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Materiality of Incarceration in Mediterranean Antiquity

The Prison Project (2023–2026)

1 Introduction of Project Hypothesis, Aims, Impact (MDCL)

Incarceration was central to many ancient Mediterranean societies.² Yet the materiality and archaeology of prisons and practices of incarceration has largely escaped the grasp of researchers in the field of carceral studies. Scholars lament that “prisons of the ancient world have disappeared.”³ Our new project disputes this historiographic position in the field of carceral studies by launching new research in ancient history and archaeology; our hypothesis is that incarceration remains hidden in the archaeological re-

¹ Order of authorship was calculated on a Texas Instruments TI-84 Plus CE, Rose Gold.

² See M. Folch, “Political Prisoners in Democratic Athens, 490–318 BCE, Part I: The Athenian Inmate Population,” *CP* 116.3 (2021), 336–368; id., “Political Prisoners in Democratic Athens, 490–318 BCE, Part II: Narrating Incarceration in Athenian Historiography and Oratory,” *CP* 116.4 (2021), 498–514; J. Hillner, *Prison, Punishment and Penance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); J.N. Reid, *Prisons in Ancient Mesopotamia: Confinement and Control until the First Fall of Babylon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); M.D.C. Larsen, “Carceral Practices and Geographies in Roman North Africa: A Case Study,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 3.4 (2019), 547–580; M. Letteney and M.D.C. Larsen, “A Roman Military Prison at Lambaesis,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5.1 (2021), 65–102; id., *Ancient Mediterranean Incarceration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming); J. Bauschatz, *Law and Enforcement in Ptolemaic Egypt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³ This is the case despite several archaeological sites being long-since exposed and published as prisons. More below. Quotation: E.M. Peters, “Prison before the Prison: The Ancient and Medieval Worlds,” in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. N. Morris and D.J. Rothman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3–43, at 3. Cf. P. Pavón Torrejón, *La cárcel y el encarcelamiento en el mundo romano*, *Anejos de Archivo Español de Arqueología* 27 (Madrid: Editorial CSIC-CSIC Press, 2003), 33–39, 89–110, 118.

cord, waiting to be exposed to scrutiny and integrated into our sense of the human past.

This article introduces The Prison Project: a multi-year, interdisciplinary, team research project on the materiality of incarceration in Mediterranean antiquity that is housed at the University of Copenhagen and supported by the Carlsberg Foundation's *Semper Ardens*: Accelerate funding scheme. Our team includes archaeologists, historians, digital humanists, and reconstruction artists to study the materiality and archaeology of carceral places and practices across the Mediterranean basin from the sixth century BCE through the sixth century CE.

The project comprises six interrelated work packages. (1) We are cataloging, as comprehensively as we are able, all known carceral sites – formal prisons and known places where people were detained, though sometimes it is impossible to disarticulate sites of incarceration from those used for holding enslaved people. (2) We are using 3D modeling technologies and other modes of digital documentation to carefully study dozens of such sites. The first two work packages have allowed us to begin (3) to construct a typology of carceral sites, especially from the Roman imperial period. (4) Team members are also combining 3D data collected in the field, excavation reports, and scientifically informed inference to reconstruct some of these sites digitally. (5) Our team is building an interactive research database, gathering documentary, visual, archaeological, and literary sources pertaining to incarceration in the ancient Mediterranean. Finally (6), we are applying what we have learned to the study of the ancient Mediterranean, and especially to the history of early Christianity, which we will delineate further towards the end of this article.

2 (A Brief) History of Scholarship on Incarceration, in Antiquity and Modernity (ML)

The field of carceral history is relatively new; it has been practiced in earnest only for fifty years or so. Monumental works like Michel Foucault's 1975 *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* and the 1995 *Oxford History of the Prison* have set the tone and assumptive categories of a cross-disciplinary field of inquiry that comprises historians, geographers, philosophers, and (more recently) archaeologists, all attempting to understand the kaleidoscopic instantiations of carceral control across time, the prison's effect on

societies in which it appears, and in some instances, the future of an insidious institution.⁴

The established narrative goes something like this: some form of jail appears in nearly every complex society that submits to historical analysis; hierarchical communities throughout time have had reason and capacity to hold people in bespoke prison or *ad hoc* carceral facilities until they could be brought to trial, repay their debt, or *en route* to a punishment for their actions. The prison, on the other hand, is a novel legacy of early modern Europe – these institutions are punitive, carefully calibrating time with deviance to arrive at a “prison sentence,” and often with the additional aim of reforming offenders.

Work in the new millennium has continually pushed back the timeline. Pieter Spierenburg’s 2007 *The Prison Experience* details the slow, complex evolution of punitive and reformatory practices in early modern Europe, focusing on German and Dutch examples stretching back to the late Middle Ages, while Guy Geltner’s 2008 *The Medieval Prison* explores distinctive approaches to crime and punishment in medieval Italian city states and, importantly, attends to documentary evidence for carceral practices rather than literary materials prescribing an ideal carceral order.⁵ He finds that in Italy, a number of the punitive and reformatory aims of incarceration were in practice long before they were fully theorized or, indeed, “legalized.” Recent work by Spencer Weinreich demonstrates that punitive “mass incarceration” is hardly new – by any measure it existed already in the early seventeenth century in Bamberg, Germany.⁶ Julia Hillner’s 2015 *Prison, Punishment and Penance in Late Antiquity* pushed the timeline back yet further, exploring the long tail of Platonic ideals about reformatory incarceration up through the Roman imperial period, and their apparent widespread institutionalization in late antique monastic confinement.⁷

All along, classicists have poked holes in the common theory that the ancient world had jails but no prisons, and that these spaces were marginal and insignificant. Already in 1994 Andrea Lovato demonstrated that legal

4 M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, Bibliothèque des histoires (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); Morris and Rothman, *Oxford History of the Prison* (see n. 3).

