DIRETTORE RESPONSABILE
Angelo Torre

COMITATO DI DIREZIONE
Renata Ago, Angiolina Arru, Michela Barbot, Emmanuel Betta, Roberto Bizzocchi, Tommaso Bobbio, Benedetta Borello, Sabina Brevaglieri, Marco Buttino, Eleonora Canepari, Simona Cerutti, Simone Collavini, Federica Favino, Giovanna Fiume, Andrea Gamberini, Luca Giana, Isabelle Grangaud, Gabriella Gribaudi, Alice Ingold, Margareth Lanzinger, Giuliano Milani, Alessandra Molinari, Diego Moreno, Mark Pearce, Osvaldo Raggio, Domenico Rizzo, Biagio Salvemini, Vittorio Tigrino, Angelo Torre, Massimo Vallerani

SEGRETERIA DI REDAZIONE
Vittorio Tigrino
c/o Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici
Università degli Studi del Piemonte Orientale
Piazza S. Eusebio, 5
13100 Vercelli
tel. 0161228368 – fax 0161269959
e-mail: vittorio.tigrino@uniupo.it

La rivista è presente in: Web of Science (Art & Humanities Citations Index), Current Contents, Scopus Bibliographic Database, ERIH Plus, Historical Abstracts, America: History and Life, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), Current Abstracts, Periodicals Index Online, JournalSeek, Essper, Articoli italiani di periodici accademici (AIDA), Bibliografia storica nazionale, Analecta-Spoglio dei periodici italiani, Dialnet, Fondazione Istituto F. Datini, Primo Central (Ex Libris), EDS (Ebsco), Catalogo italiano dei periodici (ACNP); Google Scholar.
THE GRAFFITI OF THE INQUISITORIAL PRISON
IN PALERMO: NEW PERSPECTIVES

edited by Giovanna Fiume and Mercedes García-Arenal

Introduction, di G.F., M.G.-A. .............................................................. 3

JOHANN PETITJEAN, *Inscribing, Writing and Drawing in the Prisons of the Inquisition. Methodological Issues and Research Perspectives on Graffiti* .............................................................. 33


GIOVANNA FUI ME, *Justice, Expiation and Forgiveness in the Graffiti and Drawings of Palermo’s Secret Prisons* ................... 33

VALERIA LA MONTA, *Saints in Prison: Francesco Baronio’s Calendar* ...................................................................................... 33

ANTONIO CASTILLO GÓMEZ, *Secret Voices. Prison Graffiti in the Spanish Empire* .............................................................. 33

RICERCHE

LUIGI PICCIONI, *La natura come mestiere. Tre generazioni di guardiaparco in Abruzzo* .............................................................. 33

ANDREA LANZA, *Carpentieri in sciopero. Una lotta operaia nella Parigi del 1845 e i suoi significati politici* .......................................... 33
FORUM: GENEALOGIE


JÉRÔME MALHACHE, *Genealogie e storia familiare, una identità da trasmettere*

PAOLO ROSSI, ROBERTO BIZZOCCHI, *La genealogia come disciplina auxiliaria della genetica*
INTRODUCTION

THE GRAFFITI OF THE INQUISITORIAL PRISON IN PALERMO: NEW PERSPECTIVES

During his travels in Sicily from November 1785 to February 1786, University of Copenhagen theology professor Friedrik Münter made room in his itinerary for a visit to the prisons of the recently abolished Holy Office, and his travel narrative includes the first known description of the prison\(^1\). The building would then be used for nearly two centuries to house judicial offices, along with the archives of the Royal Chancery, the civil court, the customs office, the commercial court, etc. In 1904 Vito la Mantia described some of the drawings and transcribed several of the inscriptions in the cells of the penance prison located inside the Steri (the Chiaromonte family’s palace), but not the secret prison\(^2\). However, this graphic production appears not to have aroused significant interest until two years later, in 1906, during the process of relocating the criminal court, when all of the archival records were transferred to the former Convento della Gancia, located nearby. The Palermo city council then began to restore the Steri’s adjoining buildings, and during the remodelling work the whitewash suddenly fell off the wall of a room on the upper floor, revealing an image. News of the find was sent to Giuseppe Pitrè, Senator of the Kingdom, physician, and historian of popular traditions, who immediately visited the site and speculated that more images must have been concealed under the many layers of whitewash. He would spend six months meticulously peeling off layers of paint, a task so delicate he decided to carry it out himself. «Gradually», he writes, «figures, drawings, inscriptions and verses [covering the walls] took shape before my very eyes. It was a true lost generation»\(^3\).

