

## From war material culture to popular heritage, and beyond. The “PSP - *cancelli di Venosa*” as paradigms of object biography theory.

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### Abstract

Using object biography and Behavioral Archaeology as main theoretical frameworks this paper will examine how the pierced steel planks (PSP), also called Marston mat, become *cancelli di Venosa* (Venosa's doors) within the social context where they happen to be located – in the immediate surroundings of Venosa airfield in this case-study – where several actions occur such as reclamation, re-crafting, functional change, etc. These objects' biography is, however, not restricted to this study area since they were used widely in the Second World War thus the paper aims to assess their geographical and chronological evolution. Furthermore, I will focus on the modern day utilization of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* and their promotion to the category of local heritage, a phenomenon often termed as heritagization, and their agency in the reproduction of war ideology and imperialistic narratives in Twentieth century popular culture.

**Keywords:** Object Biography, Material Culture, Life-Use, Second World War, War Heritage, Venosa-Italy.

### Introduction

This paper reflects on one particular element of the heritage of Venosa (Basilicata, Italy), the so-called *cancelli di Venosa* (Venosa's doors) to which I will refer as PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* in order to respect both the original denomination and the most remarkable object-use addressed here. This object is an American war material, a pierced-steel plank used in many Second World War scenarios across Europe, from the shores of Normandy in France to the Adriatic Sea, to quickly build up airfields by assembling several of these planks or to be used as ramparts for landings (i.e. in the Battle of Anzio). Pierced Steel Planks (henceforth PSP) were 10 feet long and fifteen inches wide (3.048 meters by 38 centimeters), weighing 30 kilograms. As evident from their denomination, one of the most characteristic feature of these planks was the presence of holes that contributed to strengthen the product, to reduce the overall weight for transportation as well as installation costs and to implement the adhesion of each section to the ground. R. K. Smith calculated that 6000 of these planks could be laid to create a surface 1500 meters long by 45 meters wide in a relatively short time-frame (Smith 1989: 84). After the war, these planks

have been very often reclaimed and recrafted by the civilian population in order to be utilized in their daily-life, in Venosa and neighboring cities mainly as wine cellar's doors.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the concept of object biography by presenting the ill-known case, at least to current scholarship on war heritage, of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* as an example of how objects can gain meaning throughout their interaction with society and especially beyond the concept of life-use cycle as traditionally defined by processual archaeology (Schiffer 1987, Shanks 1988, Peña 2007). Despite this processual interpretative framework being illustrative of the biography of a particular object, I aim to discuss here not only a single object's life, rather an object as a set of similar elements that undergo different biographies related to their cultural interaction. This constitutes one of the innovations of the approach put forward in this work.

The origin of such reflection is grounded in the current interest for materiality in archaeology as illustrated by the work of Olsen (2010, 2012), who addresses the importance of things in the modern world, their social importance, and the lack of attention often put into everyday realities. Since the 1980s, the genealogy of material cultural studies and the interdisciplinary debate between archaeology and social cultural anthropology have been studied in greater depth (see the introduction of the Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies by Hicks & Beaudry 2010). Hicks (2010) in particular focuses on the disentanglement of such complex epistemological genealogy, putting forward also a new mode of framing such a heated debate, to which he refers to as "the material turn". Engaging in the theoretical discussion of the processual and post-processual perspectives on the material turn as brought forward by Olsen and Hicks would stray from the main aim of this work, however, I acknowledge the influence of Olsen's scholarship on my own observation of the phenomenon described in the following pages as well as on the reflection about object's agency in shaping local heritage beyond its original use.

Gosden and Marshall (1999) have highlighted the many ways in which an object biography or life-history can be reconstructed by following the seminal ideas of Kopytoff in the already classic World Archaeology issue on The Cultural Biography of Objects (1999). One of the most inspiring statements pointed out by Gosden and Marshall is the following:

*If objects accumulate histories over time, (thus) it should be possible to reveal relationships between people and object by unravelling object histories* (Gosden & Marshall 1999: 169).

Ten years afterwards, Joy (2009) has elaborated further on the argument formulated by Gosden and Marhsall in a very illustrative synthesis of the longstanding debate on the topic of material studies. Her text provides us with the appropriate analytical tools and theoretical framework to propose an object biography approach useful to address the case of the PSP-*cancelli*. On the one hand Joy stresses the importance of

embedding more solidly single artefacts diverse geographical space within the anthropological analysis (Joy 2009: 542). On the other hand, her synthesis emphasizes indirectly the relevance of a study-case such as the one I am illustrating here, because “*archaeologists most often encounter objects at the moment they ended their social lives*” (Joy 2009: 543), which is not the case of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa*.

