



Project Gallery

Galleys and gameboards: graffiti at the Prigione del Castello, Noto Antica, Sicily

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The Central Mediterranean Penal Heritage Project (CMPHP) employs remote-sensing techniques to study and preserve archaeological remains of human confinement. Within this larger project, digital photogrammetry was used to document part of the castle prison in Noto Antica to identify and digitally preserve graffiti depicting galleys and gameboards.

Keywords: Mediterranean Europe, Early Modern, photogrammetry, graffiti, confinement, games

Introduction

Gameboards and stylised galleys carved into the stone at the Prigione del Castello, or castle prison, in Noto Antica, Sicily, provide insight into the complicated nature of life in confinement. Left to their own devices, prisoners found amusement or escape through play and storytelling (Casella 2009) while the threat of the torturous life of the *forzato* (convicted galley-rower) hung ever present over them (Palmer 2021). The Central Mediterranean Penal Heritage Project (CMPHP), which began in the summer of 2023, investigates sites of confinement from the fifteenth to early twentieth centuries in the central Mediterranean for the purposes of archaeological analysis, heritage preservation and public outreach. The project aims to create a diachronic comparative analysis of sites of confinement in this region to better understand the ways in which prisoners responded to the various and changing forms of confinement.

Background

The plateau on which Noto Antica (Figure 1) rests was continuously inhabited from at least the ninth century BC to the seventeenth century. Sometimes referred to as the ‘*Sicilian Pompeii*’, the city of an estimated 26 000 inhabitants was destroyed in an earthquake in 1693 and subsequently abandoned (Barone & Nuccio 2017); the Baroque city of Noto was then constructed some 10km away. The graffiti at the castle prison is well known to locals who walk

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Figure 1. Map of south-eastern Sicily showing Noto Antica's location (figure by Scott Kirk; base map: Earthstar Geographics).

the trails of this medieval city turned archaeological park. Gambin and Kassulke (2023) note that some masonry from the prison has been reused elsewhere in the city, as evidenced by ship graffiti found at the church of the Madonna dei Miracoli. The digital photogrammetric modelling of the castle prison itself has revealed the graffiti still visible on the stone there.

Methods

The CMPHP used digital photogrammetry to create a digital surrogate of the castle prison of Noto Antica. A single photogrammetric image set was captured for each of two rooms of the prison where graffiti were identified. A total of 747 digital photographs were taken with a Nikon D5300 DSLR camera equipped with a stock Nikon 18–55mm VR II lens and processed using Agisoft Metashape v. 2.1.0 (Figure 2).

The model was imported into Blender 4.0 to manipulate the lighting within a digital environment, including light intensity, angle and the presence of ambient light. An animation was then created (after Bertocci *et al.* 2018) and exported as a series of png files. The frames in which the graffiti were most visible were then imported into open-source image manipulation software (GIMP 2.10.36) and traced using a stylus and touchscreen monitor to create the first drawings of these graffiti.

Results

Analysis of the full catalogue of graffiti at the castle prison in Noto Antica is still underway, but seven pieces of nautical graffiti, five rectangular, target-like carvings and a humanoid head



Figure 2. Capturing photogrammetric image sets of the two rooms of the castle prison in Noto Antica (photographs by Sara Mitrovic).

have so far been identified (Figures 3 & 4). Consistent placement of the target-like graffiti on horizontal surfaces suggests that they were gameboards for the game known as Nine Men's Morris, while the nautical graffiti can be linked to vessels used by the Knights of Malta in the sixteenth century (Figure 5).



Figure 3. Screen captures of the south-facing wall of the cell from the digital surrogate: left) with no digital elaboration; and right) with elaboration of the nautical graffiti (figure by authors).

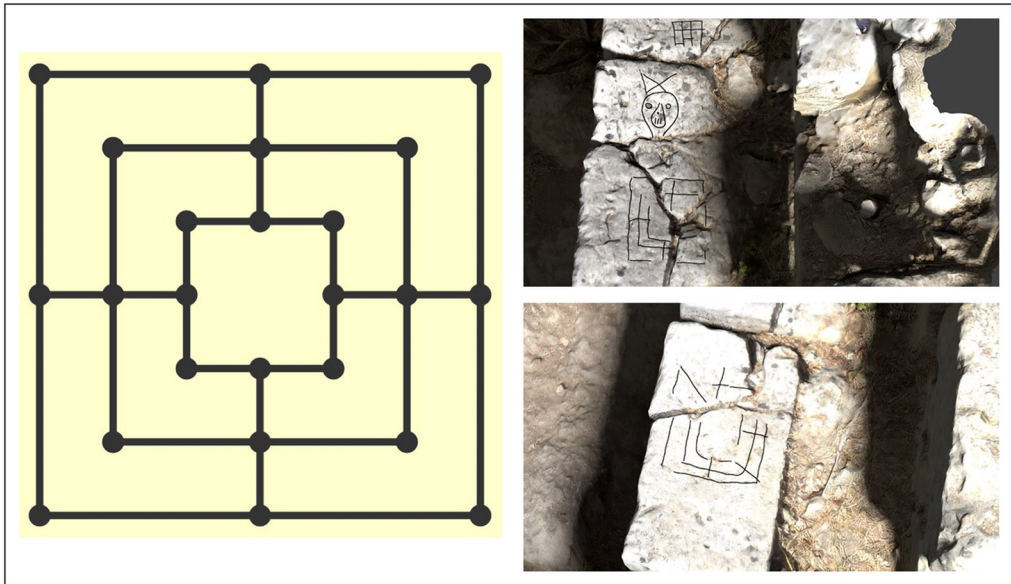


Figure 4. Left) schematic of Nine Men's Morris board (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nine_Men%27s_Morris_board.svg#filelinks, public domain); right) details of the western wall of the cell visible in the digital surrogate of Noto Antica's castle prison (figure by authors).