Despite Pitrè’s find, featured in the local newspapers, the walls were replastered\(^4\) to make way for new judicial offices housed in the former cells up until the end of World War II. In 1964, author Leonardo Sciascia confessed that during the building restoration he had sneaked into the cells located inside the Steri proper – therefore not the same ones described by Pitrè in the building located outside the palace –,
which was slated to become the main building of the university. He had had photographs taken of the drawings and graffiti on the walls of three cells and the mezzanine between the ground floor and the top floor, which Pitrè had not discovered. Sciascia paints a similar picture to the one described in 1906 by Pitrè⁵: the space was completely covered in the prisoners’ drawings, expressing their sorrows and thoughts⁶, all of them dating from between 1770 and 1782. Upon returning ten years later, he discovered that his find had been ruined. «A remarkable testimony, perhaps unlike any other, had been destroyed»⁷. Pitrè discovered the cells on the top floor of the secret prison; Sciascia, the cells of the penance prison; however, it was only with the restoration carried out in 2000-2007 that the writings, drawings and graffiti on the bottom floor of the secret prison came to light, revealing the full extent of the phenomenon.

These most recent restoration efforts have brought to light a truly exceptional testimony, reviving the «soundless screams» of the inmates awaiting trial in the secret prison of the Spanish Holy Office in Sicily. As the restorers uncovered names and dates, Maria Sofia Messana, drawing on her extraordinary database with files on all the trials, recovered the judicial stories of the inmates, bringing the cell «back to life»⁸. The cárceles secretas were built in 1603 and would remain in operation until 1782. Inside the Steri palace proper there were other prison cells for the penance of convicts who had already been sentenced. These inmates, too, left their mark on the walls, but, as Sciascia wrote, all but a few – undoubtedly important – vestiges have survived. These vestiges, therefore, tell us about an institution – the inquisitorial tribunal –, about a detention centre – the prison –, and about the subjects who lived there and left rich traces of their presence. They bring us face-to-face with a stratified documentary deposit that brings together elements of the political, institutional, cultural and religious history of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Sicily.

Graffiti, drawings and writings are often found in places of confinement; the prison population draws out of necessity, driven by a whole range of motivations. Marks of detainees’ passage can be found illustrating the walls of prisons both secular⁹ and ecclesiastical¹⁰, asylums¹¹, dungeons in towers¹² and castles¹³, lazarettos¹⁴, libraries¹⁵ and even churches¹⁶. Of the prisons of the Inquisition, the Torre del Trovador, in Zaragoza’s Aljafería Palace, conserves walls «full of names, graffiti and drawings: a checker- or chessboard, crosses, stars, a caricature, boats, fish, birds and short inscriptions»¹⁷. In the Umbrian town of Narni, there is a cell in the convent of Santa Maria Maggiore, former local headquarters of the Holy Office, whose walls are completely covered
in graffiti. There are writings, crosses, a sun, a moon, a meridian, a tree, a falconer, doves with one leg bound carrying olive branches in their beaks, Saint Nicholas of Bari, the name Giuseppe Andrea Lombardini alongside the date 4 December 1759 and the name Andrea Pasqualucci alongside the date 1811; the most recent date written is 1845.

