Abstract:
This essay attempts a reflection on rurality and herding by looking at a particular carceral setting: the Sardinian penal colony as established in the 19th c. and still surviving as a marginal institution within the national penal system. Despite the long-lasting effort to modernise and stabilise animal-farming and to eradicate herding as an allegedly criminogenic practice – effort to which penal colonies actively contributed both by dispossessing land used by the herders and by means of exemplarity as a model sedentary farm - errant herding has lingered in free society and also, in an apparent paradox, within the very carceral estates of the penal colony. I will discuss how, within the territorial project of the Sardinian penal colonies and its uncertain, yet extensive, structures of control and production, herding and the wondering of the herder after goats, sheep, and cattle in search for pastures and waters, is to a certain extent a creative practice whose spatial agency simultaneously challenges and is challenged by the spatial and institutional principles of the prison estate. This essay is grounded on archival and field research in the penal colonies of Mamone, Isili, and Is Arenas and makes use of drawings and photographs as key research tools.

Keywords: Herding, penal colonies, rural Sardinia, pastoral carceral trap

1 This essay is a revised version of the text “The herder inmate. Carceral mobility in the vast estates of the Italian prison farms” presented at the 4th International Conference for Carceral Geography – 14-15 December 2020.
Introduction

The Sardinian penal colonies were established in the 19th and 20th centuries. Three of them, Isili, Mamone and Is Arenas, still exist as examples of a marginal institution within the Italian national penal system and are here considered as grounds for reflection on rurality and herding.

In previous studies (Puddu, 2016a, 2016b, 2018), I have shown how the colonies partook in the wider project of reforming the nomadic realm of the Sardinian countryside (Brigaglia, 2006) towards sedentarism based on agriculture and absolute ownership. I did so by emphasising the original long-term plans for the colonies that proposed their status as prisons to be a temporary phase before being passed over to colonists. In this text, I attempt to combine land and human and non-human animals into a single discussion and to acknowledge the survival of herding as a fiction – which I will refer to as the ‘double myth’ – and as a practice within the space of the very institution that aimed at its disappearance: the penal colony. This analysis will confront herding inside and outside the colonies’ boundaries, considering the prison as more than a self-contained estate set in the rural realm. By mixing insights from architecture, criminology and penology, carceral geography, anthropology, history, literature and cultural studies, this work aims to contribute to research on the ‘architectures of carcerality’ (Kirkham-Lewitt, 2020) as well as on issues of determination, autonomy, freedom and resistance (Crewe, 2009; Sparks et al., 1996; Talay & Pali, 2020; Ugelvik, 2014) in carceral environments. It aims to tackle two questions:

1. Does herding in the penal colony act as a project in itself, one that both adheres and contradicts the disciplining territorial structure laid out by the carceral institution in its 150 years of existence? In another words, is herding a creative practice with agency in the institutional and physical structures of the colony?

2. Why has herding in Sardinia survived within the very institution that targeted its disappearance and to what extent is the practice of herding, its spatialisation and ‘the double myth’ of the Sardinian herder reproduced within the penal colony?

I will use the term ‘creative’ to refer to those processes capable of modifying the spatial form of the territory or the experience of it – by resisting, adapting or misusing the infrastructure of movement, production and containment built by the carceral institution.

This text will discuss the creative agency of herding as a specific practice with its own rhythms, customs and modes of operation and also consider the subjects that perform it. Herding in the colony is administered by the institution through the performance of a concert of actors – the prisoner herder, the staff and the animals. All of them use herding to creatively undertake forms of resistance to the structures of power that are imposed on them. For the sake of this study, I will delve into the way in which just one of those actors (the prisoner herder) exercises liberties, freedom and resistance via herding.

I will eventually argue that to a certain extent, herding in the colonies is a creative practice by which its agency challenges the prison’s spatial and organisational institutional structure and its boundaries and that it does so by adapting to those very structures. There is a mutual adjustment of the herding practice to the prison’s institutional protocols and routines which is reflected in the use of space. Second, I will argue that herding has survived within the prison estate in a condition that amplifies what happened in the free countryside – in a tamed, more sedentary version compared to the past. However, the prisoner herder exists as the surrogate figure of the civilian herder, for he is deprived of any relational activity while in the fields. Finally, I will argue that the penal colonies can

[1] In this essay I will refer to the Sardinian prison farms as penal colonies, recovering the historical institutional label (Colonie Penali Agricole) which is still informally used by staff, imprisoned people, locals, and media.
offer a lens to interrogate the free countryside, to understand to what extent the herder is trapped in an exploited yet proudly identified position in relation to modern narratives of farming, identity and environmental preservation, and how the structure of the territory is used and misused within this framework.

The notion of *pastoral (carceral) trap* (Stuit, 2021a) is key to an understanding of the extent to which creative agency can unfold in spaces that are carceral and in rurality, in particular, where the destiny of land and human and non-human animals is explicitly intertwined. By carceral spaces, I mean all ‘the sites and relations of power that enable and incentivize the systematic capture, control, and confinement of human beings through structures of immobility and dispossession’ (Story, 2019, p. 2).

The text is structured as a narrative made up of six episodes, including a prologue: the first presents the spatial and organisational principles of the penal colonies; the second provides a summary of how Sardinian herding has developed in free society and narratives that have misunderstood it as criminogenic, static and isolated; the third positions herding in relation to the theories of architecture, focusing on herding as a creative, aesthetic and relational practice that materialises in space in specific forms; the fourth describes herding, the prisoner herders and the herds at the colonies of Mamone, Is Arenas and Isili; the fifth discusses the previous section and reflects on the survival and agency of herding in the colonies; and the sixth, as a conclusion, delves into the notion of the *pastoral carceral trap*.
Prologue: ‘I PASTORI NON SI ARRESTANO!’

