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From Fertility Symbol to Political Propaganda – Decoding the Massa Marittima Mural.

An interview with George Ferzoco

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In the year 2000, during restoration work, a rare and important mural was uncovered at the communal fountain of the Tuscan town of Massa Marittima. It was not necessarily a welcome surprise, at least at first, as this painting from the Middle Ages depicted a tree covered with phalluses. “At first when the painting was discovered they were a bit backfooted”, explains George Ferzoco, the director of the Centre for Tuscan Studies at the University of Leicester, about the general reaction of the townspeople and administration. “They considered it to be somehow dirty or

erotic – he continues – one or the other. Those who saw it as erotic looked at it as being a symbol that mirrored the reality of the water and the place. Water gives life; Phalluses give life: Isn't this a unique and interesting way to portray the life-giving properties of water? The porn camp, if we can call it that, saw it as being somehow deliberately obscene and thus believed that as little attention as possible needed to be drawn to it”.

Luckily for the town, Ferzoco, who had chosen the town to be the annual base for his university's summer Italian programme, was immediately intrigued by the painting and its strange imagery. His research has uncovered layers of meaning that add significantly to our understanding of the popular culture of medieval and renaissance Tuscany and Europe. According to Ferzoco's theory the painting is neither an extravagant fertility symbol, nor shocking pornography.



Background

To explain the mural, one first needs to delve into the history and politics of medieval Italy (the painting was done in the late 13th century). “Broadly speaking – Ferzoco explains – this was the time of the rise of the Italian communes, or city republics. The Northern part of the peninsula in particular was polkadotted with these independent States. To consider it in modern terms, had there been an Olympic Games in the late 13th century there would have been a dozen or two teams from what is today Italy. Each of these city States was effectively its own nation. Some of the more famous ones are well known to even those with the most passing knowledge of medieval or renaissance Italy, just think of Venice or Florence or Pisa, for example.”

In the illustrious role call of Italian city States, Massa Marittima may be an unfamiliar

The Medieval culture, more than ours, was one that was extremely sensitive to what was perceived as the goodness of nature, the goodness of what is natural, and they would have put two and two together in a way which involved seeing this particular tree bearing fruit that is not natural fruit

name to many. “A couple of years ago there was an award-winning, six volume encyclopedia published on the Renaissance, and you’ll look in vain anywhere in those six volumes for even a vague mention of Massa Marittima – concurs Ferzoco – but in its time it was an extremely wealthy place and was completely independent from the years 1225 to 1335. It was smack in the middle of this period of independence that this mural was created.

Massa got its money from an unusual source. Most of the money that financed the mushrooming of independent States came from banking, especially in the case of the Tuscan city States, and the trade in textiles. It was a different, almost unique, raw material that gave Massa Marittima its wealth and that consisted in minerals. The hills around Massa Marittima are in fact called *Le Colline Metelifere*, The Metal Rich Hills. In the Middle Ages there would have been about thirty different types of ore excavated, mined and refined, ranging from gold to lead. It was easily the greatest

mining centre of the Italian peninsula, so anyone wanting to have these raw materials from a relatively close source would have had to, by default, deal with Massa Marittima, and hence its prestige and wealth. As a result it was highly contested. As usual it’s the closest neighbours who are the peskiest ones. The ones who tried most assiduously and repeatedly to take over Massa Marittima were Pisa and Siena, and it was ultimately Siena that won the day by over-running Massa Marittima in 1335.”

The background of wealth and warfare is vital to the understanding of this peculiar

mural. Painted in the town's communal fountain, the mural shows a tree covered in phalluses, with a number of eagles flying around it, and with women underneath. The location of the mural is the first key to its importance: "It was a work that was destined and intended to be seen – Ferzoco emphasises – by everyone in the town and by all visitors to the town because it was placed at the central water fountain. The water fountain alone was an extraordinary technological and sanitation feat. Most hill top towns would have had their water source well outside the walls of the city, down the slopes from the city in a low lying area. That meant that for the inhabitants of most cities to get their water on a daily basis would have to allow for quite an excursion, carrying large jugs of water, perhaps with their mules or donkeys. The actual effort involved is not slight. Even as a tourist going to a place like San Gimignano, visiting their communal water source outside the town walls, walking back up the hill, carrying nothing but a camera you'll be covered in perspiration and quite tired. Apart from that, there's another important factor when dealing with supply of water and that's enemy invasion, as for example with Pisa and Siena. Enemies trying to attack any town would first and foremost try to besiege it, and the easiest way for anyone to get a town to fall to its knees would be to get a hold of its water supply. So it was extremely difficult for these hilltop towns and city States to safeguard their water supply from attack. The extremely unusual thing about Massa Marittima was that, through their wealth and particularly through their technological expertise, developed through the construction of galleries and shafts in mining, they were able to channel water in large quantities into the very heart of their city republic, within the city walls. That meant that no-one had to walk far to get large quantities of water, and this water supply would be completely safe when enemies attacked. People wouldn't have to risk a kamikaze-style run to get water outside the walls."

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