

THE GOZO PRISONS GRAFFITI

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PART I – THE GRAFFITI

The tradition of engraving on walls one's name or a distinguishing mark runs through the ages. In the Maltese Islands it dates back to the Tarxien period (2500-2000 B.C.) and a number of public places exhibit modern graffiti as if to perpetuate this practice. By graffiti we refer to the incision, scribbling or scratching on stone walls of pictures of ships or other symbols, names, dates or the length of time spent in a prison cell. It is interesting to note that graffiti in the Maltese Islands have been found mainly on the interior and exterior walls of churches, walls of prison cells, dungeons, internal yards of the Order's Court of Justice, coastal towers and other similar locations. In places of fortune or in places of misfortune man thought it fit to leave his imprint for posterity.

Some of the graffiti under survey are simple primitive representations of ships which add no technical data to what we already know. They are crude caricatures of ships of the period. It must be emphasised that no accurate dating can be deduced from such graffiti; approximations are attempted on the basis of experience in ship recognition. These ship graffiti were never intended to be accurate records of naval architecture. Therefore, there should not be over-reading in these rudimentary and diagrammatical engravings. They should be treated simply as the most direct evidence, pictorial too, drawn by salt-hardened people themselves as rough, graphic designs, the product of course men. While no artistic merit can be attached to these graffiti, it is evident that they are not the work of children. The idle prisoners were permitted to scribble on corridor and cell walls. However, such casual scratchings can never be treated as *ex-voto* offerings.

Usually graffiti are not easily seen from a distance; they were never intended to be wall decorations but reflect man's inherent need to assert himself. Graffiti, especially those depicting ships and upraised hands on church walls, may be considered as cult objects; but similar graffiti in different places may denote different connotations.

Some graffiti were discovered during restoration work in the old prisons of Gozo. On 17th March, 1989 the Museums Department assigned Ms J. Cassar and Mr J. Muscat to investigate, document and report on the findings with special attention to stone preservation and the identification of the graffiti.

The Gozo old prisons yielded one of the richest collections of engravings which offers ample scope for investigation and this preliminary survey is merely intended to stimulate further research. Similar collections were discovered in the Natural History Museums of Malta and Gozo; it must be emphasised that both collections need further study.

The upper entrance door to the Gozo old prisons leads to an open air corridor. This corridor has an access to cell no. 3 on the right hand wall and leads into the internal yard. From the yard one finds the doors of cells no. 1 and 2. The lower prison door leads into another corridor; on the left hand side, one finds the doors to cells nos. 4 and 5. As work was still in progress, only 60 per cent of the whole premises was examined, though the rest, when properly restored, should show up more graffiti. Cell numbers were chosen for the purpose of this survey to facilitate the location of the graffiti under review.

It was noticed that the buttresses strengthening the left hand side of the upper corridor were originally covered by an old type of black plaster (*gir iswed*). This was subsequently cemented over, thus covering a certain number of graffiti. Unfortunately, these are now difficult to uncover and restore.

Cells nos. 2 and 3 measure $8\frac{1}{2}$ ft by 7ft with barrel-vaulted ceiling while cells nos. 1, 4 and 5 are somewhat smaller, measuring $8\frac{1}{2}$ ft by $6\frac{1}{2}$ ft with the same type of ceiling. The upper corridor is only $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft wide, the lower one 5ft. One can still note the original massive wooden doors and windows in place while most of the original iron work is in good condition. Some drainage holes in cell corners lack iron gratings.

The graffiti were hidden under several layers of whitewash. Luckily, no colours were used and the plaster was easily removed. It should be noted that a simple coat of whitewash was used in cells from time to time for reasons of hygiene.

As might be expected, graffiti in the cells were incised above the space taken up by the wooden bed, between the fourth and the seventh course, and sometimes higher when a prisoner used to stand on his bed. There are Xs and fish type markings high up in the arch of the ceilings. All walls were used for graffiti work.

It might have been by chance or design that certain cells were allocated to a specific type of prisoner. In cell no. 1, referred to as the *Speronara* Cell, there is the greatest collection of *speronara* graffiti; perhaps this cell was reserved for local sailors familiar with that type of boat. Cell no. 2, conveniently named Foreign Ships

Cell, is covered mostly with ship graffiti of foreign design. In my opinion, a sailor or any other person would more likely depict an object familiar to him, such as a ship, rather than something else. In cell no. 5, the Knights Cell, one finds perhaps the only galley graffiti in the whole collection. Besides, the majority of eight-pointed crosses are also found in this cell. It is assumed that this cell was reserved for members of the Order. Here, one incision gives the date 1638.

Certain graffiti need further cleaning as they are still covered with plaster. Regrettably, certain pointing in the cells has been done with cement and there are areas ruined by cement coatings. Luckily enough, some type of local stone can withstand centuries of exposure to the atmosphere without excessive deterioration, depending on location. On the whole, the condition of the stone in the prison is satisfactory. In certain areas there are too many stone dressing marks; this is, however, also historically important as smoothing tools were not used at the time. There are also damaged edges of stone blocks which necessitated excessive plaster pointing. While the results of weathering are more pronounced in the open air corridors and the internal yard, the cells have hardly suffered at all from disaggregation, powdering and mould. (see *infra*, report by Ms J. Cassar).

Sizes of ship graffiti differ from tiny ones, just 4 cm long, to others 120 cm long; the average size is 30 cm. Other symbols consist of simple circles of a few millimetres in diameter and simple straight lines 30 or 40 cm long.

The implements used to inscribe graffiti have to be envisaged as part of the particular physical environment of their users, the prisoners. They would never be permitted to carry knives or other sharp instruments. A prisoner would perhaps smuggle into his cell an iron nail or an odd end of an iron fitting. Later, incisions might have been made with the tongue of the buckle of a girdle-belt. Heavy, wide incisions could never have been made by these instruments, especially the attempts at relief work which must have necessitated the use of an odd broken handle of a metal spoon or a fragment from some odd tool. But the question persists; how were the graffiti made? Man in dire need is apt to be inventive and, with an abundance of time to spare, necessarily finds ways and means to keep himself busy.

Lighting for each cell was provided by a window 4sq. ft from the inside tapering to half that size on the corridor connecting the cells; there was also an inspection hole on each door. No artificial light was used: and there is not the least trace of smoke marks on the walls and no niches near the doors to accommodate oil lamps. This means that all work had to be done in the brightest part of the day when each cell would be slightly illuminated.

We have not attempted to include here all the incisions found on all the walls. For practical reasons, all symbols with a possible intelligent explanation were documented. Some of the graffiti were found to be insignificant or too casual for present day evaluation and any attempt to attach a reasonable purpose would simply be conjectural. This survey is comprehensive in so far that it includes all easily discernible and meaningful designs such as ships, hands, crosses, names, dates, etc.

To determine the exact dating of graffiti is almost impossible. One comes across the odd date which bears out circumstantial evidence on some graffiti. Older graffiti are recognisable from later ones by the colour of the incisions. Pitting formed in old incisions can easily be seen with a magnifying glass. A “modern” graffiti forms clear-cut incisions in contrast with the rugged and pitted ones found in old scribbles. Superimpositions offer another unorthodox means to determine the old from the new engravings; in this case the trained eye immediately reaches a reasonable conclusion.

The cells abound with graffiti overlapping each other indiscriminately. This compares badly with graffiti found on exterior and interior walls of churches where each ship graffiti is depicted by itself on a whole block of stone or part of it. But there is a plausible explanation for the lack of respect for other people’s work in prisons. Here, space was limited whilst time was abundant. It is only reasonable to assume that, although superimpositions occurred, the rounded ceiling space was hardly ever used because this would have called for too much exertion from the indolent prisoner who found it more expedient to work within easy reach even if this interfered with other people’s incisions. Each fresh whitewashing of a cell covered, to a certain extent, older incisions. Newcomers, entering freshly “decorated” cells, found the walls very inviting for new incisions. Unconsciously, the later engravings might have overlapped the earlier incisions.

Many ship profiles are found on any site examined in search of graffiti and always take the lion’s share amongst other symbols depicted on walls. Sequences and fashions play an important part in determining customs. One cannot overemphasise the influence of ships on the life of men everywhere, more so on the life of people living in a small island such as Malta. It follows that this symbol is found so often in places of fortune and misfortune – the destiny of so many people united with their most important means of livelihood. We may safely assume that the ships under survey reflect the work of those who toiled on them: sailors.

When looking at ship graffiti, one should remember that a faithful reconstruction is almost impossible. Interpretation of ship design is subjected to innumerable inconveniences resulting from a rudimentary-expressed hull profile showing basic

lines or rigging which is schematically indicated with perhaps just stays and shrouds in place. One cannot, for the sake of argument, complain about distortions as in the case of interpreting designs on pottery – the flat medium under survey at least offers a better perspective. But in many cases, simple rounded hull profiles with more or less pronounced crescent shapes create the same effect as if graffiti were incised on a rounded surface.

Enigmatic and hypothetical ships are shown with a symmetrically curved sheer although sometimes the distribution of body volume is concentrated towards the stern. Vertical lines on hulls are reminiscent of the reed boats of antiquity. It is not likely that they represent futtocks or frames. Straight hulls with a 45 degree stern and bow projection resemble children's drawings. Masts incised on hulls right down to the keel are common to other ship graffiti elsewhere. One or two swan-like bows point to a Muslim origin, and square matting of sails is a return to Roman times. All this shows that local and foreign boats were discovered, a fact which denotes the occupation of the cells by Maltese and foreigners alike.