5 P. Spierenburg, *The Prison Experience: Disciplinary Institutions and Their Inmates in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); G. Geltner, *The Medieval Prison: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

6 Geltner, *Medieval Prison* (see n. 5), 44; S.J. Weinreich, “Why Early Modern Mass Incarceration Matters: The Bamberg Malefizhaus, 1627–31,” *Journal of Social History* 56.4 (2023), 719–752.

7 Hillner, *Prison, Punishment and Penance* (see n. 2); ead., “Confined Exiles: An Aspect of the Late Antique Prison System,” *Millennium* 10.1 (2013), 385–434.

sources from the Roman imperial period at least countenance punitive incarceration, though they are not univocal on the practice, while colloquia at Strasbourg in 1997 and 2000 and at Madrid in 2001 produced edited volumes of great learning that explore the history of incarceration in the ancient Mediterranean and Europe from the Ptolemaic period through the Middle Ages.⁸

Archaeologists have identified spaces as potential prisons in Greek and Roman contexts, including at Rome, Athens, Cosa, and Cuicul (see below). Nevertheless, the small number of archaeological sites has left historians with little material to work with – so little that a legal historian like Yann Rivière could claim that the relatively limited number of sites and their diminutive nature is itself a point of analytical departure, proving that the prison in antiquity was a place of abandonment rather than a place of punishment or reform.⁹ As much as could be said based on previously identified sites was explored by Pilar Pavón Torrejón in 2003 – a study that opened doors for our team and others looking to leave the world of text and delve into the materiality of carceral practices.¹⁰

3 Key Data Categories and Sources (MDCL and ML)

Our project integrates archaeological material with documentary, literary, and visual evidence for the practice and ideology of incarceration across Mediterranean antiquity. We consider data in these four categories: archaeological, documentary, literary, and visual. Many of our collected sources offer new information, beyond what is often cited when speaking about ancient incarceration. We differentiate between four broad categories of data because each source type offers a different kind of information about incarceration.

⁸ A. Lovato, *Il carcere nel diritto penale romano: Dai Severi a Giustiniano*, Pubblicazioni della Facoltà giuridica dell'Università di Bari 115 (Bari: Cacucci, 1994); C. Bertrand-Dagenbach et al., eds., *Carcer: Prison et privation de liberté dans l'Antiquité classique* (Paris: de Boccard, 1999); C. Bertrand-Dagenbach et al., eds., *Carcer II: Prison et privation de liberté dans l'Empire romain et l'Occident médiéval* (Paris: de Boccard, 2005). S. Torallas Tovar and I. Pérez Martín, eds., *Castigo y reclusión en el mundo antiguo*, Manuales y anejos de Emerita 45 (Madrid: Consejo superior de investigaciones científicas, 2003).

⁹ Y. Rivière, "Détention préventive, mise à l'épreuve et démonstration de la preuve (Ier–IIIe siècles ap. J.-C.)," in Bertrand-Dagenbach et al., *Carcer* (see n. 8), 57–73, at 57.

¹⁰ Pavón Torrejón, *La cárcel* (see n. 3).

3.1 Documentary Sources (ML and NB)

Documentary sources collected by the project comprise a variety of first-hand accounts from antiquity, written primarily on stone and papyrus but including other material supports as well. For instance, ostraca (texts preserved on ceramic sherds) offer evidence of daily administrative tasks and bookkeeping related to debt incarceration in late ancient North Africa, while even graffiti written in mud on a prison wall give a glimpse of prisoner complaints – and apparent resourcefulness, making a mark on the built environment with the minimal supplies at their disposal. The largest group of materials is papyri, beginning with the Zeno archive (mid-3rd cent. BCE) but also including bail receipts, requests for supplies, legal documentation, orders for arrest and appearance, and other document types from Egypt between the Ptolemaic and Byzantine periods.

Papyri offer several unique vantage points. For instance, a small group of prisoner letters apparently written by the same scribe offer insight into the creation and transmission of communications between prisons and the wider world in the Ptolemaic period, while a handful of Roman imperial era receipts indicate the release of prisoners after they have served an allotted amount of time as a legal sanction. A slew of second-century CE tax receipts indicates that local prisons across Egypt were publicly funded, and late ancient bail receipts indicate an apparently common practice of collateral incarceration, in which wives are left in carceral facilities on account of their husband's debts, releasing the husband to work and repay. Papyri related to carceral practices in Egypt correspond broadly with practices seen in literary sources from across the Mediterranean and throughout the period of our project's study, and they are eminently useful as vignettes into prison life and administration.

