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Reconsidering the ‘Obscene’: The Massa Marittima Mural

*The sight of the eyes is so fettered that things seem to be other than they are.*
– Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger (1486)

*From the beginning of Western Civilization, the penis was more than a body part. It was an idea.*
– David M. Friedman (2001)

In 2001, delegates from the region of Tuscany were invited to speak at the inauguration ceremony for the University of Leicester’s new Centre for Tuscan Studies. In the course of his presentation, Claudio Martini, President of the Region of Tuscany, addressed the cordiality between the nations of Britain and Italy pertaining to both scientific and cultural interests. In addition to these tokens of goodwill, Martini touched upon a then recently discovered wall painting from the small Tuscan town of Massa Marittima, characterizing the work as “a representation of the obscene.” From its comparatively recent discovery by Italian conservationists in late 2000, the Massa Marittima Mural (fig. 1), as it is more commonly known, has provoked its audiences to respond in kind.

Located inside one of Massa Marittima’s main public fountains, the Fonte dell’Abbondanza (fig. 2), the Mural consists of a sizeable tree that spans the rear left wall and is flanked (and framed) by the structural supports of the vault. Unquestionably, the tree’s most extraordinary attributes are the twenty-five large phalli with accompanying testicles suspended from branches in a reasonably symmetrical arrangement. Below the branches stand eight female figures together with a ninth, indiscernible body; two figures are consumed in a heated dispute over a phallus, tugging at one another’s hair. Some stand complacent in soft discussion, while another frantically combs the tree for a phallus, all under the auspices of hovering eagles curiously reminiscent of an emblem employed by a political faction.
The peculiar spectacle puzzles scholars, tourists, and residents alike, each attempting to grasp some understanding of the Mural’s heterogeneous content and general significance. George Ferzoco, chair of the Centre for Tuscan Studies at the University of Leicester, is one of the first scholars to present and publish his preliminary findings on the Mural. In response, scholars have been sluggish to take critical issue with Ferzoco’s explication of the Mural’s formal elements, disparate influences, and candid political spirit. The objective of this essay is to systematically deconstruct Ferzoco’s (previously) undisputed analysis of the Mural and its related elements in order to develop a deeper, more precise reading, while opening new lines of flight.

As a methodology, I intend to scrutinize individual facets of the Mural and to construct my argument within the logical framework of descriptive headings. It is not my aim to fully dismiss or impugn Dr. Ferzoco’s findings but merely to challenge his convictions and engage, or commence, a sustainable dialogue of critical debate to which others may enrol as they wish.

**Formal Inconsistencies**

It is effortless to dismiss that which we have not the capacity to understand as aberrant, “obscene,” or “evil.” The Massa Marittima Mural is certainly no exception. As Ferzoco asserts, the Mural is, without question, unparalleled in the history of Western art. Discovered in 2000, conservationists establish that the work was painted in fresco; measures a tremendous five metres in height by six metres in width, and embellishes the left inset of three interior walls in one of Massa Marittima’s major public fountains. For such an “obscene” representation, it resides in astonishingly close proximity to the palazzo comunale, the central cathedral, and the main public square. As a communal fountain, the Fonte was accessible to the general populace of Massa Marittima, meaning that the Mural must have been intended to be observed by young and old, male and female; viewers from any social class or position of local and regional authority.
As indicated by Ferzoco’s visual analysis of the fountain’s interior complex, the middle and right wall insets contain minimal traces of fresco painting far too damaged for restoration. In light of this discovery, questions should be raised about the rendering of the interior murals: what is the significance of the Mural being positioned on the rear left wall? In comparison to the other, more deteriorated frescos flanking it, why is the Mural so well intact? What adorned the remaining walls and would they have been affiliated with the Mural’s imagery? Several responses may be unearthed and expanded upon by evaluating particular elements of the Mural’s construction in context with its immediate surroundings.

Against a background of what would have seemed a mirror-like reflection of the water below, hints of a lavish blue-green fresco adorn the central rear wall amongst a handful of ostentatious “floral designs” framed by intricate filigree. As indicated by Ferzoco, the ornamental floral patterns allude to a small painted motif, likely of the Virgin holding a lily. The painting resides above an opening in the wall called a tympanum, designed for easy repair of the fountain’s internal structure and for the steady flow of water into the basins below. Ferzoco contends that the rendering was executed later than the fourteenth century and attributes its patronage to the Guelfs, a prominent political faction supporting the papacy: “The Virgin [is] at the centre of all created things, holding the lily that is not only her attribute but also that of the Guelfs.” This interpretation seems unlikely, as Wieruszowski’s work shows.

