

REFRAMING ASINARA

From ‘the Devil’s Island’ to an ‘uncontaminated nature paradise’

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ABSTRACT: Like many other islands in the Mediterranean, Asinara, located to the north of Sardinia, has been a prison island for a long time. Unlike other islands, however, which often housed other forms of use and activities together with their prisons, Asinara was emptied of its population and used solely as a detention centre for more than a century. It was first an agricultural penal colony and a quarantine station for maritime travellers, then a concentration camp, and finally a maximum-security prison, where the ‘enemies’ of the Italian state (terrorists and mafiosi) were detained under extremely harsh conditions (this has led to it being called by sinister epithets such as Devil’s Island, or Italian Cayenne). Since only prison-related activities were allowed on the island, human presence has remained very limited. As a result, although its vegetation and fauna have been massively altered over the years, Asinara has retained a seemingly ‘uncontaminated’ appearance. Today, this allows the island to be reframed as a park and natural oasis, on the one hand rehabilitating its past (after all, it was the prison that kept out land development) and, on the other hand, stimulating the arrival of visitors. As far as the past is concerned, the available visual images are very limited, and consist of a few postcards and snapshots, offering an institutional image of the prison facilities or a ‘normalising’ view of the activities conducted outside them by the relations of the correctional officers (the inmates did not have cameras, and their point of view can only be grasped through their writings). Much richer is the visual material produced after the prison’s closure, both by the main Italian television networks and by the Park Authority itself. This material was analysed in order to study the changing image of an island that, after becoming a gulag, is now portrayed as paradise.

KEYWORDS: Asinara, prison island, maximum security prison, paradise-island.

Introduction

The gulag/paradise cliché (Baldacchino, 2005; Royle and Brinklow, 2018) works quite well for many Mediterranean islands (dell’Agnese, 2023), which were formerly prison-islands: feared as ‘gulags’ when they were spaces of detention, they are now branded as ‘paradises’ for tourists. For none, however, is the contrast between the former ‘hell’ and the image of ‘uncontaminated paradisiacal location’ currently promoted by the media more striking than for Asinara, a twenty kilometre long island situated in the north-east of Sardinia (Italy) (Figure 1). There are two reasons for this. First, unlike many other islands where a prison

existed alongside other activities, Asinara, now a national park, was only used for prison-related purposes for over a century. Second, Asinara was no ordinary prison. In fact, in its long history as a space of detention, the island was first a penal colony, later a concentration camp for prisoners of war and, eventually, between the 1970s and the 1990s, it became the most feared maximum-security prison in Italy. At the time, Asinara was the prison for those accused of being the 'enemies' of the Italian state, such as the exponents of the political terrorism that animated the Italian 'years of lead',¹ and the members of criminal organisations such as Neapolitan camorra and Sicilian mafia. To them, a form of "enemy criminal law"² (Jakobs, 2006; Krassman, 2018) was applied, with the 41-bis detention regime entailing a suspension of ordinary prison treatment, and the rights that go with it (Kalica, 2109; Nocente, 2023)³ The conditions of extreme harshness were further aggravated by 'state vendettas' carried out against the inmates by prison guards, outside the law but with the connivance of the legal system. According to numerous testimonies,⁴ the prisoners were beaten and forced to drink rusty water from the taps, eat meals laced with detergent and urine, and suffer cold or scorching heat, depending on the season, in almost total isolation. So, Asinara, already known at the beginning of the 20th century as the 'Devil's Island' because of the concentration camp, became later famous as the 'Italian Cayenna' or the 'Italian Alcatraz'.

Asinara was turned into a detention facility in 1885, when the Italian state decided to empty the island of its inhabitants and divide it between a lazaret and an agricultural penal colony. At that time, Asinara had just over 500 inhabitants in an area of 51.9 square kilometres. Such a low population density suggests that life must not have been easy for those who lived on the island as farmers and fishermen. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of very favourable descriptions of its environment and alleged fertility. Indeed

The construction of a paradisiacal image of the places and the daily life of the inhabitants of Asinara has continued over time, hiding a historical context marked by a hard daily struggle to live in a difficult environment, complicated by the isolation and abandonment of those who ruled there as robber barons. (Mondardini, 2005, p. 656)⁵

¹ The expression 'years of lead' (*anni di piombo*) refers to a period marked by bombs and terrorist attacks of various origins and nature, which marked the Italian society from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.

² The "enemy criminal law" is aimed at punishing "certain figures represented as particularly dangerous, reprehensible, evil, as transgressors not so much of individual articles of law, but of the entire legal-institutional order" (Mosconi, 2019, p. 4), who do not deserve the guarantees attributable and therefore applicable to ordinary offenders.