Inscriptional evidence allows us to hear, *inter alia*, the voices of ancient prison guards. Many dozens of inscriptions survive from prison wardens and their staffers, speaking to their careers, personal relationships, and the groups with which they claim affinity, though the formulaic nature of this data means that the inscriptions do not speak meaningfully to staffer sentiments on the prison or how they reflected on the implications of their job (if they did so at all). For the most part these inscriptions conform to the general epigraphic habits of the Greek and Roman contexts from which they survive, meaning that the archive is biased toward evidence from the Roman imperial period, having been set up by and for men serving in state administration or with some affiliation with the army. In one rare instance, from Bostra (Buṣrā, Syria) in the third century CE, a troop of low-level

prison staffers dedicated an inscription to their boss, who they call “an incomparable supervisor.”¹¹ A group of altars discovered in 1900 in a room within the Roman legionary fortress in Carnuntum presents another fascinating case: three of the altars still retain some of the original inscriptions, dedicated in the third century CE by two *clavicularii* (keepers of keys) and one *optio custodiarum* – most likely the camp’s designated prison warden.¹²

Documentary sources provide important insights into the day-to-day aspects of incarceration, including the bureaucracy of running prisons and other carceral facilities like mining camps, and (mediated) access to the voices of incarcerated individuals and those who kept them under guard. These sources offer insight into the basic issues that prisoners faced, such as accessing food and communicating with people on the outside. They also shed important light on more fundamental aspects of ancient Mediterranean societies: labor markets, the economics of resource extraction, and the relationship between individuals, communities, and the state.

3.2 Archaeological Sources (EL and NB)

At its foundation, our project attempts to understand the architectural and material realities of ancient carceral facilities. Archaeological inquiry and fieldwork are fundamental aspects of the project, even though prison identification has often been assumed to be difficult – perhaps even impossible. It has even been doubted that there is any securely identifiable architectural evidence of prisons.¹³ There is one such prison, though, whose location and structure have been continuously known for millennia: the Carcer Tullianum or Mamertine Prison in Rome, which had long been associated with the imprisonment of the apostles Peter and Paul under

11 M. Sartre, ed., *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, vol. 13.1: *Bostra* (Paris: Geuthner, 1982), no. 9088.

12 M. von Groller, “Grabungen im Lager von Carnuntum,” in *Der römische Limes in Österreich*, vol. 3: *Übersicht der im Jahr 1900 ausgeführten Grabungen* (Vienna: Hölder, 1902), 1–120, at 84–89; E. Bormann, “Epigraphischer Anhang,” *ibid.*, 121–130. See also H. von Petrikovits, *Die Innenbauten römischer Legionslager während der Prinzipatszeit* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1975), 81; G. Kremer, ed., *Götterdarstellungen, Kult- und Weihedenkmäler aus Carnuntum*, *Corpus signorum Imperii Romani*, Carnuntum suppl. 1 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2012), 361–362.

13 L. Lavan, “Political Space in Late Antiquity,” in *Objects in Context, Objects in Use: Material Spatiality in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. Lavan, E. Swift, and T. Putzeys, *Late Antique Archaeology* 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 111–128, at 121.

Nero.¹⁴ In 1960 scholars had already noted the remains of the civic prison in Cosa, and by 1993 the initial excavators noted: “oddly enough, Cosa’s Carcer, if that is what it was, seems to be the only one so far identified outside of Rome.”¹⁵ Studying excavation reports published across the twentieth century, our project team members have found several further sites already identified as prisons by excavators as early as the early nineteenth century, including in Pompeii, Cuicul, Sarmizegetusa, Tiberias, Caesarea Maritima, and Cagliari.¹⁶ Team members have since added two additional securely identified prisons to the roster: a late antique prison in Corinth and a Roman military prison in Lambaesis.¹⁷ The identification of a military prison has, in turn, spurred identification by the excavators of these sites themselves of two further facilities of a similar type – one possible military prison in Vindobona and a second in Apulum.¹⁸ We expect that further identifications will be made in coming years, expanding our dataset and allowing for yet finer-grained architectural analysis.

All in all, our database of archaeological remains of prisons or other sites of incarceration has grown significantly, and we suspect will only continue to increase. These sites include civic prisons, military prisons, amphitheater prisons, workers’ prisons, private prisons, and other types of carceral sites. Methods for securely identifying a prison or site of incarceration include: legible graffiti on walls or floors of secure rooms with statements such as “get me out of this lawless place,” anchors cut into walls for stocks with signs of wear and situated directly above dowels for wooden benches, which were surrounded by graffiti, or a prolonged description of a prison in an ancient source, which is still clearly identifiable today.¹⁹ We have examples of each method of identification. In addition to architectural structures, the

14 See A. Russo and P. Fortini, eds., *Carcer Tullianum: Il Mamertino al Foro Romano*, Bibliotheca Archaeologica 74 (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2022).

15 F. Brown et al., eds., *Cosa*, vol. 3: *The Buildings of the Forum: Colony, Municipium, and Village*, MAAR 37 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 41; cf. F.E. Brown, *Cosa*, vol. 1: *History and Topography*, MAAR 20 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1951), 81; Pavón Torrejón, *La cárcel* (see n. 3), 118–119; Y. Rivière, *Le cachot et les fers: Détention et coercition à Rome*, Antiquité au présent (Paris: Belin, 2004), 56.