In her insightful essay “Art and the Commune in the Time of Dante,” Helen Wieruszowski comments on the veneration of the Virgin, stating, “Since the middle of the twelfth century, [the Virgin] had everywhere become the center of devotion, had taken on a local, even a political character in those communes which like Siena, Massa Marittima, and later Florence, had chosen her as their patron.” Wieruszowski positions Massa Marittima’s proximate association with the Virgin nearly one hundred and fifty years prior to Ferzoco’s, indicating that a Guelf faction may in fact have had nothing to do with the Mural’s patronage and that the image may have more to do with what is on the adjacent wall than with any political adoption.
Remnants of fresco on the right rear wall of the interior offer little in terms of decipherable imagery, but considering the three paintings in context (rear left, centre, right) the murals may have performed as a sequential visual narrative. Hans Belting comments on narrative frameworks in medieval secular painting, affirming that:

With secular painting, new themes entered the repertory of public painting in Italian city states: political and social visions, subjects from epic literature, and battle scenes in chronicle style. In addition, the scope of narrative changed. Allegory became its new domain. This was conveyed through fictitious narrative, that is, narrative used as a device for carrying out arguments, or narrative as exemplum to illustrate a point made by a program of an abstract or theoretical nature.11

Bearing in mind a possible narrative sequence associating the three interior rear walls and the suggested narrative in the Mural itself, the political and social consequences of the fountain, interpreted allegorically, are perplexing to say the least. Such a sentiment is compounded since little, if anything, remains on other walls.

It is highly conceivable that descriptive or didactic text accompanied painted elements, possibly enforcing political propaganda, allegorical themes, or behavioural norms, but obviously, no text remains today. Ferzoco trusts that the paintings on the central and right rear walls were painted decades later, in contrast to the Mural as the earliest instance of paint to touch plaster, and equates what little remains of the right rear wall to Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s popular secular allegorical narrative of Good and Bad Governments (fig. 3).12 Lorenzetti’s representation of so-called “bad” government addresses issues of infrastructural, moral, and political decline, whereas the initial painting of the Mural (before a second layer and its subsequent painting-over) conceivably merely touches upon the moral without any reference to degrading infrastructure or rampant political corruption until its second coat of paint to which, I believe, the symbol of the Ghibelline eagle is added.

Fig. 3. Ambrogio Lorenzetti, Allegory of Good and Bad Governments, fresco, 1328.
Furthermore, Ferzoco draws the comparison between the rear left and right walls as distinguishing “good” from “bad” governments, and takes for granted that the Mural’s subject matter is consistent with “bad” government. The comparison to Lorenzetti’s Good and Bad Governments only emphasizes the ambiguity that lurks between potential narratives.

A closer, more formal inspection of the Mural reveals a myriad of information. A finely executed tree, with a structural resemblance to a fig tree, occupies most of the Mural’s visual field. The tree’s branches support twenty-five budding phalli with testicles, quite literally signifying the fruit of the tree, juxtaposed with dark, spherical, fruit-like forms. The phalli act as a visual device corresponding to the silhouette of the wall inset (and geometrical painted brick frame), tracing a curvilinear path for the eye to follow. The tree accentuates pictorial harmony and balance by means of its trunk and lower branches; both demarcate a clear horizontal and vertical axis. The latter, delineated by the tree trunk, may offer considerable insight into the distinctive shift between the behaviour of the figures in the left and in the right sections.

Eight (and possibly nine) discernable female figures, dressed in medieval garb, stand below the tree. On the far left, a female figure in navy blue appears to be clutching a small black rope lassoed to a floating phallus; another figure, clad in yellow ochre, prods at a branch with a stick or may even be pulling the branch within her reach with a rope. To the right of this figure, two female figures, locked in ferocious combat, wrench each other’s hair. The object of their desire: a phallus situated in the foreground of an incongruous red vase. Ferzoco, alluding to the Mural’s subsequent whitewashing, assumes that the vase was executed on top of the phallus to shield it from the view of dismayed onlookers. Although the vase may have been frescoed at a later date, this does not take into account the fact that the phallus protrudes beyond the periphery of the vase form. The evidence of a black frescoed outline hanging slightly below the red vase may shed some light on this perplexing phenomenon. The black contour, in the shape of the vase above it, demonstrates that it in fact may have been the original vase to house the disputed
object. This accounts for the seemingly out-of-place red vase residing at the rear of the hands of the female figures and the phallus. But can we remain certain that the two figures are wrestling over a phallus because it looks as though they are tugging at one another’s hair? As evidenced, there is little that is certain in the work. Directing our attention to the bowed, placid arms of the figures, we come to see that the figures may not be locked in battle as previously assumed. What is more, the multiple twists of hair point to the fact that they may be wringing out their hair to be caught by the vase or basket positioned directly below. Are these two figures meant to provide an element of a grand narrative? Are we correct to assume that there may be something more at issue here than a proverbial “tug-of-war?” If the female figures are wringing their hair, does this have any connection to the water below? Do the women to their left, and all the other figures for that matter, enact their own narrative sequence to complement a larger narrative whole?

The painting of phalli occurred simultaneously with the painting of the tree, its leaves, and its cylindrical fruit-like forms, as phalli occur in fresco layers both behind and ahead of the tree branches. This gesture demonstrates an advanced two-dimensional system of perspective and a facility of fine detail rarely observed in mural works from this period.