³ While '41bis' is still legal in Italy, it was considered comparable to torture by a US court. Specifically, in 2007, Judge D.D. Sitgraves denied the extradition of a drug trafficker, connected to a Sicilian Mafia family, on the grounds that in Italy he would have to face a prison system designed to physically and psychologically compel criminals like him to reveal information about the Sicilian Mafia, adding that "This . . . coercion is not related to any lawfully imposed sanction or punishment, and thus constitutes torture" (Gorman, 2007). '41bis' has also been defined "inhuman and degrading" by the Council of Europe, in 2019, which has called upon the Italian authorities to engage in a serious reflection on the current configuration and execution of the "41-bis" detention regime throughout the prison system, also taking into consideration Article 27, paragraph 3, of the Italian Constitution" (Seregini, 2023).

⁴ See, for instance, De Feo (n.d.).

⁵ All translations from Italian are by the author.

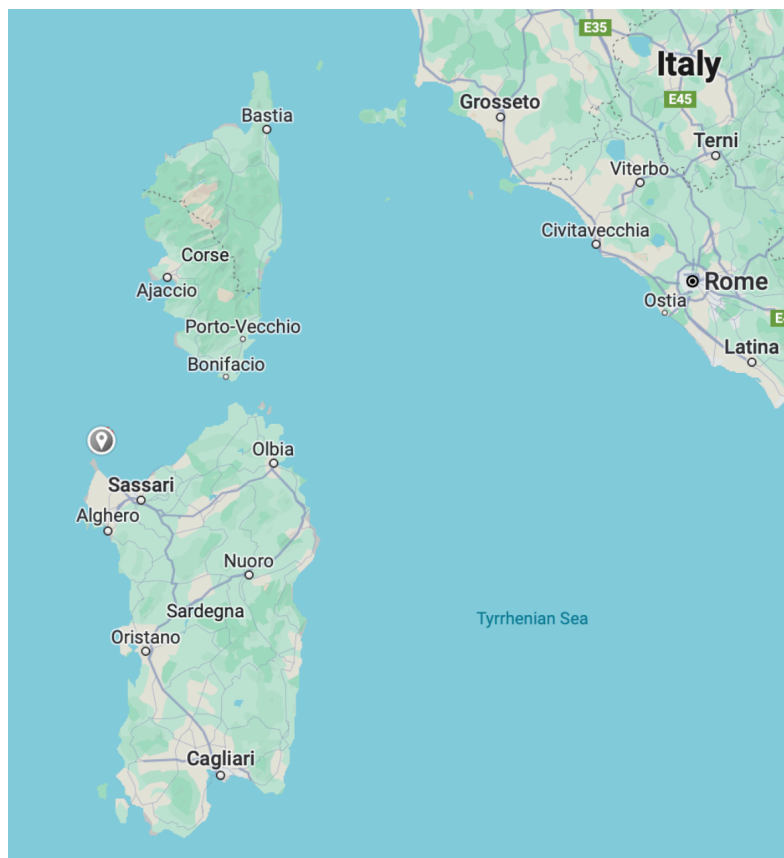


Figure 1 – Asinara (marked by pin, mid-left) and its position relative to Sardinia, Corsica and the Italian mainland. (Google Maps, 2024).

This image of pre-prison Asinara as a rural idyll was revived in the 1950s. Later on, after the closure of the prison in the late 1990s, when the island was turned into a national park, its representation as a ‘paradise’, this time naturalistic and ‘uncontaminated’ by human activities, became dominant. Of these different images of Asinara, as an idyllic rural place, as a Cayenna and as a ‘paradise’, the most dramatic is perhaps the only true one. In fact, even if the island’s context proved unsuitable for agriculture, it has not remained untouched by human intervention (as evidenced by the remains of the prison buildings and all the changes made to the fauna and flora by the prison institution itself). The image of ‘uncontaminated nature’, however, obscures the memory of the extremely harsh prison conditions maintained on the island for decades. In a way, it gives the prison a positive patina: after all, it is thanks to the prison’s presence that the island has been preserved from other anthropic developments and thus appears today as an ‘unspoilt natural paradise’.

To follow the changes in Asinara’s image, we will start with a brief history of the island, from the 18th century, when it was ceded to the Savoy family by the Hapsburgs, to the present day. We will begin with the Savoy’s attempts to colonise the island, followed by the rural development projects linked to the agricultural penal colony and the events of the two world wars. The period of the strict regime prison, which began in 1971 and ended in

1997, will then be briefly reconstructed, using the testimonies of those who were imprisoned on the island, among other sources. We will then analyse the visual material available to the public about the island: firstly, postcards, the most widespread form of visual communication for the first part of the 20th century; then promotional videos and documentaries. The postcards study is based on the content analysis of about one hundred items.⁶ In terms of video material, documentary footage produced before and after the prison's closure has been considered. Ten video documentaries were selected: *Asinara, isola proibita* ('Asinara, forbidden island'), by Daniele Cini e Maurizio Felli, 1994, which was perhaps the first documentary to be filmed on the island; some videos produced by Italian national television networks after the prison was closed,⁷ and finally a documentary produced in 2020 by the Park itself, *Il cambio della guardia: viaggio nell'Asinara* ('Changing of the guard: a journey to Asinara').