16 See Larsen and Letteney, *Ancient Mediterranean Incarceration* (see n. 2).

17 Letteney and Larsen, “Roman Military Prison at Lambaesis” (see n. 2); M.D.C. Larsen, “A Prison in Late Antique Corinth,” *Hesperia* 93.2 (2024), 337–379.

18 M. Mosser, “A *carcer castrensis* in Vindobona?,” lecture given at European Association of Archaeologists 30th Annual Meeting, August 31, 2024, Sapienza Università di Roma, Rome, Italy; G. Cupcea, *Latin Inscriptions from the Legionary Fortress of Apulum*, Tyche Suppl. 16 (Vienna: Holzhausen, 2024), 153.

19 IG IV 2.3, no. 1277; Larsen, “Prison in Late Antique Corinth” (see n. 17), 349.

archaeological sources of the project database also include other material objects related to incarceration, such as shackles, keys, and locks.

Archaeological remains of carceral facilities are important to the project in several ways. A key goal of our project is to assemble a dataset that allows us to develop a typology of carceral sites, discussed below; the more carceral facilities we can identify, the more useful our typology will be. Additionally, these remains present invaluable insight into what ancient incarceration was like. It is as difficult to imagine the experience of reading in late antiquity without having ever seen a codex as it would be imagining the experience of incarceration without knowing what a prison looked like.

3.3 Visual Sources (RL)

Although the image of bound captives has existed as a visual trope for depictions of powerful rulers from the earliest art of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, these images are often generalized. Images of captives and prisoners created and dispersed by powerful institutions (e.g., numismatic depictions on Roman imperial coinage) are highly curated and tend to follow strict visual conventions, depicting subdued prisoners easily controlled and held by the state. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that our most compelling visual representations related to captivity, incarceration, and criminal punishment are often found at cultural contact zones or the edges of empire, where the impulse to restrain and control must have been heightened and language and cultural barriers reinforced the need to visually broadcast messages about judgment and punishment.

Where prisoners and captives are pictured in ancient Mediterranean sculpture, painting (including decorated ceramics and mummy cartonage), mosaic, and glyptic, they are rarely identified by name and seldom appear situated in landscapes or contexts that would provide diagnostic evidence of the practical conditions of these states of unfreedom. Instead, we look to the archaeology of potential spaces themselves and objects of restraint like shackles for such evidence (see sec. 3.2 above).

In theory, an artistic representation of judgment and captivity could help to facilitate the identification of a prison, though at present we do not have examples of such. More often, however, portable objects are removed from original archaeological contexts, and their meaning remains enigmatic. See, for instance, the corpus of roughly twenty small bronze cast figures of bound captives from Britain and the Rhine/Danube region that appear to depict naked men and restrained by a chain or rope that encircles and links the neck, wrists, and ankles. These small figures have been in-

terpreted as symbols of slave trading, depicting non-Roman captives destined for the market, but discovery of new examples in context may elucidate their use and significance.²⁰

Mythological scenes present another venue for visual depictions of incarceration. They are often moralizing and depicted within larger decorative programs, such as the fourth style wall painting in the House of Marcus Lucretius Fronto at Pompeii depicting the story of Pero and Micon.²¹ These scenes do not represent historical actors, but they are nevertheless informative, as artists' depictions of apparatus and spaces of captivity are doubtless informed by contemporary examples. In the case of Pero and Micon, for example, the painter depicts the father and daughter in a dark room with a small, inaccessible barred window that seems to be consistent with Roman spaces of incarceration. Such mythological representations stand apart from the general corpus in that the imprisoned person may be a sympathetic figure. The physical state, gender, and level of restraint of depicted prisoners varies in accordance with the circumstances of their imprisonment and the position of the captor: those imprisoned for civil crimes, including those who may be unfairly held, are usually distinguished by an unkempt or emaciated appearance, while defeated adversaries in warfare are often depicted as physically formidable, as on carved column bases in Mainz decorated with two muscled captives, chained to each other around the neck.²²

3.4 Literary Sources (NR and ML)

Literary sources in our dataset are selective and currently number around three hundred, spanning from the mid-fifth century BCE to the sixth century CE, including prose and poetry in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and Coptic, and legal materials in Latin and Greek. Collectively literary materials are an invaluable resource for understanding the cultural history of carceral ideals. Juristic sources prescribe a carceral order, and literary accounts deploy incarceration as a dramatic stage upon which broader dramas unfold. Often, these sources dispute and disagree. The

20 R. Hobbs and R. Jackson, *Roman Britain: Life at the Edge of Empire* (London: British Museum Press, 2010), 34; R. Jackson, "Roman Bound Captives: Symbols of Slavery?," in *Image, Craft and the Classical World: Essays in Honour of Donald Bailey and Catherine Johns*, ed. N. Crummy, Monographies Instrumentum 29 (Montagnac: Mergoïl, 2005), 143–156, esp. 151.

21 Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 5.4.7.

22 W. Selzer, *Römische Steindenkmäler: Mainz in römischer Zeit; Katalog zur Sammlung in der Steinhalle*, vol. 1 (Mainz: Zabern, 1988), 241.