An inanimate red object, perhaps representing a well or a pushcart, exists where the trunk of the tree meets the ground at the lower centre of the composition. In sharp contrast to the figures on the left of the tree, the figures to the right seem to be placidly conversing. The formal and psychological discrepancy of those to the right and those to the left of the tree trunk and red object is startling, suggesting these structures as a possible divider of narrative elements.

Lastly, the presence of immense black birds hovering over the female figures and beneath the branches of the tree add a dynamic sense of movement throughout the composition. One particular bird to the left of the painting hovers above a red-garbed female figure, resting the point of its tail feather precisely on top of her head. This bird is far removed in appearance from the remaining four birds that roam about in that it includes visible legs and feet (although it is highly conceivable that
there were more birds present in the image principally to the right hand side of the tree trunk). The qualities of the eagle remind one of the emblem of the Ghibelline political faction (fig. 4), prominent in Massa Marittima and throughout Italy during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The awkward inclusion of the Ghibelline eagle suggests that this component of the painting was illustrated at a different period in time for various reasons, and possibly by different artists.

**Phallus/Phalli**

The representation of phalli as quite literally the fruit of the tree is bewildering to contemporary observers of the *Mural*, but one must keep in mind that our notions of sex and sexuality are highly constructed and differ greatly from those of our predecessors.\(^{14}\) From the earliest cultural development of humankind, the phallus stood as a primary object of man’s adoration and worship.\(^{15}\) Historian Hodder M. Westropp elaborates on this issue, suggesting three fundamental phases in the relationship of the phallus to the history of humanity:

1) As an object of reverence and religious worship.
2) As a protector of power against evil influences of various kinds, and as a charm of amulet against envy and the evil eye.
3) The result of mere licentiousness and dissolute morals.\(^{16}\)

One could assume that Westropp may categorize humour, more specifically laughter, as “licentiousness and dissolute morals” but this would surely be a far stretch and inevitably not the case. What happens, in Westropp’s scheme, to spontaneous emotion, to the more surreptitious and madcap human responses to visual material and cultural artefacts; to laughter in the face of taboo? Was this the intention for the artists, patrons, and observers of the *Mural*? Did their reading of the work elicit a common visceral reaction to the whimsical imagery above as they gathered water in the basins below? When confronted with the enormous image of a tree adorned with large phalli and accompanying testicles, citizens may have
imitated a similar response to ours today – that of the silent chuckle or transparent
laughter – a rather obvious reaction to the image that should surely not, in any
forum, be so easily overlooked, and is in no way an example of moral depravity,
cultural degeneration, or the “obscene.”

Surveying particular rituals and festivals from late antiquity may perhaps
inform us of some well-known precedents for locating the Mural’s obscure phallic
subject matter. In ancient Rome, the Festival of Venus took place in the month of
April when women were purportedly at the height of fertility. The event consisted
of the physical transportation by Roman women of an immense phallus to the
Temple of Venus just outside the Quirinal. In the early medieval era, The Festival
of St. Cosmo and Damiano every September twenty-seventh in Naples included
the manufacture and sale of scores of wax phalli in a variety shapes and sizes ferried
about in baskets. Wax phalli were believed by many to contain transcendental
powers, the scope of which extended from female fertility to male cure. For a
diseased penis, most likely the result of a sexually transmitted infection, men
purchased a wax phallus as a means to repair their damaged member, whereas
women commonly acquired them to increase the probability of conception.

Ferzoco lists a number of possible influences in his analysis of the Mural;
he helpfully raises numerous points of interjection between the Mural and other
sources. Included in his list of possible precedents, Ferzoco cites the ScholB/Castel
Moos-Schulthaus in Eppan/Appiano, north-eastern Italy (but fails to mention its
connection to trade routes leading from eastern France to Massa Marittima), a bas-
relief on the Pont du Gard, and an amphitheatre in Nimes. One nagging trait of
Ferzoco’s examples is that he does not mention the significance of oral tradition and
routes of trade that may have influenced the Mural and often refer back to French
sources. Investigating French medieval manuscripts and texts could expose aspects
and influences of the Mural that Ferzoco casually dismisses as being far too different
in physical scale and audience.
THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL,
THE TREE OF LIFE, OR, THE TREE OF TABOO

The present day local Massa Marittima population acknowledge the Mural as the “tree of fertility,” a wonder ripe with generative potential, but one must be conscious that the work insinuates lines of flight beyond the obvious.22 Ferzoco does not take into account the potential correlations relating the Mural and the Christian ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ mentioned in The Book of Genesis, presumably a pervasive belief held by many Massa Marittima citizens. As it is narrated in The Bible, Adam was forbidden by God to eat the fruit from the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil.’ Later, after being tempted by a serpent, it was Eve who consumed the ‘forbidden fruit’ and thereafter was banished from the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life, along with Adam, both to carry the unremitting burden of mortality.