The pre-prison island

In Asinara, it is possible to find traces of anthropic use dating back to Roman and medieval times. The island was then a base for pirate raids, but also the site of fortifications (the Castellaccio) and watchtowers (sited in Cala d'Arena, Trabuccato and Cala d'Oliva), erected to defend the city of Sassari and the coast of Sardinia. Once the period of incursions came to an end, it was gradually repopulated by shepherds and fishermen. It passed to the Savoy in 1720, when the Habsburgs, who had briefly succeeded the Aragonese in the control of Sardinia, ceded it to them in exchange for Sicily.⁸

After acquiring Sardinia, the Savoy sent the engineer Antonio Felice De Vincenti to check the state of the defensive structures of the area. In his report, the engineer also covered Asinara and defined the bay where the village of Cala d'Oliva would later be built as a "very fertile valley", rich in springs of "very good water" and "good pastures" (Diana, 2015, pp.26-27). This positive report was based on a very partial view of the island's agricultural potential. However, Asinara, like Sardinia, presented itself to the Savoy as an underpopulated area deserving of a colonisation project to promote its development (Salice, 2017). For this reason, the proposal put forward in 1768 by two French brothers, Giuseppe Gioacchino and Antonio Felice Velixandre, was welcomed by the Savoy government. The project provided for the transfer to Sardinia of the shepherds who lived on Asinara and the settlement there of about one hundred families from outside the kingdom. The operation quickly failed, the new settlers left, and the shepherds returned from Sardinia (Giglio, 1974). A new project was later developed by a member of the Sardinian nobility, Don Antonio Manca-Amat, who was appointed Duke of Asinara in 1775. During his administration some fishermen arrived from Camogli in Liguria and founded the village of Cala d'Oliva. Later, fishermen from Naples also arrived. In 1836, the feudal

⁶ For vintage postcards, in addition to the author's private collection, it was possible to consult <http://www.ilttempodellamemoria.it/cartoline-dallasinara/> (last accessed: 8 March 2024)

⁷ *Linea Blue* episode *Sardegna, Asinara* (Donatella Bianchi), RAI, 17 May 2015; *Geo* episode *L'isola dell'Asinara* (Francesca Catarci) RAI, 6 May 2018; *Linea Blue* episode *Le isole carcere* (Donatella Bianchi) RAI, 16 November, 2020; *Di Martedì* episode *Asinara, l'isola prigioniera fra storia e natura* (Andrea Scazzola) La7, 21 May 2021; *Linea Blu* episode *L'isola dell'Asinara* (Donatella Bianchi), RAI 17 July, 2021; *Kalispé* episode *L'isola che non c'è* (Massimiliano Ossini), RAI, 19 January 2022; *Linea Blu* episode *Sardegna: tra Stintino e l'Asinara* (Donatella Bianchi), RAI 29 July, 2023; *Freedom* episode *Asinara: Sardegna l'Alcatraz Italiana* (Roberto Giacobbo) Mediaset, 29 January 2024.

⁸ A detailed reconstruction of Asinara's ancient history can be found in Giglio (1974), reprinted in anastatic form in 2022.

dependency was abolished and the living conditions improved a little. Nevertheless, as Alberto La Marmora (1860) noted, the people of Asinara were “far from living in prosperity”. Indeed,

water is very scarce. This lack of water will always be an obstacle to the growth of the population, which amounts to about 300 inhabitants, all of whom are shepherds or fishermen who at the same time are farmers. The granitic soil generally gives a thin and sterile sandy soil. (La Marmora, 1860, p. 144, ed. 1997)

Despite these overall difficulties, after the Unification of Italy (1861), the island, now free from feudal harassment, enjoyed a period of relative quiet, so much so that some fifteen families from the nearby towns of Sassari and Porto Torres began to spend their summer holidays there (Giglio, 1974). Unfortunately, the decision to establish a lazaret on the island, and an agricultural penal colony in order to provide it with agricultural products, soon disturbed this period of peace.