Movimento Pastori Sardi (MPS) is a grass-roots movement of Sardinian herders involved in social actions against the state’s hegemony and market structures. The movement’s overarching goal is to lobby so as to assert the herders’ political agency and social role in their local areas as well as within the global market, thereby safeguarding their economic interests (Pitzalis & Zerilli, 2013b). In a context of increasingly depopulated inland villages where herders are conceived as key figures in guaranteeing economic stability, safeguarding the environment and defending localism, their voice has had a mounting – yet fluctuating – political weight since post-WWII. In 2019, MPS made the headlines of national and international newspapers with their protest against the fluctuation of the price of milk which targeted some major private dairy companies. The protests ranged from blocking major roads to assaulting milk collection vans and, in a most dramatic act, spilling milk onto public roads (Figure 1). Some of the protesters were taken to court over those events, which sparked the association Libertade. Pro is deretos e sa solidariedade² to launch the campaign ‘I pastori non si arrestano’, a slogan playing on the double meaning of the Italian verb ‘arrestare’ and sending out a double message: ‘herders won’t stop’ and ‘herders should not be arrested’.

In the context of the protest, a group of shepherds refused to deliver their milk to the dairy companies with which they were affiliated, taking it instead to the dairy of the penal colony at Isili³. The colony was built at the end of the 19th century as a large rural estate on what was once used as a common⁴, triggering a process of territorial transformation made up of experimental forms of

---

² Libertade is a non-profit organisation that provides legal assistance to people engaged in political social struggles, and it is active in campaigns of information that counteract media attempts to criminalise social movements in Sardinia.
³ This event took place in February 2019 and involved three farms from the towns of Isili and Gesico.
⁴ I will use common to refer to the land that in feudal Sardinia was subject to the doctrine of Dominium Divisum and to the right of use called ademprivium. This was called Saltus and included mostly pastures, forests and ‘waste-
settlement; that is, uses of the land, agriculture and livestock at odds with the traditional herding practice that has historically constituted the socioeconomic backbone of the Sardinian countryside.

The recent episodes related to the MPS’ protest are raising attention as much about the controversial ties between herding, herders and the state as about the complex relationship between this peculiar rural carceral institution and its adjacent territory. It shows how a prison – a garrison of national power – has been absorbed within local communities to the point of being understood as an ally in a protest against the national state itself.

Territorial discipline: The spatial and organisational principles of Sardinian penal colonies.

Since their foundation, the Sardinian penal colonies have been characterised as a project for extensive territorial structures aimed at disciplining both an inner community made up of imprisoned people and staff and their outside neighbours (Di Pasquale, 2019; Puddu, 2015, 2016b, 2018).

The birth of the modern prison in the 18th–19th century marked the moment when architecture gained consciousness of itself as a socially empowered discipline shaping people’s behaviours and relationships, and more widely, practices of inhabitation and the movements within them. This was most powerfully demonstrated by the floorplans of prison buildings, which were conceived as footprints of architecture’s disciplining powers (Evans, 1982). But in what ways were such powers scaled-up to territorial design in the vastness of the rural penal colonies? (See Figure 2)

The Sardinian colonies were designed as loosely fenced estates with a hierarchical structure made up of a central settlement and several detached branches. The former was a surrogate village (Pud- lands’. The right of ademprivium was abolished in 1836, and in 1865, the state acquired the full ownership of all those lands.
du, 2016a) hosting detention, productive and administrative buildings alongside housing and facilities for the staff and their families. The branches were sub-units controlling the estate’s boundaries and in charge of a specific sector of the estate by monitoring the behaviour of humans and non-humans, productivity and movements (Mele, 1996; Puddu, 2015). Communication among the sectors was guaranteed by an infrastructure of movement that was never fully accomplished according to the plans but remains quite exceptional in terms of extensiveness and rationality as compared to the adjacent countryside. At odds with any modern idea of secluded carceral compounds, some of the colonies until very recently could be freely crossed by civilians at any time of day (Murtas, 2010). Some civilians from the adjacent villages also regularly entered the colonies to visit staff, for occasional jobs or for informal/illegal activities like mushroom and wood harvesting or hunting. We can still appreciate this territorial structure today, despite the closing of many branches, habitation of the village by very few members of the staff, the infrastructure of movement partly laying in ruins due to a lack of maintenance and some colonies having rectified their boundaries to reduce their public permeability.

Similar to the past, the people imprisoned in the colonies are all male individuals who volunteer to transfer from closed prisons and who satisfy a few main prerequisites: they are in the final years (6–10 years) of their sentence, they are certified as suitable for agricultural work and they are judged suitable for detention in medium security. The number of people imprisoned at the moment of writing is at its historical minimum, with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating a process in which the population of colonies has been in decline for the past few decades: Isili counts about 60 people out of 130 available places (there were about 100 people pre-COVID); Mamone about 100 people out of 370 available places (about 140 people pre-COVID); and Is Arenas about 50 people out of 180 available places.

The imprisoned population largely consists of Sardinians of rural origins and foreign people, the majority coming from Eastern Europe and Africa. According to the staff, the number of Sardinian herders taken into detention has decreased compared to the past, thus contributing to a sometimes problematic shortage of skilful herders within the colonies. They are increasingly condemned for new crimes, like drug dealing, which adds and to a certain extent supersedes the more ‘traditional’ crimes associated with herders (i.e., arson, rustling, kidnapping, robberies). Foreigners have instead numerically escalated in the past decade, reaching very high percentages within the overall populations of the colonies with peaks of up to 80% (today 69% Is Arenas, 67% Mamone, 46% Isili). This is mainly due to crimmigration policies as well as pragmatic reasons that make the colonies more attractive to foreigners as opposed to Italian citizens.