Ferzoco and I find in our visual scrutiny of the Mural a barely discernable “serpentine figure” to the centre-right of the trunk.23 Does this bear any correlation to the story of Adam and Eve and the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil’ in the Book of Genesis? Does the serpentine figure tempt the females below to collect the fruit of the tree? Was the serpentine figure, if it exists at all, painted simultaneously with the tree or added at a later date, marking yet another complication in the Mural’s reading? If a serpentine figure exists, the Mural may be anything but a secular allegorical narrative and may in fact point to Christian iconography.

The possibility of a symbolic (and symbiotic) fellowship between the Tree of Life and the Mural implies that they may in fact be one and the same – the phallic tree being a comparable provider of sustenance to the local population; the water in the basins below representing a proverbial “life force.” A deeper examination of Christian iconography reveals that this may not be so.

E. O. James, in his essay “The Tree of Life,” argues that “The Tree of Life was protected by a cherubim designed to prevent Adam from putting forth his hand to secure immortal life by partaking its fruit. If we assume this interpretation is correct, in the earlier myth, the tree had always been taboo…”24 ‘Taking into account James’ perceptive statement, one comes to realize that the Tree of Life may not have been
so positive in character (as alluded to earlier). The presence of phalli certainly indicates that the tree features elements of taboo.

In one of the most fascinating offerings supplied by formal investigation and as mentioned earlier, the branch structure, trunk, leaves, and appearance of buds on the tree tellingly resemble those of a fig tree (fig. 5, 6, 7). It is no secret that the fig tree has long retained sexual connotations throughout the Western world. As noted by George Ryley Scott, fig leaves comprise a lengthy tradition in Western art, employed as aprons to cover male genitals by morally conservative groups, examples of which are familiar to many. A second illustration of the sexual associations of the fig tree dates back to antiquity: Plutarch informs us that Roman women marched phalli through the streets of Rome during festivals that commemorated Priapus, a god of fertility (among other things) as part of the procession, with baskets full of figs following close behind.25

Although widely acknowledged for its nutritional and digestive worth, figs are also considered to be a potent aphrodisiac, inspiring both lust and knowledge. Taking this sexual idiosyncrasy a step further in linguistic circles, one finds that, in Latin, a fig is commonly known as a *figus*. Interestingly, *figus* also happens to be a metaphor for the female genitals. Along similar lines, in Italian, a vernacular for female genitals is *fica*.26 Through its varying vernacular associations in both Latin and Italian, we may suppose that the *Mural* is not only a ‘penis tree’ per say through its visual imagery but also a ‘vaginal tree’ through its linguistic metaphors. Fusing these fragments constitutes a play on imagery, semiotics, and language of which the patron, artist, and observer may well have been aware.

A Procession of Witches

*To the best of my knowledge, the Massa Marittima Mural is the earliest public painting of witches.* — Ferzoco27

Marking the *Massa Marittima Mural* as a depiction of witches is only one probable assertion of its meaning. Scrutinizing Ferzoco’s steadfast position may unlock clues in understanding the *Mural’s* cryptic message(s). In much of medieval
society, witches, Jews, and sodomites were undoubtedly both the most criminally prosecuted people and the most universally feared. As Michael D. Bailey explains, witches embodied “the idea of a diabolically organised and conspirational cult of maleficent sorcerers bent on harming faithful Christians and subverting the order of the Christian world.” Furthermore, as Karen Jolly observes, witchcraft was the “most abominable of all heresies, its four essential characteristics being:

1) The renunciation of the Christian faith
2) The sacrifice of unbaptized infants to Satan
3) The devotion of body and soul to evil
4) Sexual relationships with incubi [male demons].”

When we translate the aforementioned stereotypes of witches and witchcraft onto the visual domain of the Mural, the result is rather unsatisfying. The female figures in the work are reasonably peaceful (with the one exception of the two figures holding the phallus), Satan and infants are not present to commit a sacrifice, and no sexual acts with male demons occur. The nine figures in the Mural do not exude the temperament or appearance of witches in their beautifully crafted and brilliantly coloured clothing; indeed, these “witches” are more reminiscent of their antithesis, the virgin.

Augustine Thompson O.P.’s thorough description of the fashions of virgins in the medieval era is relevant when addressing the figures in the Mural. Thompson states that married women commonly veiled their hair as a sign to the opposite sex of their wedlock. In addition, Francesco Piperino, a noted dignitary from the 1300s, describes the proper dress for a virgin, asserting, “[women] wore a plain tunic, the sotano, of simple cloth. Over it, she threw a mantle of linen, the socca… Exposed hair was the mark of a virgin, a sign of availability for marriage.” The female figures in the Mural accurately fit both the modern descriptions of medieval virgins and Piperino’s contemporary report: the hair of each visible figure is conspicuously unveiled while each is garbed in simple cloth, the sotano. Ferzoco’s designation of these figures as witches glaringly contradicts the aforementioned details. If we bear in mind that these figures are not witches, what then do they
represent? The answer to this question may be revealed later in a closer inspection of medieval manuscript illumination.