Transforming Asinara into a place of detention

At the end of the 19th century, the Mediterranean was still plagued by cholera epidemics and in 1884, the city of Naples was hit by a severe outbreak. In the following year the Italian government, alarmed by the epidemic that was raging in the French city of Marseille, decided to replace the health station located on the small island of Nisida, considered too close to the city of Naples, with a new national health station, located on the more isolated island of Asinara. To this end, the Parliament passed law no. 3183 on 28 June 1885, authorising the expropriation of the island for the construction of a national health centre for the compulsory detention of passengers from suspect ships entering the Mediterranean. A subsequent decree stipulated that the island had to be evacuated by 15 August of the same year (Giglio, 1974). There were different plans for the two settlements on the island. The inhabitants of the village of Cala Reale, who were mainly shepherds, were dispersed throughout Sardinia; those of Cala d’Oliva, who were of Ligurian origin and dedicated to fishing, managed, through mediation, to be transferred to a newly built village on the north-eastern Sardinian coast, which was to become the town of Stintino. Asinara, once emptied, was divided into two parts. One was assigned to the Ministry of the Navy to house the lazaret (officially called Stazione Sanitaria Marittima Quaranteneria), located in Cala Reale; the other, larger part, was assigned to the Ministry of the Interior for the construction of an agricultural penal colony (Casa di Lavoro all’aperto), located in Fornelli, in the southern part of the island, the produce of which were intended to contribute to the subsistence of those who were kept in the lazaret.

These decisions were made on the basis of the positive image of the island lingering at the time (notwithstanding the correct analysis of Alberto La Marmora, quoted above). As the *Giornale della Reale Società Italiana d’Igiene* reported, in an article about the government’s idea to install the sanitary station on the island

There are now three small population centres at Cala d’Oliva in the upper part, at Reale in the central part, and at Fornelli in the southern part towards Capo Falcone... The soil is fertile... Good pastures abound there, as well as woodlands rich in olive trees or bushes and cultivated plots with fairly luxuriant vegetation. The air is salubrious, as is confirmed by the exceptionally

flourishing state of the inhabitants and their minimal mortality rate” (Giornale della Regia Società d’Igiene, VII, 1885, p. 754)

Despite this initial optimism, these new attempts of agricultural colonisation did not work out well. Indeed,

they tried to plant fruit trees, to graft olive trees, to use the watercourses to plant vegetable gardens, to establish vineyards everywhere... they even tried extensive sowing of cereals and broad beans... But the difficulties proved hard to overcome, orchards produced only fig and almond trees, olives were harvested small and sparse. (Giglio, 1974, p.172)

In 1915, Asinara became a concentration camp for prisoners of war. At that time, the penal colony housed around 300 prisoners, divided between various sections, and 200 guards, employees, etc. Drinking water was supplied by a tanker from Sardinia, and agriculture, to which most of the inmates devoted themselves, consisted of “a few vineyards, a few fields of wheat and corn, a few meadows” (Ferrari, 1929, p. 4). The prisoners, Austro-Hungarian soldiers captured by the Serbs, boarded the ships towards Asinara in conditions of great distress (Gorgolini, 2011; Ischia e Terranova, 2017). In addition, they arrived in an area that was totally unprepared to receive them, as the order to take them in was issued just a few days before the first disembarkation. In total, some 24,000 prisoners arrived at the island, some of whom brought cholera with them. The penal colony experienced difficulty in providing sufficient shelter, food and clothing (according to Ferrari’s report, 1929, p. 19, some of the prisoners arrived “half-naked, others wrapped in sackcloth or ragged blankets; most of them barefoot”). Cholera raged among the prisoners. Officially, about 5,700 of them died (but probably more than 8,000). Asinara became known as the ‘Devil’s Island’, and the prisoners “the damned of Asinara” (Gorgolini, 2011); with both sobriquets being very apt, given the description offered by the General who commanded the camp:

They felt no restraint; only the power of instinct triumphed in them; humanity, to which the intellect and the moral sense were attached, seemed diminished in value before that horde of suffering bodies which threw themselves upon food, which had no disinclination to live, to eat, to sleep among the choleric, in the midst of a sea of sad and disgusting things, which undressed the dead and the dying; who crawled on all fours at night under their comrades’ tents or to the stores to steal a loaf of bread or a pair of shoes. One had to fight not only against the fury of the disease and the shortages of the island, but above all against this inferior state of life, a purely animal life, without a shred of conscience, into which the prisoners had fallen. (Ferrari, 1929, p. 29)

