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## Manners of Killing and Rituals in Apulian Mafia Murders\*

**ABSTRACT:** The Apulian (South of Italy) territory saw the birth of a criminal organization called Sacra Corona Unita (SCU, United Holy Crown) which transformed the rules of traditional mafia organizations. This work examined 83 victims of the SCU between 1980 and 2000. The bodies were mainly of SCU members and in some cases, of police and law enforcement officers and other citizens caught in the crossfire. Some of these were discovered; thanks to the collaboration of “repented” SCU members who became police informers. The condition of the bodies varied in relation to the date and manner of killing. In some cases anthropometric research methods were necessary. In 73% of the cases, lesions of the head were the only marks left on the body. In conclusion, the existence of some social aspects connected with the symbolisms and membership rites that characterized the origin, evolution, and decline of the SCU is stressed.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, criminal organization, ritualism, Italian mafia, anthropometric research, ballistic investigation

Since the 1960s, the Apulian territory has been increasingly taken over by criminal organizations that have brought about profound social transformations, turning this area with simple rural roots into a point of reference and meeting point for traditional mafia organizations (Sicilian, Campanian, Calabrese).

The disappearance of single, disorganized groups of local delinquents coincided with the foundation of the Sacra Corona Unita (SCU, United Holy Crown), a criminal organization in the forefront of national and international trafficking in tobacco, drugs, illegal immigrants, and weapons, with a traditional, mystical approach to all ceremonies among members. Tribal rituals, secret codes, and theatrical punishments transformed the “onorata società” into a kind of distorted Masonic lodge. Thanks to its business–political–mafia powers, it has tentacles reaching into the central power sectors and recruits “rough” members seeking social establishment, turning them into professional criminals. This new criminal organization was founded with the name of “Sacra Corona Unita” on Christmas Day 1981 in cell number 12 of Bari prison by Pino Rogoli known as “The Elder”:

Sacra: (Holy) because its principles are absolute and incontestable,

Corona: (Crown) because its members are bound together like the beads in a rosary and the crown holds the mafia family together, and

Unita: (United) because the positions in a rosary are absolute and immutable.

Each ritual marks the passage to a higher rank on the hierarchical scale of 15 levels, each of which is characterized by rituals and symbolisms (Table 1). The ranks are:

- Founder: Giuseppe Rogoli;
- Crime: with the right to a medal and chain;
- Detached crime: with the right to a medal;
- Quarter;
- Three-Quarter;
- Half-Quarter;
- Evangelist;
- Saintist;
- Deviator;
- Member of the Camorra: with the rules, social prescriptions, and rights to booty;
- Blood Member of the Camorra;
- Named Member of the Camorra;
- Picciotto (Little Man) with all the rules and social prescriptions;
- Picciotto di sangue (blood Little Man);
- Picciotto fatto a voce (named Little Man) (Table 1, Fig. 1a–c).

A solemn oath binds each member to the others (Table 2); during the swearing-in ceremony a fellow member binds the new member’s index finger with a thread and pricks it, spattering a few drops of blood on a holy picture (generally St. Michael the Archangel), that is then burned and the ashes are cast in the air. The thread represents the indissoluble bond between the new member and his fellows, the blood bears witness that he is ready to give his life for the others, the holy image is the society itself, and the scattered ashes shows that in the same way as the picture cannot be pieced together, so the member cannot recede or fail in the obligations he has taken on (1).

Sometimes the ritual is enriched by other symbols: the pin used to prick the finger, named the armour; the picture of St. Michael the Archangel; white silk handkerchiefs symbolizing the purity of soul of the new adept; the booty consisting of a few cigarettes representing the gains of the society to be shared out fairly; a pill for committing suicide if the member betrays faith with his companions; a gun symbolizing an exemplary punishment of unfaithful members; a lemon to “heal the wounds of the wise companions”; and a puff of cotton wool that, according to the most accredited tradition, represents the Monte Bianco, considered as a holy place.

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TABLE 1—Examples of tattoos of rank found on the victims, all members of the SCU.

