

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The name 'ndrangheta: history versus etymology

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Abstract

The article uses archival sources to critique the currently dominant etymological approach to the history of the word 'ndrangheta as used to refer to the Calabrian mafia. Scholars such as Paolo Martino and John Trumper have latched onto the word's ancient Greek origins to argue that the mafia organisation that we today call 'Ndrangheta has origins dating back many centuries. Moreover, according to Martino in particular, the flattering connotations of the word 'ndrangheta (courage, martial prowess, manliness) indicate that the 'Ndrangheta as a social phenomenon was rooted in the same positive values, and that it only later degenerated into criminality. This article proposes that the work of Martino and Trumper represents a largely evidence-free extension of etymology into the field of history. Analysing the latest archival evidence about the word from criminal trials conducted in the 1920s and early 1930s, and setting it in the context of current historiography and criminology on the 'Ndrangheta, the article argues that two conclusions about the history of the word are likely: that the use of 'ndrangheta as a name for the Calabrian mafia began at around the time it first appeared in the documentary sources; that the first to adopt it were *mafiosi* themselves.

Keywords: 'ndrangheta; mafia; organized crime; etymology

Introduction: from mafia to 'ndrangheta

Salvatore Lupu begins his *Storia della mafia* by addressing the ambiguities of the word mafia:

Mafia is a word that, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, appears continually in day-to-day political and journalistic polemics, in judicial investigations, in the press, in fictional narrative, in the work of anthropologists, sociologists, jurists, economists and historians. However, it is a polysemic term that refers to facts that vary in different contexts and circumstances, and according to the intentions and interests of the people using it. It is difficult to isolate a homogeneous theme, typology or a succession of phenomena that we can group under the heading 'mafia'; and it is equally difficult to escape the impression that the word owes its success precisely to the latitude exercised in its use, and the indeterminacy of its fields of application. (Lupu 1996, 11)¹

As Lupu goes on to explain, this confusion surrounding the word is an integral part of the historical context in which the criminal organisation itself emerges:

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Returning to the *original* use of the term might seem like a good antidote to the concept's ambiguities. However, in the primordial soup of post-Risorgimento Sicily when the word *mafia* began to be used, these ambiguities were even more vast. (Lupo 1996, 13)

So to understand the Sicilian mafia's origins, there is no alternative for the historian but to plunge into a confusion of sources and discourses. Moreover, as Lupo goes on to argue, etymology does not offer a way to side-step this rule:

It is as if the protagonists of this historical moment, when faced with the word's rapid success, thought that they could solve the mystery of the concept by finding an *original* and truer meaning. In reality, these various philological options already prefigure interpretations of the word, and how people interpreted the word closely matched what position they took up in political debate. (Lupo 1996, 16)

In all too many cases since that time, etymology has been used in an attempt to short-circuit historical research: as if the origins of words must inevitably lead us to the origins of the things they denote. Frequently, moreover, etymology locates those origins in a distant past, thus clashing with one of the underlying principles of contemporary research into the history of the mafias: that mafia organisations are *modern* phenomena, inconceivable without defining characteristics of the modern state, notably the pretention to monopolise the legitimate use of violence through institutions such as the police, the courts, and the prison system.

My intention in this essay is to apply some of Lupo's lessons to the history of the word '*ndrangheta*'.² At first glance '*ndrangheta*' is marked by an obvious contrast with the Sicilian case: whereas, as Lupo points out, *mafia* is a polysemous word, '*ndrangheta*' is a word with many synonyms. Indeed '*ndrangheta*' is only the most recent of many other names for organised crime in Calabria to gain currency. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, names such as *picciotteria*, *camorra*, *mafia*, '*ndrina*', *famiglia Montalbano*, *fibbia*, and *Onorata Società* were used. Each of these words deserves an analysis of its own in the Calabrian context.³ This proliferation of names is partly a sign of the marginal place Calabria, and Calabrian organised crime, have occupied in public and academic debate by comparison with the Sicilian mafia and Neapolitan *camorra*. It took a long time for the light of publicity to fix the terminological flux. The name '*ndrangheta*' entered the national public domain for the first time in 1955, during the police crackdown known as the Marzano operation, when a number of newspapers mentioned it – notably *Corriere della Sera* with an editorial by Corrado Alvaro.⁴ During the ensuing 50 years, the history of the word, at least beyond the criminal sphere, is reasonably linear: it tracks the growing volume of public debate about organised crime of Calabrian origin. Moreover, the name's greater public visibility does seem to have led to its more generalised use *within* the Calabrian mafia. Famously, during the Montalto summit of 1969 which was raided by police, the boss of Taurianova, Giuseppe Zappia, made an appeal for unity: 'There's no Mico Tripodo's '*Ndrangheta*' here. There's no 'Ntoni Macri's '*Ndrangheta*' or Peppe Nirta's '*Ndrangheta* ... we need to all be united. Those who want to stay should stay, and the ones who don't should go.'⁵ There is no evidence that members of the Calabrian mafia used the word so nonchalantly as the name for the whole criminal fraternity before this time. All the same, the widespread adoption of the name took time. Only at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century did that process reach completion when national and international institutions endowed '*ndrangheta*' with official status as the name for the Calabrian mafia.⁶

I don't intend to tell the story of that name since 1955 here. Rather, my interest is in an earlier period in the word's relationship to organised crime – one before it became used

widely – because it is in relation to that earlier period that etymology has entered the debate, bringing with it a number of confusions analogous to those highlighted by Lupo in relation to Sicily.