The object hereby discussed may lead to other transversal issues of importance for different archaeological perspectives, such as the cultural heritage of World War 2 (henceforth WW2), memory policies, the archaeology of twentieth century conflicts, and war material culture. All these issues are of remarkable relevance to present day archaeological approaches to modern conflicts (i.e. González-Ruibal et al. 2015, Schofield 2005) and as such some of them will be used to contextualize the biography of the PSP-*cancelli* in Venosa and in other war scenarios, however, due to practical constraints this paper cannot provide a comprehensive review of the entirety of topics potentially involved in the reconstruction of the life history of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa*.

### **An object biography approach**

Within the realm of archaeology, object narrative research owes much to Kopytoff's pioneering contribution (1986: 67) to disentangle the complex set of social dynamics and cultural definitions that govern the relationship between things and people. In particular, when looking at this relationship through time and space, objects show an inner potential to explain specific aspects of culture, however, such explanatory capabilities are often limited to specific “object biography” episodes, thus an object's meaning is subject to change for its cultural meaning evolves in direct association with human interaction. Such interaction has been presented as a “commercial” exchange in which the object's meaning changes as its owner's cultural background redefines the role of that object. A process defined as “commoditization” where trade and exchange play a primary role in the transformation of meaning or identity and that can be applied to any idea, object or person subject to exchange.

Thomas' statement (1996: 141): “Objects are not just a product of society, they are fundamental to it” picked up on by Joy (2009: 540) as part of her effort to promote object biography as a methodology to gain a better understanding of human-object relationship, is extremely useful to grasp the significance that people assign to the many forms of the material world, its role within society and its relevance to as carrier of cultural meaning.

Drawing most heavily from Joy's, Gosden and Marshall's scholarship, I was able to place the PSP-*cancelli* in the line of inquiry leading to the construction of their object biography. As mentioned earlier, Gosden and Marshall have put forward the many ways in which the life history of things could be constructed. According to their analysis, the object here under review can accumulate a biography in itself (Gosden & Marshall 1999: 176), yet at the same time can be a static one (Joy 2009: 541) whose identity's changeability is not related either to exchange nor – interestingly – to

ritualized aspects of society. Moreover, despite the focus here lies on the specific biography related to the interaction of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* within the cultural scenario of Venosa, these objects like many others produced within the framework of modern economies (i.e. cars as a mass-produced item reaching different cultural communities over long periods) unfold various unexpected biographical branches embodied in the creation and evolution of the popular culture of the second half of the twentieth century. Such biographical branches have very little to do with the original purpose of the *cancelli di Venosa*, yet can be considered as a vivid example of how the identity of a primary object can be reshaped against different cultural backgrounds, and as such it can materialize an episode of cultural evolution in geographical space and time.

The following sections will illustrate in detail the story of these objects by tracing back their origins and how the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* arrived to South Italy and beyond, chiefly in WW2 scenarios across Europe and Asia. I will then emphasize how these artefacts acquired an agency in the living experiences and war memories of the American soldiers involved in the conflict. I will examine how the *pierced steel planks* actually turned into *cancelli* (doors, gates) through a reclamation process set off by Italian peasants from Venosa and surrounding towns in the northern Potenza province (Basilicata) and eventually turned into a conspicuous heritage element within the landscape of Venosa, following a trajectory that could be identified as a bottom-up heritagization. Secondly, the impact of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* in post-war ideology will be explored by underlining the capabilities of these objects to create and disseminate war narratives. The last section of the paper will reinterpret these objects in the light of the above framed object biography approach.

