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*Governing Punishment through the Bagni Penali:  
Gaeta, Santo Stefano, and the Making of Carceral Order  
in Nineteenth-Century Italy*

SUMMARY: Introduction – 1. *Bagni* in Reformist Discourse – 2. Beyond the Discourse: Governing the *Bagni* between Reform and Inertia – 3. Gaeta and Santo Stefano between continuity and prison reconfigurations – Conclusions.

*Introduction*

In recent years, the historiography of detention in the modern age has undergone significant developments, progressively shifting its focus from general legal norms and reformist theories to the concrete practices, spatial configurations, institutional apparatuses, and material contexts of punishment. Within this renewed interpretive framework, *bagni penali*—Italian penal labor institutions—deserve renewed critical attention as enduring punitive devices that spanned multiple historical phases and adapted to changing state structures and rationales of governance<sup>1</sup>.

Italy offers a particularly rich case study. The persistence, even after national unification, of penal establishments inherited from the *Ancien régime* raises questions about the resilience of traditional models of punishment and the limited capacity of the post-unitary state to standardize its carceral geography. Although the historiography of Italian prisons has expanded in recent decades, it has seldom addressed these hybrid and resistant sites—such as the *bagni*—which have often been regarded as marginal or obsolete in relation to the broader narrative of penal modernization<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to provide an exhaustive bibliography in this context. We therefore refer to the historiographical considerations in C.L. Monticelli, C.G. De Vito, *Pluralità dei regimi punitivi: periodizzazioni, circolazioni, modelli cattolici*, in «Meridiana. Rivista di Storia e Scienze sociali», 101 (2021), pp. 9-22; M. Gibson, *Le prigionie italiane nell'età del positivismo (1861-1914)*, Rome 2022, pp. 13-24; L. Martone, *Introduzione*, in Id. (ed.), *Giustizia penale e ordine in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, Naples 1996, pp. v-xix and the bibliography in C.G. De Vito, *Camosci e girachiavi. Storia del carcere in Italia*, Rome-Bari 2009, pp. 197-202.

<sup>2</sup> Among the few exceptions, A. Tolomeo, *Bagni penali e isole di relegazione nel Regno di*

This article contributes to this line of inquiry by examining the trajectories of the *bagni penali* in the nineteenth century from a comparative and diachronic perspective. Focusing on the cases of Gaeta and Santo Stefano in Ventotene, it explores the interplay between penal discourse and institutional practice, between normative reform and the inertia of inherited structures, within a context in which the state struggled to govern marginality, deviance, and public order through often contradictory mechanisms.

The article is structured into three main sections. The first analyzes the evolution of reformist discourses concerning the *bagni penali* from the Bourbon period to the early decades of the Italian Kingdom, tracing the plurality of proposals, the circulation of international models, and the institutional translation of reformist ideals within a fragmented and contested penal landscape. The second section investigates actual prison practices—routines, labor regimes, spatial use, and prisoner classification—highlighting continuities and ruptures across the pre- and post-unification divide, with the aim of revealing long-term dynamics that challenge conventional chronological periodizations. The third section focuses on the case studies of Gaeta and Santo Stefano not as exceptions, but as privileged vantage points from which to observe the evolution of penal governance in Southern Italy. Drawing on archival and statistical sources, the section examines the structural and functional transformations of these institutions and their integration into the emerging national prison system following the abolition of the *bagni*. The comparison between the two sites enables a reflection on convergence, divergence, and institutional strategies of adaptation during a phase of regulatory transition.

Taken together, these three sections seek to reframe the history of Italian *bagni penali* by moving beyond teleological readings and binary oppositions, offering instead an interpretation attentive to practices, temporal plurality, and the material conditions of punishment.

### 1. *Bagni in Reformist Discourse*

Throughout the nineteenth century, *bagni* figured prominently in debates on penal reform within the various pre-unification states of the Italian peninsula. Increasingly regarded by contemporaries as both anachronistic and morally degrading, these institutions became the focus

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*Napoli*, in Martone, Luciano (ed.), *Giustizia penale e ordine in Italia*, pp. 1-62.

of intense theoretical and administrative scrutiny as part of a broader reassessment of punitive models and carceral rationalities.

From the 1830s onward, a diverse and growing body of critical discourse emerged, articulated by reform-minded jurists, prison inspectors, and state officials. Despite differing ideological and institutional standpoints, these actors shared a fundamental unease with the legitimacy of the *bagni* in light of the evolving principles of penitentiary science. Their writings reveal a shifting penal imagination—one that questioned not only the efficacy, but also the ethical and functional place of forced labor institutions within a modern penal order.

Reconstructing this corpus of discourse allows us to trace both ruptures and continuities in the way *bagni* were conceptualized before and after Italian unification. It also provides insight into how theoretical debates shaped, and were shaped by, the pragmatic constraints of governance, contributing to a gradual reconfiguration of carceral space in the newly unified state.