To this day, by far the most frequently cited authority on the origins of the word *'ndrangheta*, and on its relationship to the longer history of organised crime in Calabria, is linguist Paolo Martino, who dedicated two articles to the issue, written a decade apart: 'Storia della parola *'ndrànghita*' (1978) and 'Per la storia della *'Ndrànghita*' (1988). The two articles set out a single thesis.⁷

I do not have the competence to challenge the core component of Martino's analysis, according to which *'ndrangheta* has Greek origins: *'ἀνδράγαθος* meant "a noble courageous man, worthy of respect owing to his own abilities" and *'ἀνδραγαθέω* "to distinguish oneself through acts of valour, to carry out actions worth of glory and honour" (Martino 1988, 11).⁸ Most experts in etymology regard this lineage as broadly secure: *'ndrangheta* does seem to be one of the many *grecismi lessicali* of southern Calabria – the linguistic legacy of both Magna Graecia and of the Byzantine Empire.

Two tasks concern me in what follows. The first, to highlight some strains and inconsistencies in Martino's argument when it comes to creating an interface between etymology and history. And second, to suggest a different basis for that interface, drawing on archival sources that were unknown to Martino. In very recent years, a cluster of documents from the 1920s and 1930s have provided us with the earliest known uses of the word *'ndrangheta* to mean criminal association. The most likely implications of these documents, as I will go on to argue, are the following: 1) that the meaning of 'criminal association' was first attached to the word *'ndrangheta* by the criminal association itself; and 2) that the *'Ndrangheta* probably began to use that name in the aftermath of the Great War.

Paolo Martino's *grecismo lessicale*

Having established the Greek etymology of the word *'ndrangheta*, Martino traces a historical trajectory in which the essentially *positive* connotations of 'a noble and venerable ancient Greek word' come, at some point in time that Martino does not define clearly, to be attached to the Calabrian Honoured Society, whose members obey a code of honour that finds a reflection in the word's positive meanings (Martino 1983, 124). Later, negative associations enter the scene, 'obliterating' or heavily qualifying the original positive connotations. This semantic reversal is, according to Martino, the result of external pressures applied on the Honoured Society by the Italian state and by modern society more generally. Martino blames various different scenarios and moments for this change: a 'criminalisation' process at the hands of the post-unification Italian state leading to the 'moral isolation' of the Honoured Society which would subsequently be embraced and emphasised by the society itself (Martino 1983, 124–125); a 'debasing' of the word in the postwar period when the old Honoured Society underwent a 'metamorphosis' into a 'pure and simple criminal association' of young men in thrall to the 'systems of American gangsterism' (Martino 1983, 138); and finally the influence of politics and television in their metaphorical use of the term (Martino 1983, 138, note; Martino 1988, 10).

According to Martino the venerable 'positive' connotations of the word did not die out entirely after this transformation. Instead, they survive among what he euphemistically calls, 'certain sectors of Calabrian culture, according to which the *'ndrangheta* should not be abhorred, or even feared, by the weak, the defenceless, and the "honest", but only by the "detestable" [*infami*]' (Martino 1988, 23).

Martino's thesis about the history of the *'Ndrangheta* does not survive an encounter with the most recent historical research.⁹ While the word *'ndrangheta* may have ancient origins, there is no evidence whatsoever to hint at the existence of the criminal

organisation that today goes by that name before the nineteenth century. Moreover, the archival and other documentation that allows us to reconstruct the history of the Calabrian mafia since the nineteenth century does not portray anything remotely resembling Martino's good, old Honoured Society. The Honoured Society, as we know it from the trials conducted between c. 1880 and c. 1940, engaged in the activities typical of gangster crime in its day: extortion, theft, cattle-rustling, smuggling, murder, labour-racketeering, violence against people and property, the exploitation of prostitution, the infiltration of the state apparatus for corrupt purposes, and so on. Very many of its members in the earliest trials in the 1880s and 1890s had already spent time in prison when they became involved in mafia-like activities – so many as to support the theory that what we now call the 'Ndrangheta emerged from the prisons, and was a projection into the outside society of a criminal network that was well-established within the carceral system far beyond Calabria (Dickie 2011, 165–208). Be that as it may, there was certainly no simple 'criminalisation' of a traditional and honourable brotherhood by an uncomprehending Italian state in the way Martino imagines, and no 'gangsterisation' of the Calabrian mafia by external influences. Nor, indeed, was the media to blame for changing the meaning of the word 'ndrangheta, not least because the early history of the Calabrian mafia hardly registered at all in the national press.

Of course, Martino was writing at a time when there was a comparative lack of historical research into Calabrian organised crime, and also at a time when a dominant anthropological paradigm tended to see mafia organisations as the products of a backward or traditional society. But even allowing for these limits in the intellectual culture of his time, Martino's case has a couple of important weaknesses when it comes to maintaining key aspects of the particular link he postulates between the word 'ndrangheta and the history of organised crime in Calabria. I will highlight two such weaknesses in particular because it is precisely these that are exposed by the new sources.