The most prominent of the ships is the *speronara*. This double-ended open boat with the characteristic triangular projection at the bows and the use of a double spritsail, a jib and a topsail, is represented fairly well. Only one Gozo Boat has been identified and perhaps one galley of the Order. Amongst other ships one can see perhaps a brigantine, a British first rate, a third rate of the Order, a tartan, a barque, a fishing boat, modern sailing boats and other fanciful representations. Oversized anchors are usually seen hanging from bows and sterns to decorate the design.

Next in importance after ship representation is the symbol of the hand. This symbol has been found on the walls of many churches, prisons and coastal towers. It is a common belief that, in the majority of cases, the left hand was outlined with the right hand. Usually the palm or the back of the hand were engraved but sometimes the wrist was added, or part of the forearm. On occasions, the hand is shown bent from the wrist but the fingers and thumb are always well spread out; few exceptions depict the fingers closed and raised up. Other details include the highlighting of finger nails when the back of the hand is selected and the folds next to the proximal phalanx when the palm is shown. When the wrist is not drawn, the hand is usually rounded off at that point. The custom of the upraised hand is a well-established custom going back to Phoenician times. The Muslim custom is well-known and is still used in North African countries. The hand on church walls is shown in supplication, as an *ex-voto*. The same symbol on prison walls may carry the same connotation but, most probably, it was only intended as a “*memento*”, a reminder for posterity even if it were to remain anonymous. Some prisoners included a number on their hand graffiti but keepers and wardens should not be excluded as the possible engravers of some graffiti.

Other symbols found in the prison include a good number of Maltese crosses, other normal crosses, stars, fish signs and the design for the Maltese game of “*trija*”. This game was still popular amongst children and adults up to a few decades ago. This symbol was found also on the pavement of the cells in the Castellania, on the doorstep of the church of St. Paul’s Shipwreck at Mosta and at the Vilhena courtyard and cells. It was one way of keeping busy.

Frequently, ship hulls are decorated with pitting, another feature in local graffiti going back to Punic times. Amongst many inexplicable symbols, one finds the square with diagonals, and X with a plus sign on it, small circles with a centre point, casual numbers and other markings.

One expects to come across some method of telling time amongst the many markings on the walls of old prisons. A basis for time reckoning was followed unconsciously by various methods. The prison daily routine followed a fixed timetable, whilst the tolling of bells at 8 a.m., noon and sunset, so popular in Malta, also punctuated the long hours. Obviously, each sunrise marked a new day and each week started by a religious service on Sunday. Special annual feast days were regularly observed. One can hardly expect to read the name against a specific type of marking time – anonymity is not a surprise in such places.

The commonest way of marking the passage of time was a horizontal line crossed with smaller vertical ones incised downwards or upwards. Each vertical line marked a period of time be it an hour, a day, a week, a month or a year. This comb-like graffiti is seen in all sizes and directions; the horizontal position was used frequently. There was the ladder type of time reckoning with two or sometimes three upright long lines joined horizontally with short strokes each equivalent to a period of time. The less frequent symbols include a series of closely united brackets, a number of stars in one location, square matting of flags, Xs sometimes joined at one end resembling a fish, etc. The use of pitting and vertical lines on hull representation could well have been another way of keeping time.

Foreign names in cells or corridors are rare and only three Maltese ones have been traced. A prisoner might leave his mark but he preferred to remain anonymous. No messages were left and the total absence of bad language or obscenities does credit to the code of behaviour of those times. Today’s standards are far less commendable. Several religious motifs were incised, indicating that a decent standard of religiosity prevailed, even in such dreary surroundings.

The latest engravings on the walls of cells include recesses and an attempt at low relief sculpture. Strictly speaking, these cannot be classed as graffiti but they go to

explain that prisoners must have had an access to better “tools” to work on stone. Such work includes a man and two other smaller figures upside down, a tableau of the crucifixion, tree-type recesses besides other unintelligible motifs. One can guess the result on prison walls if all prisoners through the ages were to make use of such better “tools”. Luckily enough, by the time the latest fashion set in, the prisons became obsolete or too costly to run.

The archives at the Gozo Courts should contain valuable information referring to the old prisons at the Cittadella. Court proceedings and the prison occurrences registers should be thoroughly examined to authenticate names, trace dates and years appearing in graffiti, determine the extent of prison population, the duration of internment, the facilities provided and the personnel involved in the running of the place.

Man is able to perpetuate his memory and assert his identity even under the worst of adverse conditions. The examination and documentation of the Cittadella prison graffiti offers another link with the past. It is admitted that these graffiti are not a great discovery but they provide a visual aspect of sequences or fashions in everyday life.

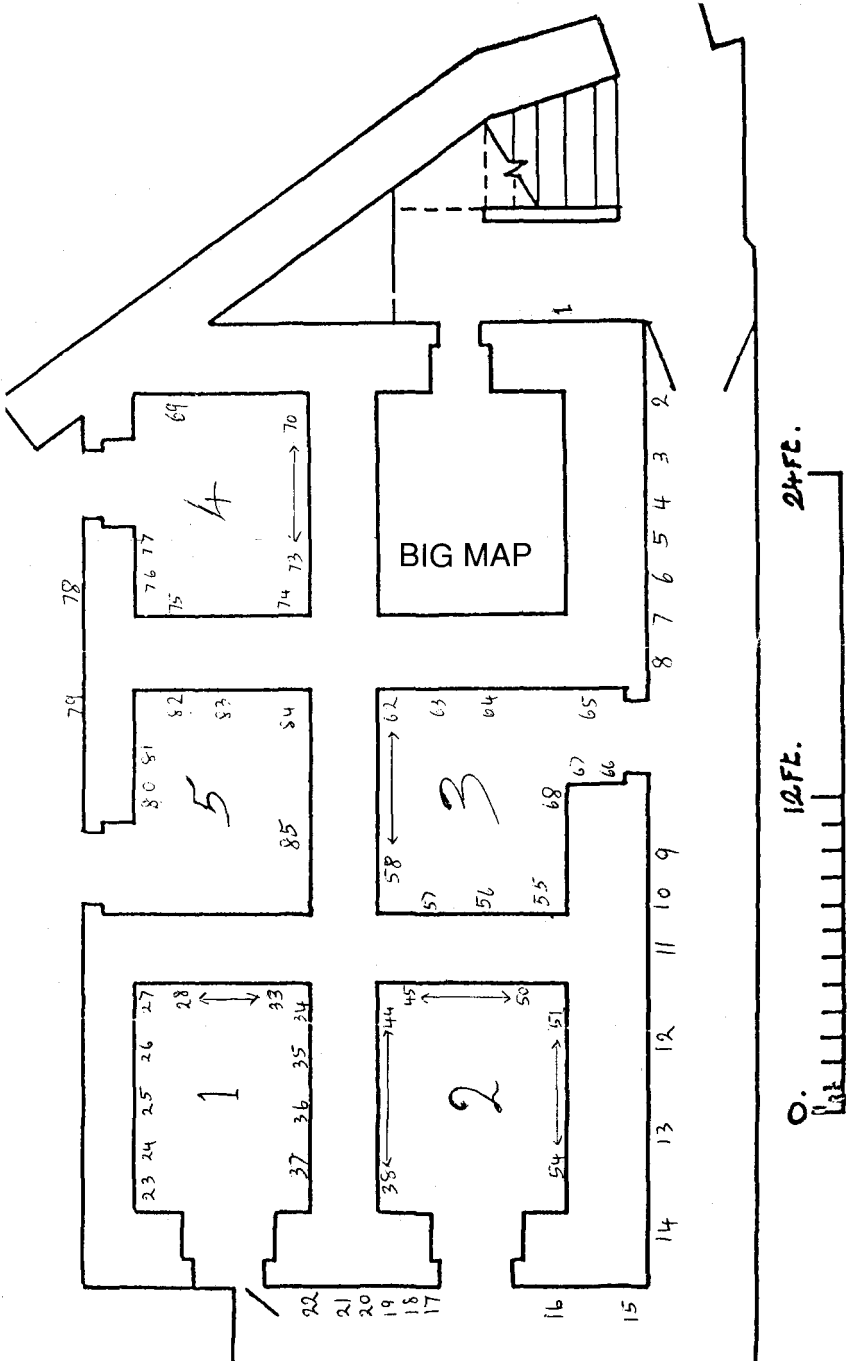
A plan of the prison is included showing the cells and corridors referred to in this survey. Each photograph groups a number of graffiti and is numbered. The location of the graffiti is indicated by the number of the photograph as it appears on the plan.

DESCRIPTION OF GRAFFITI

Upper Corridor

On entering the upper corridor, one finds the second turning to the right which has an access to a cell, not covered by this survey. In this place one finds the first graffiti.

- 1 A normal-sized palm of the hand incision is clearly outlined, the thumb partly covered by the wooden backing of a fuse box.
- 2 Another full-sized incision of a right hand palm can be seen covered by heavy layers of plaster; but it can just be made out.
- 3 Various writings are superimposed by casual scribblings: someone wrote his name, “Monifiury (sic) Ottobre 1817 prigioner”.
- 4 The top date reads “Li 28 Luglio 1624” and the bottom one reads “Li 28 Luglio 1824”. The top date shows a shallower incision and might reflect the year of origin; the lower has deeper lines and might have been inscribed to coincide with the 200th



SCALE: 1/8" = 1 FOOT

anniversary of the upper one. One cannot exclude the hand of a practical joker. There are also certain similarities in handwriting.

5 A faintly incised graffito is sometimes very difficult to interpret. This triangular sail shape might have been part of a ship design whose hull representation has unfortunately faded away.

6 This 38 cm portrait of a ship-of-the-line shows a simple rounded hull design, square sails on the fore and main masts and a lateen on the mizzen. There is a faint outline of a decorative stern and an anchor, too. The flag shown could be that of the Order. The ship is under full sail except for the lower fore and main sails which are furled up; no jibs are shown. There is an indication of gun ports with pittings in them; these might represent guns in position.