#### *The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies: Volpicella and the Neapolitan debate*

In the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the question of *bagni* formed part of the broader discourse on prisons that permeated both institutional and intellectual circles between 1830 and 1860. This period was characterized by a growing interest in European penitentiary models and an active engagement in contemporary Italian penal journalism<sup>3</sup>. The accession of Ferdinand II to the throne in 1830 coincided with the appointment of Filippo Volpicella, entrusted by Minister of the Interior Nicola Santangelo, with conducting a preliminary inquiry into the state of detention facilities across the kingdom<sup>4</sup>. The findings of this investigation, published in

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of contemporary publications on the subject: P.S. Mancini, *Del miglior ordinamento del Carcere di Avellino e della introduzione della riforma penitenziaria nel Regno delle Due Sicilie*, excerpt from “Ore Solitarie”, fasc. VII-VIII-IX, 1843; Id., *Della utilità di ordinare i nuovi asili di mendicizia nel Regno di Napoli, sotto la forma di colonie Agricole. Discorso pronunziato nella seduta generale della Regia Società economica del Principato Ulteriore del 30 maggio 1843*, excerpt from «Biblioteca di scienze morali, legislative ed economiche», 1844, f. V, pp. 1-32; T. Mamiani, P.S. Mancini, *Intorno alla filosofia del diritto e singolarmente intorno alle origini del diritto di punire: lettere*, 2 voll., Naples 1844.

<sup>4</sup> The most relevant elements of the early contributions were collected in the following volume: F. Volpicella, *Delle Prigioni e del loro Migliore ordinamento*, Naples 1837. For all contributions published by Volpicella in «Annali civili del Regno delle due Sicilie» for the period 1833-1842, cfr. F. Assante, *La regina delle galere: storia e storie del carcere di Procida*, Naples 2015, pp. 147-148 (n. 64). On Volpicella's relationship with the contemporary international debate, see D. Ambron, *Le carceri regie del Regno di Napoli*

1837, offered a damning assessment of the *bagni*, portrayed as ineffective, morally corrosive, and counterproductive from both a disciplinary and rehabilitative perspective. As Volpicella wrote: “E in vero lo stato in che al presente trovansi i bagni dee spaventare per modo che si abbia quindi ad immaginar come escludere dalle categorie della pena questa [...]”<sup>5</sup>.

Despite his initial harsh critique, Volpicella appeared to maintain, at least in the early stages, a degree of confidence in the potential for an organic reform that might reintegrate *bagni* into a newly rationalized and modernized penitentiary system. This cautious optimism, however, gave way in the ensuing decades to a more definitive stance, as reflected in the proceedings of the *Commissione per l'immegliamento dei luoghi penali in Napoli*, which he presided over in 1861. By that time, Volpicella asserted that the *bagni* of the Kingdom had remained essentially unchanged since the era when they confined “gli slavi turchi e i rei dei peggiori delitti”, and that their continued operation was no longer justifiable—neither from an economic standpoint nor in terms of deterrence or rehabilitation. As he declared: “Le vele e il vapore bastano a menare i vascelli [...] e delle antiche galee [...] resta solo la storica rimembranza”<sup>6</sup>.

The conclusion reached by Volpicella is that *bagni* should no longer be considered autonomous institutions within the penal landscape. Rather, they ought to be reabsorbed into the broader architecture of the kingdom’s prison system and included within the overarching framework of penitentiary reform. As penal spaces, they were no longer justifiable as distinct or exceptional. In his words: “non differiscono da qualunque altra prigione di pena. Vi vengono tratti i rei dei più gravi misfatti, coloro che meritano un più lungo e severo castigo. Ma lo stesso fine della emendazione a che dee mirare ogni altra carcere, debbono similmente in principal modo mirare”<sup>7</sup>.

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*tra capitale e province (XVII-XVIII secolo)*, in Antonielli, Livio (ed.), *Carceri, carcerieri, carcerati: dall'antico regime all'Ottocento*, Soveria Mannelli 2006, p. 147 ff.

<sup>5</sup> “And indeed, the state in which the baths currently find themselves is so appalling that one is forced to imagine how to exclude them from the categories of punishment [...]”. Volpicella, *Delle prigioni e del loro migliore ordinamento*, p. 218.

<sup>6</sup> “Turkish slaves and the worst criminals”. “Sails and steam are enough to propel ships [...] and of the ancient galleys [...] only a historical memory remains”. Id., *Sui bagni di Napoli: due rapporti indirizzati al dicastero dei lavori pubblici dalla Commissione istituita per l'immegliamento dei Luoghi penali*, Naples, Stab. tip. delle Belle Arti, 1861, pp. 19-25.