Severan jurist Ulpian preferred prisons not to be used for punishment, though admitted they were widely used as such, while the emperor Constantine legislated quite the opposite, declaring in 320 CE, “The prison is for punishment. The prison is for guilty people.”²³

The third- or fourth-century CE “prison diary” of Perpetua deploys the prison as a background upon which the young martyr appears as a sympathetic and spiritually meritorious carceral subject. We do not know if the diary is authentic; what we know is that it was believed to be already in antiquity, and that the details of Perpetua’s journey through a variety of carceral spaces accord well with documentary and archaeological evidence, using literary verisimilitude to offer a portrait of prison life that would be believable to a population who, for the most part, had no first-hand experience of incarceration. In this sense Perpetua’s prison diary is like the various frescoes of Pero and Micon at Pompeii – they reflect contemporaneous practices in part, and in turn they broadcast a caricature of incarceration meant to be immediately recognizable to readers.

Sometimes literary materials provide corroborating evidence for archaeological sources. The quarries in Syracuse called the “Lautomiaie,” exploited from the Bronze Age until the modern period for limestone, were known in antiquity as a site of imprisonment, where – according to Thucydides and others – seven thousand Athenians were incarcerated following the failed military campaign.²⁴ This “natural prison” (*nativus carcer*) was apparently still in use as such in Cicero’s day.²⁵ Here the literary record has reified one moment in the continuous history of a space, rendering it a synecdoche for incarceration writ large, such that, centuries after the failed Sicilian expedition, one of Rome’s major public prisons was named “the Lautomiaie,” in imitation of the quarries.

Literary sources at times offer our most sustained criticism of ancient carceral practices. One prominent example was the fourth-century Sophist Libanius’s condemnation of carceral practices that he witnessed first-hand and heard of second-hand in his city of Antioch (*Or.* 33 and 45). Libanius condemns the governor’s negligence in arresting people in large numbers but failing to bring the accused to trial, which led to severe overcrowding of local facilities. Libanius complains, for instance, that prisons are so packed that the inmates cannot lie down but must sleep standing; that guards’ extortion obliges relatives to provide for prisoners through sex work; that

²³ *Dig.* 48.19.8.9; *Cod. Theod.* 11.7.3.

²⁴ Thucydides 1.7.87; Seneca, *Marc.* 17.4.

²⁵ Cicero, *Verr.* 2.5.68; T.J. Cadoux, “The Roman *Carcer* and Its Adjuncts,” *GR* 55.2 (2008), 202–221, esp. 203.

both witnesses and the accused are treated the same in prison; and that the majority die in prison before making it to trial – numbering in the thousands (*Or.* 45.8, 9, 11, 15). He deploys the prison as a literary tool, in some cases to condemn the inefficacy of legislation aimed at protecting prisoners. Reading Libanius, along with accounts of prison abuses in Livy, Tacitus, and Suetonius, offers a mediated glimpse into practices on the ground, but much more than a glimpse into the kaleidoscopic carceral ideals held by different historical actors at different points in the ancient and late ancient world – “The majority of them never deserved this punishment: not even those who deserve to be punished by death, deserve it by a death like this,” Libanius says (*Or.* 33.42).²⁶ While highly rhetorical, Libanius’s portrait of a corrupt prison system coincides with what we know from other types of sources: incarceration was a tool deployed by the powerful at the expense of the powerless at least as much as it was a question of maintaining good law and order.

4 Prison Project Database (HI)

Operating with these four data categories presents specific challenges to data management. While database records carry overlapping types of information, the data comprise both physical and intangible evidence, including text, translations, commentaries, spatial locations, and movable objects. All relevant project data must be incorporated in a unified data management system, and yet metadata differs significantly among records and between categories, as does recording methodology. For instance: one record may indicate an archaeological site, like the late ancient prison of Corinth, and embedded in that record is a location, timeframe, an annotated 3D model of the site as it looks today as well as a 3D reconstruction of the facility at several distinct periods of its use. All that data comprises one record within the subcategory “Archaeological Sources.” Associated with that record, however, are the individual graffiti scratched into the wall of that facility, each of which comprise a Documentary Source record, including transcription, translation, images, and location. Literary attestations of incarceration in late ancient Corinth appear in yet other records, and depictions of prisoners from the forum just outside of the late antique prison appear as Visual Sources. Each record requires distinct metadata, but each record is historically relevant to the others, and the database seeks

²⁶ Trans. A.F. Norman, LCL 452:231.

