Beat: Arts

Origins of the Camorra: History, Legends, and the Development of Criminal Power

A journey through myth

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USPA NEWS - The Camorra is a criminal phenomenon deeply rooted in the history of Naples, where it developed over centuries as a parallel system of power based on territorial control, intimidation and networks of exchange. This article retraces the origins and historical evolution of the Camorra, from its emergence in Bourbon prisons to its expansion into the city and the neighborhoods of nineteenth-century Naples. It examines the controversial origins of the name, the legendary story of Osso, Mastrosso and Carcagnosso, the rituals and hierarchical structure of the organization, and the complex relationship between the Camorra, society and political power. Particular attention is given to the period surrounding Italian unification, when Camorra leaders shifted their allegiance and played a role in maintaining public order during the transition from the Bourbon regime to the new Italian state. A historical journey through the origins of one of the most enduring criminal phenomena in Italian history.

What is the Camorra, and why was its name not spoken?

The word “Camorra” has a controversial history. In the past, both those who fought against this phenomenon and those who were part of it avoided using the term. Legislators feared that doing so would legitimize a criminal organization, while its members preferred to describe themselves as “nobles of the plebs”, dispensers of justice in the gaps left by the State.

The uncertain etymology of the term “Camorra”

According to Isaia Sales, “Camorra” was initially synonymous with extortion. There are several etymological hypotheses:

From the Arabic term kumar, referring to a brawl or gambling (also mentioned in the Quran).
From the “company of gamurra”, a Cagliari-based mercenary militia of the 13th century.
From the guarduna, a Spanish criminal brotherhood mentioned by Cervantes.
From the game of morra, as attested by a Bourbon decree of 1735.

Origins of the Camorra: Osso, Mastrosso and Carcagnosso

A popular legend tells of three knights, three Galician brothers — Osso, Mastrosso and Carcagnosso — who were sentenced for killing a local nobleman who had violated their sister’s honor. They founded, in the harsh prison of the island of Favignana, the three criminal organizations: the Camorra, the Mafia and the ’Ndrangheta. They also wrote their code of rules, known as the “Frjeno”. Although this is a myth, it is historically established that the Camorra emerged in Bourbon prisons during the 19th century.

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