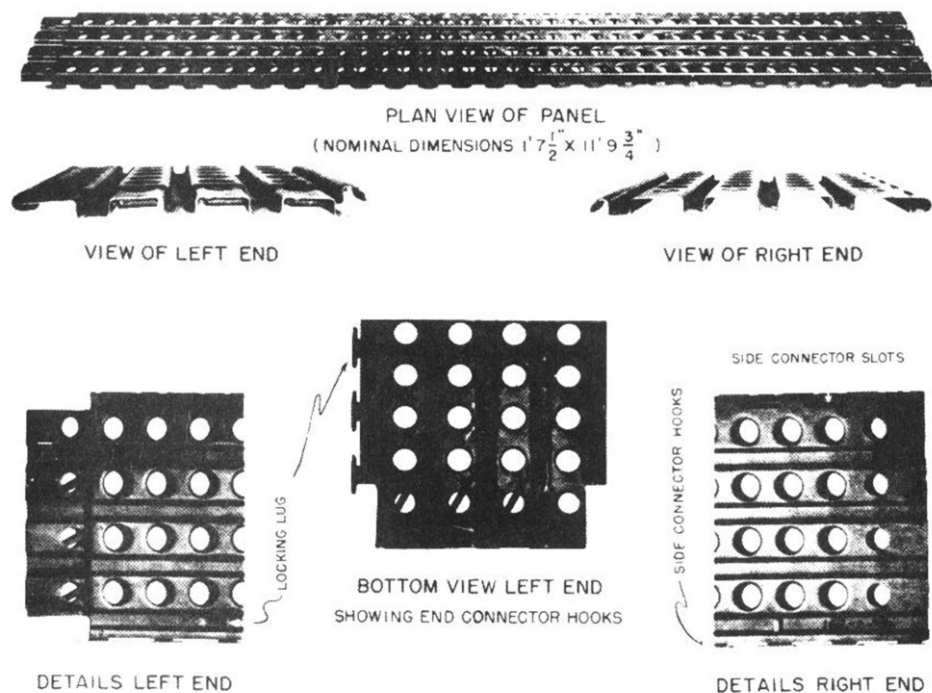


Figure 8-56a. M8 Landing Mat (ref. 9)

Figure 1. Design and technical details of a PSP or Marston mat (Currey 1984).

### **PSP-*cancelli di Venosa***

The name used in this paper, PSP- *cancelli di Venosa* (Venosa's doors or gates), stems from the observation of how that war material has been and currently still is recycled in the city and countryside of Venosa, a small town located in the north of the Potenza province in Basilicata, Italy. The deliberate choice of referring to these objects as PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* might indeed not be the most appropriate one, since it highlights one specific stage of these objects' biography, nevertheless when related to further stages, detached in space and time from the Venosa context, I will use its original denomination of pierced steel planks or its other common name, Marston mats.

Since the 1940s, the so-called PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* have attracted much interest due to their conspicuous occurrence in Venosa's landscape and do not cease to surprise the many tourists increasingly flocking to the region also after the nomination of Matera as European Capital of Culture in 2019. At any rate, visitors walking around the medieval city center of Venosa are completely unaware of the complex, multilayered nature of that noticeable element within the urban fabric of the region (Libutti & Mancino 2009), which may appear just as a simple wine-cellar door at times also combined with Roman *spolia* remains. The same phenomenon occurs also in neighboring towns such as Ginestra, Barille, Lavello, Rionero in Vulture, etc. The noticeability of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* might be interpreted as a "naïve givenness" in the words of Olsen (2012: 15), but a closer examination of their biography may contribute to the most current debate on materiality and reassess the role played by archaeology as the discipline of things. Even more remarkable the case of Venosa, where the PSP-*cancelli* appear jointly with the rich heritage of the *spolia* from the Roman and Medieval past of the city.

The presence of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* is well known by the locals who at times still remember their fathers reclaiming the metal planks from the airfield after the end of the war. However, this type of modern heritage has not entered (yet) in the hegemonic touristic narratives put forward by the regional administration of Basilicata, the Heritage authorities, supra-regional and international organisms (UNESCO, European Parliament), as in the case of the worldwide famous *Sassi di Matera* recently listed among the UNESCO heritage sites. The bottom-up heritagization process, in which communities' interplay with memory, values and local heritage is discussed in the final section of this paper. It is worth mentioning here that such processes are far from being straightforward, thus the significance and need of applying anthropological and sociological frameworks on such phenomena is pivotal to locate the roles played by the diverse stakeholders and parties involved all along.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these ideas and relevant methodologies - for example the importance of using sociograms - have been discussed at the INCIPT Institute of Heritage Sciences in Santiago de Compostela (CSIC), where the case of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* has been presented for the first time.



