



The sea on the skin

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Abstract

The following contribution explores the role of tattoos in the maritime community between the end of the 18th century and the middle of the 20th century. During this period, sailors, often engaged in long voyages across the world’s oceans, faced a variety of unique challenges and experiences that distinguished them from those leading more established lives on land. The nomadic lifestyle of these sailors often caused them to be marginalised by society. In this context, tattoos emerged as powerful identifiers that not only reflected personal histories, but also reinforced this marginalised group’s sense of belonging and identity through their relationship with the marine spaces. For sailors, tattoos became an identifying element, representing their achievements, experiences and connections to specific marine spaces. These marks on the skin often represented nautical themes, such as anchors, ships and mythical sea creatures, working as a visual narrative of their experiences. Each tattoo told a story, embodying life at sea, the dangers of maritime voyages and the deep connection between sailors and the vast and unpredictable marine environment. Furthermore, the tattoos acted as markers of cultural exchange and adaptation, illustrating how sailors interacted with different coastal communities and indigenous peoples during their voyages. This study aims to reflect on how tattoos can serve as a lens to understand how the frequentation of maritime spaces influenced the creation of a community. Through the analysis of this cultural practice, the study tries to uncover the meanings behind these tattoos and what they reveal about the relationship between sailors and the maritime spaces that they frequented. By exploring the geographical dimensions of tattooing culture within the maritime community, we obtain an insight into their experiences and identities, highlighting how these marks on the skin served not only as personal symbols, but also as reflections of the sailors’ links to the oceans, ports and cultures they encountered during their voyages.

Keywords: Human Geography of the Sea, Maritime Community, Tattoos, Visual Geography

1. Introduction

Jean Pierre Chevalier (1997) defined geography as a “field of knowledge” which not only includes educational geography but also any cultured or popular representation of the

world. In particular, peripheral geography (Dell’Agnese, 2023) represents a way of perceiving the relationship between humans and the environment which, albeit subconsciously, has the ability to generate environmental ideas. As well as being expressed verbally,

geographical meaning is also conveyed through the vast world of iconography. Denis Cosgrove argued that geography has always prioritised visual forms in order to relate to and describe the world (Cosgrove, 1990). The visual form has the advantage of communicating the relationship between human beings and the environment in a way that can be accessed regardless of language, and for this reason is therefore more inclusive. Cosgrove also underlines that visual images have the power to strengthen or undermine the dominant social view of the community (1990). Steven Hoelscher emphasises that as well as showing “things”, images also do “things”, alluding to their performative power (2014), to the active interpretative role not only of the creator but also of the users who, by viewing the image, give it life.

The tattoo is a form of visual communication which, located where the bodily self meets the external world, is particularly suitable for expressing personal, deeply-lived views and experiences connected with one’s identity, memory, its narration and relationship with the world (Krtalić et al., 2021).

This essay aims to examine the tattoos of sailors – and to a lesser extent those who worked in contact with them – at the height of their ubiquity between the late 1700s and the middle of last century, focusing in particular on the meanings and motives of this practice and the image of the sea and the seafaring life that was transmitted by these tattoos.

2. An ancient practice

The practice of body art has ancient origins, as demonstrated by the presence of tattoos on 96 mummies found in Arica, Chile, on a number of bodies discovered in Siberia and on the mummy known as Ötzi, discovered embedded in glacial ice in Similaun, between Italy and Austria, whose age has been placed at between 5200 and 5300 years thanks to radiocarbon dating (Deter-Wolf et al., 2016; Macchia and Nannizzi, 2019).

A widespread practice in many parts of the world which, in Greek and Roman times, took on negative connotations and was considered barbaric (Jones, 1987) also because of the custom of branding slaves with what was known

as stigma (*στιγμα*).

Monotheistic religions also banned tattooing, viewing the body as sacred and any modifications to it as going against the will of God. It may be possible to trace the origins of this prohibition to a Biblical verse in Leviticus, which forbids any marks, cuts or scarifications from being made on the skin (Calefato, 2018). The practice therefore only survived in some marginal circles, for example in the Christian world where pilgrims used tattoos to show that they had completed some of the most important pilgrimages.

The practice of tattooing, first stigmatised then largely forgotten and abandoned in Europe, returned to the public consciousness thanks to the journeys of explorers and colonialists.

