

When was “BRANDO” born?

The historical origins of the Piedmontese dance of conscripts

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Summary

The question of the historical dating of the Piedmontese dance called "BRANDO" still presented some uncertainties. In this work we have carried out comparative research, description and historical attestation, *i.e.* dating. In addition to the etymological dictionaries, the documents that constitute the milestones in the history of BRANDO are reported here in chronological order, starting from the 12th century.

Our approach was to consider the existence of a confinement, that is to say that the name BRANDO understood as dance must necessarily have had a beginning in a time subsequent to a period during which the documentation that should have mentioned it did not mention it. This does not necessarily mean that the dance did not exist in some form in the previous era, but only that it did not exist with the widespread use of the name BRANDO or its equivalents having the same linguistic root.

In short, the dance in question could be more or less always the same but change name in different times, places or contexts. On the contrary, it could always have the same name in various locations, but in reality be a different dance in terms of music and/or structure.

However, the geographical distribution of a name never occurs for unfathomable reasons, but rather occurs for reasons due to the migration of populations

or, more often, the spread of fashions. These fashions (the BRANDO in our study) almost never spread from the people to the upper classes (the nobility or the court in historical times), but rather it is the upper classes who enhance something by creating a *status symbol* that everyone then quickly and massively they try to imitate. This happens spontaneously and powerfully according to mechanisms that are difficult to escape.

In the present study we want to establish how and when the dance called BRANDO (with all its related geographical name variations) emerged in history starting from previous dances that had some similar characteristics, but were called by different names.

To achieve the aim of this work we took into consideration various sources. The results that will be discussed therefore result from the synergistic combination of different fields of study and sources of information:

- Etymology and ancient vocabularies.
- Anthropological and historical context.
- Historical images of dance.
- Original documents in chronological order.

We would like to point out that the bibliography of this work is mainly based on the great abundance and online availability of French sources, as well as

their homogeneity with Piedmontese culture, especially in the medieval era. Where possible we have obviously included specific Piedmontese references.

Due to many of its characteristics, the BRANDO can be correlated to the ancestral dances that we danced in a circle around the fire. The word BRANDO itself means fire in the languages of our ancestors who arrived in Piedmont and Montferrat in the Early Middle Ages. This ritual also seems to have been associated in ancient times with ceremonies for reaching adulthood and therefore the status of warrior. Furthermore, uses connected to different rituals are not excluded, as could be observed more generally for many ancestral dances done around the fire.

However, the available medieval documents show that until the fourteenth century the circle dances had various names, such as CAROLA and VIRELAI, but not the name BRANDO or other names with this etymological root.

During the fifteenth century, BASSE DANCE quickly became a ceremonial fashion of a princely type in courts and castles, "BASSE" because without large leaps which were unsuitable for clothes and nobility.

The BASSE DANCE includes parts that are a little more lively and swaying. These parts have different tempos and rhythms which make the whole less boring. They were described for the first time in history in northern Italy in 1455. The musician, however, had difficulty managing the measures of time for these dances and in fact reported that, within the BASSE DANCE, these moving parts are from peasant people. We therefore have evidence of the folk origin of the moving parts within the BASSE DANCE. At the end of the fifteenth century these dances

were fixed in two codes, one of which is a luxury one, written in gold and silver at the court of Burgundy. In these codes the moved parts of now ancient popular origin are called BRANLE.

These moving parts of the BASSE DANCE are called BRANLE in Burgundy and France, while they are called BRANDO in Piedmont and Montferrat.

The first mention of the term BRANLE as dance dates back to around 1495 (Michel Toulouza, L'ART DE BIEN DANSER). This is a new definition, given by Michel Toulouza in an arbitrary way to describe the swaying movement of the feet. In this sense, BRANLE was born exactly on this date with the publication of this code [58].

The term BRANDO, understood as dance, appeared for the first time in 1499 at the Estense Court of Ferrara. It was an interlude dance between one part and another of some theatrical performances [92].

The BRANDO dance is documented in Piedmont for the first time in the Carnival of the year 1525 in Valperga in the province of Turin. Already at this date it was a popular dance for the Piedmontese, but unknown for the foreign guests who came from the "Venetian country" [94].

BASSE DANCES in the fifteenth century spread quickly in the space of a few decades in all the castles of the French and Piedmont area, so as to constitute a noble model that all the people try to emulate, especially in their less ceremonious and more cheerful component, which moreover already came from the folk dances of the previous century and of which perhaps even the memory had been lost.

The theatrical performances at the Estense Court with the intermezzo BRANDO which was much more popular

than anything else also spread BRANDO's fame.

In the years from 1500 to 1520, BASSE DANCE, after having reached its peak, becomes antiquated and is almost no longer danced, while at a folk level the new fashion is strongly established whereby everyone in Montferrat dances the BRANDO while in France everyone dances the BRANLE.

From the documents we can see that at the time there was no doubt that one was equivalent to the other. The dance had become so popular that the nobles in Montferrat no longer considered it dignified for them to dance it.

In the sixteenth century the new fashion of BRANDO may have continued to resume and incorporate within this denomination other old circle dances which, as a name, have apparently disappeared. Furthermore, the creativity of French and Italian musicians of the sixteenth century gave rise to many dozens of new pieces with basic characteristics that are very little related to the medieval originals. In short, with the name BRANDO or BRANLE a varied series of dances and music pop out. But, they are related to each other more by the fashionable name than by their musical or dance technical characteristics.

The BRANDO in Piedmont was danced widely in the Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. It then tended to become antiquated in the first half of the nineteenth century, but remained alive on the Montferrat hills, where in these recent years there has been an important renaissance within Folk music.

The use of BRANDO in Piedmont as a dance for conscripts who have reached adulthood to do military service is natural

and ancestral. We therefore cannot exclude some folk use which in Piedmont, with this specific purpose, may have been fashionable since the sixteenth century. A period that corresponds precisely to the period of maximum diffusion of BRANDO. The musical form of the current BRANDO could, however, be more correlated with an update between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, while the second half of the Nineteenth Century represents a period of decline of the BRANDO where its use as a conscript dance could only be explained in certain areas of Montferrat with greater maintenance of tradition. Indeed, precisely because it had lost its diffusion as a general fashion, in the Nineteenth Century the BRANDO may have resumed a more limited and ancestral context of use in the Montferrat hills, as a conscript dance.