**Malleus Maleficarum**

Ferzoco links the infamous late-fifteenth century treatise on witchcraft, the *Malleus Maleficarum* by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger to the *Mural* as the source of its subject matter. A single anecdote from the *Malleus* stands out for Ferzoco, who bases much of his argument on an excerpt headed: “How, as it were, [Witches] Deprive Man of his Virile Member”:

And what, then, is to be thought of those witches who in this way sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird’s nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report? (Part II. Qn. I. Ch. 7.)

Ferzoco’s speculation that the female figures in the *Mural* are witches is largely unsupported. First, I believe that the female figures in the *Mural* are not witches but possibly virgins, making Ferzoco’s link to the *Malleus* tenuous. Second, although there is a bird’s nest in the tree at the area where a female figure prods a branch with a staff (or stick), on closer inspection, the nest in fact holds bird’s eggs and not phalli. Moreover, by the *Malleus’* account, the phalli should only be in a “bird’s nest” and not distributed at varying intervals throughout the tree. Thirdly, there is no evidence of a box “where they move themselves like living members” nor even a basket for that matter. Lastly, the phalli are not feeding on “oats and corn,” but are more apt to be feeding upon *fica* (figs); this formal scrutiny serves to reinforce the *Mural’s* tenor of boundless sexuality.

The idea of the menacing “evil eye” loomed ubiquitously during the middle ages. The evil eye was based on a common belief, held since antiquity, that looks could literally kill: “…the eyes being powerful weapons that emitted rays and
which were susceptible to demonic imprints from outside.” 

Individuals who envied physical beauty or material prosperity were apt to concentrate their evil gaze upon the person in question, emitting from their eyes harmful particles that could potentially enter the body and kill in their wrath. To ward off the evil eye, many individuals sported amulets, hung bells in public and private spheres, carved phallic sculptures or painted phallic imagery. The universal formula to circumvent prospective infection: the more ridiculous the imagery, the better, as laughter thwarted the evil eye. The presence of a phallus carved into the façade of the Fonte Nuova, the original structure of the Fonte dell’Abbondanza, and phalli hanging from the tree of the Mural may have functioned to prevent the harmful forces of the evil eye, but we must not forget that the phallus not only thwarted the evil eye but doubled as a source of good luck. The presence of phallic reliefs may have been thought to ensure a plentiful and clean source of water for public consumption. We can find similar sources of luck in antiquity. An aristocratic Roman villa in Pompeii, drawn in 1814 by Sir William Gell, houses a phallus comparable, physically and symbolically, to the carved phallus on the exterior of the Fonte dell’Abbondanza. The phallus resides in the kitchen directly above the stove and is branded with the inscription “HERE DWELLS HAPPINESS” in bold face. The location of the phallus was meant to encourage the baker’s bread to rise. I do not have to explain the metaphorical connection here. The placement of phalli on the Fonte almost certainly does not symbolize fertility but may replicate a similar message to the villa at Pompeii, that of persuading water to rise and in turn, fill the basins below.

If one were to employ the Malleus as a possible source for the imagery depicted in the Mural, there is much more relevant information to analyze that may lead to subsequent interpretations. Throughout the Malleus, Kramer and Sprenger reference numerous de-phallicizing acts carried out by devils and witches. One such reference attributes to witches the removal of phalli from men; “For since devils can do greater things than this, as killing…therefore they can also truly and actually remove men’s members”. With a lack of sinister creatures in the Mural
this notion loses force, but in the following chapter, “How, as it were [Witches] Deprive Man of his Virile Member,” the authors disclose the story of a man whose penis was stolen by a witch and subsequently replaced after he strangled her and she touched his groin. In two different sections, the authors document several of the destructive abilities that witches and the devil keep at their disposal to remove phalli, throwing into question both Ferzoco and the Malleus’ relevance to the Mural:

When the devil by himself takes away a member, he does actually take it away, and it is actually restored when it has to be restored. (Part II. Qn I. Ch. 7)

…such members are never actually taken away from the body, but are only hidden by a glamour from the senses of sight and touch. It is clear, too, that those who live in grace are not so easily deluded in this way, either actively or passively, in such a manner, that is, that they seem to lose their members, or that those of others should appear to them to be missing. (Part II. Qn 2 Ch. 4)

The previous sections of text deny that phalli are physically removed from the male body and therefore, unable to be placed in the bird’s nest or throughout a tree like the one found in the Mural. Further compounding this sentiment is another assertion by the authors in a section entitled, “How Witches Impede and Prevent the Power of Procreation”:

First, when they directly prevent the erection of the member which is accommodated to fructification…Secondly, when they prevent the flow of the vital essences to the members in which resides the motive force, closing up the seminal ducts so that it does not reach the generative vessels, or so that it cannot be ejaculated, or is fruitlessly expelled. (Part II. Qn I., Ch. 6)

The text (and Ferzoco’s analysis) contradict the imagery of the Mural, as the phalli in the tree are rather noticeably erect. As the most common forms of maleficium
cause impotence, the witches supposedly performing witchcraft in the Mural should in fact cause the phalli to appear lifeless. This is most certainly not the case. Ferzoco’s analysis is further discredited by a paradox as he dates the Mural to “the last quarter of the thirteenth century or, at least, the beginning of the Trecento. [The Mural] is more likely to have been produced in the earlier years.” The Malleus first appeared in 1486, almost one hundred and fifty years after Ferzoco’s earliest dating and use of the text to identify the subject matter of the Mural.