<sup>7</sup> “They do not differ from any other prison. The worst criminals are hosted in there, those who deserve a longer and harsher treatment. The same goal of reform that every other prison must aim for must also be the main goal here”. Ibid.

*The Kingdom of Sardinia: Petitti di Roreto and Massone on the Crisis of the Bagni*

In the Kingdom of Sardinia, similar critiques were advanced by figures such as Carlo Ilarione Petitti di Roreto<sup>8</sup>, who, in a series of influential writings during the 1830s and 1840s, called for the abolition of the *bagni*, arguing that they were entirely incompatible with the principles of prison reform. Petitti maintained that these institutions had failed to achieve their intended purpose of maximum deterrence, instead producing only “l’infelice risultato di una più grande corruzione derivante da essi.” His moral condemnation was accompanied by economic considerations: the costs associated with maintaining convicts were seen as excessive, especially given the ineffectiveness of the system<sup>9</sup>.

A more radical stance was taken by the military physician Giovanni Battista Massone, who in 1851 denounced the *bagni* as “archivi di quanto v’ha degenerato e di guasto nella nostra natura,” describing them as an “immoral school” from which inmates emerged even more dangerous and depraved than they had been upon entry<sup>10</sup>.

Despite the diversity of regional contexts, the critiques voiced in the pre-unification states revealed several common features. Reformers in both the Neapolitan and Piedmontese spheres articulated a predominantly negative assessment of the *bagni penali*, which they regarded as vestiges of an archaic penal regime ill-suited to the demands of modernity. In both cases, however, these reformist arguments often collided with the practical exigencies of prison administration and the inertia of entrenched institutional frameworks. As a result, calls for abolition frequently remained unheeded, failing to translate into concrete legislative or structural change.

<sup>8</sup> Among his main publications on the subject: C.I. Petitti di Roreto, *Saggi sul buon governo della mendicizia, degli istituti di beneficenza e delle carceri*, Turin 1837; *Della condizione attuale delle carceri e dei mezzi di migliorarla*, Turin 1840; *Esame della polemica insorta sulla riforma delle carceri, considerate nelle ultime produzioni delle opposte scuole e riflessi relativi*, Milan 1842; *Esame della polemica insorta sulla riforma delle carceri, considerata nelle ultime produzioni delle opposte scuole e riflessi relativi*, Milan 1842; *Della condizione esordiente della riforma delle carceri: discussioni e fatti relativi con alcuni riflessi definitivi*, Florence 1843. For an overview of his figure, cf. P. Casana, C. Bonzo, *Tra pubblico e privato: istituzioni, legislazione e prassi nel Regno di Sardegna nel 19 secolo*, Turin 2016, pp. 59-112.

<sup>9</sup> “It is believed to have been demonstrated that they do not achieve the intended purpose of maximum intimidation but only have the unfortunate result of greater corruption deriving from them”. Petitti di Roreto, *Della condizione attuale delle carceri*, pp. 334-335.

<sup>10</sup> “Archives of all that is degenerate and corrupt in our nature”. Massone, Giovanni Battista, *La pena dei lavori forzati considerata nella sua applicazione pratica ossia i bagni marittimi negli stati sardi studiati sotto l’aspetto economico, statistico-igienico-morale ed al confronto della riforma*, Genoa 1851, p. 367.

*Persistence and reformulation in the Kingdom of Italy*

In the aftermath of national unification, the question of *bagni penali* was only partially redefined. Their continued existence was increasingly perceived as an anomaly when measured against the principles of contemporary penitentiary science. A notable example is the 1870 report presented by Scipione Staffa to the *Accademia Pontaniana*, in which these institutions were described as places that “producevano ne’ condannati il più freddo e ributtante cinismo negli atti, nelle parole, nell’aspetto”<sup>11</sup>.

Similarly, the *Effemeride carceraria*—the official journal of the Ministry—referred to *bagni* in stark terms, branding them as a “vergogna della civiltà” and a “piaga dell’erario”<sup>12</sup>.

Yet even within the institutional framework of the unified Kingdom of Italy, such critiques did not immediately translate into substantive reform. Abolitionist rhetoric continued to coexist with a prison reality still largely reliant on forced labor and on the persistence of inherited spatial configurations. It was only with the implementation of the Zanardelli Penal Code in 1889, followed by the 1891 *Regolamento carcerario*, that a more coherent reform effort took shape—ultimately paving the way for the gradual dismantling of *bagni penali* and their absorption into a nationalized penitentiary system.