7 The year 1799 is shown. The sickle type of capital "G" is in front of the year corresponds with the G for "Giusep" to be found in cell number 3; the same man may have written his name in the cell and, while out in the corridor for fresh air, incised his initials and the year.

8 This 13 cm ship representation is a *tartana* showing two lateen sails and a raised poop deck. Its relatively high freeboard is a good indication of a merchant ship. This graffito needs further cleaning.

9 The graffito shows a fully stretched out right hand palm 24 cm from small finger to thumb. Honeycombing is clearly visible.

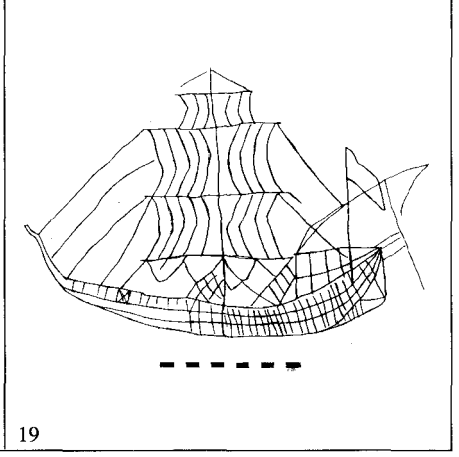
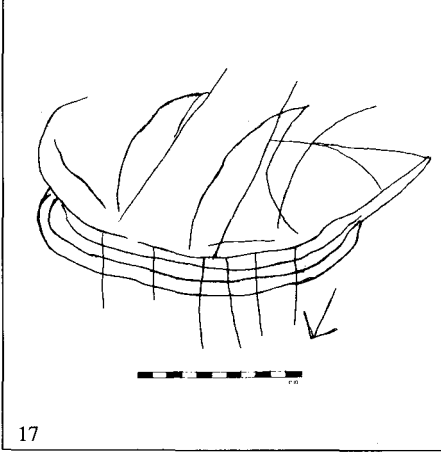
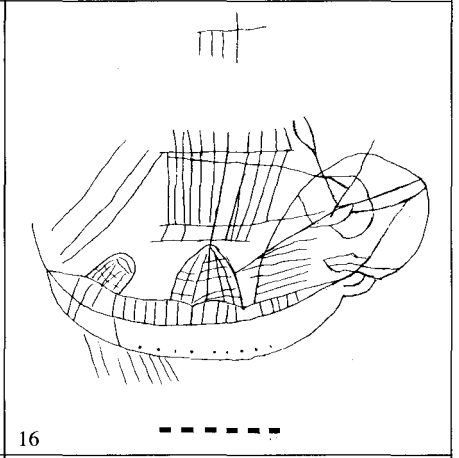
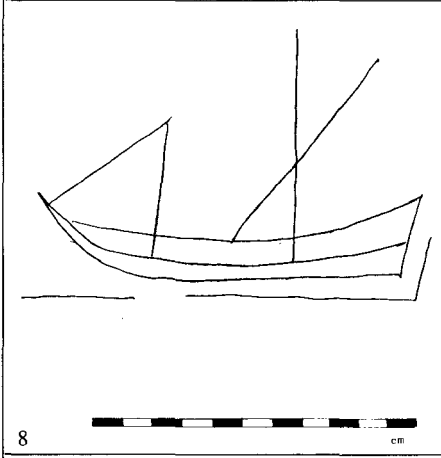
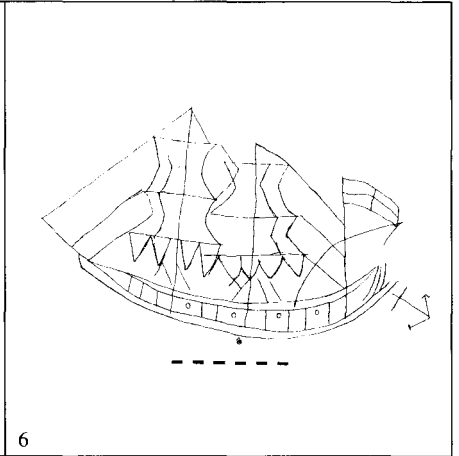
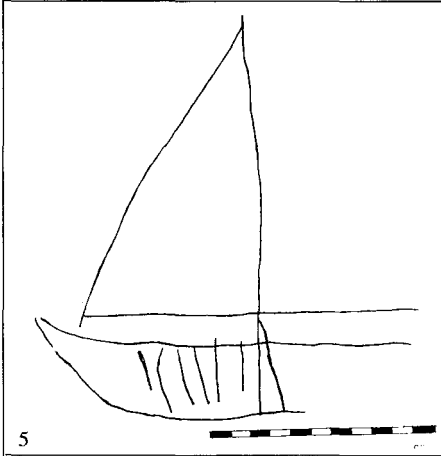
10 This 25 cm eight pointed cross is lightly incised and is of an early date.

11 The year 1798 is clearly indicated in this section of the wall.

12 This is a fairly small sized palm of the hand just under 20 cm span from finger to thumb. It is rounded off at the bottom and shows the folds between the palm of the hand and the proximal phalanx as in various other hand graffiti. The year 1868 might be a later addition and shows a much deeper incision.

13 Here one can see a badly-weathered number of letters, presumably a name which cannot be deciphered.

14 A deeply-incised small eight-pointed cross stands out quite clearly. To the left hand side of this cross there is also an unidentified scratching. It is probable that these two incisions are recent additions. The eight-pointed cross at the top right hand



corner is of a much earlier period. One can see the latest additions at the right hand side bottom corner dated 1971.

15 This unidentified quadrilateral figure shows two designs in perspective with various upright line scratchings. Honeycombing is setting in. The quite recent “N” shown on the top right hand corner shows the white effect of the scratch when compared with old scribblings.

16 Next we come to a 40 cm graffito of a fishing boat with a typical rounded hull profile using oars and possibly dragging a net. Two conical fishing traps, one rounded and the other pointed, are on board. The ship is using two square sails – the main sail is furled – and perhaps a lateen is on the rear mast. The ship is equipped to take jibs also. The stern is rather heavily incised with lines. This makes identification of the ship more difficult.

17 This rounded type of hull representation does not represent a local craft and one is inclined to attribute this graffito to foreign sailors. The ship is shown under a rather curious type of lateen rig using six oars with oversized projections – a rounded one at the bows and a straight one at the stern. The running lines, bows to stern, make positive identification difficult.

18 Here, again, we come across a 30 cm enigmatic graffito. As this particular area needs proper cleaning it is difficult to interpret this graffito. It could be a lateen-rigged ship under sail and oars.

19 This 30 cm ship graffito is definitely influenced by foreign design unless it is a casual incision. Four square sails are shown on the main mast with the main sail furled up. A lateen sail is rigged on the rear mast. There is a cabin at the stern and an unidentifiable flag. The running lines on the hull are squared off, using slanting lines though this could have been an attempt to represent oars. The sleek, long projection at the bows make identification even more difficult.

20 A ship representation 50 cm long shows a hypothetical design with a round hull shape and pitting as part of the freeboard decorations. The flag at the stern shows the cross of the Order of St. John and, at the main topmast, there is a great ceremonial burgee. Most of the foremast has been lost under recent cement pointing. The circle incised on the upper part of the mainmast is out of place and is not part of any ship design.

21 On this 5 cm Maltese cross, note the weathering in the recesses of the graffito indicating an early execution of the design on the stone. Honeycombing is gaining ground. It should be noted that this cross is on one of the walls of the internal yard.

Cell no. 1 – Šperonara Cell

Here one enters cell no. 1 through a very narrow door which is not the original width of the doorway. Cell numbers are arbitrarily chosen for the purpose of this survey only.

22 This left back of the hand is indicated as belonging to (prisoner) no. 63. It seems that the hand was superimposed on other symbols. Note the deeper and sharper lines of the hand when compared with those of other graffiti. Any attempt to interpret the lightly incised graffiti would simply be conjectural. In this cell of the internal yard one finds the only symbols of a peculiar “star” (a small X superimposed with a much larger plus sign). The chequered flag on a mast on the left hand side seems to be a casual incision; it stands by itself without any reference to other symbols.

23 A full name Joseph Luaton (sic) or Begtnin (sic) preceded by number “34 63”. Later incisions show vertical lines with no apparent significance and a number of Xs, three of which also include a vertical line. It might be suggested that these Xs could be some kind of time-keeping account. The rectangle at the bottom is spaced in four sections. There is also an indication of the year “18...”.

24 The main interest in this section is the graffito of a left hand including part of the fore-arm. This is crudely executed, lightly inscribed and superimposed with various lines. Here, again, we come across a chequered flag on a tall mast as we found in photograph no. 22. A graffito of an early type of building is superimposed by a deeply incised symbol of a tree. To the right of the photograph there is a chequered square as also found in photograph no. 23. At the right hand bottom corner, there are three small modern sailing boats and, beneath them, a kind of time-keeping record.

25 This is a deeply incised 20 cm span of a wide open right hand palm rounded off at the bottom. It shows the folds between the palm of the hand and the proximal phalanx and includes the wrist. To the right there is a religious symbol, most probably a chalice and host; the lines incised are all pitted with a finely-pointed instrument. This symbol is damaged by later incisions of slightly inclined straight lines.