Luckily, this ‘hell’ lasted only a few months, since in July 1916, most of the prisoners were sent on to other destinations. They left behind many cemeteries (their remains were later gathered in a single ossuary), some works of art (including valuable sculptures such as ‘The Long Journey’ by the Hungarian Georg Vemess, now lost) and a severely damaged environment, since a large part of the island’s tree cover (consisting mainly of junipers, wild olive trees and elms) was removed to provide shelter and fuel. Many junipers, in particular, were lost forever, since, as Giglio (1974; p. 182, 2022) notes, “the island’s soil does not permit the reforestation of this plant by transplantation”. In 1919, after the end of the conflict, the Casa di Lavoro all’aperto regained possession of almost the whole island (although the lighthouses remained under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Navy and the Maritime Sanitary Station under that of the Ministry of Health). It was then decided to abandon

agriculture in favour of what was most profitable on the island: sheep and cattle farming. To this end, the production of grasses and fodder was increased and large areas of the island were cleared of their original vegetation. In the 1930s, about 250 Ethiopian prisoners were sent to the island.⁹ However, during the Second World War, the island was not involved in any military action. The administration of the detention centres continued in an effectively quiet manner until the 1970s.¹⁰ In 1971, when the first 15 suspected mafiosi were sent to Asinara, after the brutal murder of the Palermo prosecutor Pietro Scaglione, the situation began to change.

“...the place was reminiscent of hell and the most damned prisoners of all were in there”:¹¹ Asinara in the ‘70s, ‘80s & ‘90s

In the early 1970s, the Asinara prison was made up of more than 10 sections, scattered all over the island, where prisoners were usually placed according to the type of crime they had committed. Depending on the section they were assigned to, they had different duties and freedoms. In Cala d’Oliva, there were the staff quarters, the church, the school and three sections: the central section, which housed the least dangerous prisoners, who worked in the kitchens and in the guest quarters; the bunker, with some security cells; and the new section, which housed semi-released prisoners. Then there was Fornelli, the first prison built on the island. Another section was Tumbarino, in the centre of the island, where paedophiles were held. There was also the Santa Maria section, for prisoners accused of drug trafficking (due to the high proportion of foreign inmates, the section was known as the ‘Foreign Legion’). Then there were other small sections for *sconsegnati*, that is prisoners who did not require constant supervision and who worked in agriculture, viticulture and animal husbandry.

The transformation of Asinara into a maximum-security prison came about in stages. In the 1970s there was a climate of great tension in Italian prisons, which often led to riots and violent protests by prisoners linked to political organisations. Asinara was considered a safer place to keep these inmates because of its isolated location. Therefore, the government decided to transfer some mafia leaders and, later, various members of Italian terrorist groups, such as the Brigate Rosse and Ordine Nero (see Calderone, 2005), as well as some members of Sardinian Anonima Sequestri criminal gangs. Article 90 of the Law provided for special treatment for prisoners considered dangerous, so the section of Fornelli was set aside for them. To make matters worse for the prisoners, between 1974 and 1980, the prison’s director was Luigi Cardullo, nicknamed ‘the Viceroy’ because of the arbitrary and violent way he treated the inmates. Asinara quickly became the symbol of the state’s hard line against terrorism, the ‘Italian Cayenna’. In 1976 and 1977, a series of articles in the newspaper *La Nuova Sardegna* tried to denounce what was happening on the island.¹²

⁹ See https://campifascisti.it/elenco_internati.php?num=34

¹⁰ At least, on the side of those who were not imprisoned, since they could enjoy the services rendered by the prisoners themselves (who, as well as being shepherds and farmers, were barbers, servants, etc.). See, for instance, the autobiographical book *La mia Asinara* by the schoolteacher, Franca Fadda Silveti, who worked on the island from 1952 to 1985. Far less ‘quiet’ is the account offered by the 1952 radio documentary, *Asinara Colonia Agricola di Detenuti*, RAI, by Aldo Salvo; here Asinara is recounted as a place with an “African climate” and a “half moon, half African” landscape, where the convicts are broken by imprisonment and climate.

¹¹ Musumeci (2010).

¹² See Sanna (2010, p. 13) for discussion.

But 1978 was an even more difficult year for those detained there, since in April the Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, was kidnapped by the *Brigate Rosse* and later killed; as a result, the living conditions of the prisoners accused of belonging to that terrorist organisation deteriorated. A first revolt broke out in August 1978, and a second, much more violent one, broke out on 2 October 1979, when Fornelli was almost destroyed by the inmates. After the uprising, those accused of being terrorists were taken away and dispersed to other Italian prisons. General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, at that time already in charge of the most relevant counter-terrorism Italian unit (de Vito, 2009), had the task of coordinating the external and internal security of Italian prisons, and was put in charge of rebuilding Fornelli. He entrusted director Cardullo with the task of ensuring that all procedural rules were respected, but the management of the contracts was far from transparent and in 1980 Cardullo was transferred elsewhere (and later convicted of embezzlement) and Fornelli was closed.