## 2. *Beyond the Discourse: Governing the Bagni between Reform and Inertia*

While reformist discourse across the various pre-unification states increasingly denounced the *bagni penali* as outdated and degrading institutions, an examination of actual practices reveals a far more nuanced picture. Administrative inertia, the structural persistence of inherited facilities, and contingent political or logistical imperatives often resulted

<sup>11</sup> “Produced in the condemned the coldest and most repulsive cynicism in their actions, words, and appearance”. S. Staffa, *Della riforma delle carceri giudiziarie in Italia. Memoria letta all’Accademia nella tornata del 3 aprile 1870*, in «Atti dell’Accademia Pontaniana», f. 1, vol. 10, Naples 1871, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> “The shame of civilization”; “a scourge on the treasury”. G.B. Rossi, *La pena dei bagni marittimi. Vergogna della civiltà, piaga dell’erario*, in «Effemeride carceraria. Rivista ufficiale delle carceri del Regno d’Italia», y. II, Turin 1866, pp. 71-87. This opinion is shared by both the press and government bodies. See, for example: F. Bellazzi, *Prigioni e prigionieri nel Regno d’Italia*, Florence 1866; *Sull’Unificazione nazionale della legislazione penale*, in «Effemeride carceraria», y. I, Turin 1865, p. 70.

in slow, fragmented, and contradictory processes of penal reform. The management of *bagni* was marked by a gradual formalization of regulatory frameworks, which rarely translated into meaningful functional change. In both the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the Kingdom of Sardinia, *ad hoc* adaptations of existing spaces and rules to emergent needs generally prevailed over any systematic rationalization of the punitive apparatus along coherent or consistent lines.

*The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies: expansion and regulation*

In the Bourbon context, the administration of the *bagni penali* was increasingly marked by efforts toward bureaucratic centralization. Until 1822, these institutions remained under the authority of the *Corpo dei custodi della Real Marina*, a naval custodial corps later dissolved and absorbed into the regular ranks of the Royal Navy. As a result, administrative oversight shifted to the Director of the *Real Segreteria di Stato di Marina*, while high-level supervision was entrusted to the *Maggior Generale della Real Marina*<sup>13</sup>. A further step in this centralizing trajectory occurred with the 1835 reform and the creation of the *Ispezione dei rami alieni*, which reinforced the strategic role of the maritime department in supervising such institutions<sup>14</sup>.

In 1857, the management of the *bagni penali* was once again reconfigured, this time passing under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Works, which was already responsible for administering the Kingdom's islands of confinement<sup>15</sup>. Alongside this administrative reorganization, a progressively articulated legal framework emerged to regulate prisoner classification and disciplinary regimes. The 1824 *Regolamento per i condannati all'ergastolo* and the 1826 *Regolamento per i forzati* constituted the primary legislative references, later supplemented by norms concerning *presidiarj*<sup>16</sup>. The nineteenth century witnessed a notable expansion in the number of *bagni penali*. In addition to the historic facilities located in Naples and the surrounding provinces, new institutions were established on the islands (Procida, Ischia), on the mainland (Pozzuoli, Castellammare, Granatello), and in smaller

<sup>13</sup> *Collezione Leggi e Decreti del Regno delle Due Sicilie* (hereinafter CLD), I sem., decrees of May 31, 1822, pp. 296-303.

<sup>14</sup> *Almanacco Reale del Regno delle Due Sicilie per l'anno 1854*, Naples 1854, p. 326-327.

<sup>15</sup> CLD, 1857, II semester, decree no. 4649 of December 29, 1857.

<sup>16</sup> G. Madonia, *Supplemento alle cinque parti del Codice per il Regno delle Due Sicilie*, Palermo 1840, 236-244.

inland locations (Montefusco, Pescara, Capua). On the eve of national unification, the *bagni* were predominantly concentrated in the province of Naples, although some were also operative in Brindisi and Gaeta.

*Between Discipline and Stagnation: Penal Baths in the Kingdom of Sardinia*

In the Kingdom of Sardinia, the reform of the penal system initiated in the 1830s resulted in a series of fragmented and partial measures concerning the *bagni penali*. The *Regolamento Sanitario per i condannati* of 1839 and the *Regie Determinazioni* of 1841 addressed various hygienic, administrative, and financial aspects of these institutions<sup>17</sup>. The primary detention sites included the central prison of Genoa and several annexes located in Savona, Capraia, and Villafranca. Among these, the maritime facility on the island of Capraia stood out for the size of its inmate population and its logistical significance within the broader penal geography of the kingdom.

In 1851, control over the Sardinian maritime *bagni* was transferred to the Real Marina, reflecting a broader pattern of administrative restructuring. Alongside this shift, the authorities pursued efforts to rationalize prisoner classification and forced labor practices. However, these attempts were seldom accompanied by a structural rethinking of the penal model. The institutions established to oversee penal administration - such as the *Ispettorato generale delle carceri* (1849) and the *Consiglio generale delle carceri* (1851) - lacked both the political authority and operational means to produce a coherent and lasting transformation. In practice, the system remained anchored to outdated logics of punishment, in which maritime penal labor continued to serve as a residual yet persistent component of the Sardinian penal landscape.