Unlike prison writers in the vein of the sixteenth-century English dissidents or the twentieth century’s Antonio Gramsci, in Narni, Zaragoza and Palermo the prisoners did not write in prison or from prison, but rather wrote the prison, using the walls in lieu of paper, as in a palimpsest. The walls of these places of incarceration and punishment are often plastered and repainted, and old writings emerge from beneath newer ones, creating a suggestive documentary stratification, a collage of words and drawings. They are the palimpsests produced by the repeated whitewashing that Pitrè described. «Even though the walls appear to have filled up in a disorganised, apparently spontaneous fashion, the graffiti could not have been carried out with the quick, covert gestures of an act done in secret. They must have taken quite some time to complete.»

We may therefore assume that this activity was largely tolerated by the jailers, who do not seem to have interpreted it as a challenge to their authority.

How should this find be approached? How should graffiti be studied? And how do we propose to study it here? At the outset, we, the editors of this monograph, shared a common aim and background; we had both worked at length with inquisitorial sources, and were all too familiar with the problems that these sources pose for historians. When we came up with the idea for this monograph, our objective was first and foremost to explore new methods and approaches that could help us to better use graffiti as a historical source. We also shared a common interest in hearing the voices of those who created them, in particular given our shared concern as to the limitations of the Inquisition’s trial documents. Essentially, our aim is to express our own voice and testimony as historians, to bring together our time and theirs, our place and theirs, to give a life in the present to people and situations of the past, and to render them, to the extent possible, intelligible. The graffiti of Palermo’s Steri, as mentioned, have already been the object of numerous studies, starting with Pitrè’s initial discovery, and especially since the palace was restored and opened to the public in 2011. They have been restored, described and transcribed, and have served as the basis for quite a few studies. And yet, the perplexity that they elicit has not dissipated, but rather grown. It is only now that we have begun to peel back the different levels of meaning, like the layers of an onion, revealing a whole new degree of complexity as the graphic and iconographic
material is matched up with other documentary sources, in particular those of the Inquisition itself.

We have now come to understand that the graffiti cannot be studied on its own as a one-dimensional source. However, we are also well aware of the degree to which historians have contested the validity of inquisitorial sources as historical evidence, since everything they tell us is filtered through the eyes and ideology of the Holy Office (as highlighted by García-Arenal in her contribution to this volume). It is undeniable that the duress and torture involved in the Inquisition’s interrogations, coupled with the survival strategies of the accused, casts a veil over the facts, making it very difficult for the historian to know what is actually going on, and to arrive at the victim’s true voice, identity and religious credence or affiliation. We believe that this situation makes the graffiti particularly valuable. Instead of a dialogue between inquisitors and defendants, the graffiti open up a chorus of voices; how can we hear them, comprehend them, make sense of them? In our opinion, which we will put forward here, the combination of graphic and iconographic sources produced by the prisoners, together with more «commonplace» Inquisition materials such as trial documents and relaciones de causa, should encourage a profound revision of the field, and lead to further studies on these materials and even on the very institution of the Holy Office. As Giovanna Fiume argues in her contribution, while the effort of cross-referencing the graffiti with the Inquisition documentation has certainly produced considerable results, these nevertheless remain insufficient. The papers included here go a step further, proposing a broader contextualisation: with contemporary urban graphic culture (Fiume), with liturgy and theological knowledge (La Motta), with cultural anthropology (Petitjean), and with interconnected histories at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, taken within a specific political context (García-Arenal and La Motta). With this monograph we hope to explore new paths and methodological possibilities, in order to show that the Steri graffiti should be examined in the light of a different sort of historiography. For example, since the 1980s, witnessing and testimony have been the object of a great deal of writing in different fields, from cultural studies to history, from history of emotions to literature. This body of work has essentially turned «testimony» into the subversive language of the oppressed and subaltern groups, and has found in it a crucially important vehicle for moral sensitivity toward the victims of atrocity, and for discovering these victims’ self-representation. There is also a growing and fascinating genre known as «prison literature», which consists of different forms of writing, such as letters, defences, petitions, prologues, etc., originating in prison. Of particular interest
in understanding prison graffiti is to compare it with this other type of documents originating in prison, confiscated from prisoners and (only rarely) enclosed within the trial documents. They also invite comparison with the letters written by Christian captives, held in slavery in the North African regencies, to family members and to secular and ecclesiastic redeemers, describing their terrible loss of liberty and uncertainty about their own future.