If in fact the work possesses a connection to witches or witchcraft, scholars should direct their attention to more contemporary textual sources like Johannes Nider’s Formicarius (The Anthill). Like the Malleus, the Formicarius is also a treatise on witchcraft dated almost fifty years earlier than the Malleus to the early 1430s and may have served as a model for Kramer and Sprenger’s subject matter.

**Roman de la Rose**

First published by Guillaume de Lorries and Jean de Meun in the early 1280s, the Roman de la Rose (The Romance of the Rose) is one of the most admired and quarrelled over allegorical narratives of the medieval era. The Rose was a “bestseller” of its day, pointing to its wide influence, distribution, and general appeal. Three-hundred and ten fragmentary manuscripts of the Rose remain in existence, with over two hundred and thirty of these possessing marginal illustrations or designated spaces for them. Offering insight into medieval perceptions of sexuality and moral virtue, the Rose advocated for an enjoyment of sexual intercourse primarily through the character of La Vieille, a sexually charged personality who values the benefits of boundless love and love-making. According to the Rose, for men to neglect the “tools” with which nature supplied them was a cardinal crime, resulting in the jeopardization of the continuation of the human species. In other words, the Rose supported the notion that sex is an instinctual performance of nature. Ferzoco downplays the Rose’s proliferation throughout Europe and its influence on medieval manuscript production, citing the text as “intended for private consumption” only. But if we are to trace a possible
precedence for the Mural’s subject matter, the Rose is surely more topical than the Malleus.

Michael Camille, in his brilliant survey of marginal illuminations in medieval manuscripts, explicates some fundamental issues in manuscript design and execution. His analyses raise several interesting and consequential questions concerning the Murals’ source of subject matter and reception. One section in particular is relevant for its perception of the mindset of contemporary medieval viewers, one that may be pertinent in understanding the citizens of Massa Marittima confronting the Mural:

The men of the Middle Ages participated in two lives: the official and the carnival life. Two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing aspect, co-existed in their consciousness. This co-existence was strikingly reflected in thirteenth and fourteenth-century illuminated manuscripts…Here we find on the same page strictly pious illustrations…as well as free designs not connected with the story…

In the Mural we find both serious and laughing “aspects” in the Ghibelline eagle (serious) and the phalli as the fruit of the tree (laughing), therefore, the Mural satisfies both the appetites of those seeking a political message and of those privy to the joys of “carnival life”. We happen upon a similar experience when viewing imagery like the Rose’s “naughty nun”, for instance. In several marginal illuminations of the Rose, we find depictions of a mischievous nun who represents the illuminated embodiment of the character “La Vieille”. These marginal illuminations add a further blow to the contention that the female figures in the Mural are personifications of witches, “incubi,” or devils. On the contrary, the illuminations in the Rose complement my argument that the female figures represent virgins, or, perhaps even further, nuns.

In the Rose’s “The Discourse of La Vieille,” several images clarify the understanding of the subject matter in the Mural. The images included here are among the first known images of a female figure removing phalli from a tree. Sylvia
Huot, in *The Romance of the Rose and its Medieval Readers*, describes a particular manuscript featuring a nun on the lower left side of a bifolium collecting phalli (very similar to those in the *Mural*) and placing them in a basket. On the other side of the bifolium, another nun leads a monk by a leash, but this leash is not affixed around the monk’s neck – it is secured to his penis. In the *Mural* we see a comparable leash attached to a phallus behind the second figure from the left’s right knee (fig. 8). Ferzoco claims that this phallus is “lodged in her rear,” referencing the act of sodomy, an act considered the extreme materialization of “discord” and “heresy” in medieval Italy. But in context of its clear placement at the rear of the figure’s knees, Ferzoco’s allegation loses its bite. The relationship between the leashed phallus in the *Rose* margin and the *Mural’s* leashed phallus reveals an additional connection between the two works. This connection gains significance when considering the image of nuns gathering phalli from the phallus-yielding tree in the *Rose*.

The “Discourse of La Vieille” underscores adherence to socially constructed norms. Many high-ranking officials in medieval cities and communes were preoccupied with preserving the chastity of their women: any deviance coupled women with sinful powers and a carnality better suited to witches. Women maintained a lasting struggle between their instinctual desires and the socially administered tasks of retaining their virginity (obviously, such retention increased if the woman was a nun). Huot elaborates on this notion and places it within the context of the *Rose* and its image of female figures collecting phalli from trees:

*The Rose* addresses the regrets of those who take a vow of chastity (vv. 13937-48); this allusion probably determined the decision to use a monk and a nun as the amorous couple […] in addition to vividly expressing the rampant sexuality of La Vieille – who declares that she had always wanted ‘d’estre de touz homes amee’ [to be loved by all men]. (v. 14076).”