In 1557 Martin Frobisher’s men captured an Inuit man, woman and child with tattoos and brought them to England as examples of a curious phenomenon and demonstration of Europeans’ superiority over the “uncivilised”¹. But it was mainly with the explorations of the 18th century that the practice spread in Europe. The diaries of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville tell of his meeting with tattooed men and women (De Bougainville, 1771, p. 254) while James Cook provided a detailed description of the tattooing technique used by native Polynesians in the Captain’s log of his voyage to the Pacific Ocean between 1768 and 1771 (2021, pp. 168-169). Some of his crew, but also Sir Joseph Banks, his scientific consultant and British aristocrat, even returned to England with tattoos. Indeed, it was among seafarers that the practice of tattooing began to spread again, first among English ship crews then among all crews in what we currently call the “West”.

So much so that in 1892 Francesco Bertè claimed that in eastern Sicily the tattoo did not have local origins, was almost exclusive to the maritime industry and that almost all old sailors got tattoos sailing with the English and the Maltese (1892, p. 207).

In fact, sailors were a nomadic community

¹ http://www.biographi.ca/fr/bio/frobisher_martin_1F.html.

which, travelling the seas, called at ports all over the world and often also changed ships depending on crew requirements, regardless of the flag being flown. John Mack claims that, even at the height of the British merchant navy's power, the number of foreign sailors on board its ships was rarely less than a third (2012, pp. 170-171). Men who were easily able to spread the practice of tattooing, in other words. Ships and their crews therefore became formidable tools of cultural diffusion.

Crews were international communities which, given their nomadism, heterogeneity and use of a technical language that was cryptic for all non-seafarers, were quite closed and marginalised, even regarded as transgressive in some circles for their difficult-to-control individuals whose use of tattoos made them immediately identifiable.

In traditional societies the tattoo was a symbol of belonging; similarly, the tattoos displayed by sailors can be regarded as demonstrations of their membership of the community that travels the sea. Jean-Louis Lenhof (2005, p. 4) argues that sailors regarded the time they spent at sea as real life and their periods on land simply as parentheses between one voyage and the next. This line of thinking helped them create a community based around elements of internal cohesion but also their exclusion by outsiders and their own self-exclusion from the same. Tattoos are one of their distinctive and identifying characteristics, even if they are not the only one, are not common to all sailors and are also worn by other individuals.

For example, because of their propensity to decorate their skin, sailors were ironically described in an early 20th century report on the port of Marseille as follows: “une peuplade non encore représentée à la Société des Nations [...] La race de ces individus n'est pas très pure. Ethnologiquement, on tâtonne sur son origine. Ces gens parlent des langues différentes et n'ont pas beaucoup de religion. Jusqu'ici, on n'a pas remarqué qu'ils fussent anthropophages. Ce sont les tatoués”² (Londres, 2023 pp. 67-68).

² “A population not yet represented at the League of Nations [...] The race of these individuals is not very pure. From an ethnological point of view, it is a

At the end of the 19th century, doctor and criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1876) associated tattoos with primitiveness, moral degradation and deviancy (Marrone and Migliore, 2018) with the widespread practice of tattooing among sailors giving society on terra firma an additional biopolitical reason to exclude them from so-called “normality” (Foucault, 1978), “treating” the practice, to use medical parlance, by excluding them from society (Minca and Proto, 2022, p. 361). As Patrizia Calefato describes, within European culture the tattoo was always a distinctive marker of groups that existed outside what was regarded as civilisation – slaves, criminals, deserters, social deviants and prisoners, for example – and were viewed as inferior or as people that straddled two worlds incapable of communicating with one another (2018, p. 89). Tattoos were also seen as vehicles or causes of illness, particularly cultural and sensual contamination in these areas of middle ground (*ibidem*). And perhaps sailors used this practice as a form of self-exclusion, binding themselves to their group identity (Agamben, 1995), and at the same time as an act of rebellion against social and biopolitical control. If representing the world means creating it, the sailor's tattoo offers an alternative vision of the world compared to the official view of the social elites, one that takes the form of geographical and, more generally, iconographic representations of a world that revolves around the sea and the experiences of those that inhabit it.

Once the tattoo acquired a certain degree of popularity among sailors, the following formula was widely accepted as a general truth: sailor = tattooed and tattooed = sailor. A stereotype that continues to be perpetrated also by mass means of communication which have contributed to the current rise in popularity of tattoos (Walzer and Sanjurjo, 2016) albeit for mainly aesthetic purposes and in the majority of cases with personal meanings that have little to do with their original significance.

struggle to identify their origins. This people speaks different languages and is not very religious. Until now it hasn't been possible to establish whether they are cannibals. They are the tattooed”.