*From Fragmentation to Unification: the Kingdom of Italy*

The unification of 1861 brought with it the coexistence of heterogeneous structures and legal frameworks. The Royal Decree of September 19, 1860, originally designed for the *bagni penali* in the northern provinces, quickly proved inadequate for the newly annexed southern territories. Royal Decree No. 169 of August 11, 1861, reorganized the Neapolitan penal institutions and abolished the General Office of *bagni*. The path to regulatory harmonization, however, was far

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<sup>17</sup> G.B. Massone, *La pena dei lavori forzati considerata nella sua applicazione pratica ossia i bagni marittimi negli stati sardi studiati sotto l'aspetto economico, statistico-igienico-morale ed al confronto della riforma penitenziaria*, Genoa 1851, pp. 21-37.

from linear and revealed persistent tensions between inherited systems and centralizing ambitions. The *Ispettorato generale dei bagni penali*, created in 1860, was already abolished by 1865. The transfer of *bagni penali* from the Ministry of the Navy (*Ministero della Marina*) to the Ministry of the Interior (*Ministero dell'Interno*) did not take place until 1867 (Royal Decree No. 3411 of November 29, 1866), followed by the delegation of disciplinary responsibilities to the *Direttore Generale delle carceri*. In 1874, an interministerial commission was established to reconcile the Bourbon and Savoyard regulations, culminating in the 1878 Regulations, the Zanardelli Code of 1889, and the General Prison Regulations of 1891.

At the same time, *bagni* continued to be extensively employed. By 1880, the number of such establishments had increased to 24 (33 including branches), with a total capacity exceeding 18,000 inmates. Their overuse was particularly pronounced in the southern regions, which the central authorities regarded as “critical” areas requiring intensified forms of repression. This expansion, however, was accompanied by a marked decline in financial commitment: the funds allocated to *bagni* were significantly lower than those destined for ordinary prisons and judicial institutions<sup>18</sup>.

The management of the various facilities followed differentiated logics, reflected both in the composition of the prison population and in the architectural interventions - ranging from the construction of isolation cells to the establishment of workshops. The definitive turning point came with the Zanardelli Code and the *Regolamento* of 1891, which sanctioned the end of *bagni penali* as distinct institutions. These establishments were absorbed into the ordinary prison system and reclassified as life prisons (*ergastoli*), houses of correction or civil and military prisons. In many cases, however, this formal reclassification concealed a deeper continuity of practice, as modes of segregation, coercion, and non-educational punishment persisted beneath the surface of legal reform.

### 3. *Gaeta and Santo Stefano between continuity and prison reconfigurations*

In order to concretely illustrate the operational and institutional dynamics analyzed in the previous sections, the trajectories of two major

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<sup>18</sup> *Considerazioni generali. Personale, fabbricati, trasporti*, in Ministry of the Interior, DGPS, *Statistica delle carceri per l'anno 1871*, Rome 1873, p. XXI and CCXXI; Assante, *La regina delle galere*, p. 125.

*bagni penali* in southern Italy - Gaeta and the islet of Santo Stefano in Ventotene - highlight both local specificities and continuities between the Bourbon and post-unification periods. Despite their differing origins - Gaeta as a former fortified site gradually converted into a prison, and Santo Stefano as a purpose-built facility - both institutions embody the evolving strategies of punishment and the ambivalent nature of prison rationalization in the long nineteenth century. The *bagno penale* of Gaeta was part of a broader process of gradual transformation of the fortified complex. Its Angevin wing ceased to serve as a royal residence and military garrison as early as 1734, following the establishment of the Bourbon dynasty. From that point onward, the site was progressively repurposed for detention, a function it maintained until its final decommissioning in 1990<sup>19</sup>. In contrast, the prison of Santo Stefano was constructed *ex novo* between 1794 and 1797 on the explicit orders of the monarch. It was conceived as an isolated and self-sufficient carceral institution designed to accommodate political detainees and common criminals awaiting trial<sup>20</sup>.

Both institutions were formally integrated into the Bourbon prison system by the *Ordinanze Generali della Marina* of 1818, which classified Santo Stefano as a first-class prison and Gaeta as a second-class one<sup>21</sup>. From the 1840s onward, the two *bagni penali* acquired growing centrality within the Bourbon carceral network, both for the number of common convicts they accommodated and for the presence of prominent political detainees. Santo Stefano notably housed figures such as Luigi Settembrini and Silvio Spaventa, both imprisoned between 1851–52 and 1859, while Gaeta served as a site of detention for Giacomo Longo and Mariano Delli Franci, incarcerated in 1848 and released only in 1860<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the conversion, see S. Leccese, *Il castello di Gaeta. Notizie e ricordi*, Gaeta 1958.