In the penal colonies, labour is highly valued and both staff and imprisoned people are employed in rural activities: horticulture, livestock, forestry, building and road maintenance, dairy farming and slaughtering. Some of them work as herders, which includes shepherds, goatherds, cowherds and swineherds (about 18 imprisoned people in Mamone and 8 in Isili).

In earlier times, imprisoned people were assigned to work crews, but today it is preferable that they work in pairs if not individually, and they are assisted by staff in their jobs. One reason for this

---

5 The population of Italian Penal Colony is exclusively male; hence I will refer to the prisoner herder as “he”. This does not reflect the gender of the entire herder population: in free society, while most herders are men we also have female herders.

6 Data refers to 2021 and derives from the official data published by DAP, Ministero della Giustizia, and by Antigone. Osservatorio sulle Condizioni della Detenzione.

7 Data is referred to 2021 and derives from the official data published by DAP, Ministero della Giustizia, and by Antigone. Osservatorio sulle Condizioni della Detenzione.

8 i.e. Foreigners, whose families are often in their countries of origins, don’t find the remote location of the colonies as problematic as do Italians.

9 These numbers include the grazing workers (‘pascolanti’) and the workers in the stables.
change in the organisation of work is explained by the staff who claim that people in teams develop a ‘vaguer identity’ and a collective de-responsibilisation towards work as opposed to more specialised figures, like the prisoner herder, who acquire a precise individualistic work identity which, in turn, allegedly has a positive impact on the development of the detained individual (Gazale & Tedde, 2015, p. 346).

Another change regards the demise of continuous supervision, especially since the 1950s–1960s: in earlier times, armed wardens would accompany the imprisoned people to work in the fields, while today, this is substituted with intermittent patrols. Intermittent surveillance relies on the features of the territory – topography, thickness of vegetation and quality of the soil – favouring or impeding movement and visual and sound control. More importantly, it relies on building trust and interactions between staff and the people imprisoned while working in rural activities. The colonies have indeed played an anticipatory role in Italy vis-à-vis the closed prisons’ implementation of the concept of so-called dynamic security (Dunbar, 1985). This choice is rooted in the very nature of the penal colony – in its vastness and accessibility – coupled with a chronic lack of staff and the nature of the work performed, wandering herding in particular.

The Sardinian herder10: The reproduction of a myth

Nomadic herding is reported to have characterised Sardinian society since antiquity (Le Lannou, 2006 [1941]) and its myth and relevance have been contradictorily reinforced through modernity by those very narratives of modernisation that called for its necessary disappearance (Pitzalis & Zerilli, 2013a; Salice, 2015). The penal colonies were strategic tools at the service of the modern state’s post-feudal anti-pastoral rhetoric as well as its racist and criminalising counterparts. By forcibly enclosing portions of former common land, they were meant to confront an outside that was misunderstood by post-feudal reformers as an unproductive barbarian domain populated by herdsmen who opposed modernisation by usurping the lands reserved for agriculture, denying the principle of absolute ownership of land and who – due to their anarchist nature towards power – prevented the construction of an ordered modern world. Within such a conflictual context, it was not unusual to encounter a statement like the following, uttered by anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza in 1869:

The wandering herder, a beautiful type for the anthropologist and novelist, is the bane of Sardinia; he is often synonymous with thief (p. 90; my translation). [...] he must be transformed into a peasant and must replace to the contemplative or rapacious idleness of which he is pleased the healthy and moralizing work of the land (p. 199; my translation). When civilisation will erase the wandering herder from Sardinia, that island will be one of the most moral countries in the world (p. 91; my translation).

Attacks towards herding aligned with a general feeling of anti-pastoralism characteristic of modern national states that, as observed by anthropologist James Scott (2017), praised the superiority of sedentary communities over the ‘barbarians’. Yet among the barbarians, Sardinians have been labelled as very peculiar by both exogenous and endogenous moralising arguments. To some (mostly the local elites that have observed rural Sardinia since the 18th century), such peculiarity had historical roots and came into being as the result of feudal domination misread as retrograde (Salice, 2015); to others it had roots in the peculiar geographic, topographic, pedologic and climatic conditions of Sardinia (Le Lannou, 2006 [1941]); to yet others, it was linked to the very ethnical and racial features of Sardinian people (Lombroso, 1889; Mantegazza, 1869; Niceforo, 1897).

10 This synthetic account could not properly acknowledge the complexity of Sardinian herding society that, far from being homogeneous, is structured in social classes and presents differences in the use of land and socioeconomic organisation.
peculiar is the character of ‘perpetual migration’ (Le Lannou, 2006 [1941]) and the movement of Sardinian herds, which were not limited to seasonal, long transhumance. Peculiar is the (mis)conception of the pervasive yet static, ancestral and hard-to-change nature of herding, which is said to seamlessly inform the life of rural communities. Peculiar is the (mis)conception of herding as a practice that developed in isolation, in secluded areas and with little exchange with the outside. More importantly, peculiar is the alleged relation between herding and criminality, which coexist with a fatal appreciation towards the figure of the herder.