26 The earlier incised graffito here shows a possible 20 cm hull design of a ship. The hull is marked with vertical lines giving the impression of the ship’s contours; a horizontal line starts from the bows and ends at the eleventh vertical one. This might have been another system of keeping time. Two anchors can be seen suspended from the bows and the stern of the ship. The absence of sail or rigging makes it rather difficult to attempt further interpretation. Besides, many casual

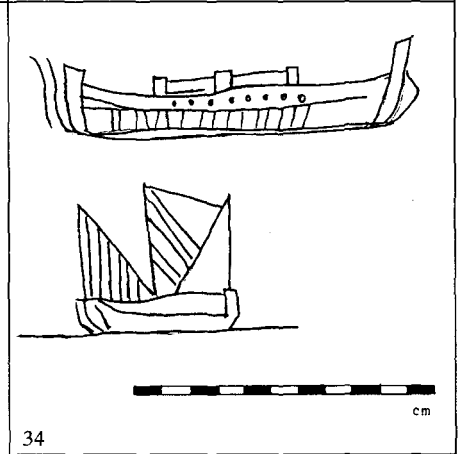
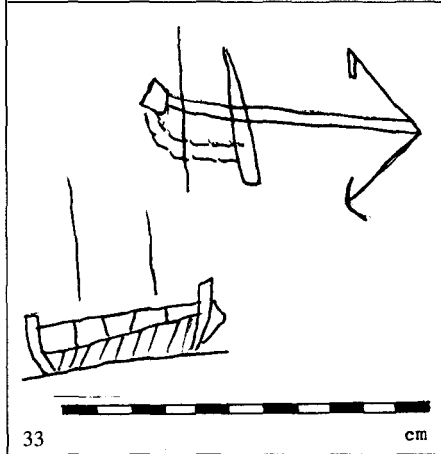
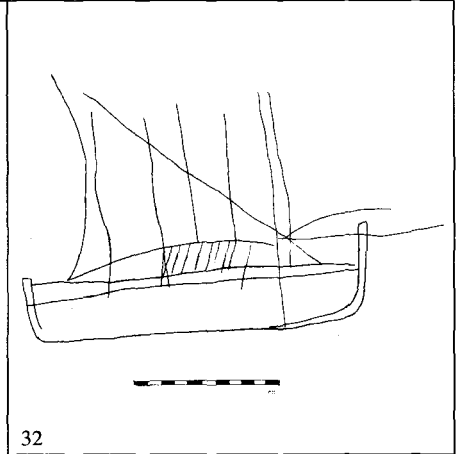
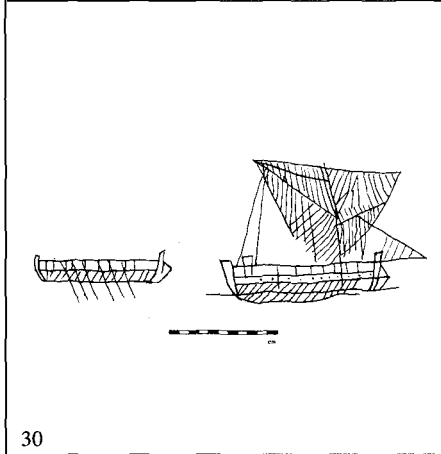
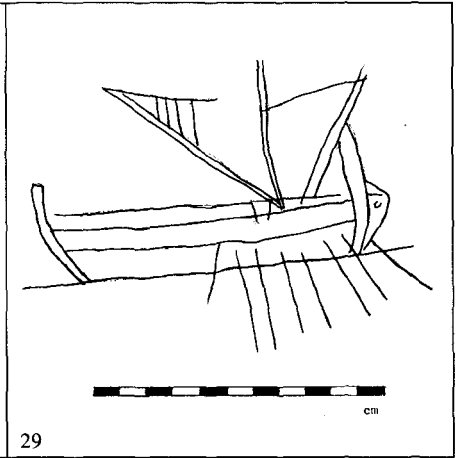
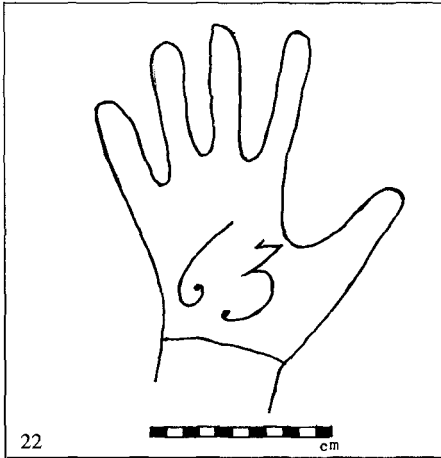
scribblings have been superimposed. A much later addition shows the name “Farrugia Francis”. Another chequered square is shown again here in this space surmounted by a cross and having a rather short mast or pole.

27 The upper block shows a right hand palm superimposed on a number of lightly incised graffiti. Just to the left of the finger there is the commonest method of keeping time by scratching vertical, small lines to indicate days or weeks or months and maybe years. The lower block shows a well-stretched palm of the hand superimposed on other scratchings. The palm is shown chequered, except for the fingers and thumb. If properly cleaned the lower part of this block might yield further information for the interpretation of the lower graffiti.

28 This part of the wall is rather overcrowded with graffiti. There are three *speronaras* with one mast under full sail and oars. All possible canvas which a *speronara* could take included two spirit sails, a topsail and a jib. The bow projection or the residual part of the *sperone* is visible on the fore stem. The lines on sails represent the system of striped or chequered sails used on such boats. The top right quarter of the stone block shows two other lateen rigged ships under sail and oars; one of these ships is flying two flags of the Order of St. John. Possibly there is also a hull of a small boat. In my opinion all these ships are superimposed on a system of recording time.

29 A 13 cm graffiti of a Maltese *speronara* is shown with mast and sprit yards in place but without any sails; oars are in the water. The *sperone* at the bows is clearly visible and there was an attempt to represent washboards and the freeboard level. The boat is represented floating on a thickly-incised straight water level. There are various marks for checking time but the comb-like one is the most conspicuous. In this latter case, a horizontal line was first incised and each successive time lapse – whether day, week, month or year – was marked by vertical short lines incised under the horizontal one. Under the time-keeping record there is also an unfinished graffiti, possibly a small open boat.

30 This stone block includes three other *speronaras*. The one on the right hand side shows a straight linear profile with the characteristic beak at the bows. The side washboards are in place and the figure is perforated by decorative pittings. These cannot represent oarports as they are too far in excess of the usual three or four used on each side. All sail arrangement is shown and rigging indication is kept to a minimum. A fore stay and spreader yard braces are also shown. The incision of the mast is seen continuing through the hull profile design. The left hand side *speronaras* show no pittings and were done by a different engraver. The upper *speronara* shows the *oculus* on the beak projection at the bows; this is not found on similar graffiti.



The lower *speronara* to the left shows an unusual rounded fore stem but no sail representation was attempted. These three *speronaras* are defaced by two rather wide, smooth scratchings and stone disaggregation. It is also interesting to note that these three *speronaras* are shown with the stern awnings or shelter in place. Various markings are included which might have been a basis of reckoning time.

31 Unfortunately, these two ship graffiti need further cleaning which might reveal more details. The left hand side *speronara* is criss-crossed by decorative lines, washboards are in place and most of the canvas is rigged up. There is an indication of a much smaller boat with a triangular sail at the bows of the *speronara* while the slightly-slanting lines at the stern is an attempt to represent the sea. Other faint markings are very difficult to decipher.

32 The Gozo Boat evolved from the *speronara* and it is rather surprising to find this only graffiti of such a boat in this premises. This simple representation of a Gozo Boat includes all the essential elements – high stems fore and aft, two masts with the incision of the fore one continuing through the hull profile down to the keel, the jib yard is in place lashed to the fore mast, the main lateen sail is spread out and a tarpaulin to shelter merchandise can also be seen. No rigging is shown and the foremast was left unfinished. Various time-keeping records are seen superimposed on this lightly incised boat.

33 Various symbols are engraved on this stone block. The deeply-incised anchor is most conspicuous. This motif is repeated elsewhere. To the right and lower than the anchor, we find a design of a fortified place with two flagpoles on the outer walls. The fanciful decorations on the walls might have also been some kind of time record. Underneath this fortress, we find a 6.5 cm graffiti of a hull of a *speronara* on a well-defined straight water level with the usual beak at the bows, washboards and high stems; the slanting lines might indicate the oars. To the left of the picture we come across two, five-pointed stars. Various other time-recording symbols are found.

34 Amongst these boats we find two simple hulls of *speronaras* without any sail arrangement. Two other such boats are shown under sail. Other lightly incised graffiti include three small boats. The symbol at the extreme right might be another time keeping record. The 4 cm graffiti found at the bottom left hand corner shows the boat goose-winged with a third lateen sail at the stern. The boat is incised with a straight water level.

35 This stone block shows various unfinished *speronaras* each lacking any sail arrangement. Out of these ten boats only the middle bottom one shows the usual *speronara* characteristics. The chequered square found here and the other vertical lines might be casual scribbles or some sort of reckoning time.

36 The unfinished outline of a hand is superimposed on a lightly incised unidentified motif. Below this, one can see the common comb-like record of time. To the right, there is a *speronara* badly faded and underneath in a central position there is another such boat under the main sprit sail.

37 The chequered square is repeated here once again, together with the comb-like system of time reckoning. Casual scribbles were added but with no apparent significance. An interesting rounded, simple hull design with vertical lines might be an indication of a non-Maltese craft since vertical lines on hulls usually refer to the reed boats of antiquity. The primitive representation of masts and rigging in no way facilitates interpretation.

Cell no. 2 – Foreign Ships Cell

If cell number 1 is characterised by the number of *speronara* graffiti, cell number 2 abounds in foreign ship graffiti.