We have likewise incorporated theoretical studies linking punishment to prison writing, which is often forbidden and carried out in secret. What these studies on prison writing are also showing is just how much the experience of prison, and in particular the prisons of the Inquisition, profoundly affected the religious life of the early modern period, and the extent to which having so many of their members incarcerated, along with the fear of imprisonment, shaped different dissenting or persecuted religious groups and led to the glorification of martyrdom. Prisons are therefore studied as the production site of a unique religious culture; what type of religiosity emerges, given the mixed make-up of the prison population? What religious practices take place in the cells (praying, reciting the rosary, lighting candles, listening to mass celebrated in the hall, etc.)? What type of religious interaction takes place between prisoners held in the same cell?

The experience of prison and its possible translation into religious radicalisation has also been the object of recent writings, particularly with respect to Islam in Europe. Various authors, mainly in France and Germany, have pointed out how today’s prisons have repeatedly emerged as the locus of religious reactivation. Religion can provide a normative system of reference in the harsh, violent world of prison, and restore an identity disrupted by stigmatisation, isolation and loss of privacy, and may favour and integrate inmates’ sociability. The Chiaromonte graffiti is therefore situated at the intersection of a number of highly relevant and productive historiographical questions.

Indeed, this graffiti clearly constitutes victims’ first-hand account of an appalling situation, a «soundless scream». However, this undeniable truth leads us to a whole series of questions that the authors of the studies in this volume have sought to answer. In the first place, we must explain the characteristics and purpose of the graffiti. It is the victims’ testimony and the expression of their pain, of their desire to fight against depersonalisation and the dissolution of the individual, and, in some cases, of their religious radicalisation. It is also a pastime, a form of consolation and of self-representation, a way to make clear one’s stance or express a belief, to leave a record of a lived experience, with names and dates included. It is an appropriation of space. But to whom was it dir-
ected? Or was it more of a soliloquy? It is hard to imagine the graffiti as a mere soliloquy, considering the monumental proportions of some of the writings and drawings. Perhaps they began as such, but that should not prevent us from reading them in terms of chronicles, of a chorus of voices, of dialogue with those who came before and after in the cell, as well as with the inquisitors. The relationships between cellmates are crucial in order to understand these writings, and it is in the *relaciones de causa* and the trial documents, as well as in the signatures and initials on the walls, that we are to discover the identities of these cellmates and the dynamics between them over multiple years spent together in prison. One also writes for one’s cellmates, for the prisoners to come, and, as we have said, for the inquisitors; it is they who will see and read what is inscribed on the walls, which the prisoners who paint and write on them are fully aware of. We have no doubt, as the essays that follow will show, that the Inquisition knew of these writings, and there are even some indications that they used them against the defendants at trial. There is also evidence to this effect in Inquisition trial documents from inmates at other jails where graffiti has not been preserved. For example, in Lisbon, a Judeo-Converso was accused by his cellmate of disliking the virgins and saints painted on the cell walls and turning his back to them. In another case, a Judeo-Converso painted a galleon in full sail but refused to paint crosses on the sails when his cellmate and accuser asked him to do so26. In other words, references to paintings and graffiti almost always show up in the trial documents as a factor that worsens the accusations against the inmate in question, as further proof of guilt. The restoration of the Chiaromonte provides grounds to ask whether the Inquisition might have occasionally provided materials to carry out the paintings, bearing in mind, however, that 90% of the graffiti were made with resources directly available to the prisoners: their handcuffs for the graffiti proper, candle smoke, or powder from the red bricks of the floor. The colours found exclusively in one cell on the top floor may have been purchased by the prisoner, who, based on the quality of the images, might have been a painter. We do know that on the top floor preference was given to well-to-do prisoners, who were able to purchase certain comforts such as chairs. In fact, we know that by turning a blind eye the Inquisition gave prisoners access to paper and ink, even though it was forbidden to communicate with the outside world. Did they do so in order to gain access to their inner forum? In the hopes that they would give themselves away? There are indications, here in the form of letters included in the trial documents, that on occasion members of the Inquisition actively promoted this form of writing in order to secure a conviction27. Does this mean that graffiti is
Introduction