<sup>20</sup> On the origins of life imprisonment, I refer you to A. Santilli, *Entre proximité et promiscuité. Vivre l'enfermement dans les petits espaces insulaires: le cas des îles de Ventotene e Santo Stefano (1770-1810)*, "Criminocorpus", 23 (2023), URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/criminocorpus/13300>; G. Mirenda, *L'origine dell'Ergastolo di Santo Stefano*, in Santilli, Anthony (ed.), *Biografia di una prigioniera. L'Ergastolo di Santo Stefano in Ventotene (secc. XVII-XX)*, Genoa 2018, pp. 23-42.

<sup>21</sup> *Ordinanze Generali della Marina del 1818*, Parte Prima, Vol. II, titolo XVIII, Napoli 1856, p. 312 sgg.

<sup>22</sup> On the specific experiences of Settembrini and Spaventa in Santo Stefano: L. Settembrini, *L'ergastolo di Santo Stefano*, edited by Riccardo Navone, Genoa, Ultima spiaggia, 2010; S. Spaventa, *Lettere a Felicetta*, edited by M. Themelly, Naples 1977.

*National Unification: A Real Turning Point?*

However, the two institutions followed markedly different trajectories after national unification. Gaeta was affected by its strategic location near the border, its continuing military function, and its use during sieges—most notably that of 1860–61—which turned it into a site of internment for prisoners of war<sup>23</sup>. By contrast, the insular position and geographical isolation of Santo Stefano were seen by the authorities as a safeguard for the incarceration of the most dangerous individuals—although in many cases, this isolation proved more symbolic than real<sup>24</sup>. In 1871, both were among the 24 *bagni* in the Kingdom of Italy, with significant prison populations: Gaeta housed 878 prisoners, making it the third most crowded prison in central and southern Italy, after Nisida (980) and Civitavecchia (908), while Santo Stefano held 732<sup>25</sup>. Despite the relatively lower population, Santo Stefano had a disproportionately high number of *ergastolani*—255 individuals sentenced to hard labour for life—ranking second only to Civitavecchia, which held 261 in the same category.

The figure reported by official statistics for Gaeta—‘only’ 168 life-term convicts—must be read in conjunction with the 710 inmates sentenced to *temporary forced labour* (a category entirely absent at Santo Stefano). This indicates that the entire inmate population at Gaeta was engaged in forced labour, either temporary or permanent<sup>26</sup>. It is important to note that, from 1863 onward, Gaeta also hosted a separate military prison, equipped with numerous workshops (printing, carpentry, tailoring, and others), with a prison population that reached 852 in 1871<sup>27</sup>. The combined total of the civil and military sectors made Gaeta one of the most significant detention centres in the Kingdom of Italy.

These trends persisted throughout the following decade: Santo Stefano consolidated its role as a site for the internment of individuals deemed dangerous, while Gaeta was increasingly oriented toward forced

<sup>23</sup> On the constant flow of prisoners, see, for example: Quandel, Pietro, *Giornale della difesa di Gaeta da novembre 1860 a febbraio 1861 per Pietro Quandel*, Rome 1863. For a better understanding of Gaeta’s role in the complex transition phase of the 1860s, see: C. Pinto, *La guerra per il Mezzogiorno: italiani, borbonici, briganti 1860-1970*, Bari-Rome 2019.

<sup>24</sup> A. Santilli, *La porosità delle isole carcere d’epoca borbonica attraverso il caso dell’Ergastolo di Santo Stefano in Ventotene (secc. XVIII-XIX)*, in Id. (edited by, *Frammenti insulari. Nuove prospettive storiografiche per le isole del Mediterraneo (secc. XV-XX)*, Rome 2025, pp. 95-114.

<sup>25</sup> *Movimento di entrata e uscita dei detenuti ripartiti negli stabilimenti penali*, in *Statistica delle carceri per l’anno 1871*, Rome 1873, pp. 220-221.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>27</sup> Ministerial dispatch of April 1, 1863, no. 3115, in L. Torres, *Storia della reclusione militare e corpo moschettieri*, in «Studi Storico-Militari 2001», Rome 2004, pp. 461-463.

labour. In 1880, expenditures for manufacturing services were four times higher at Gaeta than at Santo Stefano<sup>28</sup>. Nevertheless, a report from 1879 highlighted the practical limitations of the work sector at Gaeta: «una sola camera adibita a scuola per una capienza di 24 posti», for a prison population which, «se si eccettuano 33 *mestieranti* e 42 addetti ai servizi domestici, [...] sono da considerarsi oziosi»<sup>29</sup>. Despite these constraints, the intention to expand the institution's productive capacity remained evident. In 1885, new *arts workshops* were established at Gaeta, whereas no similar investment was made at Santo Stefano<sup>3</sup>. Resource allocation thus reflected the specific institutional profiles of each *bagno penale*, and more generally, the centrality attributed to prison labour by both contemporary penitentiary science and political discourse. However, these priorities were not accompanied by coherent or uniform models of implementation<sup>30</sup>.