The herder has assumed a positive connotation for his productive relevance within the global market, and in recent times, is taken as the bearer of some local genuine identity at the service of the tourist industry (Angioni, 2004), or even as the bearer of contemporary environmental values in the guise of an ‘unwitting gardener’ (Pitzalis & Zerilli, 2013b; my translation) or as a rebel set against global capitalism, as demonstrated in the 2019 milk protest (Pitzalis & Zerilli, 2013b).

This ambivalent characterisation of the herder finds historical origins at the passage from the 18th to the 19th century (Salice, 2015). While 18th century sensitivity railed against the herder, the same character would emerge as a romantic hero for the 19th century observer. These narratives contributed to create the made-up character of the Sardinian herder – and it could be argued by extension, the Sardinian individual – as concomitantly a ‘negative other’ defined as a retrograde dangerous individual and a ‘heroic other’ conceived as the romantic, solitary, rebellious hero (Salice, 2015, p. 151; Pitzalis & Zerilli, 2013b, p. 381). In both cases, however, as an individual conceived as deviant.

While this fiction continues to thrive today, recent scholarship has attempted to provide some clarity and to contrast the misleading rhetoric of herding as an unchangeable and archaic practice grounded on individualism and isolation. Scholarship has focused, on the one hand, on the solidarity and relational skills of herders (Maxia, 2005b) and, on the other, on the processes of change and modernisation of herding society and the economy.

A number of structural transformations have stabilised and modernised herding in the second half of the 20th century (Meloni & Farinella, 2015; Ortu, 2017), making observations like those registered by geographer Maurice Le Lannou in 1941 (2006 [1941]) partially invalid today. He described the perpetual movement of the herders in search of land and resources and in continuous negotiation with other groups of inhabitants and institutions. Against the state’s intent to eradicate such ‘peculiar nomadism’, the shift from a feudal economy of subsistence to capitalism in the 19th century pushed the herders to adapt to modernity by seeking more land for extensive breeding. This use of the territory has always hampered any attempt to classify land use – ignoring codification of ownership and uses imposed by the rural cadaster – or has developed parasitic tactics to absorb and exploit state-driven transformations. This was the case of the enclosures (tancas) in north Sardinia that originally were meant to favour the establishment of large horticulture estates but became a fundamental spatial structure for the modern herding economy.

In the second half of the 20th century, seasonal transhumance has waned and is today almost completely abandoned: herding has expanded through the introduction of farming in stables and the permanent transformation into pastures of those lands that were abandoned by horticulture. However, the result is not complete sedentarism but a hybrid situation: modernising practices (sown

11 Despite recent scholarship attempts to describe criminal phenomena beyond the prejudices that have categorised inland Sardinia as indissolubly pastoral and criminal, such nexus persists. Giulio Angioni’s seminal book (1989) fostered a new season of scholarship on pastoralism, yet reiterated the invitation to reduce the scope of herding as a way to also reduce violent acts and crimes (Angioni, 1989, p. 244).

12 ‘The image of the <unwitting gardener> used by the leader of the MPS Felice Floris during assemblies and on many other occasions […] refers to the idea of a shepherd who builds, preserves and saves the landscape without knowing it.’ (Pitzalis & Zerilli, 2013a, p. 158; my translation.)
pastures, availability of fodder and stall breeding) mix with extensive breeding and grazing in the wild. The latter not only persist, although mitigated, but are also strategically valorised as relevant identarian features within the most recent processes of ‘repastoralisation’ (Pitzalis & Zerilli, 2013a). In this process, ‘Pastoralism resumes its meaning, it no longer becomes a mere economic activity in terms of GDP or number of employees, but a necessary condition for the very existence of man and the survival of the cultural roots of Sardinian identity’ (Pitzalis & Zerilli, 2013a, p. 158; my translation). This brief account shows that herding is adaptive rather than static and isolated; instead of denying a priori the invitations offered by modern and external forces, herding selects what it can incorporate, manipulate and use to its own advantage.13

The adaptive survival of herding as a double myth and as a practice in strict relation to the making of space has also happened within the allegedly fixed non-negotiable land of the penal colonies. Why and to what extent has this happened? What exactly is the agency of herding and to what extent is this creative within the limitations and transfigurations that are inevitable in prison environments?

Figure 3
A Line Made by Walking, 1967, Richard Long. Tate, Purchased 1976. © SABAM Belgium 2022 / Photo: Tate

Herding as a creative, aesthetic and relational practice

Before moving forward, some introduction is necessary as to how herding as a fundamentally walking-based activity can be theoretically understood in architecture as a creative practice that has an agency in space and how anthropological scholarship has helped to trace the agency and spatialisation of herding in the landscape.

13 This observation partially follows the argument advanced among others by Manlio Brigaglia (1972).
Architectural historian Robin Evans (1977) has argued on several occasions that modernity has regimented movement to achieve maximum and frictionless connectivity among secluded parts, and this is equally evident if one were to analyse, as he did, either the prison, the house (and housing) or a whole city. More recently, another architect, Francesco Careri (2017), wrote about ‘Walkscapes: walking as an aesthetic practice’, claiming that walking is an act of resistance able to precisely challenge the dogma identified by Evans in modern normative architecture in favour of an open and indeterminate architecture. Careri claims that walking is relational rather than just a solitary romantic action: ‘The art of wandering, is followed by the art of meeting, of the construction of a threshold’ (p. 28).