In order to trace the original manufacturing context, I had to look back at the pre-WW2 Waterways Experimental Station, an engineering laboratory established in 1929 by the US Army Corps of Engineers (Tiffany 1968, 1–3). Only in 1942, military operations in North Africa and South Pacific made it an urgent matter to develop materials to facilitate rapid construction of airfields components, namely runways, taxiways and hardstands for aircrafts. The PSP (whose main constitutive parts are shown in Figure 1), were designed and created in 1942-1943 following pre-existing models used by the British in Burma and India (Tiffany 1968: VI-6-7). In the next paragraph a brief explanation of the most relevant features of these planks is given. I will focus on the main features of the PSP, these sturdy metal perforated planks that were intended to serve in overseas campaigns and eventually ended up being very useful items for household activities such as wine making in a southern Italian region. This shift in use and the impact that these objects had on the community lies at the very core of this work that seeks to reflect upon the PSP biography, material agency and heritage.



Figure 2. Crew assembling PSP in Amchitka Island in Aleutians in 1943 (NARA, retrieved from <https://www.airspacemag.com>) Last access 20-03-2018.

On 15 April 1944 the 485<sup>th</sup> Bomb group, part of the 15<sup>th</sup> United States Army Air Forces (USAAF), enters the Mediterranean basin and settles in the surroundings of Venosa. The main activity of this group was to hit targets in Northern Italy, the Balkans and Central Europe (Austria and Germany) by using the B-24 heavy bomber. A major task was to build a suitable airfield in the clayish soils of the north Potenza Province, where the Allies decided to dislocate part of their air force. The

remains of the airfield built by using PSP are still visible today thanks to aerial and satellite photography (Cantoro et al., 2017). We can see how PSP was used and how it became a common background in any military setting as it was depicted in many pictures taken at the airfield, including crews and aircrafts as part of a single and indivisible unit. Many examples of what could be defined as the primary life-use (Schiffer 1987) of PSP exist in the whole European WW2 theater from Normandy to Sicily. These military product took part in the most crucial operations and acted also as core material to build up standardized airfields in Southern Italy. Examples of such standardized airfields built by USAAF engineers (Fig. 3) might be found at several locations in Northern Basilicata and Puglia, such as the Torretta airfield (near Cerignola, Puglia) built by the 461<sup>st</sup> Bombardment group, Castelluccio (451<sup>st</sup> BG), Amendola (2<sup>nd</sup> BG), Spinazzola (460<sup>th</sup> BG) or San Severo (5<sup>th</sup> Photo Recon Group) and north of Venosa, the 485<sup>th</sup> Bombardment group (part of the 55<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing together with the 460<sup>th</sup>, the 464<sup>th</sup> and the 465<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Groups). The way in which all these groups have experienced the war seems quite similar, including their interaction with the materiality of war. This is in fact the main message conveyed by the descriptions of military life published on their own online fora ([http://www.15thaf.org/49th\\_BW/461st\\_BG](http://www.15thaf.org/49th_BW/461st_BG)), a space in which veterans remember, share, and inscribe their memories and histories, some of which are related to the pierced steel planks.

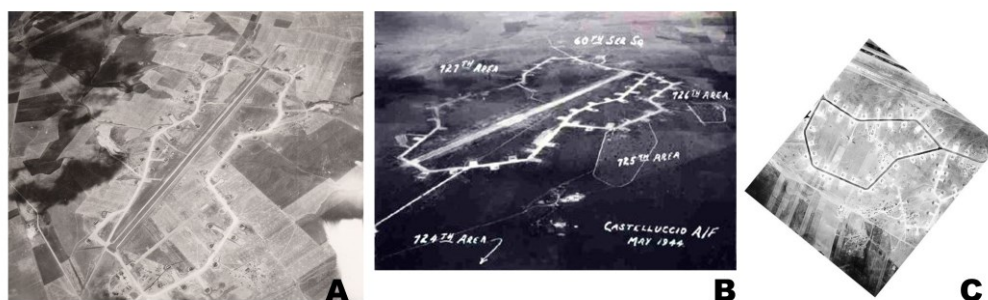


Figure 3. USAAF airfields in Puglia and Basilicata. A. Venosa airfield (Cantoro et al. 2016: 3); B. Castelluccio (retrieved from <http://451st.org>); C. Cerignola-La Torretta (retrieved from <http://www.461st.org/Torretta/Torretta.htm>) Last access 01-04-2018.