The first problem that Martino faces derives from the fact that, as he points out, between the late sixteenth century and at least the early twentieth century, his 'noble and venerable ancient Greek word' vanishes entirely from the known historical records. Martino attributes this absence primarily to the fact that other words such as mafia, camorra, and *omertà* came to occupy the semantic space that otherwise 'ndrangheta would have rightfully claimed (Martino 1988, 54–55). This argument is teleological. As Martino points out there is no mention whatsoever of the term 'ndrangheta to mean 'Honoured Society', or anything like it, in any published source before the German glottologist Gerhard Rohlfs recorded it in his *Dizionario dialettale delle tre Calabrie* of 1934 (1932–1939). Nothing in Martino's history of the word before that point in time suggests that it was in any way predestined to make the huge semantic leap from 'manliness', 'courage' and 'martial prowess' to 'criminal association' or even 'Honoured Society'.

A second problem is that Martino feels the need to defend his thesis from one other threat to its coherence that derives from Gerhard Rohlfs. Here is the famous 1934 entry in the *Dizionario dialettale delle tre Calabrie*: "ndranghita "malavita, mafia" (gergo).¹⁰ It is important to stress here that Rohlfs finds that the equivalence 'ndrangheta = mafia, which he was the first to record, is not valid across the whole of Calabrian dialect at that time, but is instead part of a specific jargon (*gergo*) – a criminal jargon. Martino rejects this assertion by Rohlfs, and indeed regards it as having prevented the German linguist from researching the etymology of the word. Yet Martino's argument is again not coherent here: a word whose meaning is shifted by being incorporated into a specific jargon needs more than etymology to explain it. 'Ndrangheta could quite easily have both Greek roots of the kind Martino identifies, and take on a new meaning in the framework of a specific jargon. Underworld slang, as recorded in many documentary and published sources in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is full of radical

transformations in meaning when compared to common usage, a good number of them recorded in the pages of Rohlfs' *Dizionario dialettale*. The etymology of the word 'specchiu' (mirror) tells us nothing about its use by criminals to mean 'razor', for example; the etymology of the word 'ricotta' tells us nothing about criminals' use of the word 'ricottaru' (ricotta-maker) to mean a pimp. It is, of course, easy to imagine how the everyday meaning of these words might lend itself to such an adaptation in meaning by criminals.

Martino goes on to argue that 'ndrangheta = mafia cannot be part of any underworld jargon that derives from 'purposes rooted in cryptolalia' – that is, from the criminals' intention to disguise their affairs by adopting a jargon others could not understand. Martino explains his reasoning as follows:

All of this is alien to the mentality of the men of the 'ndrangheta, whose 'code' ... is a complex of organisational, penal and ritual norms. That code may reveal some affinities with the statutes of confraternities and Medieval chivalric orders, or with secret societies like Freemasonry. (Martino 1988, 20)

In other words, according to Martino, whereas ordinary criminals try to conceal their meanings behind unfamiliar uses of words, 'ndranghetisti have a rich culture which combines rules and rituals comparable to those of the Freemasons. Now, Martino is very probably on the right historical track when he refers to the affinities between sworn criminal brotherhoods like the Sicilian and Calabrian mafias on the one hand, and the world of Masonic or para-Masonic societies on the other (Dickie 2020, 121–150). However, he misses a very obvious point: one of the things that drew Sicilian and Calabrian criminals towards a quasi-Masonic culture in the first place was precisely secrecy, and the 'purposes rooted in cryptolalia' of Masonic rituals and jargon.

The weaknesses in Martino's argument seem designed to deny him one simple and yet powerful explanatory option: members of the Calabrian Honoured Society are criminals, who think and talk like criminals, and have always been such. Furthermore, without those weaknesses, Martino's etymological research points towards an obvious hypothesis – so obvious, in fact, that some of his readers have assumed that it is what he is proposing, when in reality he does no such thing.¹¹ That hypothesis is that the word 'ndrangheta maintained the same broad area of meanings associated with its Greek origins (manliness, courage, martial prowess, or whatever) until it was radically adapted by the Calabrian Honoured Society for its own communicative purposes. In the first instance, the word was useful precisely because it did not obviously mean criminal association. At the same time, to a mafia whose power was rooted in violence, the most widely accepted meanings of the word, along with its clear sense of belonging to the local culture of this Greek-influenced area, and perhaps even its aura of antiquity, would bring benefits in terms of *esprit de corps*, legitimacy, and mystique – according to the audience being addressed.

As I will go on to explain, historical research carried out since Martino was writing has demonstrated that just such an explanation is by far the most plausible.

On foot across Calabria: Gerhard Rohlfs

The academic influence of Martino's essays on the history and etymology of the word 'ndrangheta has overshadowed the contribution made to this very specific question by the German linguist Gerhard Rohlfs (1892–1986).¹² A passionate glossologist from his school days, Rohlfs first became interested in Greco-Calabrian and in the Greek influence on Calabrian dialects more generally when he suspended his studies at the University of Berlin to serve in the Great War, and had the chance to speak to a great number of