a means of communicating with – or even defying – the authorities? Or, perhaps, of proving one’s piety and seeking reconciliation? Can graffiti be compared with súplicas (petitions), for example? Since the cells were visited by the jailers and prison directors, it is also worth asking whether they had a hand in determining which paintings and writings were preserved. If the walls are a sort of palimpsest, did the Inquisition have some of them erased? Was there a tendency to preserve mainly devotional images and Catholic iconography? Iconography and graffiti constitute a way for the defendants to challenge authority, but also to assist it, reconcile themselves with it, and demonstrate their devotion in the face of accusations that they had deviated from proper Catholic belief.

It is with this mind to revision that we have brought together these five essays, which fan out from the current state of the art along new avenues of research and exploration. The first two provide an overview or framework in order to rethink and situate the Steri graffiti. Antonio Castillo Gómez extends this overview across the territories of the Hispanic Monarchy, connecting a series of dots that will help us understand the reasons why the prisoners wrote and painted on their cell walls, as well as what it was that they wrote and painted. In this way, he brings out both the common and the unique aspects of the Palermo graffiti. Johann Petitjean proposes an analysis of the graffiti based on new perspectives in the social and cultural anthropology of the written word. To do so, he employs concepts and methods from an array of disciplines, most notably linguistics and palaeography, in order to interpret these writings as speech(less) acts that the prisoners performed not only to document their experience but also to overcome it, while at the same time reclaiming their space and time in prison. His proposal has several aspects in common with Giovanna Fiume’s essay, with the difference that while Petitjean deals with methodology, Fiume focuses directly on a case study of cell 3, on the ground floor. She first analyses the inscriptions and how they are intertwined with the images (here the verbal and the visual are closely connected). Writing/drawing is an action told and recorded through the graffiti, which constitutes the traces of an experience. The relationship between the authors and their graffiti is not so much intellectual as physical, corporeal: they are made with saliva, urine, sperm, perhaps even blood; they pray to them, touch them, insult them, hit them, sully them. The biographical traces of the prisoners have literally been incorporated into the prison. Through this action the subject turns a hostile space into a domestic and sacred one. At the same time, he claims his dominion over it, highlighting important elements of his own religious convictions, and authorising himself to take charge of the devotional practices carried out in this space. In
particular, the «pictorial cycle» of cell 3 allows us to track down the iconographic models at play, identified as votive aediculae and the Via Crucis, as well as the authors’ proximity-based iconic memory. But the drawings and graffiti are also linked through iconographic tradition to hagiography and theology, as emerges in the representation of the Leviathan. In the references to the harsh conditions of the prison, in the unrelenting references to the suffering of the righteous, one can read an implicit delegitimisation and criticism of the actions of a tribunal that does not consider this suffering to be sufficient punishment to merit forgiveness.