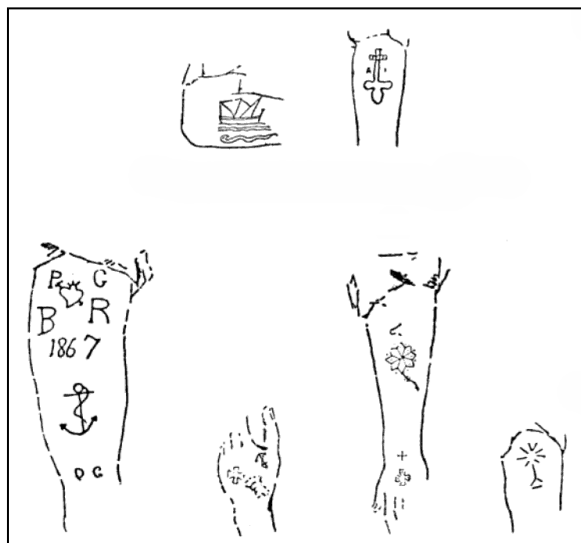


Figure 1. Reproduction of sailor tattoos by Prof. Bertè at the end of the 19th century. Source: Bertè F. *Il tatuaggio di Sicilia in rapporto alla resistenza psichica*, 1892.

3. Tattoos as visual communication

Traditional tattoos have lots of different and complex meanings. In any event, a tattoo was a symbolic form of communication whose meanings, personal and collective, were comprehensible within the individual's community. As well as externalising the character traits that individuals believed they possessed, permanent skin markings were also visible evidence of their belonging to a certain human group (adults, warriors, tribes, castes, etc.).

Undergoing a tattoo was often associated with a rite of passage, an act that marked the acquisition of a new status. In general, rites of passage involved a physically or psychologically painful test and, being invasive, traditional tattooing techniques were even more appropriate for these rituals in which such demanding and painful trials symbolised the death of the individual and their resurrection in a different form (Eliade, 2018).

Being irreversible, tattoos also marked a change from which there was no going back. Perhaps this is why Armand Hayet, one of the last commercial sailing ship captains, laments, in his book full of nostalgia for an era now in its death throes, how the practice of tattooing had

become less prevalent among younger mariners in the final years of his career in the early 1900s (1973, p. 22), a trend interpreted as a refusal to swear allegiance to the seafaring lifestyle.

The indelibility of tattoos did not however mean that they were final. In many cases, the original tattoo was joined by others relating to events in the life of the individual and to remember the places where these events took place. Important endeavours, experiences, social promotion, more children and deaths could all be communicated through the addition or supplementing of tattoos. The tattoo therefore became a person's *curriculum vitae*, communicated via their body.

Tattoos could also have religious or protective purposes; a series of inscriptions on the skin could be designed to ward off evil and invoke the preventive protection of supernatural beings.

The meaning of tattoos changed significantly from the end of the 1980s as tattooing became fashionable in the West and popular among all strata of society, establishing itself as a purely individual form of communication, an exclusively aesthetic practice (Macchia and Nannizzi, 2018) or, according to Adriano Fabris, quite simply a fleeting moment of exhibitionism, a desire for attention (Fabris, 2015).

Referring to the current trend for body art, David Le Breton (2006, p. 18) writes: "En se tatouant, en se perçant, en scarifiant son corps, le jeune en prend symboliquement possession, il le marque du sceau de son contrôle"³. A consideration that can also be applied to the sailors of the period in question and be interpreted as a subconscious form of rebellion against biopolitical control.

As we have seen, in traditional communities the tattoo was a tool of communication whose messages were understandable within a certain human group. Sailors' tattoos were also metaphors that were completely comprehensible within the seafaring community. Let's take a look at the meaning of some of them, remembering that in some cases the priority was

³ "By tattooing themselves, piercing themselves, scarifying their skin, young people take symbolic possession of their bodies, marking them with the seal of their control".

given to aesthetic value over the communicative aspect, to tattoos with multiple meanings and to personal interpretation.

4. Meanings and signifiers

Human beings. The subjects of sailors' tattoos also included human beings, sometimes men whose features made it possible to identify them as mariners, idealistic self-portraits or idealisations to which the individual in question aspired, all ways of underling their identity. More frequently the subjects were women, sometimes symbolising the sexual pleasure denied for long periods of time to those travelling at sea, other times representing loved ones left back on land – wives, lovers, mothers. In general these weren't portraits but idealistic depictions with stereotypical features that were often accompanied by a name or an indication of the woman's connection with the tattoo wearer.