Against common understandings of nomadism as anti-architectural (cfr. Supersurface by Superstudio [1972]) Careri insists that walking is creative and materialises in forms and spaces. Among his references is the work of artist Richard Long (Figure 3), who often turned at the countryside as a locus for experimenting with walking as both action and sign/form. In Long’s masterpiece, A Line Made by Walking (1967) ‘the image of the treaded grass […] is also unmistakably the result of the action of a body, and it is an object, something that is situated between sculpture, a performance, and an architecture of the landscape’ (Careri, 2017, p. 211). In Long’s work, the body is ‘a tool for measuring space and time’ and a ‘tool of drawing’ (Careri, 2017, p. 213–214) ‘that can be superimposed on existing forms, both in reality and on paper’, that is, in cartography (Careri, 2017, p. 217–218).

The appropriation of the act of walking by artists and architects is influenced by an observation of how this has been practiced by human and non-human animals. For instance, Careri looks at the work by Sardinian anthropologist Carlo Maxia on goat herding and its agency on the rural territory which materialises in the formal structure of the filàda.

In Sardinian language, this term belongs to the world of goat herding and it has the double meaning of a path occupied by the daily movements of goats in search of pasture and of the directional orders given to animals by the herder. As explained by Maxia, a filàda should not be exclusively understood as a place of passage, of the simple transit from one area to another; it is the main living space of the flock, and as such, it guarantees the fulfilment of their various needs: it is a peripatetic space (Maxia, 2005a, p. 120).

Beginning and ending in one fold, many filàdas are created as loops, some longer and others shorter, as shown in the maps produced through Maxia’s field studies, and as I could also confirm through some recent field research in the Sardinian countryside (summer 2021). Some filàdas might reach more than 10 km in length where goats walk as much as 12 hours, and one of their assumptions is that the more goats walk, the better the milk production. Every morning (or evening, in summertime), the goat herder evaluates which filàda is best according to certain variables, such as season and length of the day, availability and quality of food and water, and climate conditions, and initiates the flock towards the most convenient one. Then the herder follows the flock for the entire path or just fragments of it, the latter having become the more frequent case in contemporary times as the herder diminished his time and commitment out in the fields and started using mechanical means of movement to reach out to the herd more intermittently. Such process is not without negotiation, as goats, famously animals of strong will (Thwaites, 2016), sometimes refuse to trail the indicated filàda and derail based on their instincts if they sense possible rain or some predator on the route (Maxia, 2005a, p. 113).

In conclusion, a filàda is a space – a peripatetic space – a formal structure that can be mapped and observed in the territory. The basic needs of the goats, in particular, voracious eating, can impact the quality of the landscape and vegetation, the walking of the goats can mark the ground and the
need to contain them can stimulate the erection of enclosing structures like walls and wire fences. The filàda is a tangible product of the agency of herding and the outcome of negotiation between human intentionality (what we can call a daily project), the opportunities and constrains to access the lands adjacent to the fold as well as and some behavioural characteristics of the goats (Maxia, 2005a, p. 114).

But what about carceral filàdas? How does the penal colony interpret, absorb and reproduce herding?

Herding and the prisoner herder in the penal colonies of Mamone, Is Arenas and Isili.

If we agree that detention facilities participate in the production and reproduction of ‘normal’ structures, practices and fictions, either as their testing bed or by passively absorbing them from free society to inevitably transfigure them, I will now try to explain how the Sardinian colony has confronted herding and the rural realm.

The way in which herding today is interpreted varies among colonies. It also depends on the animal species that is farmed and that is classified according to their degrees of sedentarism: goats, cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry.

In general, it must be noted that a mix of modernised livestock and herding has always been the case in the incomplete modern carceral–agrarian project of the Sardinian colonies, as already observed in early reports (Cusmano, 1903; Doria, 1912). Hybridity in the colonies derived from the incomplete achievements of the original plans for a modern sedentary farm due to inconsistent investments in infrastructures, tools and techniques. In free society, this is instead the product of the evolution of herding to adapt to market logics as land availability shrunk and a generational shift happened, with the new generation of herders apt to embrace the comforts of a modern lifestyle and abdicating the harshness of previous herding practices.

The penal colony at Mamone has a massive estate of almost 3,000 ha, with considerable variations in altitudes that in the past made it possible to operate a seasonal internal transhumance. The branches are very remote from the main village, and they are larger and more specialised than in other colonies. The estate’s steep topography, rocky grounds and dense vegetation make movement uneasy for humans as many areas are only accessible by foot but easy enough for animals, making it a perfect setting for extensive herding.

Farming is a mix of wild grazing and pasture in enclosed fields (tancas), with many perimeter walls built over time to define the pastures. Sheep are mostly grazed in enclosed fields within two sectors (S’Alcra and Cogoli), and each flock is easily overseen by a single imprisoned shepherd. Cattle graze wild in their own sectors (Nortidi and Temi), and the extension of the territory often requires that cowherders work in pairs. Sectors are subdivided into tancas with sown pastures to host calves, heifers and cows to complement extensive breeding (Figure 4).

Prison staff instruct the herders on the boundaries that must be respected and on the pastures that can be used, and trespassing between sectors is punished with disciplinary sanctions: animals must not mix and detained people must always be traceable, not only for surveillance but also for their health and safety. There is continuous negotiation between the movement of the animals, the availability of pasture and water and the boundaries of each sector (Figure 6) that overlaps the geographic conditions and the spatial structure of the prison. Surveillance is not the easiest, and staff wonder if drones would be a solution.
During my last visit to the colony of Mamone (28 July 2021), I spent most of my time in the branch of Nortiddi, which is located 15 minutes away by car from the core village. Nortiddi has a large residential building where people sleep in shared dormitories. It is organised around courtyards, and there are a few adjacent farming facilities. It specialises in cattle and can host up to 50 people. Due to a decrease in population for COVID-related concerns, it only hosted 18 people last summer: four were Italian and 14 were foreigners. Curiously, there were no Sardinian herders as they were all employed as shepherds at another branch. At Nortiddi, I did not follow a single cowherder as I originally wanted to do, but I joined in the morning patrol of the branch coordinator (Figures 5a and 5b). He was a member of a trade union, a poet who writes in the Sardinian language, an inhabitant of a neighbouring village and a former herder himself, and he explained to me that as a young adult, his father convinced him to join the prison administration in the hope that he would have a more stable life condition than what herding could provide.