The brief personal reports and pictures taken from muddy fields enable us to understand how the PSP had an agency on how such a large group of men have experienced war. Examples from the 461<sup>st</sup> BG and the 484<sup>th</sup> BG (websites enlisted in bibliography) clearly depict how the living conditions in the airfield were affected heavily by the materiality present in the camp, especially by the PSP that were originally designed to counteract marshes and muddy flatlands but eventually were found useless (Fig. 4).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For the complete list of websites, see the reference list at the end of this contribution.



Figure 4. Group picture of the 829th Squadron, at Venosa airfield (retrieved from <http://www.485thbg.org/Photos/829th/829th.html>) Last access 01-04-2018.

The website of the 461st Bombardment Group (H) describes their airfield in Cerignola as follows:

*The facilities consisted of one large airdrome with over 100 "soft" hard stands [an individual way of calling the PSP], ample but unusable taxi strips and one gravel landing strip with a long stretch of mud holes on each end and a big hump in the middle.*

The 484<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (H) website also echoes the PSP in their war memoirs, even if those were depicted openly as not positive ones:

*The 484th BG took over farmland where wheat was once grown. Dual North and South runways were laid out and paved with crushed gravel, and later improved with pierced steel planking, a dubious improvement especially when it rained.*

These daily reports from the American airfields confirm that the original design of PSP was absolutely of impact in a muddy landscape beyond its actual use as taxiways and certainly the effect of pierce steel planking was grasped by the solders. However, they were sometimes doubtful and negative about the efficacy of the planks to adapt to the extreme terrain conditions in southern Italy. This brief episode well epitomizes what we could call as the agency of the object over the human experience.

The life on the Venosa airfield was no different, as the 485<sup>th</sup> BG website and in the descriptions brought to us by Libutti and Mancino (2009) clearly point out. PSP



were one of the most important features of any American airfield, built with a strongly standardized structure designed to mimic a sort of shared “American lifestyle” that included coffee, donuts, barbershops and a baseball practice courts. All these facilities as well as the industrial equipment represented by the pierced planks had an impact on the way American troops experiences war.

Moving on to the subsequent history of the materiality of Venosa airfield, I will now portray the moment in which the cultural context starts changing the meaning and interpretation of the PSP. To put it differently, I will attempt to identify and describe the moment in which PSP becomes *cancelli di Venosa*, whereas in other places the same object will acquire a completely different significance or maintain its identity as a war instrument.

In May 1945, the 48<sup>th</sup> BG returns to America, leaving behind its material traces on the airfield, chiefly metal shelter remains scattered on the ground. For any American soldier that metal object becomes a “footprint of Allied airpower” in the Mediterranean, usually not displayed in museum or memorials, but apparently vivid in their own military concept of war and history. A concept shaped by their own war experiences and reinforced through the memories engraved solidly in wartime photographs (Winter 2006: 80) and more recently through military associations’ websites.



Figure 5. Mosaic made with photos of PSP recrafted as cancelli, all in Venosa city center. In the center of the image a detail of the added lock (photos J. García Sánchez).

When referring to what is significant in the process of adoption of alien objects, Kopytoff states rightly that “what is relevant is not the fact they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use” (Kopytoff 1986: 67). What else

could the American war industry ever be considered in post-WW2 rural Southern Italy but an alien object? After its primary use, these pierced planks were just narrow steel boards that helped to solve the scarcity of metal from which the local population was suffering during the Fascist era due to war policies (Libutti & Mancino 2009, 17-18). Aside their possible re-use as metal sources, American war materials soon became completely disconnected from the life of rural communities in Basilicata, losing immediately their original significance. Only later on, after acquiring a secondary (civil) use, they will become a very popular part of the local heritage.

After the demise of most of the Allied airfields in southern Italy, their metal spoils were reclaimed and redistributed among the rural communities populating the region. The PSP were quickly re-crafted and rearranged in homogenous pieces to which a lock was added. The final purpose of recycling the PSP was to use them as *cancelli* or doors for wine cellars: the pierced planks in fact let the air circulate, conveniently allowing poisonous gases from winemaking to dissolve into the atmosphere (Fig. 5). In this way, an industrial American military product was recrafted into another civil household landscape element, exactly how it happened with the Roman *spolia* recovered for the construction of the medieval town. When walking around one of the many centers in Basilicata mentioned above, it is very common to encounter a suggestive combination of the Roman and Medieval periods mixed with a modern era American twist. Their material remains feature placed side by side in many buildings, in a continuous mechanism of modern re-cycling of the historical and archaeological heritage that has remarkably different implications (see Figure 7 for an example of an aesthetic combination of Roman circles from a *cloaca* lid and the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* holes).