Ships. For months on end, for sailors the ship represented home, work but also survival in a hostile space. Sailors had to look after their ship and the ship had to look after them. Ships also reflected their pride at being part of a community and crew. In addition, this symbol could also indicate a nomadic life, with no permanent home.

Anchors. This instrument makes it possible to keep the ship relatively stable, to resist the power of the wind and the waves that could sink it. For this reason, as well as being one of the most common sailors' tattoos, it also symbolised strength of will.

Compasses and compass roses. The compass is the instrument that makes it possible to plot a course, to find your bearings when you have no fixed points of reference. The compass and compass rose therefore symbolised the ability and the desire to find and follow your path in life.

Lighthouses. The lighthouse indicates both a danger to avoid but also a point of reference. Lighthouse images therefore symbolised guidance and help in avoiding the hazards of the sea and of life.

Animals. Animals were recurring subjects in the tattoos that decorated the bodies of sailors. Some marine animals were metaphors for the

qualities that the individual claimed to possess – sharks for strength, tenacity and invincibility, dolphins for speed and dexterity, seagulls or albatrosses for freedom. Other sea animals, like the octopus or the legendary kraken, both represented and exorcised the mysteries of the deep sea. Other animals, like pigs and roosters, were thought to offer protection. As it was believed that these animals were unable to swim, the hope was that in the case of a shipwreck God would save them and those who had their likenesses tattooed on their skin. The swallow, one of the most common symbols, carried different meanings: given that this bird returns to the same place every season to build its nest, it represented the hope of a happy return. Also, as it never travels far from the coast, it also symbolised that the wearer's journey was close to an end. The swallow was also one of the symbols used to recount the personal history of the sailor, of which we will talk about further ahead.

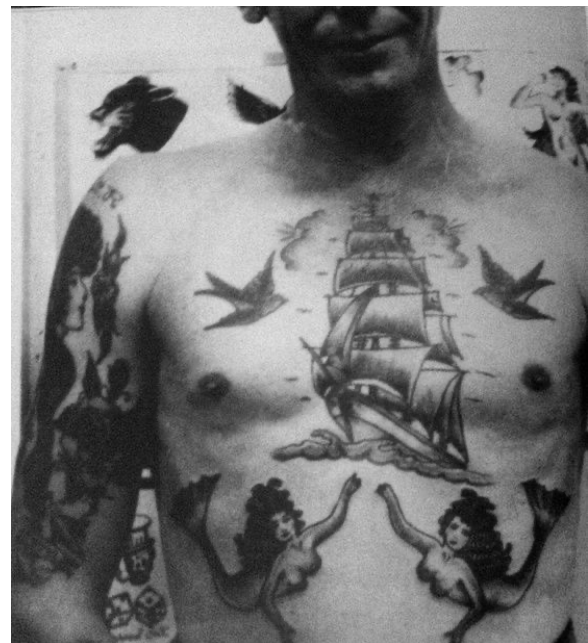


Figure 2. Maritime tattoos example. Source: <https://www.artofit.org/image-gallery/288723026121833455/here-are-the-meanings-behind-19-classic-sailor-tattoos/>.

Mermaids. The mermaid image is both captivating and a warning of danger. The excitement of the nomadic life at sea but also its

difficulties and hazards; the appeal of romantic and sexual adventures, but also the physical and moral dangers.

CV on the skin. A series of symbols could be used to communicate the personal and working history of the sailor. Crossed rifles and cannons meant they had served in the navy; a dagger that they had suffered an affront that merited revenge; a tower that they had served time in prison. As well as the meaning previously alluded to, the anchor was sometimes tattooed when a sailor first crossed the Equator while a dragon signified that they had sailed in the Far East. The swallow, which we mentioned before, was tattooed when the sailor had sailed for 5000 miles and a second swallow added when they reached 10,000 miles. Symbols that represented the sailor's CV and which in the seafaring community visibly communicated his story and value.

Religious symbols. The danger of life at sea, the disappearance of many vessels with no way of knowing the cause, fuelled superstition and unsophisticated religiousness. Religious symbols were therefore also widespread: crosses and likenesses of saints and the Virgin Mary were tattooed mainly for their presumed ability to protect the wearer, the sacredness of the representation warding off evil and keeping the sailor safe from harm.

