or in some lodges. For this occasion, exquisite handmade desserts are prepared. In every part of the village, the taste of these desserts is almost the same, something that indicates great experience and tradition. It is precisely during this feast that Mamoiada's traditional masks "**Mamuthones e Issohadores**" parade – or *escono* (go out) as Mamoiada's people usually say – for the first time in the year. This is one of the most archaic representations of Sardinian folklore and it is not a coincidence that it's another rite to encourage the fertility of the fields.



Mamuthones and Issohadores in their first annual release on January 17th dance around the numerous fires of St. Anthony





Typical sweet sweets called *cascettas*



photo: R. Ballore – M. Setzu – e archive Paradisola