In practice, the administration of penal labour was shaped by continuous negotiation between political contingencies and entrenched institutional routines. During this period, if more systematic interventions were being undertaken, they concerned not so much the question of labour as the introduction of punitive configurations that had by then been assimilated by both penitentiary theory and state governance. One such example is the structural modification of prison facilities to introduce solitary confinement regimes. Both institutions examined here were involved in these changes. At Gaeta, 25 punishment cells were completed in 1883<sup>31</sup>. At Santo Stefano, the intervention was even more radical: the old Bourbon cells were divided in two, and a new wing was built specifically for solitary confinement. This so-called *Fourth Special Section* consisted of 78 individual cells and was intended for prisoners considered particularly dangerous<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> *Servizio delle manifatture negli stabilimenti carcerari*, in RDC, 1880, p. 487.

<sup>29</sup> "A single room used as a school with a capacity of 24 places"; "with the exception of 33 craftsmen and 42 domestic workers, [...] are to be considered idle". ASCas, Prefecture 1 ser., General Affairs, Administrative Papers, b. 6386, "Bagno penale di Gaeta. Relazione sull'attuale situazione del bagno," Gaeta, January 30, 1879.

<sup>30</sup> For a general overview, see R. Giulianelli, "*Chi non lavora non mangia*". *L'impiego dei detenuti nelle manifatture carcerarie nell'Italia fra Otto e Novecento*, in «Rassegna penitenziaria e criminologica», 3 (2008), pp. 83-105.

<sup>31</sup> ASCas, Prefecture 1 ser., Administrative documents, ctg 17, b. 1258, letter from the General Prison Administration to the Prefect of Caserta, Rome, February 26, 1883.

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Justice, Criminological Museum of Rome, Plan of the Santo Stefano Life Prison, 1896.

*The Reconfiguration of the Bagni Penali in the 1890s*

In light of these developments, it is not surprising that under the *Regolamento carcerario* of 1891, the only facility formally classified as a *ergastolo* was Santo Stefano, designated for «condannati al carcere a vita, con una sezione per i condannati a lunghe pene». As indicated in the 1904 report presented by the Director General of Prisons to the Commission for Judicial and Notarial Statistics, this exclusivity stemmed from the «relativa scarsità dei condannati» and from the particular suitability of the site to guarantee security and control over the inmate population<sup>33</sup>. It is no coincidence, then, that between 1897 and 1901, Santo Stefano housed high-profile political detainees such as Pietro Acciarito, author of the 1897 assassination attempt on Umberto I, and Gaetano Bresci, the anarchist who assassinated the king in 1900. In 1890, the *bagno penale* of Gaeta was officially converted into a *correctional facility* (*casa di correzione*), resulting in a series of substantial inmate transfers. To cite just one example, 392 prisoners were moved from Santo Stefano to Gaeta, and 350 from Gaeta to the island of Pianosa, involving the mobilization of approximately 40 prison guards<sup>34</sup>.

The critical issues already evident in previous decades - particularly those relating to forced idleness and internal unrest - continued to manifest and provoked concern among local authorities. It was only later that the entire facility was absorbed into the military system, which revitalized its productive activities<sup>35</sup>.

A comparative examination of the two sites reveals two distinct prison strategies: on the one hand, the insular and segregated specialization of Santo Stefano as a *life prison* (*ergastolo*), designated for the detention of the most dangerous convicts; on the other, the productive orientation and hybrid function—both civil and military—of the Gaeta penal site, which was progressively reconfigured into what would become the most important military prison in Italy. In both cases, the institutional transformations that took place between the 1880s and 1890s did not

<sup>33</sup> R. De Notaristefani, *Penitenziari (Sistemi)* (15 agosto 1906), in L. Lucchini, (ed.), *Digesto Italiano*, vol. XVIII, II, Turin 1906-1912, p. 86.

<sup>34</sup> ASCas, Prefecture 1 series, cat. 17, b. 103, f. 1009, “Bagno Penale di Gaeta. Trasferimento all’Isola di Pianosa di 350 condannati e 20 agenti di custodia. Arrivo di 392 condannati e di 19 agenti di custodia dal Bagno Penale di S. Stefano”, 1889.

<sup>35</sup> ASCas, Prefecture 1 series, Administrative documents, cat. 17, b. 100, f. 950, “Disordini avvenuti nella Casa Penale di Gaeta,” September 26, 1891. For more details on the military aspect, see the contribution by Enrico Serventi Longhi, in this same volume.

signify a real departure from previous coercive models. Rather, they entailed a process of refunctionalization of pre-existing practices within the new regulatory and political framework of the unified state.