Italian prisoners of war. In 1921, despite having been badly gassed on the Somme, he set off to Calabria to carry out primary research for his PhD. Between April and October of that year, travelling on foot, he visited towns and remote mountain villages in the provinces of Cosenza, Crotona, Catanzaro and Vibo Valentia, and reached into centres such as Rosarno and Bagnara in the province of Reggio Calabria. Over the next decade, he would show himself to be just as intrepid, walking the entire length of the region from Pollino to Capo Pellaro, and relying mostly on the hospitality of the locals, who ranged from notables to peasants (Gemelli 1990, 74). Although his exact routes are not documented in most cases, it is clear that he visited many of the towns and villages that were, and are, strongholds of the Calabrian mafia (Gemelli 1990, 78). He married Ruth Helbig in 1926, and invited her to share in the hardships of his research, as a result of which she nearly died of dysentery in Briatico (Gemelli 1990, 97). No Calabrian or Italian linguist can have ever matched either Rohlfs' near-obsessive dedication to his research or his first-hand knowledge of dialectal variants across the region. If someone *had* been as adventurous as Rohlfs in some earlier period, then we might have an idea of whether and where the word *'ndrangheta*, with whatever meaning, was in circulation before Rohlfs' famous dictionary definition. His huge *Dizionario dialettale delle tre Calabrie. Con note etimologiche e un'introduzione sulla storia dei dialetti calabresi* was published in *dispense* in Germany and Italy from 1932. My contention is that the succinct definition which I have already cited, "*ndrànghita* "malavita, mafia" (gergo)", placed in the context of historical documents of its time, actually tells us more about the word's relationship to organised crime than do Martino's two articles.

For now, it is worth making one observation. Rohlfs *only* records the meaning 'malavita, mafia' for the term, and none of Martino's cherished 'noble and venerable' connotations. What makes these absences more noteworthy is that Rohlfs, as Alessandro De Angelis has recently argued, was a Hellenophile who had a tendency to over-emphasise the ancient Greek origins of Calabrian dialect (De Angelis 2021). Such words of Greek origin would have supported the German glossologist's prejudices. There is no obvious reason for him to have excluded any 'noble and venerable' connotations, of the word, if he had encountered them.

Thus if, as seems highly likely, the Calabrian mafia picked up *'ndrangheta* from the Greek-influenced dialects of the area, we cannot be sure where exactly that happened, how widely known and understood the word was when it happened, and what exactly it was taken to mean before it was adopted as the name for a criminal association. Nor can we exclude the hypothesis that any subsequent spread of the word in Calabrian dialects was partly due to the success of *'ndrangheta* as a name for the deeply rooted mafia of the region. Mafia organisations like the Sicilian mafia have an *ideology*, and it is both a cause and a consequence of their hold over a society that they are successful in promulgating that ideology (Lupo 2015, 161–183). In the case of the *'Ndrangheta*, the word's association with masculinity and honourable violence provided a neat encapsulation of one dimension of that ideology.

Ndrangata / Dranghita: inintelligibile ai profani

I now turn away from etymology and towards history, and specifically towards the historical sources I mentioned in the introduction to this essay.

Any analysis of the various names that have been attached to mafia organisations, and more generally of communications by, within and about mafias, must negotiate a very complex field.¹³ Mafias themselves communicate with different audiences in ways that are shaped by a balance of competing exigencies related to their criminal aims: 1) the need to conceal their affairs from the authorities and, indeed, from other gangs or

elements within the same gang – Martino’s ‘purposes rooted in cryptolalia’, in other words; 2) the need to intimidate, and to spread a fearsome reputation; 3) the need for collective solidarity, and for loyalty in the face of pressure from the authorities; 4) the need to attract potential affiliates; 5) the bosses’ need to legitimate their power over the rank-and-file affiliates; 6) the affiliates’ need to legitimate their activities in the eyes of their families and hangers-on; and 7), because mafia organisations hold a degree of power within society, the need to create legitimacy in the eyes of at least part of the world that surrounds them. These influences, in different combinations, shape not just a mafia organisation’s vocabulary, but also such things as its initiation rituals, its religiosity, its peculiar notions of honour, and indeed the myths that purport to tell of its ancient origins (the Beati Paoli, for example, or the fable of a good old Honoured Society of once upon a time).

Nor do the complexities end there. The communications *within* the mafia underworld have always engaged in a dialogue with the upper world. One thinks of the entertainment industry: famously, the first printed traces of the word *mafiosi* appear in the title of an 1863 play; as is well known, the sartorial, musical and attitudinal stylemes of the characters in Coppola’s *The Godfather* have often been borrowed by real *mafiosi*. Everything becomes more complex still in scenarios where the words of *mafiosi* are used by the police and judiciary, in the form of confessions and phone-taps, for example. Interpreting what *mafiosi* mean and why they mean it is never a simple art.

All of the sources I analyse below were generated by the wave of repression, driven by the new Fascist regime, that saw many criminal groups brought to trial across southern Calabria from 1927.¹⁴ These Calabrian operations were carried out, therefore, with some delay compared to the major operations against the Sicilian mafia led by the ‘Iron Prefect’ Cesare Mori in 1926–7, and against the camorra in the countryside around Aversa led by Major Vincenzo Anceschi after December 1926. More strikingly, unlike these anti-mafia and anti-camorra campaigns, the Calabrian operations received almost no attention in the regime’s propaganda: contrary to what Martino would have us believe, the media had very little to do with what was happening to the word *ndrangheta* in this period. Lest anyone assume that the evidence in these trials was somehow manufactured by the regime, it should be pointed out that the picture of criminal power in Calabria that they reveal was broadly typical of trials conducted since the 1880s across the province of Reggio Calabria and beyond. The sheer number of continuities in geography, nomenclature, organisational structure, jargon, rituals and methods between the earliest Calabrian mafia groups, the groups targeted during the Fascist era, and the evidence gathered in our time make it abundantly clear that we are dealing with the *same* criminal fraternity which we now usually refer to as the *’Ndrangheta*.