38 The early graffiti in this part of the wall might date back to 1827; there are other numbers above and below that year. Other unidentified graffiti compare well with those of the above year. Superimposed on all these, one finds two more deeply-incised graffiti of ships. The larger one, with a rounded water level, could be a representation of a foreign vessel although the flag on the mizzen mast bears no evidence of any sort. Many stays are shown but no shrouds are in place. All sails are set, except for the fore and main ones which are furled up, and two great anchors are seen one at the bows and the other at the stern. There is no explanation for the five pittings but they could well be a decorative element. This may well be an early 19th century barque. The small vessel sailing in the wake of the larger one is foreign to the Maltese rig tradition. The flag might be either Swedish or Danish. Other graffiti refer to time-keeping records.

39 In my opinion this 40 cm graffito is a hypothetical ship representation. The huge dhow-like stem projection at the bows is not a Mediterranean feature. Three triangular sails are spread on three masts as seen on modern yachts while the square, matted topsails on the fore and main masts are an anachronistic feature when related to modern ships. All sails and ship freeboard areas are heavily decorated by square or diamond figures and all fifteen pittings are nicely fitted in a straight line.

40 The simple hull design, rounded waterline and masts continuing down to the keel through the hull design are an indication that the graffito was incised by a foreigner. Only stays are indicated and no other rigging has been added. The main and top sails on the fore mast are furled up as is the main sail on the main mast. The lateen sail on the mizzen is also rigged up while an anchor is suspended from the

stern. Amongst other incisions the customary comb-like time reckoning is the most conspicuous.

41 An unusual four-fingered hand is found on this badly defaced stone block. There is also a deeply and widely incised cross, a religious symbol repeated elsewhere. One also finds a unique attempt to carve out from the stone face a low relief of a man presumably hanging by the feet. To the right of this man there are also two other much smaller, enigmatic figures in the same predicament.

42 The name Thomas Stevens is scribbled on various other incisions. Other symbols include Xs, a flag and other markings not easily deciphered.

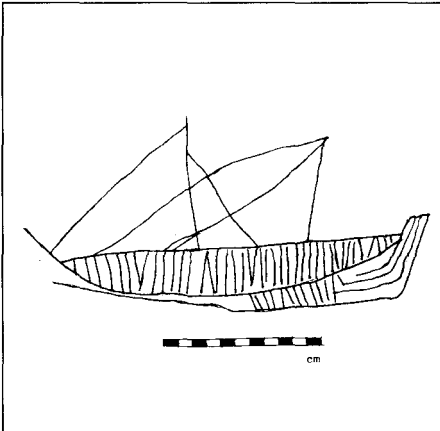
43 For the first time one can make out the full number of a prisoner on a hand incision. Many other numbers can be seen to the left of the hand but without any plausible explanation. The hand was incised on various other lightly scratched or faded incisions which includes a sort of a windmill graffito to the left of the hand design.

44 The years 1800 and 1811 are included with other time-keeping record symbols but apparently without any connection.

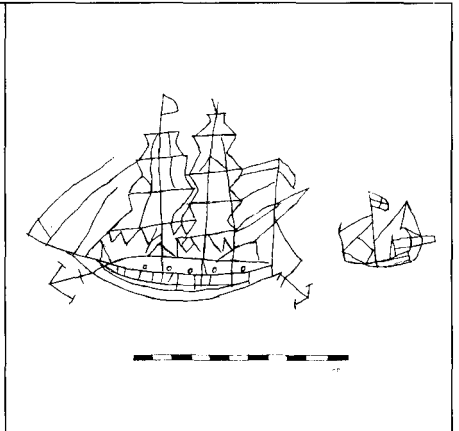
45 Straight edges were used to incise this modern type of sailing ship. This motif is repeated several times.

46 The symmetrically curved sheer of this ship, together with the incisions of the masts continuing right down to the keel, indicate a foreign influence for this graffito. Apart from the highly-raised bowsprit and the lack of any type of rigging, the covering of all sail and hull areas with vertical and oblique lines marks it off as being a rather odd ship. It is likely that all these markings were just another method of reckoning time. It is interesting to note that even the flag at the stern and the pennant on the main mast are marked to correspond with the sail areas.

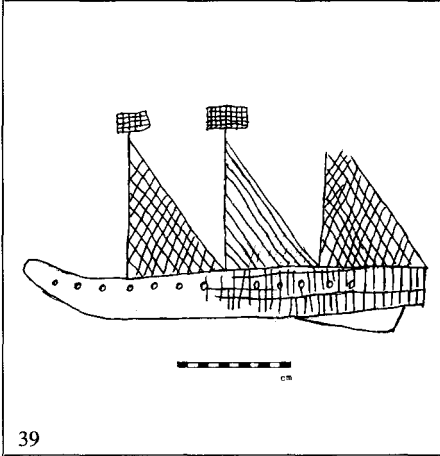
47 Three separate graffiti were superimposed on each other in this section of the wall. The earlier ship graffito with a rounded water level seems to go back to the 18th century as it bears the eight-pointed cross on its stern. Due to excessive superimpositions, identification is rather difficult. The next incisions done with the help of straight edges represent modern sailing boats. The last engraving, the most heavily and broadly executed, is superimposed on the rest of the graffiti. The pitting on the base of this design follows the practice found on other ship graffiti. Various lines could be an indication of time reckoning.



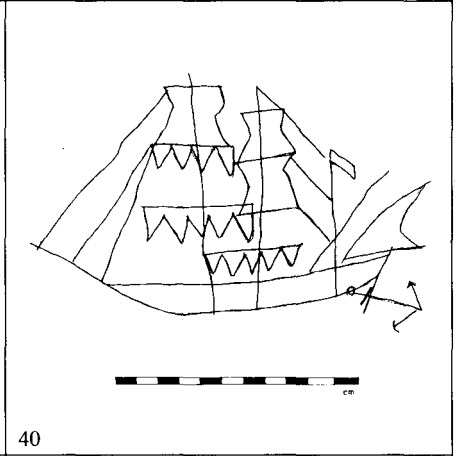
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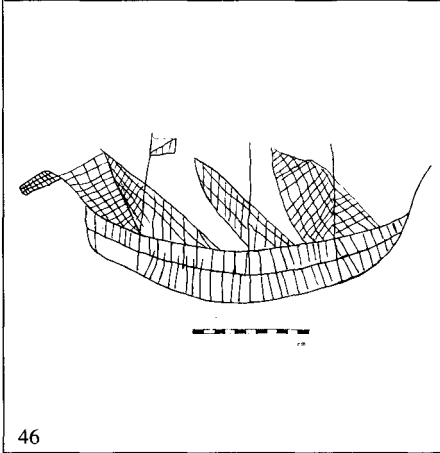
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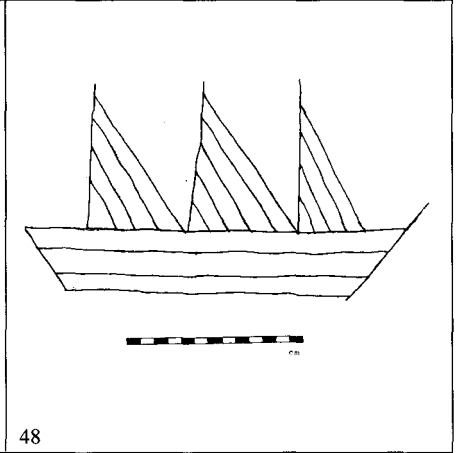
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48 A simple design of a modern sailing ship, done with a straight edge, represents a hypothetical vessel. Lack of any type of rigging goes to explain the casual nature of the execution of the work.

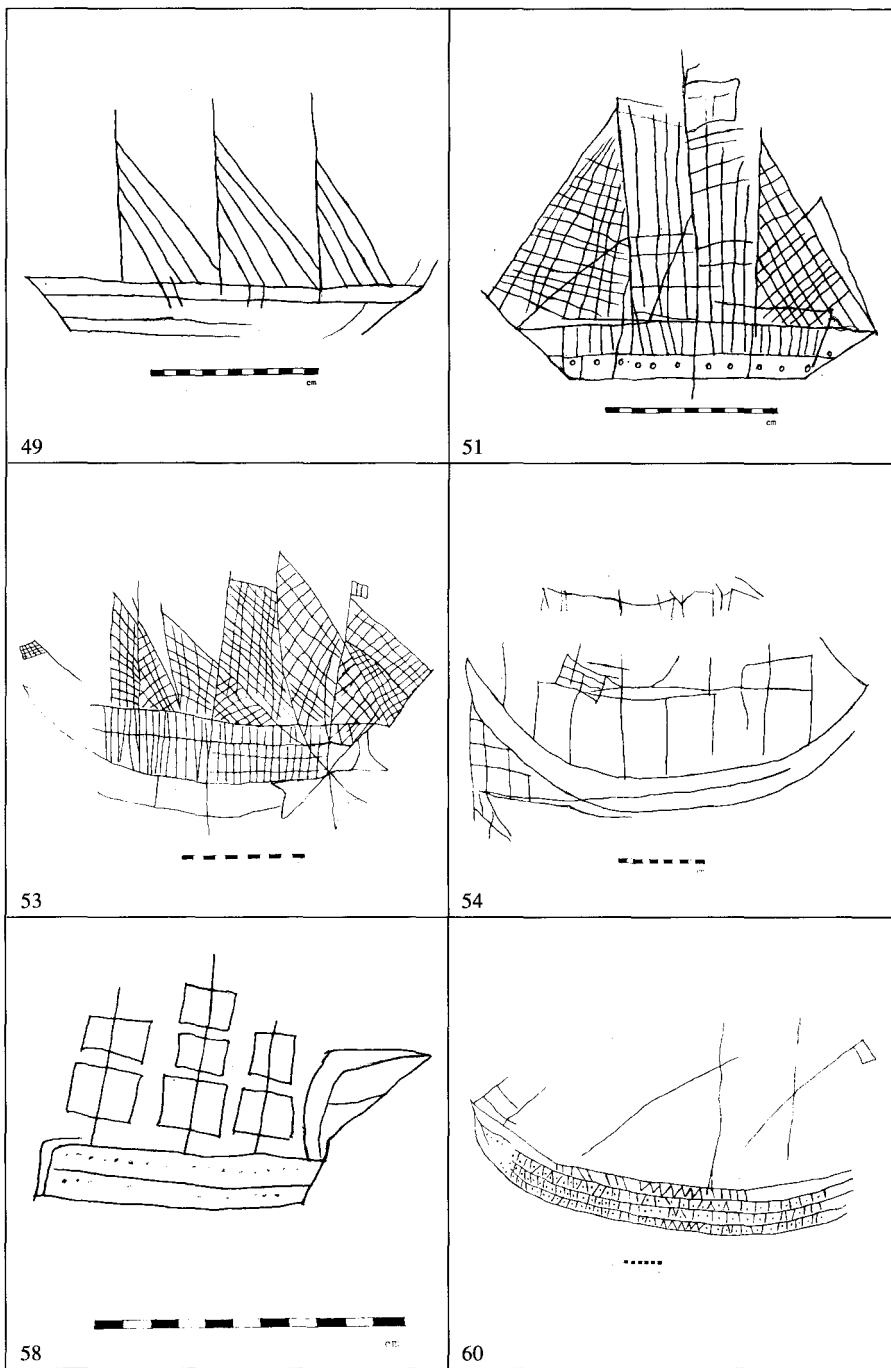
49 The design of this ship is identical to the one described at 48 above. The stone surface of this block shows a marked difference and gives the impression of being of a much earlier execution. There are also some vertical lines and centred circles near a top mast which are not shown on the previous graffito.