Aboard a white track, we moved through paved and unpaved roads, and in about one hour, we located each of the four herds and accompanying herders, who wore yellow vests. My chaperone explained that the herders are autonomous during the day and work in a morning and afternoon shift. The path is agreed in advance so that the staff can roughly locate the herds during the day. The sound of the cowbells is key to locating a herd and, hence, the herder. In summer, due to the lack of water, pastures are limited to the few that are nearby the branch, while in winter and spring the paths are longer as herds are taken further south to the pasture in the branch of Temi. I was taken to Temi after the patrol finished. Here I noticed signs of animals on the floor due to civilian flocks. The fact that the neighbouring herders left their animals to graze wild in the prison estate – and that this seems to be tolerated – is a clue that this remains a coveted territory for the surrounding villages. Occasionally we assist revindications against what is still perceived as an illegitimate occupation of land that was a common until the 19th century.
Figure 5a
Morning patrol to check the four cattle herds at the branch of Nortiddi, penal colony of Mamone
Photograph by author, 2021
While Mamone is located in an inland region with a strong pastoral economy and society, the colony at Is Arenas was founded more recently in the 1960s in a former mining and now touristic district on the coast. The colony itself was established in a dismissed mining village to undertake environmental and agricultural reconversion. Is Arenas estate has a comparable extension to Mamone, but topography and morphology, with a large dune system on the coastline, limit the actual area that can be utilised for farming activities. Flocks of sheep and cattle mostly graze in well-defined enclosed sown pastures positioned along the main paved road, and pigs, poultry and horses are kept in stables. Internal movement is thus limited to paved roads and some sandy paths for an overall maximum distance of six kilometres, and few deviations are tolerated by staff. At Is Arenas, surveillance is said to be easy. Staff more easily keep track of people’s location, evasions are rare and unwanted exchanges with the exterior are limited by topographic and morphologic features which make the boundaries barely accessible either from the inside or the outside.

Trespassing and active relationships with the surroundings are more of a headache for the governor of the Isili colony which, like Mamone, is in an inland pastoral region. This is the smallest of the colonies, but its whole territory is crossed and utilised thanks to the great variety of pastures and landscapes with available water in most parts. The lands that are not cultivated fields or built settlements are used as wild pasture for sheep and goats.

Different from Mamone where most peripheral branches are fully in operation and house the herd-ers that operate in each sector, in Isili, the imprisoned goatherders and the shepherds sleep in the main residential facility located in the core village, which is basically a prison in miniature and governed by the same rules and regimes of any Italian medium-security prison.

When I visited Is Arenas on 12 August 2021, my request to follow the daily grazing of a flock of sheep could not be satisfied because the summer heat and fear of wildfire had suspended any grazing activity. I instead visited the animals kept in stables and, separately, the empty pastures.
Figure 6

Approximate routine in the Sardinian penal colonies.

Drawing by A. Murru, A. Taccori, F. Spanu – 2014
The routines in Isili and Mamone are, however, very similar in that they are very flexible and changeable according to the season, the weather and the nature and organisation of work. Institutional routine expects that the cells are opened between 6:30 a.m. and 9:30 p.m. with meals served in the cells, while the morning is spent in work activities and the afternoon in recreational and educational activities inside the prison building. However, the prisoner herder leaves for the fields earlier than this fixed time, he is sometimes free to choose whether to return for lunch or stay out the whole day and he might return later than dinnertime when his work requires that he does so (Figure 6).

During field research in Isili (Figure 7, 8a and 8b), I observed that the work of the herder starts in the fold very early in the morning (around 5:30 a.m.). Located in the core village, the fold is a modern construction built in the 1950s when the last major investments were poured into the colony to modernise herding and in correspondence to wider agrarian reform that was investing in the whole of Sardinia. Intensive breeding in stables, however, was never practiced. Animal feed is in use merely as a complement, and each day the prisoner herders take the flocks to graze. Sheep are taken to the sown fodder where they spend a whole or half day alone, while the shepherd goes back to the fold to do cleaning or other supporting activities, has lunch and rests in the dwelling building, and then is out again until sunset when the sheep are taken back to the fold. Different from the shepherd, the goatherder follows the goats in the filàdas, overseeing them for a whole or half day until the loop is complete.

At the colony of Isili, there are several filàdas (Figure 8b), many short ones of about three kilometres and a long one of about seven kilometres. The latter is only used in spring when days are longer and climate conditions milder. In summertime, the herd walks a morning and an afternoon filàda, with a break of a few hours in the fold during the herder’s lunchtime.
Figure 8a
Sequence of paths and landscapes from the morning summer filàda at the penal colony of Isili
Photographs by author, 2021
On 21 July 2021, I followed the herd in the morning *filàda* for four hours (Figure 8a). Starting from the fold, we walked at a variable pace through little, loosely-defined paths carved in a thick forest, along the walls of an enclosed orchard where the goats jumped on the other side of the wall and across the full extension of sown pastures. We reached a peripheral branch at the boundary with the free countryside and crossed a public road that as of a few years ago was crossed by civilian herders, then stopped at a water fountain to water the goats. After that, we returned to the fold, walking along the main paved road while the goats made various diversions into the adjacent fields.