Former PSP turned into *cancelli* appear everywhere across the streets of Venosa, in some estates in the countryside and in many other locations in the surroundings. Nevertheless, its main core appears to be the city of Venosa, where there is an ongoing process of converting such objects into local heritage, with the capability of triggering narratives about the impact of Fascism and WW2 (from Nazi occupation to USA “liberation”) on its own.

After 74 years, the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* have truly become part of the town’s urban furnishing with some people still recalling their parents collecting the metal planks from a forgotten military camp on the way from Venosa to Boreano (Cantoro et al. 2017). In this sense, it is possible to observe a change in the significance of these artefacts due to their static and durable nature in the minds of the Venosa inhabitants. In one case for instance a plank has been re-crafted and incorporated into a modern door (Fig. 6) losing its original function for closing off a wine cellar, and acquiring a new aesthetic role as a reminder of Venosa’s multilayered heritage.



Figure 6. PSP-*cancello* parts recrafted as an aesthetic component of a regular wooden door (photo J. García Sánchez).

From the very moment of their repurposing, the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* shared space with Fascist era reminiscences in the cityscape, thus they did not impose their historical narrative on modern daily life in connection with USA's roles in southern Italy. Fascist heritage is present, it is diverse but not prevailing over any other kind of local heritage. It is still visible in the *Monumento ai caduti*, in which a memorial to fallen soldiers perished in the Spanish Civil War (fighting alongside Franco's fascists rebels), and in the Gold Star memorial of Donato Briscese, perished while fighting the Soviet army at Nicolaevka (Russia) in 1942. I find two major differences among the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* (Allies heritage) and the Fascist memorials. The metal planks were reclaimed and recrafted after the abandonment

of the airfield by the Americans, while the memorials were built by the Fascist regime (1922-1943) and never removed from their original location, even during the Allies' invasion of Southern Italy, or after the defeat of Germany in 1945. More remarkably, the *cancelli* are a recrafted version of a utility feature, while Fascist monuments have been created *ex novo* and with a clear ideological intent. Hence, the object's physical materiality as a simple pierced metal plank is stressed in the case of the *cancelli*, which are pure material elements without any specific interest beyond their physical characteristics - sturdy metal boards with long sequence of drilled holes - whereas ideology is the main component (albeit non-physical) of the Fascist era monumental relics and the only reason that substantiate their existence and consumption.

As noted earlier, this process may be compared to the repurposed Roman and Medieval relics dotting many corners of modern Venosa. In both cases, a community interacts with objects from a distant or near past, mostly stone architectural material which are static by nature, and reassigns them to medieval buildings. This is the case, for example, of the *incompiuta* church or the cathedral tower.





Figure 7. PSP-cancelli di Venosa combined with Roman *spolia* (cloaca lid) in Vico Olivento 14, Venosa (photo J. García Sánchez).

Longevity and an ideal connection with the ancient history of the community - see for instance the touristic relevance attributed to the building traditionally interpreted as the house of the Latin poet *Horatius* in the center of Venosa - provides an unsuspected link between WW2 and Roman *spolia* in a very fashionable way that makes the history of the city more tangible and present to the inhabitants and passers-by alike. (Fig. 7).

### **Pierced Steel Planks after WW2 outside Venosa**

Many of these elements continued being utilized in new military operations in Korea and Vietnam, with some modifications aimed to tackle the issues related to jungle environments. In this sense, the re-shaping of the PSP occurred again in different war-scenarios, where they became part of the daily life, used as fences, building elements, etc. (Fig. 8). Unfortunately, only partial evidence is available from these contexts and there are no narratives about these objects interacting so vividly within the community's life such as in the abovementioned Venosa case-study.

One of the most interesting post-WW2 identity re-shaping phenomenon involving the *PSP-cancelli di Venosa* is their appearance into the markets led by the many commercial companies trading this type of product. Occasionally sellers stress the past war context from which the PSP stem, in an attempt to show their additional value as “heritage” items strongly connected to heroism, liberty, army and war (i.e. the German company ETP-trade.de). Once their trade and exchange takes place



among private users, PSPs acquire new meanings completely detached from their primary use and design.