50 Two other hands and a comb-like time reckoning are spread over three blocks. The upper hand, with the number 1544 inscribed on it, was evenly hollowed in the stone; there was also an attempt to represent the wrist. The lower hand is simply incised into the stone surface like so many others. At the top right hand corner, one can see the usual method of recording time with one horizontal line and the familiar vertical lines scratched downwards to denote a specific time span.

51 For the third time we come across the same type of a modern, straight line hull representation. Vertical lines and pittings are added either as a decorative element or as a time reckoning system. Two triangular sails are rigged up fore and aft with a main middle mast flying a strange flag at its peak. Moreover, masts continue through the hull design right down to the keel. The square matting which is used on both sails could be a decorative element or a time record. The trident shape on the right is a type of distinguishing mark as it is partly covered by plaster. On close examination, one notices another prong to the extreme right, apart from the other three which are deeply incised. On the extreme left, there is another comb-like time record but with the vertical lines scratched upwards from the horizontal one.

52 Two dates are recorded: 1780 and 1798. These could refer to two different years of admission as they are written in two different handwritings.

53 The enigmatic hull design of this ship graffito is difficult to interpret. If one assumes that the hull continues downwards below the curved line bordering the vertical ones, we have the picture of a ship with an extremely high freeboard. The impression of a stern round counter and the three bands on the flag suggest an Italian wine schooner. Such vessels frequented our harbours in great numbers during the first half of the 20th century. The three masts are shown continuing downwards towards the keel. The sail arrangement is composed of jibs, a queer "*polaccone*" at the fore and spanker sails but no square topsails are shown. It looks as if there is a chequered flag hoisted at the gaff. The web-like sail decorations may indicate time reckoning.



54 This simple hull design may be treated as a typical casual incision. It shows just the basic lines of an extremely curved sheer, masts and square sails. Such an impression compares well with boats of antiquity.

Cell no. 3 – British Cell

The name was attributed to this cell after four graffiti were found in it referring to English names, a graffiti of a British first-rate ship and a full date in English as well.

55 English personnel must have occupied this prison from time to time. The name I. Ambrose (Doninham?), the clearest one to be read, is written on stone found in this prison. At the bottom right hand side one finds an indication of a game or another way of recording time.

56 The hull design of this square-rigged ship must have faded away. Various superimpositions have defaced this graffiti although some rigging, sails and two flags are still visible.

57 Once more, this simple line engraving shows the basic elements of a ship profile with a rounded stern or bows. It is so rudimentary and so casually executed that proper identification is not possible.

58 This is the only reference to a British man-of-war in the Gozo prison that I have come across. The high freeboard, the two batteries with pittings and the square sails on all masts are an indication of an English warship of the 19th century. As English names were found in cells one may safely conclude that one of them executed the design of this ship. Another graffiti is the enigmatic square with diagonals.

59 The name I. Ambrose appears once more in this part of the cell. The handwriting of the number 63 found here corresponds to the one found on the back of the hand (22) located in the upper corridor. Among many other symbols, one can just perceive a faint and faded ship graffiti to the middle right hand side. There are Xs, lines, capital Ms and an R. The cross at the bottom is decorated with some pittings.

60 This 120 cm ship graffiti, spread over several blocks of stone, is the largest ever found so far in Malta and Gozo. It is a grotesque design of a lateen rig with a high decorated hull. The use of pittings on three rows is very effective and the vertical and transversal lines add another motif for a decorative scheme. The crescent type sheer is of foreign origin and the whole graffiti is superimposed on several other incisions. Slightly incised and badly faded engravings show two Maltese crosses, a cross on a cupola and other indecipherable scratchings. The name C.A. (Shgaohp?) which is of a much later execution than other graffiti is repeated elsewhere.

61 The year 1798 stands out far better than other adjacent scratchings. The earlier graffito of a number 16 does not seem to contribute further information to the year incised next to it.

62 This is an enlarged version of the name found in 60 above.

63 A full date in English is found here: June 20, 1802. The olive branch next to it contrasts so well with the place where it is found. Beneath the date there is the number 62 and further up numbers 63 and 51. The game “*trija*” is clearly visible with the lower half reserved for marking points. To the right we come across the basic markings for another “*trija*” which was never completed, superimposed with the name “Francis”. Other lightly incised lines are of no importance. Three vertically curved lines are superimposed on all graffiti in this section of the wall.

64 As this probably English name (...en...ham?) is partly covered under plaster, it needs to be properly cleaned before further investigation is possible.

65 Above the cell doorway there is the Maltese name “Giusep” superimposed on various other slightly incised motifs.

66 The year graffito “1819” adds further information with regard to the dating of the engravings under survey. One can clearly read the name Michele Angel ... I presume this was the name of another Maltese prisoner.

67 These two faded and slightly incised ship profiles can hardly be interpreted. They may represent square-rigged ships but, unfortunately, the hull design does not offer any pointers to recognition. Pitting on hull profiles is repeated with the possible indication of gun batteries, time recording or simply as a decorative element.

68 A simple graffiti collection of seven five-pointed stars and a cross in one patch of a cell wall indicates the casual nature of the incisions. Such a motif has not been found anywhere else. Apart from the religious meaning attached to the cross, it might have been a substitute to conceal the identity of the prisoner – the stars intended to represent a time span of detention in a prison cell.

Cell no. 4 – Lighthouse Cell

The only reference to a possible graffito of a lighthouse was found in cell number 4. For this reason this name has been assigned to it.

69 A heavily incised cross is once again found here, possibly flanked by two systems of time reckoning. An element of decoration was added to this cross. The comb-like symbol to the right, this time without the horizontal line, is of a much earlier period and the left hand side circles, with a centre point, were made by a round-ended instrument. The casual engraving of such circles is not to be excluded. A very faint heart-shaped incision appears under the right arm of the cross. The deeply-incised design to the right of the cross is difficult to interpret.

70 This particular stone block was scratched extensively by a slightly rounded instrument as well as by a sharp pointed one. The heavily-incised ship bears some resemblance to an early brigantine with two lateen sails. The flag at the stern was left blank. The series of vertical or transversal lines could refer to a time keeping record rather than to a row of oars. Again, pitting might have been either an element of decoration or a method of recording time. The enigmatic graffito above the ship looks like a 20th century steel windmill which was so popular amongst local farmers till the introduction of powered water pumps.