In 1982, Raffaele Cutolo, the head of organised crime in Naples (the *Nuova Camorra*), was transferred to Asinara, “a place that, because of its characteristics, cut him off from the outside world, both geographically and socially”, to prevent him from continuing to give orders, as he had done before from other Italian prisons (dalla Chiesa, 2023, p. 27). That same year, Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, who had been transferred to Palermo to fight the local mafia, was assassinated in an attack later claimed by the mafia ‘boss of the bosses’, Totò Riina. In the ensuing anti-mafia crackdown, a massive inquest was launched. It culminated in a maxi-trial against more than 400 mafia suspects. The investigation for the maxi-trial was prepared by two judges, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, who, having already been threatened by the mafia, were relocated to Asinara for their protection in 1985. In May 1992, Giovanni Falcone was murdered along with his wife and security guards outside Palermo. After the killing of his colleague, Paolo Borsellino drafted the extension of the 41-bis amendment. He was murdered in July; immediately after his death, the extension of the amendment was approved by parliament (dalla Chiesa, 2023).¹³ In August 1992 tens of members of organised crime gangs were sent to Asinara, under the 41-bis regime, and imprisoned in Fornelli, with the high security structure being reopened to accommodate them. In 1993, also Totò Riina arrived and was placed in solitary confinement in the Cala d’Oliva bunker, specially converted for him. The lights were always on, 24 hours a day, so the bunker ironically became known as ‘the disco’.

Carmelo Musumeci, who was imprisoned in Fornelli from 1992 to 1997 under the 41-bis regime, describes the place as a reality completely devoid of any respect for human rights: damp cells full of mould, small openings from which you could barely see a glimpse of the sky and toilets without doors (Musumeci, 2023). However, unlike the terrorists of the 1970s who had effectively declared war on Asinara on the basis of an ideological hatred of the state and were therefore greatly feared by the prison guards (Cassitta and Spanu, 2012), mafiosi were usually quiet and did not organize riots inside the prison. Many of them, after a period of beatings and isolation, became collaborators with justice, denouncing other members of the organization (Musumeci, 2023). While Riina never became a *pentito* (repentant), in the memories of those who worked there, he too seemed to be “quiet, very

¹³ Under the 41-bis regime, prisoners are kept in a single cell, containing only a bed, a table and a chair nailed to the floor; they are guarded by prison police 24 hours a day; they can receive one visit a month and make one phone call a month; they cannot receive anything from the outside and mail is censored. Introduced in 1986 under the Gozzini Law, 41-bis was initially intended to be applied only in the event of prison riots, as an emergency. With the Borsellino extension in 1992, however, it was extended to prisoners accused of belonging to criminal organisations.

compliant with regulations”, like the other mafiosi (Cassitta & Spanu, 2012, p. 124). By the end of the decade, the low-intensity conflict between the Italian state and regional organised crime apparently ended (a new era of *pax mafiosa* began). So, in December 1997 the prison was closed and Asinara was converted into a national park.

Reframing Asinara as an ‘uncontaminated paradise’

The creation of the Asinara National Park was not based on a sudden decision. On the contrary, the Municipality of Porto Torres, to which the island is administratively attached, had been claiming its tourist potential since the 1960s. A first conference on the topic was organised in 1967 by the local administration, then in the following decades, there were various legislative proposals, and discussions, at government, regional and local level. The dual image of the island, as prison and ‘paradise’, had also begun to surface in public discourse. In this context, it is worth mentioning a parliamentary interpellation by members of the Radical Party in 1989; they were concerned about the closure of the prison (which, in their opinion, was now acceptable “because it had been restored to its original state as a workhouse”) for fear of the possible development of tourism on the island.¹⁴ In particular, the interpellation emphasised the need to oppose “the aims of building and tourism speculators who openly aspire to get their hands on these last *uncontaminated natural paradises*, objectively destroying them” (my italics) (Atti Parlamentari, 1989, p. 37204).

The idea of the island as a ‘paradise’ had already echoed in an article in *Nuova Sardegna* of 1955, in which it was written that the families forced to leave the island in 1885 “came from a small paradise on earth” (Giglio, 1974, p. 236). Later, to the supposed good quality of the environment, the idea that the area had remained ‘uncontaminated’ was added, together with the notion that it should remain protected against urbanisation and tourism. A piece for the tourist magazine *Bell'Italia* in 1996, by the journalist Mauro Lissia starts like this:

Exclusive, almost unattainable. A lost paradise for nostalgic environmentalists, coveted prey for those who make tourism brick by brick... Asinara, in the north-west of Sardinia, is the last strip of wild nature...

and then goes on to define the future park as “the most uncontaminated and wild in Sardinia” (1996, p. 57).