“mmm”: tattooed on the big toe, bearing witness to the invocation of three Spanish knights considered as the mythical founders of the mafia, camorra, and 'ndrangheta, and invoked in the swearing-in membership ceremonies by the names of “oss,” “mastross,” and “carcagnoss”
“cross, shadow, heart, and chalice”: the symbols of conferment of the second rank, the deviation
“rose”: symbol of attainment of the rank of Camorrista, tattooed on the left shoulder
“cross”: marks attainment of the rank of saintist; together with the cross, the member often wears a ring with a cross in relief; hence the expression “we kiss the ring” used by lower rank members
“two crosses entwined”: marks the highest of the ranks with the right to a medal and chain

**Materials and Methods**

This study examined 83 cadavers submitted to autopsies carried out between 1980 and 2000. All were Caucasians, largely males aged between 19 and 60 years. The bodies were mostly members of the SCU and only in some rare exceptions of police and law enforcement agency officers and other citizens who were accidentally caught in the crossfire. Some of the bodies were found only after a period of up to 3 years from the official notification to the police of a missing person, and were discovered thanks to the help and collaboration of “repented” SCU members. Scene of crime investigations were therefore required and carried out by medicolegal experts together with police officers.

Some of the bodies were found at the murder scene and others far from the site of crime and with difficult access (in a well, underground). There were 13 burned bodies, 7 found in wells, 23 inside their own car (9 of which had been burned), and the others were found in public places (abandoned farmhouses, agricultural land, streets, or public areas). As usual in mafia organizations, each member had a nickname, and ritual symbolic objects were found beside the buried bodies that referred to the member’s lifetime. For instance, the horns of a bullock were found beside the body of the son of an SCU member named the “Bull” and a mouse beside the body of a member known to be a police informer, known as the “Prostitute.” The condition of the bodies varied in relation to the date and manner of the murder: there were 51 “fresh” bodies, 13 burned bodies, 12 skeletons, and 7 adipocere bodies (Table 3).

The murder and burning of the bodies of the victims conformed to the symbolic code understood by all the members. It made explicit reference to the membership ceremonies that warn that the

TABLE 2—The oath.

I swear on the point of this bloody dagger to be faithful to this body of society made up of active, free, frank, and forthright men, and to all the rules and social prescriptions.  
 I swear to abjure father, mother, brothers, and sisters, up to the seventh generation.  
 I swear to share cent by cent, thousandth by thousandth as our elder founders shared: the Count of Ugolino, Herald of Russia, and Knight of Spain who bore a dagger in the right hand that cut and slashed skin, flesh and bone up to the last drop of blood.  
 I swear to put one foot in the grave and the other in chains to embrace the jail.

TABLE 3—State of the cadavers and place where found.

Conditions of the Bodies	Place of Finding	No. Bodies
“Fresh”	Public place (street, shop, farmhouse)	33
	Automobile	17
Burned	Automobile	9
	Agricultural land (buried)	1
	Agricultural land (surface)	3
Skeletonized	Well	5
	Agricultural land (buried)	8
Adipocere	Agricultural land (buried)	4
	Well	3

unfaithful will be burned to ashes (just like the holy picture burned during the ceremony). This technique, obviously, also has some strategic advantages because it makes the possibility of identifying the victim more unlikely and eliminates any traces left by the executors. This mode of operation is called “lupara bianca” (white lupara): “lupara” is a gun with a sawn-off barrel with a high lacerating power at short distance, “white” means a “murder with disappearance of the body.”

Autopsy was made on each cadaver, and ballistic experts examined the weapons and bullets/cartridges found at the scene of crime and in the bodies of the victims. Anthropometric analyses were necessary when the bodies were in an advanced state of decomposition (burned, skeletonized, and adipocere) to gain general information about the remains (race, age, sex, and height) and personal identification was based on examination of the teeth, scars, tattoos, old fractures, etc. (2–4).

For this purpose, requests to inspect photos, radiograms, and clinical records belonging to the suspected victim were made for



FIG. 1—(a) Symbol of attainment of the rank of Saintist (Madonna). (b) Symbol of attainment of the rank of Evangelist (Madonna garnished by flowers). (c) Symbol of attainment of the rank of Camorrista (rose).

TABLE 4—Arms used and sites of lesions.

Munitions	Total No.	Type	No. for Each Type
Munitions for single charge guns	41	7.62 × 39 (AK 47)	4
		0.32 skorpion	2
		0.32 auto	19
		0.38/0.45	16
Munitions for multiple charge guns	15		
Munitions for single and multiple charge guns	22	7.62 × 39 (AK 47)	7
		TNT	3
		0.32 auto	5
		0.38/0.45	4
		9 para	3
Absence of munitions	5		

comparison with the objective findings in the body. In the case of persons missing for more than 1 year, assessment was also made based on the compatibility between the time of disappearance and the time of death estimated on the basis of pathology-chronological parameters. The investigations had the dual aim of clarifying the method of murder and of verifying the reliability of the police informers who had indicated the burial site of the victims or the manner of "execution." The ballistic investigations also allowed classification of the number and type of the weapons used (Table 4) as well as of any affinities with ballistic findings in other mafia crimes (5).