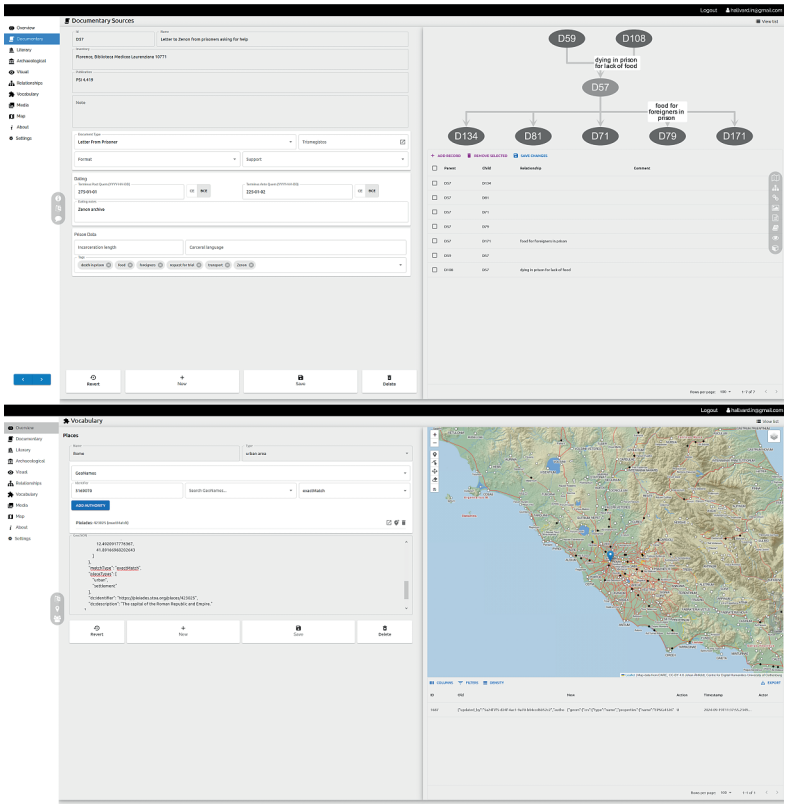


Fig. 1: Snapshots of the Prison Project database highlighting the relationship between different documentary sources (top) and the integration of a web GIS linked to other digital initiatives like the Pleiades gazetteer of ancient sites (Hallvard Indgjerd)

to elucidate such connections. Resultantly, our project has developed a custom web-based frontend that provides flexible visualization and interlinking of all records. Our solution implements open-source technologies that are already widely adopted, and the solution that our team created (under Hallvard Indgjerd’s technical direction) is itself open source, meaning that other teams may use the source code, remixing it to suit their own needs in the future (see fig. 1).

The Prison Project database is based on the Ikaros recording platform, which is deployed as a stack of containerized services. The backbone of the system is a PostgreSQL database with the PostGIS extension, ensuring stability and scalability combined with advanced handling of the diverse

data types. Table inheritance allows us to keep the basic data layout simple and queries across the categories straightforward, while distinct fields only apply to the relevant categories. “Findspot,” for instance, is relevant to archaeological, visual, and documentary sources, but not literary materials. In addition to the web-frontend, the data can be accessed through common GIS and database software, including QGIS, MS Access and LibreOffice Base.

One fundamental aim in creating the Prison Project database was to facilitate creation of data conforming to FAIR (Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reuse) and Open Data standards already at the time of data entry. All entries are given universally unique identifiers (UUIDs), which are reused in the entry’s direct URL. Locations, actors, and terms are defined separately in controlled vocabularies and can be cross-linked to one or more standard vocabularies, including ORCID and Wikidata for actors; Pleiades, iDAI Gazetteer and GeoNames for places; and Getty AAT, Trismegistos, and iDAI Thesauri for terms.

We will fully implement the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF), which improves the interoperability of raster data and allows for data exchange with major museum collections and databases. The advanced handling of NoSQL-data built into Postgres allows for direct creation of IIIF manifest files within the database. Similarly, spatial data is presented and ingested as GeoJSON, bibliographic entries are provided as CSL-JSON, and LOD-links are stored in the json format. In the early phases of data collection, the frontend has been available only for registered users, but the system is prepared for making all data publicly available online in autumn of 2025.

5 3D Modeling and Digital Documentation (EL)

Documentation of carceral architecture, landscapes of imprisonment and exile, and objects related to ancient confinement and restraint is a critical aspect of our project. With research targets that range from subterranean prisons to iron shackles, entire islands to cavernous stone quarries, accomplishing this task has required the development of novel workflows and interdisciplinary methods for digital documentation. This facet of our research is offering new advances for spatial, structural, and object recording, while simultaneously facilitating the analysis of these data alongside the diverse, multimedia evidence for ancient incarceration.

Considering the nature of premodern carceral geographies, these study areas are often difficult to access and topographically complex, including built, subterranean, and open-air spaces. In many instances, difficulties of access and recording has led to insufficient archival documentation and frequent misidentification. Moreover, the carceral use of these spaces, landscapes, and objects is often only one part of a larger diachronic story. It is impossible to understand the broader implications of a site like this without accounting for what came before and after. Our workflow incorporates novel techniques in landscape survey, drone photogrammetry, and terrestrial laser scanning, alongside more traditional archaeological, architectural, and art historical analysis to create detailed three-dimensional digital records for each object of study. These data sets serve as important records of cultural heritage in a form that facilitates sharing with local archaeological institutions, offer the opportunity for integration within the Prison Project database, and form the basis for the development of detailed three-dimensional reconstructions that inform our understandings of the experiential implications of premodern confinement (see below).