Whether the use of the island as a space for detention had really left the island ‘uncontaminated’ is highly debatable. When the various sections were closed, they left debris and rubbish of all kinds, from car bodies to asbestos cement tanks, ferrous materials, special waste and building materials, as well as fences of the most diverse types (Porcu Gaias, 2021). Not only that, domestic horses, goats and pigs were released, giving rise, in the absence of predators, to a massive population of feral animals, harmful to the island’s vegetation cover (Pisanu et al., 2012). Wild boars and mouflons had been previously introduced, for hunting reasons. Then there are the typical white donkeys, once rare, now more numerous, whose origin is still uncertain, but nevertheless linked to domestic animals and their anthropic use. Among the birds, the magpie was also introduced and today, due

¹⁴ A similar idea had already been put forward by Bocchieri (1988), that Asinara should continue to be used as a penitentiary in order to avoid the risk of privatisation, which would be the start of an unstoppable process of transformation through the promotion of tourism.

to its habit of preying on nests, poses a danger to other bird species. In addition to overgrazing, other alterations to the flora have resulted from the over-cutting of certain tree species, particularly junipers, and also from agricultural, forestry and livestock uses (Pisanu et al., 2014).

About Asinara, books of recollections abound, presenting memories of inmates, jailers, officials, relatives of officials, each telling their own version of the island. There is even a volume edited by one of the first tourists, a journalist from Genoa, entitled *Asinara. A journey between heaven and hell* (Rizzoglio, 2003). There is less to choose from when it comes to images relating to the prison period on the island. If we focus our attention on postcards, a popular visual medium of communication for a good part of the 20th century, the production relating to the island of Asinara can be distinguished into three types of images. Firstly, there are the images that offer a state-centric view of Asinara as the sanitary-detention island. Thus, we have postcards from 1906, depicting the hospital and the crematorium; postcards from the period of the prison camp (1916), with the hospital, the 3rd class accommodation, the bathing and disinfection establishment, and the cemeteries. Postcards from after the Second World War depict the International Maritime Sanitary Station and even the prison branch of Fornelli. The second type of image is the one that could be described as 'normalising' Asinara. There are postcards, again starting from the early 20th century, representing the lighthouse, or the village of Cala Reale, or, much more frequently, Cala d'Oliva, or just the sea, a little bit ruffled, or a stretch of coast. The third kind of postcards, which are more recent, provide pictures of animals, considered representative of the 'nature' of the island ('natural Asinara'). Initially, there were only images of donkeys, while later, with the creation of the park, postcards were made depicting mouflons, birds of prey, flamingos and even goats.



Figure 2 - A 'state-centric' representation of Asinara's lazaret (author's private collection).



Figure 3 - 'Normalising' Asinara: Cala d'Oliva (author's private collection).



Figure 4 - 'Normalising' Asinara - Cala d'Oliva in the 1970s (author's private collection).



Figure 4 - 'Natural Asinara': the donkeys (author's private collection).



Figure 5 - 'Natural Asinara': the goats (author's private collection).

Apart from postcards, not many photos from the island's past are available to the public. The exceptions are the offered by some photographic images of the First World War concentration camp in the photo album *Austrian prisoners of war on Asinara. 18 December 1915-24 July 1916*, reprinted on the occasion of the centenary (Trova and Zichi, 2014); some

family snapshots, posted on Facebook pages, by those who spent their childhood in Asinara, as children of civil servants during the prison years;¹⁵ or the collection of photos by Lorenzo Spanu (Diacrone, n.d.), who worked in Asinara from 1965 to 1998, first as a correctional officer and later as commander of the prison police. These photos offer images of fields, fishermen and smiling children, working prisoners, inmates playing football. But, since prisoners, could not take pictures, there are no traces of beatings and abuse.

In a 1993 video report entitled *L'Asinara. L'isola proibita*, where the image of Asinara as a 'uncontaminated paradise' (albeit at the time not accessible to outside visitors), is already offered to the public, 41-bis is obviously not mentioned. Regarding Asinara, one can admire the turquoise of the sea, the mouflons or the birds, hear the stories of the heirs of those who were forced to leave the island, see cattle and goats grazing freely and happily. Yet, the noise of the motorised vehicles around the island performing continuous checks and inspections (de Vito, 2009) cannot be heard. When there is a mention of the detention institution, the only image offered is of those who lead a pastoral life, tending their flocks. The Cala d'Oliva bunker is *ob-scene* (cannot be seen), like all those that, at that time, were locked up in Fornelli. The island is defined as been "formalinised" by the presence of the prison, because nature is "extremely generous" here. The prison, says Spanu, the commander of the guards, saved the island, which thanks to it remained "virgin, the only virgin area in Sardinia, indeed in Italy".