In January 1929, the criminal court in Gerace Marina staged a trial against a criminal association based in Ardore, in the Locride – a prosecution based on a report by the *Carabinieri* of Gerace Marina drafted in May of the previous year.¹⁵ The association used intimidation and extortion to infiltrate every aspect of social and economic life: ‘there was not a single sale or purchase, or even a marriage, that could be contracted without paying a bribe to the affiliates’. Nicola Proto, one of the chiefs of the association, had the nickname ‘the Prefect’. According to the *Carabinieri*, Proto, ‘a genuine “hustler” type, found a way to place himself alongside senior functionaries, chiefs of the Fascist National Party, and even magistrates, as if he were seeking out sources of light to remove the shadows’. Having arrived in Ardore before the war so poor that he had to ask for a loan of five lire to dress his soup with oil, ‘he had reached a highly respectable and substantial level of property’.

For my purposes here, one thing stands out from the evidence submitted to the court: one witness testified that, back in 1920 or 1921, on the beach at Ardore, a criminal had

advised him to enter the *setta ndrangata* (the 'ndrangheta sect). This represents, as far as I am aware, the earliest moment in history when we have documented evidence of the use of the equivalence 'ndrangheta (or similar transcriptions) = criminal association. In short, this is the earliest known evidence of the 'Ndrangheta becoming known by its contemporary name.

The context is worth noting: a member of the Honoured Society was using it during an attempt to convince an outsider to join. For much of its early history, the Calabrian Honoured Society often pressurised young men into joining its ranks, offering them the chance to assert themselves against their rivals and enemies in return for a joining fee that was quite substantial by the standards of the peasantry, and must have represented a useful source of income for the bosses; sometimes this membership drive amounted to a form of extortion or pyramid scheme. This recruitment policy was one reason – beyond the fundamental fact of the inherent, violent instability of the criminal underworld – why the early 'Ndrangheta proved so poor at keeping its secrets: the police had a reasonably regular supply of bullied insiders willing to give evidence. The early 'Ndrangheta was also heavily involved in exploiting prostitution, and the authorities proved very willing to use the evidence of the women they exploited against them in court. A great many trials had been conducted against the Honoured Society of Calabria since the 1880s, and a great many of them relied on the evidence of insiders, or *pentiti* as they are known today. In none of these cases was the name 'Ndrangheta mentioned, to the best of my knowledge. By the 1920s, many among the *Carabinieri* and the *magistrature* had a pre-existing knowledge of the Honoured Society. My point here is that, if the word 'ndrangheta had been in widespread use within the Honoured Society *before* this date (1920–1), then the authorities would probably not have taken all that long to find out about it.

It may also be significant here that 'ndrangheta is used in this document in an adjectival function: in the phrase, *setta ndrangata*, the noun *setta* carries the burden of linking the word to the criminal association. Thus, if this phrase was accurately reported, it may be that it represents a very rare example of 'ndrangheta's being used in Martino's 'positive' sense ('manliness', and so on) – the first recorded use since the late sixteenth century. The phrase may even give us a snapshot of the process by which the word made the semantic leap into being a synonym for mafia.

The next use of the term that we know of dates from a few years later: it appears in a 36-page 'statute of the underworld' (*statuto della malavita*) which was handed to the *Carabinieri* in 1927 by an affiliate by the name of Domenico Doldo from Gallico (between Reggio and Villa S. Giovanni). The Doldo / Gallico statute would be used in evidence in a trial in 1931, which itself was part of a cluster of trials against closely interrelated criminal groups, with over three hundred members, in the same part of Calabria. The statute consists mostly of the kind of rules for the conduct of sect business that are familiar from many other sources, and it also includes a lexicon of underworld jargon of a kind familiar since at least the late nineteenth century.¹⁶ However, in this case there is a novelty among the list of words: *dranghita* is given as a synonym for *la Società*.¹⁷

I think it is significant that *dranghita* does not appear in most of the statute: the organisation is referred to throughout as *la Società*. This implies that *dranghita* was relatively unknown, at least among those new to the Honoured Society, and therefore needed explanation in a lexicon. It may also imply that the word was reserved for particular circumstances, plausibly when the affiliates needed to talk about their association without being understood by outsiders, or even (as in the example from Ardore above) when they wanted to give a tempting glimpse of the organisation's secret inner life to prospective affiliates.

Our job in interpreting the appearance of the word in this statute would be considerably easier if the authorities who cited it had made any comment about it, but they did not: they were, after all, policemen and judges rather than glossologists.

A third piece of evidence from the same period supports the fundamental conclusion that the word emerged from within the context of a specifically criminal jargon. A 1934 trial brought to justice a branch of the Honoured Society that had been operating in Armo di Gallina, in the hilly hinterland to the south-east of the city of Reggio Calabria, since at least 1912 and, according to one witness, since 1870. After a wave of arrests in 1932, criminal solidarity began to weaken and the local *Maresciallo* of the *Carabinieri* was able to gain inside knowledge of the association. In a report dated 3 March 1932, he testified that ‘the association had the name *’ndrangata*, a jargon of its own that was unintelligible to the uninitiated.’¹⁸ The word *’ndrangheta*, in other words, had what Martino would call ‘purposes rooted in cryptolalia’ (Martino 1988, 20).