## Results and Discussion

A total of 83 cadavers, 77 males and 6 females, was studied. They were mostly of young people aged between 21 and 40 years (Table 5). Police investigations also allowed their roles within the criminal mafia organization to be ascertained, revealing that although there were more males, they were mostly of the lowest rank whereas the females were almost always important, high-ranking members. This phenomenon is new in mafia societies, and underlines the rise of the "ex-weaker sex" in criminal organizations. It is particularly notable in this particular sociocultural context, namely, a traditionally rural, farming context (6). However, the forms of respect for women typical of the "deontological code" of the original mafia organizations (Sicilian and Calabrese) were completely lacking.

The increased number of innocent victims among the members' companions and family certainly reflects the generational change within the criminal organization and the predominance of new alliances lacking the "honorable" ideals that were at the basis of the original SCU society (7).

Firearms were used in almost all the murders, while only four fatal lesions were caused by blunt instruments and three by explosives. In more than one-third of the cases (37%), the lesions were on the head, 66 produced by firearms, and 3 by blunt instruments

TABLE 5—Distribution by age and sex of the victims of the Sacra Corona Unita.

Total Cases	Sex	Distribution by Age (years)	Number for Sex and Age
83	77 Males	<20	6
		21–30	33
		31–40	27
		>40	11
		6 Females	21–30

(sticks and stones), being the only lesions found on the whole body. The head lesions produced by firearms were mostly localized in the occipital region, typical of "executions," while in the remaining cases there were mostly multiple lesions distributed over the chest, abdomen, and limbs (8).

In three cases the lesions were caused by very powerful firearms that caused heavy damage to the vehicle (Fig. 2) and occupants, often making identification of the bodies very difficult. This was particularly true in the case of armored vans transporting values, which were attacked using explosives (trinitrotoluene) and machine guns (Skorpion, Kalashnikov).

In five cases the absence of evident bone lesions of the skeletal remains examined made it impossible to make a certain identification of the cause of death of these victims. The personal identification made by morphometric analysis of an isolated patella was a case of notable interest. In May 1992, a boss of the SCU, active in southern Italy, was reported missing. A case of "lupara bianca" was presumed. In 1995 a repented member of the criminal organization became a police informer. He started to reveal information about the activities of the criminal organization. Among other things, he revealed where the body of the "boss" was buried. The "Sacra Corona Unita" came to know of this and decided to dig up the remains to discredit the informer's reliability (if the information on the boss's burial site was incorrect, then all the other information about the criminal organization might be false). So when the police went to dig up the supposed burial site of the boss, the remains had already been removed by members of the criminal organization.

Only an isolated human left patella was found by the police investigators (9). On inspection, the patella showed irregularities and a vertical groove on the anterior surface (Fig. 3). An old fracture of the patella was presumed. Postmortem radiographs on mammography films were performed. The radiographs revealed a healed comminuted fracture with transverse and vertical fracture lines.

The boss's medical record was then requested and obtained from the hospital where, in 1989, he had undergone surgical repair of the left patella for a comminuted fracture. Postanterior left patella radiographs taken before and after the surgical treatment were



FIG. 2—The damage to the armoured vans.



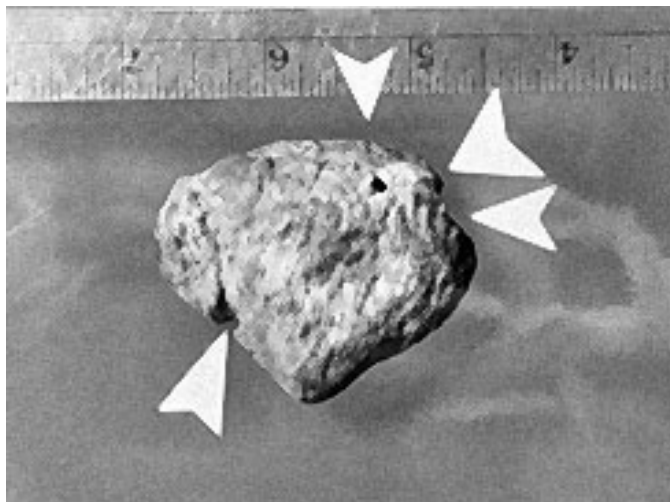


FIG. 3—Fractures on the patella.

procured. These revealed a comminuted fracture bound with a double stainless steel wire. The suture had been removed 2 years later but no medical records nor radiographs were available.