The same narrative, namely that the natural beauty of the island has been preserved thanks to the prison, returns in the documentaries produced after the prison was closed but not everyone agrees. In the 2015 nature documentary *Sardegna, Asinara*, Egidio Trainito says that "the Park would be the cure for the scars left by centuries of use that had nothing to do with protecting nature." Then, he states that the euphorbia has become "the queen of the island" because it is an indigestible plant, and therefore, all animals brought by humans (like horses, donkeys, mouflons, goats), do not eat it, while they eat everything else. Trainito's voice, however, is a lonely one. Even when it comes to the wild horses, which are certainly not indigenous to the island, comments from other interviewees are generally positive, with one person noting that although they are descendants of the horses released when the prison was closed, they still have a "landscape value". In another documentary, *L'isola che non c'è*, the TV anchor says: "look how beautiful they are, typical of this place", although a vet has just explained that the horses were released by the Carceral Administration. Then, the same anchor adds: "we can say that the prison, for better or for worse, was the element that changed the history of this place".

"A place that is today a paradise but used to be hell" – these words start a documentary program entitled *Un luogo che oggi è paradiso, ma è stato inferno*. Here, the memory of the prison, enhanced by a dramatic musical background, resurfaces, serving to arouse a somewhat morbid curiosity in those looking for dark forms of tourism. This memory is balanced by the emphasis on the fact that "Italy's worst criminals" (the enemies of the state) were imprisoned there. Indeed, as the journalist introducing the documentary *L'isola che non c'è*, states "here passed the protagonists of our country's darkest history".

So, the gulag/paradise cliché still run rampant in contemporary media programs produced by major television networks about Asinara, although local administrations and

¹⁵ Such as Asinara  Ricordi d'infanzia.

institutions obviously prefer to focus on the positive image.¹⁶ The park also made a documentary in 2020 to highlight the change from the isolation of the prison (which, according to the park director, created problems, but also protected the island from the uncontrolled development typical of other Sardinian coasts) to the openness of the new Asinara.¹⁷ Then, Porto Torres Town Hall launched a visual campaign to promote the island of Asinara for “Weddings in a Sardinian Paradise”. The island is also actively promoted by the Sardinian Film Commission as an “open-air, film-friendly and eco-sustainable set”. From this point of view, perhaps the most important contribution to this path has been to bring the production of *The Little Mermaid*, Disney, 2023, to the park (even though the story is set in the Caribbean – Nova News, 2023).

Conclusions


Asinara is an island with little water and much wind. However, over the years it has undergone various attempts at agricultural colonisation, the most significant of which was the creation of an agricultural penal colony to support the guests of the health station built there in 1885. Emptied of its few inhabitants, the island then began to be used as a detention space. This more than 100-year usage has been marked by particularly dramatic moments, such as when the island was turned into a concentration camp for prisoners of war (during World War I) and when, from the 1970s to the 1990s, it was turned into a maximum-security prison, where prisoners were subjected to cruel treatment. This has earned the island many nicknames, all very negative (Devil’s Island, Italian Cayenne, Italian Alcatraz, etc.).

Inaccessible from the outside for more than one century, the island has not undergone the heavy urbanisation typical of other coastal areas of Sardinia, and so, when the prison was closed and the island turned into a national park, the limited number of buildings and the absence of tourist or industrial use of the land seemed to suggest a very ‘natural’ aspect of the landscape (even though, in reality, the island’s fauna and flora had been profoundly altered by the prison’s usage). In order to improve the image of the island, and to soften the memory of the hard prison, alongside the ‘normalising’ pictures of Cala d’Oliva, typical of the postcards issued in the past, representations of Asinara’s scenic ‘nature’ have become increasingly popular, together with the idea that such ‘beautiful nature’ is still ‘uncontaminated’ precisely because the island has been used as a prison for long time. The glorification of the island as a ‘paradise’, as in more recent video documentaries, is the cornerstone of contemporary communication. The remains of the prison, with its many sections scattered across the island, are still there and cannot be hidden. The harshness of prison conditions of the past, however, can be justified saying that Asinara locked up ‘the worst enemies of the state’; from this perspective, its recollection can even be used to serve dark tourism impulses. But the blue of the sea is omnipresent, as is the rugged coastal landscape, often captured in a series of long takes. White donkeys are there too, along with wild horses running free, mouflons, and flowers. The contrast is the justification for the sustained presence of the prison: after all, so much beauty is (supposed to be) due to it.

¹⁶ Indeed, when the prison was closed down, the main desire of the park’s management was to forget about it (Canu, 2021/22).

¹⁷ Opening the park to tourism has also led to conflicts between protecting and using the island. See Carboni et al. (2015), and Corbau et al. (2018).

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