The previous morning, I had visited a fold in the adjacent free countryside. Here the goats were in the fold, as they had spent the whole night – from 5:00 p.m. to early morning – in a very long *filàda*, enjoying the goatherder’s company only in the first portion of the *filàda* and at the arrival in the fold.

I understood that at Isili, throughout the years, short *filàdas* were increasingly preferred as they were better adapted to the routine of the carceral institution. Consequently, goat species were selected that were more suitable to this more sedentary condition. Animals are also never left to graze alone in the fields for fear of theft. The *filàda* is chosen daily by the staff among the many available ones, but for the whole path, the goat herder is alone. He and the herd are in control of the peripatetic quality of the carceral *filàda*, subject only to intermittent control by staff. His day is one of perpetual movement and is far from being monotonous as the chosen *filàda* changes every day or even twice a day. This is not only necessary to provide variegated nutrition to the goats but also to avoid for security reasons that the prisoner herders follow fixed and predictable paths.
The carceral filàda: The transfiguration and agency of herding in the penal colonies

Cattle herding in Mamone and the carceral filàda at Isili show that herding – in its transfiguration inside the prison - seems to allow for a mitigation of the structural violence and disciplinary regimes that geographer Karen Morin (2016) claimed to be a shared structural condition across sites of captivity and carcerality for both humans and non-humans. Despite the fatigue of walking windswept and steep lands, and in a dialectic with geographical and institutional opportunities and limitations, errant herding reconfirms inside the prison its status as a practice which favours an extensive use of the territory as well as some degree of freedom and autonomy for human and non-human animals.

In most prisons, daily lives are the output of a negotiation (Sparks et al., 1996) between imposed routines and the tendency of guards and prison administration to accommodate a certain degree of flexibility in order to ensure the self-maintenance of the prison system itself and to meet a number of pressures. In the case of the colony errant herding, as an exogenous force applied to the prison, exercised the main pressures. Seeking a compromise between clock time and the timing of herding and between the need to contain and that of wandering, the prison administration’s routine, which applies to the imprisoned people as well as to staff, is forced to vary according to the natural cycles of the seasons and of the life of the herds (goats, sheep and cattle have different routines), which, in turn, affect the path and the destination of the herd and of its herder.

This has an influence on herding that despite still very extensive and mostly alings with the techniques and proper use of space similar to a free society (filàdas, wild grazing in open fields and tancas), is more sedentary and regimented in prison. Security and carceral routines limit the time-frame and extension of herding; on the other hand, herding has created the conditions that have allowed the colony to anticipate, for instance, the demise of continued surveillance.

Not only does herding have an agency but it also allows the prisoner herder to exercise some liberties while reacting to the encounter with a form of power that is the compromised product of herding and carcerality. Being a herder constitutes a prestigious role among the prison community which is accessible only to the most skilful and trustworthy people; exceptions apply to their life in detention, and they enjoy the highest degree of autonomy and freedom among their peers. The prisoner herder, who is himself of rural origins if not a herder in his prior life, is often already familiar with the features of herding and is confident of his own skills, such as orientation in the landscape and empathy with the animals. He can thus surf the possibilities that herding offers him, taking some liberties and constructing free areas (Ugelvik, 2014). While alone in the fields, he is able to carve some diversions from the tracks that the institution has built for him, with his paths adding a layer to the existing network of roads, and to negotiate the boundaries. In the case of goat herders, it is the nature of the animal and its alliance with the territory and its herder that allows the detained people a larger degree of freedom of movement and the semi-autonomous definition of a peripatetic space for his own daily life (the carceral filàdas).

The prisoner herder also perpetuates the fictional qualities that we have described (Figure 9). He is represented in new fiction, such as promotional videos, as a solitary figure, a negative character on the path to redemption. This representation matches the expectations of the institution to foster responsibilisation through individualistic work identity. Despite being allowed semi-autonomous

15 Following Sykes (1958), Sparks et. al (1996, p. 41) claimed that prison routines are more fragile than what prison governance wishes and that the monolithic character of total power is ‘cracked’ in the actuality of daily life.
16 One instance of this new fiction is the project SardiniaEvasion – Liberamente that in 2019 realised some promotional activities that aimed to enhance the cultural, historical and environmental heritage of the colonies. They also produced a short film about an imprisoned goat herder at the colony of Is Arenas.
actions, the prisoner herder is a surrogate version of his free counterpart for he is asked to abdicate those relational qualities that are instead a key aspect of herding life (Maxia, 2005b) and that, as Careri (2017) argues, are fundamental in the creative practice of wandering.

Although herding survives, what is missing in the prison estate and in its official representations is the 'social use of the territory' that contemporary anthropologists have carefully described and recorded (Angioni, 1989; Maxia, 2005a, p. 103, 2005b) with an intention to counteract the myth of herding as a solitary wild realm: *solu ke fera* (lonely as a feral beast) and unable to collective endeavour. But the social use of territory often re-emerges informally or illegally, as in the many anecdotes of illegitimate kids, dreams of personal marijuana plantations, construction of huts as illegal retreats, banquets with hunted animals, quick chats with other herders – neighbouring or imprisoned – who inadvertently or intentionally cross paths and the exchange of goods at the boundaries – which is not limited to drugs, alcohol and cell phones entering the prison but also includes herd rustling.