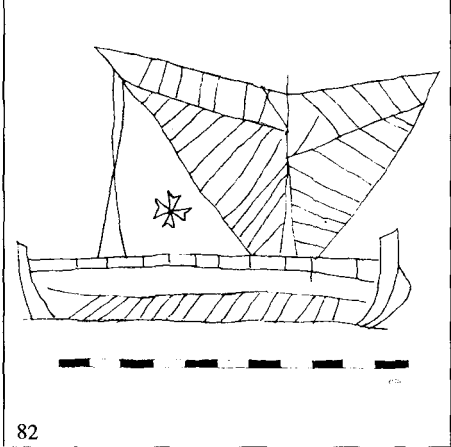
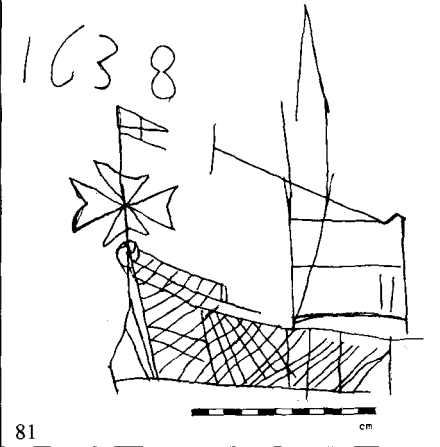
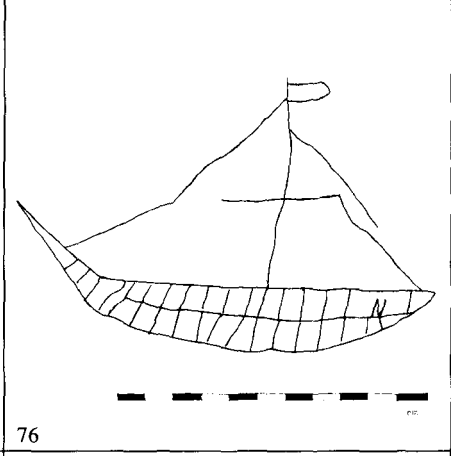
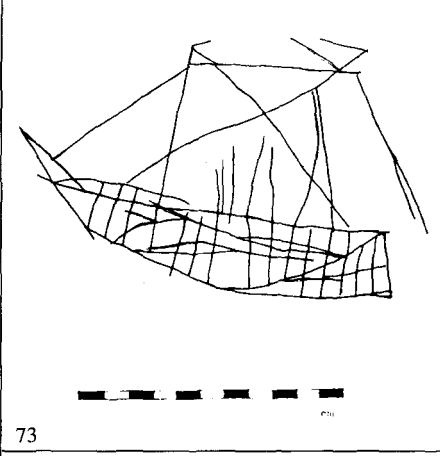
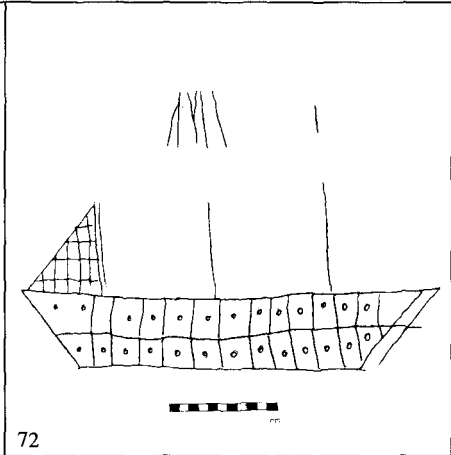
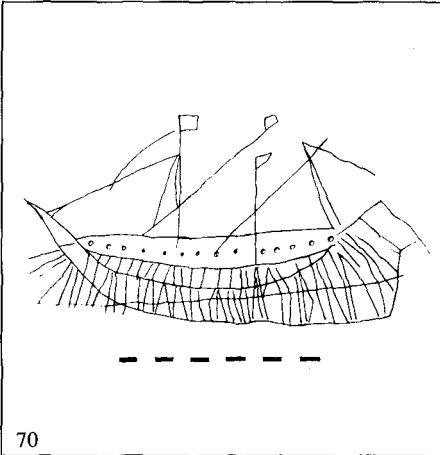
71 A similar “saintly” figure appears quite near to the one just described. It seems that there was an attempt to deface all previous graffiti on this block before the new one was undertaken. What seemed to be a windmill in the previous description is rendered here more enigmatic by the addition of a “head” on top and an outstretched “arm”. A more realistic suggestion would be to accept this graffito as a lighthouse.

72 The simplest representation of a ship is shown in this section of the cell. The straight lines denoting the ship’s contours, the absence of any type of rigging and the square matting type of sail at the bows all make proper interpretation difficult. In my opinion, the pitting deserves attention and further investigation might ascertain a close relation to a time recording practice.

73 Although the sail arrangement of this graffito corresponds with that of a *speronara*, the hull design leaves much to be desired. The vertical lines covering the hull area suggest a foreign origin. The single mast is incised on the hull profile itself right down to the keel. No explanation can be provided for the stern arrangement. This graffito may also be interpreted as a foreign fore and aft vessel.

74 A slightly flat pointed instrument was used to deface previous graffiti in this section. The relatively deeply-incised name of SH was superimposed on a comb-like time recording symbol of a much earlier period.

75 The symbol of a square with diagonals repeats itself a few times. No interpretation can be suggested except perhaps that of being a means of identification, a “presence”



mark in that particular cell. The most interesting symbol, though, is the row of pitting shown without any connection to other symbols. One may suggest that the pitting here was another basis for reckoning time. This is another indication, in my opinion, of pitting found on ships' hulls which can safely be interpreted as a means of recording the passage of time.

76 This simple, deeply-incised graffito represents a modern type of sailing boat. The jib boom and the rounded hull indicate a foreign ship design. The flag offers no means of identification. Vertical lines on the hull could represent a time recording system or, perhaps, a decorative motif.

77 This enigmatic, deeply-incised design offers no means of interpretation except that it must have been carried out by means of a fairly strong and somewhat rounded implement. Other incisions, covering all flat parts of the design, were made by a normal pointed instrument. The smooth recess to the right shows no sign of flames or smoke. Therefore, it is unlikely that it has ever been used as a niche for any type of lighting.

78 In the lower corridor there is a badly faded hand. It is rounded off at the wrist and also damaged with modern scratchings.

79 A finely defined palm, rounded off at the wrist and showing the fold between the palm of the hand and the proximal phalanx, is slightly extended to include the wrist. In the same area, one can see three other "hands".

Cell no. 5 – Knights Cell

In this cell one comes across the only reference to a galley of the Order, the date "1638" and a collection of eight-pointed crosses, symbols which indicate the possible presence of some personnel belonging to the Order of St. John. Hence the choice of the name is self-evident.

80 Strictly speaking, this representation is not a graffito but, at least, it is a testimony of the religious spirit of the engraver. This crucifixion scene was carved out by some type of better "tools" than those used on graffiti. Note that no figure low relief was attempted but just indicated in a most simple design.

81 Unfortunately, this unique galley graffito is badly damaged at the bows. The galley stern is visible as is the indication of two masts. The oversized eight-pointed cross dominates the stern. The year "1638" is seen on top of this cross. As the galley graffito was super-imposed on many other markings, further interpretation is rather difficult.

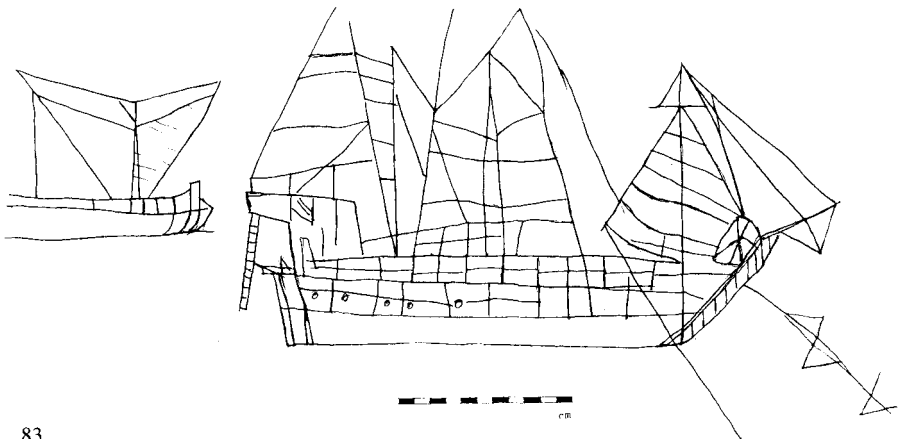
82 This Maltese *speronara* under sprit-sail rig would normally be dated somewhere in the 19th century. But the eight-pointed cross depicted on the main sprit sail is an indication that the boat was in service during the period of the Order in Malta. The transition period of sail arrangement from lateen to sprit-sail rigs cannot be narrowly determined. Evolution takes its time and overlapping of sail arrangement was inevitable. The hull profile shows high stems fore and aft, bow projection and washboards.

83 The hull profile of this graffito provides some interesting features but the sail plan does not correspond to any known arrangement. The hull rests on a straight water level and masts do not continue down through the hull design. These two features suggest the attribution of this graffito to local sailors. The rope ladder at the high, raised, overhanging poop could be a time check. The jib boom is depicted with a striker dolphin which was a feature of the 19th century. There is a good indication of a Union Jack at the bows which reflect the origin of the design. Just above the poop there is a capital "M", which is a possible identification mark. The usual comb-like time reckoning is seen at the bottom right hand corner.

84 This is a unique, crudely and heavily incised back of the left hand in which finger nails are also indicated. The cross adjacent to it indicates religious feelings though it may have been a distinguishing mark. Quite near there is another hand graffito but it has not been photographed.

85 In this cell one finds a collection of eight-pointed crosses, some of them surrounded by other decorations which also include pittings. The various visible symbols do not lend themselves to a reasonable interpretation.

Joseph Muscat



PART II – THE PRESENT STATE OF CONSERVATION OF THE GRAFFITI

During restoration works carried out in the Old Prisons of the Cittadella in 1989, which consisted in part of the removal of several layers of plaster then covering the walls, a large number of graffiti were discovered. Most were located in the upper wing of the prisons (Upper Prisons), mostly in the cells, but also in the corridor and in the inner yard. Others were found in the lower wing of the prisons (Lower Prisons).

Location of the Graffiti

The layout of the prisons is according to the plan in Fig. 1. In the Upper Prisons, the graffiti are mainly present on the right side of the corridor, the right wall of the inner yard, and in all the cells. In the Lower Prisons, there are fewer graffiti, also located in the corridor and in the cells. In all cases, the great majority of carvings are located in the 4th-6th courses, i.e. 1-2 metres above the ground.