Based on the graffiti, can we infer the prisoners’ conception of justice, their relationship with the authorities, and whether they felt the tribunal had the right to judge their actions? Can we consider these walls as a space beyond the reach of authority? This source, therefore, also pushes us to reflect on the issue of authority, of obedience and its limits, as well as on the ways of resisting the authorities’ demands. Perhaps it speaks to a «history from below» of obedience and its limits. The radicalising tendencies of prison experience are examined by Mercedes García-Arenal. Through a joint analysis of the walls of cell 2 on ground floor and the Inquisition documents that reference the authors who wrote on them, she proposes a series of connected histories, in which we see how bonds of friendship and trust favour a defiant religious stance toward the Inquisition. This stance, however, seems to have little to do with the prisoners’ initial beliefs, based on how they are described by other witnesses and cellmates. In García-Arenal’s reading of the sources, the three inmates at the heart of her essay undergo a process of radicalisation and reaffirmation of their religious identity that surpasses or even supplants the religious beliefs they held at the outset of their ordeal. She presents us with the voice of individuals whose resistance to their abject circumstances pushes them to reaffirm – or even create – an almost fictitious identity, even at the cost of their lives. The cell walls, taken in conjunction with the trial documents, reflect not only this path of radicalised self-affirmation and opposition to Catholicism and its representatives, the inquisitors, but moreover raise very intriguing questions to bear in mind when approaching these materials, in particular the separation or dissonance between religious identity and religious belief. Lastly, Valeria La Motta also focuses on a case study, in this case of cell 5 on top floor, also known as the cell of St Rocco. According to Pitrè, this was once the cell of Francesco Baronio, a cleric and scholar imprisoned in 1647, who appears to have been incarcerated not for religious reasons so much as for his participation in the 1647 uprising against the Spanish. Apart from offering a biographical sketch
of Baronio and an introduction to the political (and not just religious) contexts that held sway over the prisoners’ condition and, often, the outcome of their cases, La Motta demonstrates that the figures on the cell walls in fact constitute a liturgical calendar. More specifically, in order to keep track of his time spent behind bars, Baronio marked the days by carefully painting their corresponding patron saint on the wall. It is, therefore, yet another clear attempt to take control of space and time in prison, fighting back against the depersonalisation they were liable to produce. These three essays on specific cells also show, in contrast to the broad frameworks drawn in the essays by Castillo Gómez and Petitjean, the enormous rewards of such a detailed analysis of the small-scale, clearly delimited space that the prisoners endeavoured to appropriate as best they could. Thus, these five essays propose different lenses and different perspectives that converge on an intertwined set of questions and conclusions. Beyond their methodological differences, they share a number of common traits: the contextualisation and connection of what is written on the walls with the cultural, religious, visual and graphic universe of the people who, very much against their will, were forced to spend time among the walls of the inquisitorial prison. We believe that the authors have reached new depths in the interpretation of the Steri graffiti, and that in doing so they have brought to light a whole new series of questions.

GIOVANNA FIUME
Università di Palermo
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche
 giovannafiume@unipa.it

MERCEDES GARCÍA-ARENAL
CSIC (Spanish National Research Council)
Grupo de Investigación de Historia Cultural del Mediterráneo (ILC-CCHS)
 mercedes.garciaarelal@cchs.csic.es

Note al testo
1 Published in Copenhagen in 1790, the book was later translated into Italian. F. MÜNTERS, Viaggio in Sicilia, Palermo 1823; it has since been reprinted several times. The tribunal was abolished in 1782. Cf. V. SCIUTI RUSSI, Reformismo settecentesco e Inquisizione siciliana. L’abolizione del «terrible Monstre» negli scritti di Friedrik Münter, in «Rivista storica italiana», CXV/1 (2003).
3 G. Pitrè (Palermo 1841-1916), *Del Sant'Uffizio a Palermo e di un carcere di esso*, Roma 1940, pp. 11-2. As can be seen, the book was published posthumously.

4 This was, then, the fifth coat of plaster, after the four described by Pitrè: «white, the first and the second; yellowish, the third [...] and a fourth coat of mud-like plaster»; lastly, some walls had been completely blackened». Ivi, p. 13.


7 Responsibility falls to the regional board of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, which should have safeguarded it. Ivi, p. 7.


19 Mori, *Né strapunto né lume* cit., p. 99. In this case they are writings, drawings and soldiers’ names from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. The authors were anarchists and communists, political dissidents who left a record of their ideas and sentiments (against
law enforcement officers, judges, the bourgeoisie and fascists, and in favour of freedom, Lenin, Russia, the Revolution and the proletariat).


24 See N. Muchnik, Troubles prisons (forthcoming).