If one adopts Huot’s analysis for the *Mural*, we find that the figures allegedly wrestling over the phallus (Ferzoco) or the figure with a staff pulling a phallus down
from the tree symbolizes the sexual yearning for “all men”, in this case represented through ‘all phalli’.

A similar phallus tree appears towards the end of this manuscript. On fol. 160r (vv. 21283-350), we encounter two images, one of a tree with two nuns gathering phalli from the tree’s branches and a monk offering a detached phallus to a nun. Opposite the tree is a bifolium founded on the “Discourse of Genius” including a description of the “tree of life” which “porte le fruit de salut” [bears the fruit of salvation] (v. 20493). According to Huot, “The phallus tree is in effect the sign of this nostalgia for a Golden Age of unrestricted lovemaking” as envisioned through the character of La Vieille. At this important juncture, we must raise questions that consider the meaning, context, and significance of the Rose to the Mural. Are the contemporary citizens of Massa Marittima correct in stating that the tree in fact represents “fertility?” If, as Huot argues, “The marginalia provide an amusing gender-reversed visualization of the text,” does this insight posit the female figures in the Mural as overtly sexualized beings bent on unrestricted sexual practices and if so, what does this say about suppressed male fantasy and desire? Are the figures in the Mural witches, virgins, nuns, or unabashedly carnal females? How does the Mural inform us of the social constructions of women as represented in public spaces? Like the Rose, the Mural does not contain one definitive meaning, but I believe there is overwhelming evidence to support the idea that the Rose’s subject matter influenced that of the Mural.

With the proliferation of sexually explicit imagery disseminated throughout France (and Europe for that matter) in medieval manuscript illuminations like those in the Rose, it is conceivable that the oral tradition or even the physical manuscript of the Rose found its way to Eastern Italy. When considering the aforementioned French subject matter, and if in fact the Mural is founded upon the Rose’s allegorical narrative, one must ask: did the artists of the Mural have roots in France, and were they aware of the Rose (in its oral or material tradition) and its marginalia? This also raises the lingering question of who commissioned the work, and for what purpose?
Guelfs and Ghibellines

The traditional symbol of the Ghibelline eagle further disrupts the symbolic coherence of the Mural as it clouds the work with political consequence. A veritable horde of black eagles frenziedly surge about the foreground, presumably startled by the female figure aggravating branches with her staff (or rope). Salomon Trismosin rendered similar imagery, although several decades later (fig 9). Does the Ghibelline eagle act as a stamp or signature of its patron, or, does it, as according to Ferzoco, signify the expulsion of the Ghibelline party from Massa Marittima in 1267, symbolized by the frantic birds exiting the tree? As Ferzoco argues, “This mural can in no way be the product of a Ghibelline government. It must, by default, be a commission of a Guelf government intent on demonstrating allegorically the supposed effects of political and moral Ghibellinism.” But this proposition suggests that the Mural was painted simultaneously with the Ghibelline eagle, which is by all means not so. Ferzoco further adds to his hypothesis when contemplating the political objective of the Mural in a candid interview:

It’s the nature of political art that it be temporary. We have documentary evidence, written descriptions of art that was intended for a political use throughout this period. We have a strong feeling that the walls of almost all these city republics would have been liberally decorated with short-term political paintings...We know that this kind of political, or politically motivated, art was extremely common, but precisely because they are political and politically related, they didn’t last. Sooner or later the political impulse which gave rise to the creation of these images would disappear and the images would thus very soon become irrelevant.

The temporality of politically motivated imagery may be an important factor when considering why the Mural was whitewashed sometime after 1330. The uncanny positioning of the about-facing eagle leads me to believe that this element was added at a later date than the original fresco. Literally resting its behind on the woman’s head, the Chibelline eagle appears incongruous in both composition...
and subject matter, therefore, considering formal incoherencies, it would seem that a Ghibelline administration was the patron for the original fresco (comprised of female figures, the tree and its related elements, and the phalli), and a Guelf faction, around the fourth quarter of the thirteenth century, added the Ghibelline symbol to associate such morally objectionable imagery with the Ghibelline party. Considering the Guelf's allegiance to the papacy, and the spiritual, moral, and ethical mentality this involved, it can be of no surprise that they should oppose the Mural's subject matter. Wieruszowski comments on the relationship of the public message arguing, “... propaganda and public instruction […] in a population largely illiterate, had to a great extent replace the written word.” In light of Wieruszowski's observation, the Ghibelline eagle behaved as a stamp or signature in lieu of the written word so as to raise no questions as to who commissioned the fresco and who combated it. Like our water cooler of today, the Mural may have functioned as a gathering place to discuss current events, where citizens would be reminded of the decay of the Ghibelline administration.