Upper Prisons – Corridor and Inner Yard

These are the most exposed areas of the prisons, being for the most part roofless and, therefore, unprotected from the elements. It was, therefore not unexpected to find signs of the stone deterioration in these areas. The Globigerina Limestone found

**OLD PRISONS
at the Citadel – Gozo**

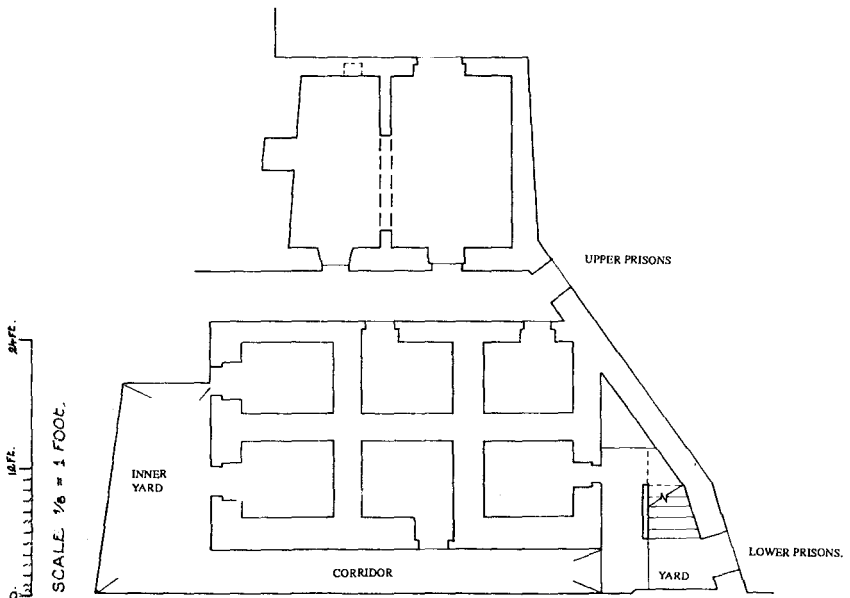




Fig. 2: Badly-deteriorated block of stone in the inner yard of the Upper Prisons (block 1 in Fig. 4). This block now has no graffiti, though it may have originally had one.



Fig. 3: Representation of a boat, still partly hidden by the thin plaster coating, in a good state of conservation. Located in the corridor of the Upper Prisons.

here is not all of one quality – one type seems to be more compact than the other. Most of the graffiti are located on the more compact stone, though it is possible that some of the badly deteriorated stones originally bore graffiti (Fig. 2). On the more compact stone, the great majority of the graffiti are in a good state of conservation (Fig. 3). A few examples in the inner yard of the Upper Prisons, however, show signs of localised deterioration, such as powdering or honeycombing (alveolar weathering) (Fig. 4).

Both in the corridor and in the inner yard, the lower three courses are in an advanced state of deterioration, manifest as powdering and flaking of the stone's surface. This is very common in all old buildings which have no damp-proof course and, therefore, no barrier to rising damp being absorbed by capillary action and depositing damaging ground salts within the stonework.

In these lower courses, however, none of the stones, not even those in a reasonably good state of conservation, bear any graffiti. Besides, many of the blocks in the lower courses had been plaster coated, this probably being an old attempt to protect and maybe also preserve the stone. Occasionally, this coating is falling away, revealing quite badly-deteriorated stone underneath. In addition, the walls in both the corridor and, especially in the yard, are very damp and covered by areas of mould (Fig. 5).

Lower Prisons – Corridor

In this corridor, which differs from that in the Upper Prisons in that it is completely roofed over, the graffiti present, though fewer in number, are in a better state of conservation, except for occasional and very limited powdering of the stone's surface.

The Cells

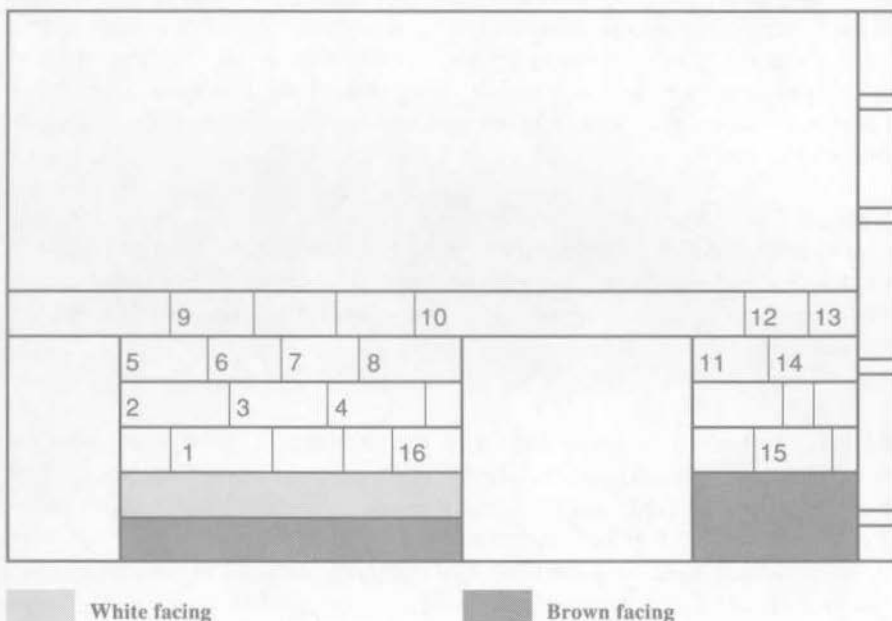
All the cells, both in the Upper and Lower Prisons, contain carvings, concentrated mostly on the 3rd-6th courses. As these were prison cells, they were always kept closed; they also had only one very small window for ventilation. These conditions tended to keep the internal environment, though very damp, also very stable. As it is fluctuations in climatic conditions, and especially changes in humidity, which bring about stone deterioration, the stable situation inside the cells have allowed the stone to remain in a very good state of conservation; in fact, there are no signs of deterioration, especially on the stones bearing graffiti.

Preservation of the Graffiti

As most of the still visible graffiti are in a reasonably good state of conservation, no emergency measures are necessary for their continued preservation. However, they

could be threatened by the presence of cement facing in the lower courses; its impermeability would tend to drive humidity (and salts) further up than usual, jeopardising the graffiti in the higher courses. It is imperative that this danger be removed and any subsequent pointing or plastering be carried out with a lime-based mix to retain the permeability of the wall's surface, and thus preserve the graffiti in the upper courses.

The greater deterioration of the graffiti in the furthest part of the corridor and in the inner yard of the Upper Prisons can be attributed to the fact that here a larger area of the lower wall is covered with plaster, and hence humidity has reached a correspondingly greater height. A small degree of honeycomb weathering in the inner yard can be attributed to the presence of salts together with air currents; it is possible that an increase in velocity or a change in direction of these currents could have followed the erection of two new walls in the yard some years ago; this deterioration is in fact still in its initial stages.



1. Deteriorated block, with no graffiti visible. 2,3,4. Graffiti of boats, in good condition. 5,6. Continuation of boat carved on block 2, showing some powdering. 7. Boat graffiti, showing very slight powdering. 8. Carved lines, with incipient alveolar weathering. 9. Carving of boat, in good condition. 10. No graffiti; localised powdering and incipient alveolar weathering. 11. "Maltese cross" in good condition. 12,13,14. Slight powdering of surface. 15. Plaster falling away, revealing lime layer underneath. 16. Small "Maltese cross" with localised powdering.

Fig. 4: Schematic representation of the right wall of the inner yard of the Upper Prisons.

Besides, the plaster coating covering the graffiti, which was in this case lime-based and which has been recently removed, was also protecting the underlying stonework from the surrounding environment. Removal of this plaster (which was, however, necessary to uncover the graffiti) has now exposed these carvings to the weather and ensuing deterioration.

The graffiti in the Lower Prisons are in a good state of conservation and little needs to be done here except to prevent the upsetting of the stable environmental conditions, established over a long period of time, which were instrumental in the preservation of the graffiti. This is even more important in view of the fact that, here too, their "protective layer" has now been removed. In the Upper Prisons, however, the environmental conditions were never stable, as most of the area is unroofed. Here, some means must be installed (such as some sort of roofing) to maintain as stable environmental conditions as possible. This will slow down, to a certain extent, the deterioration which has already started, and which can only be expected to continue in view of the recent "uncovering" of the graffiti. Consolidation of areas already deteriorating must also be seriously considered.

The situation is different, and also rather more delicate, in the case of the graffiti inside the cells. Here very limited ventilation, together with the presence of plaster, has helped keep the graffiti in an excellent state of conservation. If in the future the doors are to be kept open for long periods (e.g. for visitors to be able to view the cells), this will give rise to wetting/drying cycles (depending on outside conditions) which will gradually bring about the deterioration of the stonework and, therefore, also of the graffiti, in particular the ones on the wall opposite the doorways. Before this step is taken, it is necessary to study the microclimate within the cells, both with the doors closed, and with them opened, to determine the extent of the fluctuations of both air temperature and humidity. On the basis of these findings, it can then be established whether the cells can be allowed to gradually dry out, provided that, in so doing, the level of rising damp remains beneath the "graffiti-level". Another possibility is a system of alternately opening different cells, for short periods, whilst keeping the others closed; this is a better system to preserve the graffiti.

A further alternative, which must also be studied, involves the installation of a second, transparent, doorway to be kept closed whilst allowing the visitor to view the cell from the outside – this would, however, also probably necessitate the installation of some form of controlled ventilation or air conditioning of the area. Whichever of these methods is chosen, it will be necessary to monitor continuously the environmental conditions within the cells by the installation of thermohygrographs; regular monitoring of wall temperature and humidity would also be required, as well as the periodic examination of the graffiti to detect any signs of incipient deterioration.



Fig. 5: One of the graffiti in the corridor of the Upper Prisons, in a good state of conservation. Note, however, the presence of mould, and the incipient deterioration of the stone surface.

Some means of preventing visitors from touching the graffiti would also be necessary – in this case, individual protection of each is not feasible, as there are too many. A barrier to keep the visitors at arm's length from the walls (somewhat difficult to achieve in the very narrow corridors) must be erected. Adequate supervision by staff, who are to be made aware of the conservation problems, is also necessary if the prisons are made accessible to the public.

However, by far the best solution would be to keep the graffiti under those same conditions which have allowed their preservation for centuries – their being kept in a closed, and therefore, stable, environment.

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