As was the case in Sicily, the Fascist regime embarked on a second wave of repression against organised crime in the late 1930s – one that, even in Sicily, received no publicity whatsoever, given that Mussolini had triumphantly declared final victory over the mafia following the first wave of repression in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In Calabria, this second wave generated another piece of evidence pertinent to my theme. In 1937, a case was built against some 50 members of the Honoured Society in Fiumara and other villages in the Aspromonte foothills above Villa San Giovanni. As a preface to his ruling, the prosecuting magistrate embarked on what constitutes a kind of beginners’ introduction to the Calabrian Honoured Society, including the following reflection:

In short, this wicked society, known by the generic name ‘Honoured Society’, consists of various territorially based groups (in *comuni*, settlements and city quarters) that take the name of *’ndrine*. This term has an obscure etymology that could be related to the Greek word *’andria* (ἀνδρεία) which means ‘virility, courage’.¹⁹

The word *’ndrina* was not new to the authorities in 1937: it had been widely used before to mean a single cell of the Honoured Society and sometimes, by extension, to mean the whole fraternity. It is of course striking that, like the etymologist Paolo Martino four decades later, the prosecutor in this case speculates that some of the Honoured Society’s jargon may have Greek origins. It is not my concern here to judge whether this proposed etymology is correct. If it is, it could suggest another route for philological research into the word of *’ndrangheta*.²⁰ My point here is rather that, in contrast with Martino, the prosecutor was not persuaded by the noble antiquity of the word’s origins to shift his opinion on the ‘wicked society’, or indeed to conclude that there was anything very old about the Calabrian mafia.

Of course, one must be cautious about over-interpreting these sources. We cannot definitively exclude the possibility that the authorities of the 1920s and 1930s were *discovering* a name that had been in use within the criminal association for some time. More sources may yet surface from the archives to re-frame our interpretation. Nevertheless, these documents, the first three of them coming directly or indirectly from sources inside the criminal brotherhood, suggest two main conclusions.

First, it seems likely that the word, as a name for the Honoured Society, was new. Second, the word *’ndrangheta* was used within the Honoured Society, but was not the most widely accepted name – as its rarity, in the vast documentation generated by Fascism’s operations against Calabrian organised crime, would alone suggest. We can perhaps conclude that the name was chosen because it was arcane, and thus part of a criminal code. In short, it was ‘unintelligible to the uninitiated’ and had ‘purposes rooted in cryptolalia’.

The chronological coincidence between glossologist Gerhard Rohlfs' extraordinary expeditions to Calabria in the years following the Great War, and the investigations which led to the appearance of the word *'ndrangheta* in the trial documents like those I have just analysed, is striking. So where did Rohlfs get his information? He established a wide friendship network in the region. He interviewed numberless peasants and shepherds, developing a new way of recording dialects to record his findings. So it is tempting to imagine that he spoke to someone within inside knowledge of the Honoured Society, or to someone informed about the recent investigations and trials, perhaps even to the *Carabinieri* or to magistrates. However, we have no evidence to support this hypothesis. Instead, the first edition of the *Dizionario dialettale delle tre Calabrie* notes only one source for the word: a manuscript on *Vocaboli gergali di Reggio Calabria e provincia* provided to Rohlfs by one Francesco Geraci. So far, my efforts to track down this manuscript and/or firmly identify its author have not borne any fruit.²¹ But a glance at the other words in the *Dizionario dialettale* that Rohlfs attributes to the same manuscript is nonetheless instructive. By my calculation, there are 68 such words, of which at least 49 relate to the criminal underworld. Twenty of those words, including *drànghita*, appear in the lexicon of the Doldo / Gallico statute I discussed above. None of which should be taken to indicate that Francesco Geraci, the author of the manuscript, had read the Doldo / Gallico statute. For one thing, Rohlfs records a different spelling. More fundamentally, neither Geraci nor Rohlfs needed access to special sources for their insights into the underworld lexicon. Nor did they need special insights to conclude that *'ndrangheta*, at least when used with the meaning 'criminal association', took on a distinct meaning as part of a specific underworld jargon. It could well be, for example, that when Francesco Geraci wrote his manuscript he was drawing partly on widely available books and articles on criminal slang, particularly relating to the Neapolitan camorra – a criminal fraternity from which the *'Ndrangheta* inherited many cultural elements (Dickie 2011, 171–177). Many of the words from Geraci's manuscript included in Rohlfs are not specifically Calabrian: one thinks of terms like *cantare* (give evidence to the police), *cascittuni* (spy), *chiaru* (wine), *nfami* (detestable traitor), *ngang* or *nganga* (gang), *paranza* (crew), *ricottaru* (pimp), *sgarru* (insulting act) and *specchiu* (razor).²²

The Byzantine hypothesis in the work of John Trumper

Recently the glottologist John Trumper, in the *Cambridge History of the Romance Languages*, has refined Martino's claims while remaining within the same analytical paradigm.²³ Trumper slightly modifies Martino's etymology for *'ndrangheta*, which he sees as passing through a Byzantine Greek verb meaning 'successfully carry out military actions' and through the Calabrian verb *'ndranghitijàri*, whose primary meaning is 'to behave courageously' (Trumper 2010, 678). Much more questionable, from a historical point of view, are the conclusions Trumper draws from his etymology. Whereas Martino inserted an imaginary honourable Honoured Society into his historical narrative in order to explain the transition from good to bad meanings of the word, Trumper makes the following claim:

This criminal organization may well, then, exist from the period between Calabria's belonging to the Byzantine Empire and the coming of the Normans and the formation of the first Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, 1050–1100 being the relevant period. (Trumper 2010, 678)

Trumper gives the most detailed version of this thesis in an interview from 2011. His words, connected by interpolations from his interviewer, are those in inverted commas here:

'We move from the weak Byzantine government to the weak Norman government. The Angevin government would be just as fragile. These lands existed for centuries in a manifest situation of institutional weakness.' At that point in time something new happens: 'The men who previously performed the function of judges, and made up the court, the tribunal – men who knew how to read and write, who were known as the *andragatoi* – became the new leaders. *Andrangata* is a deverbal deriving from the verb *andragatizen*. If we translate *andragatizen* morpheme-by-morpheme from Greek into Calabrian, we get *andragatiàri*. Usually, in the dialect of Reggio Calabria, the velar consonant G disappears. Hence *aguglia* becomes *aùghia*. *Gatta* is *iatta*. To keep the velar GH they put an N in front. Thus *andragatiàri* becomes *andrangatiàri*. This proves that the word has origins in Reggio. The Reggio dialect verb *andrangatiàri* is a deverbal noun: "those who exercise the power to *andragatiàri*". ... This means that the 'ndrangheta was born, not only as a word but as an institution, long before the camorra which emerges between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.' (Dionesalvi 2011)

Given the evidence and argument that I have set out here, there seems little point in engaging at length with this argument. Suffice it to say that Trumper has a huge amount to do before it can be taken seriously. He needs to engage in a systematic comparison of these medieval *andragatoi* with the Calabrian mafia – a comparison that goes far beyond the word itself, an approximate geographical location, and vague references to the 'power vacuums' that he claims unite the two. He also needs to demonstrate the lines of historical continuity linking two such disparate historical phenomena in such wildly different contexts. Without proof deriving from such an analysis, *andragatoi*, while it may have a clear etymology, has no concrete historical link to the meaning 'criminal association'.

Trumper's argument also depends a great deal on the Calabrian verb 'ndranghitjàri, 'whose primary meaning is "to behave courageously", [and whose] secondary one [is] "to be a member of the 'Ndrànghita"' (Trumper 2010, 678). But without much more research on the history of this word, he is still vulnerable to the hypothesis that, rather than being the *origin* of 'ndrangheta = criminal association, this verb may be a consequence of it instead. Trumper also needs to show how his historical-etymological narrative is compatible with his observations on the modern use of the word 'ndrangheta, 'which is linked to the need – more of an external than an internal need – to be specific and precise when designating the criminal association' (Trumper et al., 2014, Kindle edition, loc. 3073). All of this would, of course, involve Trumper in studying the vast academic literature on mafia crime, none of which he gives any indication of having engaged with. In his case, as in Martino's, the distance between etymology and history remains very large indeed.

Conclusion

Research into the terminology of Italy's criminal fraternities is not a matter of interest only to scholars. For example, the claim that those fraternities have ancient origins – a claim which etymology has frequently been used to support – is often part of the mafias' legitimating ideologies which have long had an extensive reach in the culture at large. A further example of the relevance of such research comes from the field of translation studies, and specifically from the work of translation scholars whose focus is the difficulties associated with translating Italian anti-mafia legislation into other languages and legal systems. This is a task that is particularly urgent and important given the international spread of the 'Ndrangheta. Names are a key part of the dense skein of discourses about and within mafia organisations that I referred to above in my discussion of mafia communications. The term 'cultureme' has been used to refer to this rich and culturally

specific field: translation scholar David Katan defines a cultureme as ‘formalized, socially and juridically embedded phenomena that exist in a particular form or function in only one of the two cultures being compared’.²⁴ Translators have little hope of communicating the force of words tied into Italy’s mafia culturemes unless they start on solid ground, with as full an appreciation as possible of the meaning and history of those words.

As I have argued above, the historical evidence suggests that the Calabrian mafia may have adopted the name *’ndrangheta* into its jargon not long before it was discovered by the *Carabinieri* in the late 1920s, and not long before it first appeared in print in Rohlfs’s dictionary. Given the inevitably fragmentary nature of the evidence available at this stage, it would not be worth investing too much effort in speculating about *why* the Calabrian mafia might have adopted the name at that time. Alas, none of the trial documents analysed here suggest any potential routes towards an explanation.

Nevertheless, it is likely to be very significant that the *’Ndrangheta* is, and always has been, a huge producer of names, rituals, rules and terminology. It has a structure that is far more complex than the Sicilian mafia. For example, the Sicilian mafia only has one initiation ritual, one symbolic threshold between outsiders and affiliates. Correspondingly, Sicilian bosses tend to be very careful about who gets to cross that threshold, investing a great deal of time and effort in monitoring potential recruits. The *’Ndrangheta*, by contrast, has an ascending ladder of such thresholds, known as *doti* (gifts), each of them marked by a ritual far more complicated than *Cosa Nostra*’s. The *’Ndrangheta* even has an initiation ritual for the infant sons of bosses. Thus the selection of affiliates occurs, not just before entry, but *within* the organisation, and continues for as long as it takes an *’ndranghetista* to climb the ladder of *doti*, each of which offers access to more secrets and more authority. The decades since the 1970s have seen an accelerating inflation of *doti*, with more and more of them being created as the *’Ndrangheta*’s top echelons have sought to manage the delicate matter of who gets access to their precious relational capital among influential non-affiliates (entrepreneurs, professionals, administrators, politicians and the like; Dickie 2013, 184–195). The implication of all this is that the symbolic hyperactivity of the *’Ndrangheta* is bound to produce new secret names, words and codes – especially since the authorities keep cracking the old ones, as they have done since the nineteenth century. The adoption of the name *’Ndrangheta* may just be one innovation among many others – and so it would be unwise at this stage to bet too much on the idea that its arrival signals some major transformation of the criminal organisation itself.