Conclusion

Taking Ferzoco's preliminary research as a starting point, I have attempted to provide alternative lines of flight for the troublesome subject matter of the Massa Marittima Mural. Despite my scrutinizing its formal elements and aiming to survey its historical foundation, the Mural remains a cryptic entity, but perhaps now it is less so. Indeed, what remains certain are its possibilities. In attempting to thread together assorted elements found on the rear walls of the Fonte, the probability of a grand narrative is high, but we cannot jump to conclusions based on the political gravity of the work itself. Without sufficient remains, the possibility of reconstructing a grand narrative remains just that; a possibility. However, as the Mural is largely intact, we may come to some conclusions concerning its subject matter, influence(s), and intent.

The spectre of the serpent haunts the subject matter of the Mural, but because the serpent image is in such disrepair, where nothing but a mere trace outline
(if that) remains, we cannot presume that it has a connection to the allegorical 
Christian Tree of Life as elucidated in Genesis. If there was in fact a clear image of 
a serpent dangling from the branches of the tree, our perception of the Mural would 
shift from secular to religious subject matter and a whole host of other questions 
would rise in response. Instead, what remains probable is that the Mural's subject 
matter finds its source in the Roman de la Rose, a more contemporary and valid text 
than the one proposed by Ferzoco, who associates the Mural with the much later 
Malleus Maleficarum. As stated earlier, the female figures standing underneath the 
tree do not fit the fantastical descriptions of witches proposed by the authors of the 
Malleus but rather appear closer to the images of virgins (the symbolic connection 
with nuns is obvious here) as suggested by both modern and contemporary accounts. 
When we consider the marginal illuminations from the Rose, and its embodiments 
of the openly sexual character La Veille as a nun, visibly taking phalli from a tree, 
the Rose stands as the likely source of subject matter for the Mural. However, even 
if the actual, physical manuscripts and accompanying themes, images, and subject 
matter of the Rose did not make its way from France to Tuscany, descriptions by 
word-of-mouth may have done so. We should not overlook the pervasive influence 
of oral tradition. Finally, as the Ghibelline emblem stands out-of-place both 
formally and thematically, it must have been frescoed at a later date by a Guelf 
faction placing the patronage of the original fresco as the product of a Ghibelline 
administration. In painting the Ghibelline emblem alongside morally ambiguous 
imagery, along similar lines to Ferzoco’s argument, the Guelf faction reminded 
citizens of the moral corruption characteristic of previous Ghibelline rule.

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Endnotes


3 George Ferzoco, *The Massa Marittima Mural*, (Regional Council of Tuscany Central Communication Unit, 2004), 61. (My emphasis).

4 Ferzoco presented his initial research on the Massa Marittima Mural subsequent to Martini’s opening speech at the inauguration ceremony for the Centre of Tuscan Studies at the University of Leicester.

5 Ferzoco supported the shared perception of the work as “evil” in a telephone interview with Andrew Lawless, in “From Fertility Symbol to Political Propaganda: Decoding the Massa Marittima Mural,” *Three Monkeys Online*, (April, 2005), 2. <http://www.threemonkeysonline.com/als/_massa_marittima_mural_guelph_ghibelline.html>

6 I believe for reasons alluded to below, Ferzoco is correct in making this assertion. See: Ferzoco, *The Massa Marittima Mural*, 72.

7 Ibid., 83.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 84.


12 Ferzoco, 83.

13 Ibid., 77.

17 See: Campbell, 188-189. See also, Westropp, cxxviii.
18 Campbell, 196.
19 Ferzoco, 76-81.
21 Ferzoco, 79.
22 Ibid., 84.
23 Ibid., 73.
27 Ferzoco, 82.
29 Ibid.
32 See: Francesco Piperino in Thompson, 142.
33 Kramer and Sprenger, 121.
34 Ferzoco argues that the *Massa Marittima Mural* is the first known painting of witches and, in tandem with the Ghibelline eagle, is a product of Guelf propaganda against its Ghibelline rivals as the *Mural* associates witches and witchcraft with Ghibelline rule. (Ferzoco, *The Massa Marittima Mural*, 76-84.)
35 Camille, 38.
36 Clark, 108.
37 Ibid.
38 Clark, 97.
39 Kramer and Sprenger, 58 (Part I, Qn 9).
40 Ibid., 119 (Part II, Qn 1, Ch. 9).
41 Kramer and Sprenger, 122, (Part II, Qn 1, Ch. 7).
42 Ibid., 173, (Part II. Qn. 2 Ch. 4).
43 Ibid., 117-118.
44 Broedel, 140.
45 Ferzoco, 77.
46 See Bailey, 3-4.
48 Ibid., ix-xii.
50 Lorris and Meun, xx, xviii.
51 Ferzoco, 79.
53 Camille, 30.
54 Ferzoco, 77.
55 Bailey, 95-106.
57 Ibid., 297.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.

61 Ferzoco, 77.

62 Ferzoco in Lawless, 3.

63 Ferzoco, 77.

64 Wieruszowski, 23.

**Bibliography**