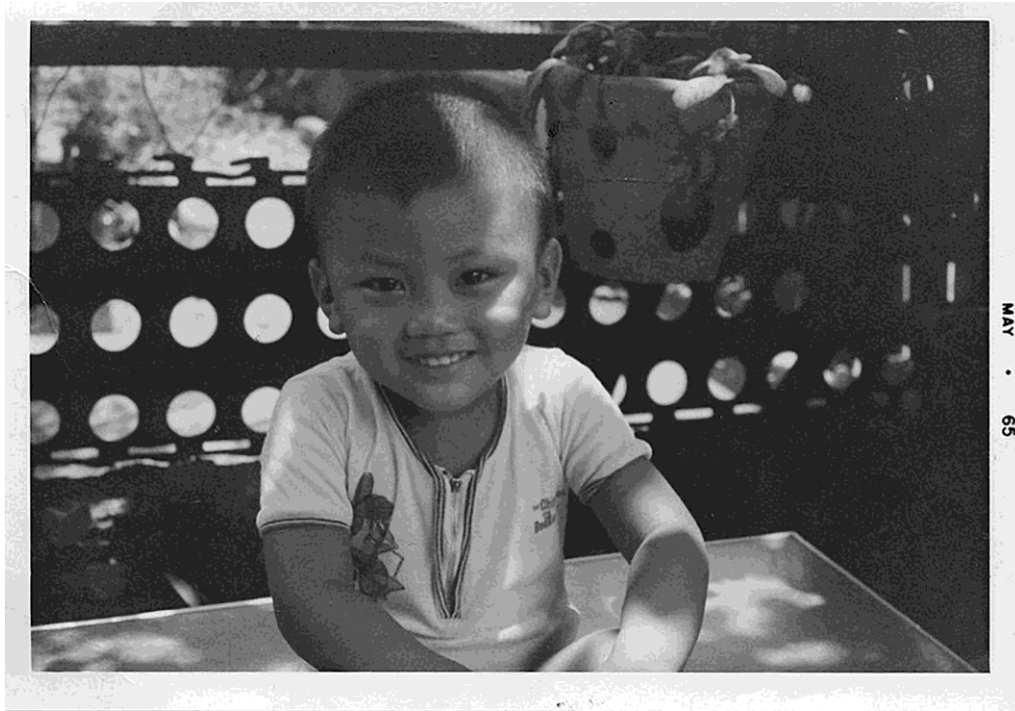


Figure 8. PSP repurposed in a housing development in Kamuning, Quezon City, near Manila on 31 May 1965 (Btotes-Wikimedia) Last access 01-04-2018.

At this moment the *cancelli* or - more appropriately- the PSP's biography splits into two branches again: on the one hand, it is possible to intercept a continuation within the PSP's life-cycle as a military objects and their post-conflict re-use. On the other, the private reinterpretation and consumption of this commodity takes many shapes and forms, for instance on the top of private vehicles (i.e. camper vans, Fig. 9) as ramparts to avoid sinking in muddy terrains or simply to pitch tents. In all these instances however, the object keeps having some of its basic design purposes.

Like many other WW2 material, *militaria*, *spolia*, etc. pierced steel planks have entered the domains of archaeological research, and especially within the broad and recent interest in conflict archaeology (Schofield 2005, 2009), which has its own methods and scopes to study war material culture from a traditional typological perspective. PSPs though have gained a position in post-war popular culture not as privileged as other objects, which became collectable items for antiquarians and amateurs or more recently subjects of archaeological research. On the contrary, they have been compared more to war junk (Seitsonen 2017) rather than to valuable war *spolia* (Herva et al., 2016).



Figure 9. Modern use of industrial produced PSP. Photo taken in Leidedorp, The Netherlands (photo J. García Sánchez).



Figure 10. PSP as part of scaled WW2 airfield reconstruction. (retrieved from <https://www.axels-modellbau-shop.de>)

PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* are directly associated to American airfields thanks to the war images engraved in our postwar memories by photographs, movies, etc., therefore they can be reproduced again in the real word with great precision. It is possible to grasp such a reconstructive approach in few different scaled models and mock-ups (Fig. 10). Not commercializing the object itself but an idealization of it implies the consumers' agreement and understanding of the original

function and purpose of that object, hence their desire to recreate and emulate that purpose. Moreover, the presence of PSPs in manga comics might as well be considered as the evidence of the influence of American narratives on Japanese depictions of war (Fig. 11) and of its materiality. The particular case of the PSP plays a major role in the artwork (Fig. 10 and Fig. 11), thus the object itself may be interpreted as the material carrier of a specific political and military postwar discourse.