The *Latomia dei Cappuccini* in Syracuse, one of the several limestone quarries discussed above, present a compelling example of this digital documentation workflow. This five-hectare site is a complex network of enormous subterranean galleries and deep, highly vegetated open-air pits, which have never been subject to detailed archaeological documentation, in addition to the fact that no material evidence for their ancient carceral use had been identified. Our fieldwork at the site follows our novel 3D documentation methodology, combining detailed aerial photogrammetry alongside high-quality terrestrial and handheld laser scanning to accurately document this large and complex landscape to a high degree of accuracy, digitally removing vegetation and isolating each preserved instance of premodern activity, graffiti, and construction (see fig. 2). This novel, integrative workflow allowed us to produce the first comprehensive documentation of the quarry (see fig. 3).

Over the course of The Prison Project, we aim to undertake high-quality digital and three-dimensional recording at several new archaeological sites across numerous sites, integrating these data into our public database, and offering scholars interested in these themes a newfound opportunity to engage with landscapes, structures, and the material remains of confinement.



Fig. 4: Cross section of the reconstructed civic prison at Cosa with its divided upper cells and subterranean cell (Niels Bargfeldt)

6 Digital Reconstruction (NB)

The fast (and partially automated) data-collection methods of modern archaeological surveying render on-site observation even more important in making sense of archaeological remains, along with processing workflows for data after our team has returned from the field.²⁷ Another key aspect of this data processing is digital reconstruction: bringing together field observations, digital assets, and relevant comparanda to produce scientifically rigorous conjectures about the spaces as they existed in antiquity. These digital reconstructions are an intellectual sandbox for members of the team, where theories and assumptions on the physical framework of carceral spaces can be tested and worked out on a conceptual level and in simulated space. In some instances, we have found that digital reconstructions have answered questions that we posed, for example, about light penetration or seasonal temperature swings, though often these digital sandboxes raise new questions that had not occurred before we “entered” a simulated carceral facility. Reconstructions help us read our texts and visual sources differently, even while the same source material informs the ongoing process of digital reconstruction. For now, some of the recurring considerations that we explore through reconstructions of civic

²⁷ N. Bargfeldt and D. Borbonus, “Architectural Documentation and Digital Reconstruction: Problems and Possibilities,” *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 123 (2022), 297–313, at 299.



Fig. 5a: Outside view of the late antique prison (Boudroumi) in Corinth with prisoners brought out of their cells (Niels Bargfeldt)



Fig. 5b: Work in progress on highlighting the prison graffiti within the project's reconstruction of the Boudroumi for dissemination purposes (Niels Bargfeldt)

prisons like the late ancient prison at Corinth or the prison facilities at Cosa, Djemila, or Sarmizegetusa are access to light, air, and the social life of the cities in which facilities appear, as well as the interdependent placement of cells, guard rooms, and connection to judicial venues (see fig. 4).

Our reconstructions are aimed at publication and dissemination in the form not only of stills, video sequences, interactive 3D models but also of

VR/XR experiences. We will never be able to reproduce the experience of incarceration in the past or the present, nor should we want to; doing so would involve subjecting users to immense physical and emotional strain with little scientific use beyond prurient interest. And yet, this form of “gamification” of the past strives to give a sense of space, light, sound, and perhaps even smell in virtual carceral environments aimed both at researchers and a broader public interested in glimpsing, partially and for a moment, a past that is almost entirely lost (see fig. 5a–b).²⁸

7 Typology and Reidentification (NB)

Across the temporal and geographical span that the project covers it is evident that carceral spaces took many forms, but that their structures often follow discernible patterns. Not all these forms will have had the possibility to survive the test of time and be visible in the archaeological record, and some will be hard to discern from other types of constructions preserved through time. These issues make it even more relevant to create a typology of places of imprisonment in order that evidence that might exist will have the best possible chance of being detected. Developing such a typology is a critical research output of the project and builds on the typology delineated in Matthew Larsen and Mark Letteney’s forthcoming monograph.²⁹

At its broadest level, our typology distinguishes between purpose-built prisons and those spaces that were not originally intended for prison use. For instance, the Roman forum at Cosa includes a purpose-built civic prison on one corner. This is only one type of space, however – literary, documentary, and archaeological sources all attest to the *ad hoc* use of buildings for temporary incarceration and to facilities that were renovated from earlier uses to become prisons. The category of purpose-built structures can be further divided into sub-categories covering civic prisons, military prisons, prisons attached to treasuries, prisons connected to amphitheaters, and worker prisons. Our other category, spaces not built as prisons, includes sites used as prisons on an *ad hoc* basis, for instance, the *aerarium* (treasury) under the Temple of Saturn on the Forum Romanum.³⁰ Another instance is prisons repurposed as such from other pre-

²⁸ On gamification, K. Garstki, “Introduction: Challenges of a Critical Archaeology in the Modern World,” in *Critical Archaeology in the Digital Age*, ed. K. Garstki (Los Angeles: UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2022), 1–9.

²⁹ Larsen and Letteney, *Ancient Mediterranean Incarceration* (see n. 2).

³⁰ Pavón Torrejón, *La cárcel* (see n. 3), 109.

existing structures, such as we see in late antique Corinth, where previously built “shops” (the Boudroumi and Northwest shops) were renovated in late antiquity into a prison, perhaps as a part of late-fourth-century’s renovations led by the governor of Achaia.³¹ Thus far, we have been able to isolate a series of features – such as windows opening to public spaces, multi-chambered structures with locking devices at each passageway, and interior guard rooms – that appear across a variety of carceral facilities and across categories.