Naked eye comparison of the radiographs before and after postmortem was suggestive of identification based upon the morphological correspondence between the patella posttraumatic changes and the fracture pattern that had been documented in 1989. Due to the importance of the case, an identification based only on the subjective opinion of a posttraumatic morphological correspondence of an isolated patella could not be considered conclusive (10).

A positive identification was of great importance to give credibility to the police informer and hence all the information concerning the criminal organization activities obtained from his testimony. Therefore we decided to continue our investigation by objective methods, performing morphometric analysis by an additional software used for the purpose of data comparison created by the engineering department.

A new radiograph in which the patella was placed in the same position as the antemortem X-rays was obtained. The ante- and postmortem X-ray images were reduced to the same scale using a luminous, computer-generated grid. Then the two images thus obtained were digitized. A computer-aided morphological analysis was performed to obtain a better definition of the fracture that had occurred in the victim's lifetime (11).

Erosive and smoothing filters were used on both the images. A strong correspondence was observed (Fig. 4). The results of the morphometric analyses allowed us to obtain a sure personal identification on the basis of objective and repeatable mathematic algorithms. In this way, the positive identification of an isolated patella finally led to prosecution of all the members of a criminal mafia organization (10).

Finally, ballistic investigations of the weapons and bullets demonstrated the use of guns imported from different nations (Yugoslavia, Czech Republic, China, etc.), confirming the central role of the SCU in the international illegal arms traffic. This availability can also be explained by the concomitant opening of the war front between Croatia and Bosnia–Herzegovina, and by the strategic geographic position of Apulia as a crossroad between the Balkan countries and the Calabrese and Sicilian reference organizations. Nor should the importance of naval traffic coming from the Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, etc.) across the Adriatic, stopping over in Albanian or Italian waters, be underestimated. In

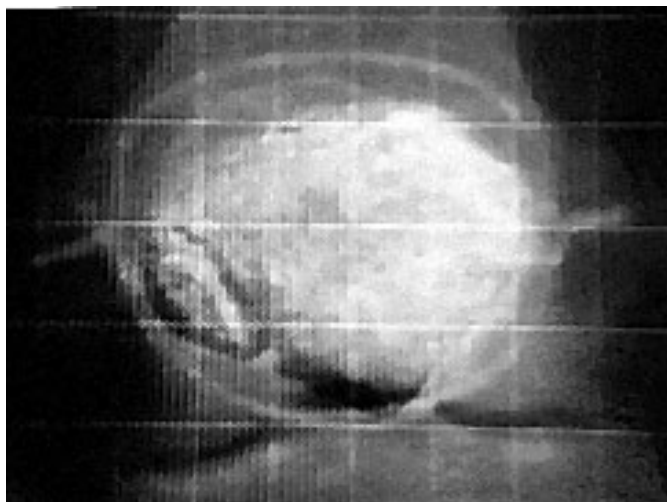


FIG. 4—Morphometric comparison between the two digitized images (ante- and postmortem X-rays) with the positioning of the patella on the corresponding bone profile points.

the context of multiple charge weapons, finally, we stress the frequent finding of hand-made modifications of guns, and especially the use of the “lupara.”

## Conclusions

At the end of the study, we were able to analyze both the strictly medicolegal aspects connected with the investigations at the scene of crime and at autopsy, and some social aspects connected with the symbolisms and membership rites that characterized the origin, evolution, and decline of this criminal association.

The ritualism associated with the SCU occasions no surprise, although it is more refined than traditional formulas. In fact, already in 1890 Alongi had underlined the importance of symbols in the early phases of development of criminal organizations: “they are surrounded by mystery, oaths, superstitious rites, arms to train, and prepare for combat against the natural enemy: law-abiding society” (12).

Instead, the ferocity of the SCU crimes and total disregard of rules among members strike the observer strongly. The frequent recourse to deception to lure the victim, the involvement of people outside the society, the instrumental use of friendships, and the manner of execution of the sentence are all new elements as compared with the mafia traditions (13,14).

As from the 1990s, in fact, a process of destruction of the criminal organization began. The community ideal at the origin of the mafia organization was replaced by “all against all” hostilities, giving rise to violent conflicts among the different clans, managed in total disrespect of all the rules of the old “onorata società.”

The unanimous recognition of the decline of the association is leading to the desertion of members who, by becoming police informers, are attempting to put an end to a criminal society as they perceived the association to lack any sort of rules, and so no longer considered it as an “honored” society.

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