Figure 11. Manga style depiction of PSP (retrieved from <https://www.ebay.com/itm/Sweet-Aviation-20-U-S-PSP-Pierced-Steel-Planking-Mat-1-144-Scale-Kit-/362054329800>) Last access 01-04-2018.

## Discussion

In this paper, I have outlined a broad theoretical framework in which objects should be studied in direct relationship with human actors. First, I referred to Schiffer's formation processes' debate and Behavioral Archaeology (Schiffer 1987, 1976) according to which considering the entire life-cycle of objects is pivotal to disentangle the dynamic interaction between people and things. Such an approach to material culture, fundamental to processual archaeology, has been further elaborated by Hicks (2010) to provide a better understanding of the concepts of objects' cultural biography as firstly theorized by Kopytoff (1986) or social life of things (Appadurai 1986), by placing them within a wider cultural context that spans from the manufacturing process, to use, discard and the latest stages of re-cycle. In our case, the a closer examination of life-use of the *PSP-cancelli di Venosa* is relevant to gain a better understanding of the industrial process of design, craft and implementation of the pierced steel planks, a process that has been developed by a highly industrialized society in a war context. Even the many different secondary uses of these perforated metal boards play a major role in illustrating the "formation process" of the *PSP-cancelli di Venosa* life biography.

As mentioned earlier, the concept of object biography formulated by Kopytoff provides us with the keys to fully explaining the story of *PSP-cancelli di Venosa*. However, his view on object trade and exchange as the main process in the object's identity change might not be entirely useful here due to the industrial nature of the PSPs. In this sense, Gosden and Marshall, as well as Joy, offer a more flexible theoretical context in which to insert our case-study, considering these aspects not correctly addressed for a processual approach. Alternative ways to approach materiality as "cognitive life of things" (Knappett 2010: 81) are not discussed within



this paper, but they certainly have a great potential to tackle aspects such as the spatial domain of cognition and provide “links that can transcend geographical space” (Knappett 2010: 88). Such a methodological framework might be useful to understand the many ways of experiencing and transforming an original pierced steel plank (human agency) and its influence on style, human experience and heritage (object agency).

Within this framework, enhanced by the current interest in material culture and object agency in archaeology as outlined by Gosden and Marshall in their introduction to the already mentioned World Archaeology volume, it is possible to extrapolate many relevant ideas in order to disentangle complex object biographies such as the case of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa*. Interpreting objects as social actors (1999, 173) studying the ways in which meanings are accumulated and transformed across places and times (1999, 172) are fundamental steps to go beyond the peculiarities of individual objects, even those manufactured industrially, and to understand objects’ biographies and their agency in past and present communities. In this light, the role and impact of archaeology in the construct of twentieth century society is central both in its theoretical and material aspects.

The PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* illustrates well how useful an object biography theoretical approach can be in tackling material culture long-life histories from a diachronic perspective. 80 years later, the origin, design, original use, experience, discard, secondary use and transformation can be traced up to the present. Over this time, several “object identities inhabited the same thing” simultaneously (Holtorf 2002: 55). Few other elements could offer such an opportunity to assess the potential of object biography to demonstrate the agency of things in all the dimensions presented so far: wartime experience, shared heritage, war reconstruction, and post-war narratives. This brief reflection upon a particular object contributes to demonstrate how important is to consider the many transformations an artefact can go through during its life-cycle. Moreover, the case study presented demonstrates how important is to consider all parallel dimensions of industrial products’ life, as clearly exemplified by the PSP planks that in Southern Italy become wine-cellar’s doors/ *cancelli*, while in other places have been transformed into another type of industrial product.

However preliminary my foray into the application of a material agency driven approach to the study of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* long-life history, such perspective has brought forward new insights to understand how objects come to be what they are (Holtorf 2002: 55) as well as highlight its implications to grasp other aspects, either archaeological or anthropological, such as the appropriation of the PSP-*cancelli di Venosa* as a new local heritage element.



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