### *Conclusions*

The analysis of *bagni penali* in the nineteenth century reveals a penal landscape shaped by enduring tensions between reformist discourse and carceral practice. The regulatory and doctrinal developments introduced between the late Ancien Régime and the liberal era only partially succeeded in producing substantial changes within the prison system. The guiding principles of modern penitentiary science - individual segregation, moral reformation, and the gradation of punishment - encountered deeply rooted institutional legacies, deficient material infrastructures, and a socio-political environment inclined toward pragmatic and coercive disciplinary solutions.

Within this framework, what emerges with particular clarity is the centrality of everyday punitive practices: the concrete uses of space, the organization of labor regimes, and the management of incarcerated bodies. These practices—more than reformist ideals or normative innovations—contributed to the consolidation of a *punitive habitus* (in the Bourdieusian sense), which shaped institutional logics and conditioned the reception and adaptation of external models. Rather than a simple resistance to modernity, this reflects a locally produced form of practical knowledge—embedded in routines, compromises, and administrative custom—that came to function as an organizing principle of punishment itself.

The history of *bagni penali* exemplifies the disjunction between reformist aspirations and carceral realities. The establishments of Gaeta and Santo Stefano—despite their markedly different origins and intended functions—persisted throughout the nineteenth century in reproducing long-standing features: carceral promiscuity, coerced labor, repressive and segregative regimes, and a flexible deployment of prisoners across institutional needs. The long-awaited prison reform was implemented only partially and belatedly, and often amounted to the mere superimposition of new terminologies onto older practices. A case in point is the adoption of solitary confinement, which took on partial and adapted forms in both institutions rather than radically transforming carceral conditions.

The rupture of 1861—so central in the political narrative of the nation—proved marginal in the history of penal institutions. Institutional unification did not fundamentally alter the internal organization or operational logics of the *bagni penali*. As Mary Gibson has pointed out, the post-unification model of the cellular prison remained more of a normative ideal than a concrete reality: its implementation was fragmented, uneven, and frequently undermined by the material constraints of inherited infrastructures and the enduring needs of everyday repression<sup>36</sup>. The real rupture occurred elsewhere: it came with the introduction—between the 1870s and 1880s—of structural reforms aimed at redefining the function of prisons, and with the emergence of a new, albeit ambivalent, focus on prisoner classification and the centralization of carceral circuits. Yet even at this stage, practices anticipated norms: it was the concrete management of prisoners—their movement, labor, and security arrangements—that shaped the penal system far more than the formal declarations of intent.

Central to this dynamic is the question of forced labor. As Adriana Tolomeo has observed, the figure of the *servitore di pena* (penal servant) clearly reveals the tension between economic utility and the disciplinary rationale of nineteenth-century imprisonment. Trained and exploited in the prison workshops, he came to embody an instrument of control and containment, but also a mechanism of institutional self-preservation, serving as a crucial intermediary between prison guards and the inmate population<sup>37</sup>.

The theme of labor—with all its inherent contradictions, whether present or absent, implemented or merely envisioned—emerges as the true cornerstone of penal architecture, more so than segregation. As Mary Gibson has pointed out, incarceration in the first fifty years of Italian unification retained markedly pre-modern characteristics: it was deeply tied to processes of social marginalization, the valorization of prisoners' physical labor, and the continuity of forced labor practices. In this sense, the *bagni penali* were not institutions in decline, but rather spaces where ancient and modern punitive dispositifs were condensed and rearticulated in a form of enduring resistance. Only a micro-analytical approach allows us to reconstruct an interpretive framework attentive to the nexus between

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<sup>36</sup> This hypothesis is also confirmed by studies of the relationship between the common and military penal systems: C. Latini, *Cittadini e nemici. Giustizia militare e giustizia penale in Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, Florence 2010.

<sup>37</sup> A. Tolomeo, *Una sperimentazione penitenziaria nel Regno di Napoli: l'addestramento dei servi di pena in età*, in «Archivio storico per le province napoletane», CXIV (2006), pp. 551-573.

local specificities and systemic dynamics. As Luigi Torres has shown in the case of military imprisonment, understanding post-unification penal structures requires a spatially grounded analysis of detention regimes and institutional functions, attentive to the plurality of carceral sites and their hierarchical integration within the broader apparatus of the state<sup>38</sup>. The history of the *bagni penali*, read through this lens, does not merely reflect the residual legacy of the Ancien Régime, but instead becomes a privileged laboratory for observing the adaptive, resistant, and reorganizational processes that shaped the making of modern Italy.

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<sup>38</sup> L. Torres, *Storia della reclusione militare e corpo moschettieri*, in «Studi Storico-Militari 2001», Rome 2004.