![Figure 9](image)

*A carceral fiction: the cloven herder.*

*Frame from video by Ifold for SardiniaEvasion, 2017. © Liberamente*

17 ‘And so the herder, the wildest and most solitary of rural workers (*solu ke fera*, lonely as a feral beast, it is often said of him), is the one who, like and more than others, is forced by his work to have extensive and precise knowledge on the social use of the territory and to entertain relationships of acquaintance and “friendship” with people [...] not only from his village, but also from distant ones even when it does not transhumate’ (Angioni, 1996, p. 350 as quoted in Maxia, 2005b; my translation).

18 Common in the past and accepted as a customary practice that regulated social conflicts and inequality, rustling was criminalised and harshly fought in modernity. Today, it has almost disappeared, but a case of herd rustling happened recently in one of the colonies.
The pastoral trap.

In conclusion, herding is a practice that has been absorbed and institutionally reproduced. In the 151 year-long modern project of the colonies, errant herding has been tamed to the extent that allows for its survival as a fundamental ‘identarian’ and productive practice for the colony itself. At first sight, the survival of herding in the institution that was established to extinguish the ‘nomadic realm of the countryside’ (Brigaglia, 2006) in favour of modern productive sedentary farming can be read as a form of internal resistance from a strong local culture to which both staff and detained people often belong. We could hence see the permanence of herding as just an unavoidable, almost ‘natural’, phenomenon. However, it is unavoidable and natural as much as it is Sardinian free society. The emphatic reproduction of the myth of the herder in the colony must be inscribed within that anti-pastoral/pro-pastoral rhetoric and the adaptive character of herding that I have already described.

As often happens while studying carceral institutions, the colonies unveil a condition that we might also observe in the parallel realm of free society: the pastoral (carceral) trap. I am here following Hanneke Stuit’s conceptualisation of the rural idyll and of the pastoral19 as genre in literature studies (H. Stuit, personal communication, Spring 2021a; Stuit, 2020, 2021b). While the idyll is read by Stuit (2021a) as a ‘structure of desire, an emotion originally attached to a specific place but that then can become detached from that place’ and, in short, stands for ‘extreme romanticisation and an idealised and privileged way of accessing the rural’, the pastoral implies tension. It tends to function as an umbrella that entails tension between the idyll and what is being excluded from it. Stuit argues that the pastoral might have an idyllic appearance, but it is a trap – a carceral trap – for the people who live in the countryside.

This is clear if we look at archival images of prisoner herders who were first dispossessed from those very common lands that they had used for centuries, criminalised for being herders – nomadic, anarchic, unproductive, violent – and then employed as herders again in a modern tamed version and once confined inside the prison estates. There is the attempt of a mediatic manipulation, which was made by design by the modern legislators who were aware of the two sides of the countryside – the ‘horror’ and the ‘rural idyll’ (Donnermeyer et al., 2013). The rural idyll is what pervades a reading of the Sardinian countryside today, with the horror side that was prevalent just a few decades ago re-emerging only on specific localised occasions.

A reason why the colonies are still in operation despite continuous threats to be shut down for their economic inefficiency must be found in their induced localism and in their ‘identitarian’ character that mixes pride for a progressive project of colonisation with ‘traditional’ practices, a factor that local staff genuinely tend to stress in an effort to value and protect the existence of the colonies. This is recognised at both local and national levels, and it also recently was served to some visitors on ‘prison tours’20 for whom herding contributes as a guarantor of authenticity. Endogenous and exogenous narratives about the colonies tend to focus on the idyll, but the tensions and contradictions of the pastoral trap (which surely includes the idyll) cannot go unnoticed in an in-depth analysis. The pastoral trap synthetises yet another instance of the relationship between freedom, power, resistance and subjectivation (Ugelvik, 2014) – where the subject is the Sardinian herder, the prisoner and the not necessarily Sardinian prisoner herder – in the space and context of the Sardinian countryside.

19 From now on, the term pastoral is used in its broader meaning and differently from the way it was used earlier in the text to refer to herding economy and society.
20 These tours were held in 2017 as part of a project that promoted the employment in the tourist industry of people imprisoned in collaboration with the private touristic service Società Studio Vacanze S.R.L and a nearby village. From what I could observe, the tours were sensitively organised without stressing the ‘dark’ side of the visit and focused on aspects of landscape and food production.
Acknowledgements

This essay is an outcome of the research project Territories of Incarceration, which has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 844184. My sincere gratitude goes to the staff and the imprisoned people at the penal colonies of Isili, Mamone and Is Arenas; to the organisers of the 4th International Conference for Carceral Geography where this work was first presented; and to the many friends and scholars who have contributed and commented this work and, in particular to Hanneke Stuit, Roberto Ibba, and Giampaolo Salice.

Bibliography

Facoltà di Giurisprudenza.
Puddu, S. (2016a). This is not the square of a rural village. It is a prison. Trans, 28, 82–87.
Sabrina Puddu, is an architect and Marie Skłodowska Curie Postdoctoral Researcher at KU Leuven, Faculty of Architecture. Her studies focus on the role of major public institutions across the divide of the urban and rural conditions, with her more recent research project Territories of Incarceration being on the architecture of prisons and agrarian penal colonies. Sabrina’s interest in architecture and carcerality extends to studies on the spatial materialisation of projects for small-scale detention houses in Europe and to the incorporation of restorative justice in architecture. At KU Leuven she co-teaches the design studio ‘This is not a prison farm. Vacant farmland for the settlement of an imperfect community’ where, together with the students of the Master’s in Architecture, she is working on a proposal for residential farms whose cohabitation is based on principles of restorative and environmental justice. She is also programme head of the visiting school Casting Castaways for the Architectural Association School of Architecture, a pedagogic attempt to discuss the controversial legacy of disused prison islands in the Mediterranean.