5. Conclusions

The skin can be regarded as the external boundary of the individual, something that both delimits us and enables us to come into contact with the exterior, both physically and culturally. Using our skin as a vehicle for a message is like reaching down deep inside us and bringing something back up to the surface where it can be seen by all. In the case of sailors in the period studied in this essay, this was particularly important because it became a means of communication within a community that was largely illiterate and consisted of people with different cultures and, therefore, different languages where the use of a visual language either took the place or supplemented verbal language. With their message imprinted on their skin, the tattooed sailor aimed to communicate a specific message which could be interpreted in different ways depending on the cultural group

of the observer. So, while within the sailing fraternity the tattoo might symbolise a life story, a desire, a wish for otherworldly protection or the membership of a community, for those that had nothing to do with the sea tattoos were equated with the maritime community and therefore took on negative connotations of primitiveness, as asserted by Lombroso, and unreliability due to the nomadic nature of life at sea. The fact that the practice of tattooing took place among what were considered to be primitive populations also fuelled ethnic prejudices. The notion that these people were wild and closer to nature helped perpetuate the idea that they were far removed from the ideal of the civilised white man and, for this reason, were ignorant and stupid, characteristics that were also projected onto the individuals that carried such markings on their bodies.

Perhaps faced with this ostracization, sailors used tattoos to underline their pride at being different. With the dawning of the modern era, as the state and, more generally, society wielded biopolitical power and marginalised those not considered to be "normal", the tattoo represented a form of rebellion against political control and the social codes which demanded that the body remain pure and untarnished. In fact, it is no coincidence that the custom of tattooing was mainly prevalent among prisoners, soldiers, prostitutes and sailors.

Consideration must also be given to the image of the sea and sea life that was communicated by these visual skin representations which have much to say about this community's relationship with its surrounding environment, particularly given the lack of written accounts by the humble seafarers.

It should be underlined how, in the majority of cases, these iconographical symbols (Panofsky, 1970) do not directly depict the sea but rather objects, human figures and mythological and imaginary beings which act as metaphors for the marine world, for life at sea and for the characteristics required to live in harmony with this kingdom. What emerges is the idea of the sea as a space that demands, of those who inhabit it, strength of character, solidarity, loyalty and determination, necessary traits in order to travel it and make it one's life. A space whose depths hide many mysteries,

whose conditions can conceal fatal dangers in which “the real sailor” - an expression which within the maritime community indicates, as Joshua Slocum reminds us, an upstanding and trustworthy individual (1969, p. 125) – learns to understand themselves and their relationship with the alien space that is the sea, and at the same time is shaped by their approach to it.

Given the negative connotations that were attributed to tattoos by those that lived their lives permanently on terra firma, the sea was also tarred with the same brush, viewed as mysterious, cruel, unstable and unreliable, traits that were projected onto wearers of tattoos who, in turn, used them to express a vision of an alternative world to that of society on dry land.

In essence, two different views of the world were at play, one centred around the Earth and the positive values of physical and social stability because, as Simone Regazzoni points out, “Terra è il nome del nostro bisogno di fondamento, stabilità, misurabilità razionale, identità: è il nome di una realtà e, più precisamente è la costruzione di una realtà che cerca in ogni modo di proteggersi dall’elemento fluido, in divenire”⁴ (Regazzoni, 2022, p. 31), and another that equated the sea with possibility and “the final realm of freedom”.

The polysemicity of the tattoo, as well as the different interpretations that it was and is given by different social classes and different working and territorial spheres, can be a stimulating reflection for students, among which tattooing is a common practice. It can show how an iconic element can be interpreted in diametrically opposite ways. It can show how a symbol can refer to a space, to the meanings attributed to it and to its practice. It can make us reflect on how the visual plays an important role in the interpretation and construction of the meaning attributed to spaces. Moreover, Elisa Bignante suggests an active use of images capable of going beyond mere illustration to develop its educational potential, in fact the image, far from

representing an objective reality, is rather an object to be decoded. For this reason, studying characters, that is, to observe it, examine it, discuss it, means giving life to an interpretation of reality that was not present at the beginning of the journey: the image does not speak, it is made spoken by its audience and in this sense represents an tool that generates, not dispenses, knowledge (Bignante, 2010).

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⁴ “Earth is the name of our need for foundations, stability, rational measurability, identity: it is the name of an entity and, more precisely, the construction of an entity that seeks in any case to protect itself from the continuous flow of the fluid element”.

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