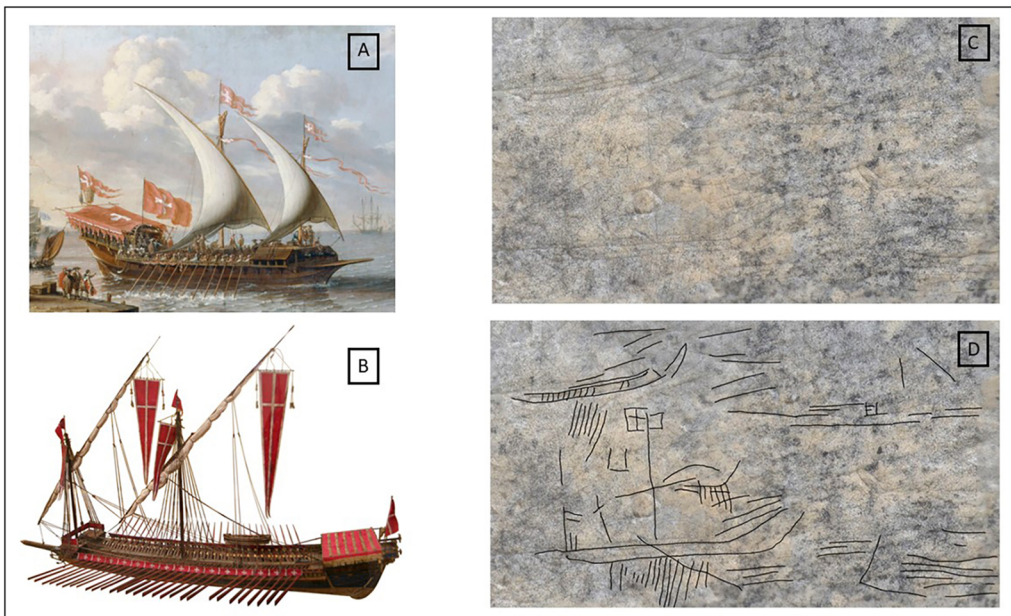


Figure 5. A) A Galley off Malta painted by Lorenzo a Castro c. 1680 (© Dulwich Picture Gallery, reproduced with permission); B) digital illustration of a Maltese galley by Myriam Thyges (CC-BY-SA-3.0); C & D) detail of engravings on a south-facing castle prison wall and their digital elaboration (figure by the authors).

Evidence for the playing of Nine Men's Morris appears across the Mediterranean and Europe throughout history, and the game may date back as far as 1400 BC (Bell 1969). Play is meaningful, perhaps even more so for people in confinement, and the presence of carved gameboards suggests that the guards at Noto Antica allowed the prisoners this leniency. Thus, while it may not have been an active form of resistance, play can be more usefully framed as 'opposition'—a term broad enough to include both resistance and 'defiance' at the erasure of humanity (Eisen 1988: 83). Not only do gameboards provide a window into the long hours of life in captivity in this 4m² cell, but we can estimate, based on the number of gameboards, that the cell held 10 or more people.

The nautical graffiti were identified using the online resource of the Malta Ship Graffiti Project (<https://maltashipgraffiti.org/>). Three ships are identified as galleys based on the depiction of a low-lying hull, triangular lanteen sails or a series of parallel lines representing oars on the sides of the ships. Two ships fly flags with the cross of the Order of St John—also known as the Knights Hospitaller. Members of the order were equal part crusader and corsair having been installed in the Maltese archipelago by Charles V in AD 1530 and ruling there until the Napoleonic period. The galley, a common type of ship used by the order, would have been well known to the people who inhabited the islands of the central Mediterranean. Each galley required approximately 280 rowers. Even during times of peace, Mediterranean nations would have employed the forced labour of some 20 000 rowers in the form of (mostly Muslim) enslaved individuals, *forzati* or debtors (*buonvoglie*) (Davis 2007; Palmer 2021).

Conclusions

In the seventeenth century, confinement was not the primary form of punishment; prisoners typically faced other physical forms of discipline such as labour on board a galley. The CMPHP reveals graffiti that links prisoners in the castle at Noto Antica to the galleys. While the carvings may foretell the destiny of prisoners as galley rowers, they may also mark the retelling of tales of privateering in the Mediterranean. The prison at Noto Antica is an important case study for understanding imprisonment in the Early Modern period, contrasting use of the intensively surveilled prisons of the Late Modern world. The captives' engagement in play and storytelling through the creation of art could be interpreted as 'opposition' at the Prigione del Castello and it provides us with a novel means to engage with the ways in which the prisoners confined there held onto their humanity.

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