The project will continue to finetune this typology and explore its application to both new findings and legacy data, reidentifying spaces already known in the archaeological record as potential prisons. It is outside of the scope of the project to reinvestigate every possible site of incarceration; we hope that by establishing a carceral typology other scholars will be able to build on our work in making their own identifications.

8 Impact on the Study of Early Christianity (MDCL)

The archaeological understanding of incarceration developed through the project has several implications for understanding of early Christian communities. Of special interest are the several dozen early Christian prisoner graffiti that provide an important insight into the lived experience of incarceration. Our project has already produced a catalog of such graffiti from late antique Corinth, which has recently already appeared in print.³² Other corpora of prisoner graffiti from Cagliari, Caesarea Maritima, and Syracuse are known but require further study.³³ Many of these use scriptural and theological imagery to express core Christian concepts, while others express rage, boredom, and creativity.

Understanding what ancient prisons looked like will also open new interpretive possibilities of well-known Christian texts, bringing out carceral aspects otherwise missed without understanding the material context. For example, many prisons in our database, especially civic prisons, contain a multi-chambered layout, with an inner and an outer prison. The outer prison would be especially dark and loathsome with no access to light or

31 Larsen, “Prison in Late Antique Corinth” (see n. 17), 373.

32 Larsen, “Prison in Late Antique Corinth” (see n. 17), 346–362.

33 M. Dadea, *L'anfiteatro romano di Cagliari*, Sardegna archeologica: Guide e itinerari 38 (Sassari: Delfino, 2006), 79–87; J. Patrich, E. Meir, and A. Amitai, “A Provincial Palace (*Praetorium*) in Tiberias? The Archaeological Finds and the Evidence of the Literary Sources,” *Scripta classica Israelica* 41 (2022), 77–107.

fresh air. Such knowledge illuminates the phrase “outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth” known from various early Christian sources, though most notably from the Gospel according to Matthew.³⁴ Most of these ancient prisons would have had an area with more access to light and fresh air as well as a further removed area with less light and fresh air: explained otherwise, the dark, outer cells of the prison would have had a space that would most naturally be described as an “outer darkness.” The carceral aspects of “outer darkness” are confirmed by the Gospel according to Matthew itself, when it says people are to be locked up on their hands and feet and thrown into it.³⁵ The Apocalypse of Paul explicitly conflates the “outer darkness” with the “lower prison,” and a non-canonical version of the story of entrusted money similarly replaces the “outer darkness” with the “civic prison.”³⁶ The gnashing (βρυγμός) of teeth would then be rightly understood as shivering or chattering of teeth due to cold temperatures and lack of clothing.³⁷

Our findings show how spaces like the prison for the condemned in the Roman amphitheater in Cagliari or the copper mine known today as Umm al-Amad (“Mother of Pillars”) in the vicinity of the ancient town of Phaino help us to visualize in our heads what may have been in the heads of early Christian writers: cavernous spaces where darkness co-exists alongside fire, and fire alongside coldness and water begin to make sense as more than just a metaphor. Such carceral spaces undoubtedly were utterly dark with lamps scattered among inmates, who were nonetheless freezing cold and miring in damp, feculent muck. In short, the archaeology of prisons may help us better understand how early Christians imagined hell.³⁸ These examples are only the beginning. The Prison Project aims to produce more such scholarship, showing the impact of materiality of incarceration.

34 Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 76.4–5. See Matt 13:42, 50; 18:8; 25:41; Luke 13:28–29; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 125.1–2; Herm. Sim. 9.14.2.

35 Matt 22:13. See M.D.C. Larsen, *Early Christians and Incarceration: A Cultural History of Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); usually associated with the Gospel according to the Nazareans, but the textual history is complicated.

36 Apoc. Paul 16–18; Eusebius, *Theoph.* (?) (Gr.) in Nicetas of Heraclea, *Catena in Lucam*; cf. A. Mai, *Novae patrum bibliothecae*, vol. 4 (Rome, 1847), 155. See also H. Szesnat, “The Non-canonical Version of the Story of Entrusted Money,” *Neot* 53 (2019), 149–174.

37 Cf. LSJ, s.v. Ia. Meghan R. Henning independently arrives at the same conclusion from a different dataset: *Hell Hath No Fury: Gender, Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 99–100.

38 See Henning, *Hell Hath No Fury* (see n. 37), 99–100; Larsen, *Early Christians and Incarceration* (see n. 35).

9 Planned Dissemination of Research (MDCL)

In addition to academic research outputs, we have two public-facing contributions in the works. We are planning a museum exhibit at the Corinth Archaeological Museum in fall 2025 on the topic of “Confinement in Corinth,” providing information to visitors about the prisoner graffiti from the late antique period as well as the remains of the buildings used as prisons. It will also look at the collection of locks and keys. The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication on key topics and a catalog of objects. We will also publish a database, discussed above, that will allow scholars and public policy experts alike to navigate the sources and promote their use in future scholarship and policy debate. We hope to provide a wide entry point for future study of ancient incarceration and to lay a framework for study of incarceration from a global perspective.

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