That said, the name *’Ndrangheta* does arrive on the scene more-or-less simultaneously with three other important developments which I will mention briefly in the hope that, in the future, more evidence might emerge that would enable us to establish whether or not there is a connection. The first is the discovery of a centralised coordinating body for the whole Honoured Society in the province of Reggio Calabria known as the Gran Criminale (Truzzolillo 2013b, 203–232). The second is the gradual abandonment of pimping as a source of income. The third is the adoption of *’Ndrangheta* endogamy in the form of dynastic marriage strategies within criminal clans (Dickie 2016).

’Ndrangheta seems to have a history that is more linear than the name *Cosa Nostra*, which became the official name for the Sicilian mafia as a result of Tommaso Buscetta’s confessions to Giovanni Falcone and the subsequent success of the Palermo maxi-trial (1986–7). Before that time, ‘*Cosa Nostra*’ was subject to a curious interplay between anglophone and italo-phone gangsters, as between the underworld and the upperworld – an interplay that involved a degree of misunderstanding on many sides (Lupo 2015, 126–130). Nevertheless, the adoption of an official name for the Sicilian mafia was a positive sign: it marked an increased public awareness of the problem, and a greater unity of interpretative perspective and investigative focus on the part of the Italian state. *Cosa Nostra* has suffered the consequences of those welcome developments. Whenever the name *’ndrangheta* was adopted, and

for whatever reason, it is to be hoped that its entry into common usage heralds a comparable decline in the Calabrian mafia's fortunes.

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Notes

1. All translations author's own unless stated.
2. For simplicity, throughout the article, I have folded the various variants in the spelling of this word into the most widely used form – except in cases where a specific variant in spelling is cited by another author.
3. There are some scattered observations on these various names in Trumper et al. (2014).
4. Alvaro 1955. Alvaro had referred to the word earlier, in a diary entry from 1953 (Alvaro 1959, 126). Before Alvaro's editorial, the word *'ndrangheta* had appeared as a name for the Calabrian mafia in newspapers including *La Stampa* (1955, 3) and *L'Unità* (1955, 2). On the Marzano operation, see for example Dickie (2013, 79–91).
5. *La mafia a Montalto. Sentenza 2 ottobre del Tribunale di Locri* 1971, 27.
6. The first report by the *Commissione d'inchiesta sul fenomeno delle mafie e sulle altre associazioni criminali*, which is explicitly dedicated to the *'Ndrangheta*, dates from 2008: *Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sul fenomeno della criminalità organizzata mafiosa o similare*, 20 febbraio 2008. Only with article 6 of decree law 4/2/2010 was the word *'ndrangheta* officially included in the provisions of law 416-bis. Decreto legge 4/2/2010.
7. See Martino 1983. The first essay is most frequently consulted in this 1983 anthology which also has a new preface. The second article (Martino 1988) supplements the first in the following ways: by new evidence from the late sixteenth century; by a response to criticisms of the first article; and by an attempt to integrate the history of the word *'ndrangheta* with other literature on the history of the terms *Camorra*, *Mafia*, and *omertà*.
8. See also Martino 1983, 130.
9. The most substantial works on the early history of the *'Ndrangheta* include: Cingari 1976, 1983, 1988; Cicone 1992; Mannino 1997; Dickie 2011.
10. The definitions quoted by Martino are in the second volume of Rohlf's (1934, 86), quoted in Martino 1983, 126.
11. See, for example, the fascinating study by the anthropologist Pipyrou (2016, 140), where she takes Martino to mean that 'the Calabrian mafia worked on a kind of historical/religious constructivism of its own, capitalizing on techniques of identity construction similar to nationalism. It could be argued that the adoption of the name *'Ndrangheta* was a conscious effort to tap into the powerful cultural capital of a glorious past.'
12. The most detailed biographical and bibliographical information on Rohlf is in Gemelli 1990.
13. The most sustained treatment of this issue is Gambetta 2011. More recently, Anna Sergi (2022) has suggested that the term 'cultureme' is useful in encapsulating the cultural and lexical field created by, around and about mafia organisations (9–10). For more on mafia culturemes in relation to the specific question of translation, see the conclusion to this article.
14. The most complete list of early mentions of the word *'ndrangheta* that I know of is Trumper et al. 2014, in the chapter entitled 'La lingua della mala e i codici: *'ndrangheta*'. However, there are questions over the reliability of the sources cited. For the context of the most of these documents, see Truzzolillo 2013a.
15. *Sentenza del Tribunale penale di Gerace Marina*, 29/1/1929, Palermo + 49. I have consulted the extensive extracts from this document published in Parisi 2021, chapter 6.
16. For a comprehensive list of the many *'Ndrangheta* statutes that have been confiscated by the authorities since the first one in 1888, see Maddalon 2020.
17. Archivio di Stato di Messina (hereafter ASME), Corte di Assise di Reggio Calabria, Processo Surace Pasquale + 84, 1931, b. 308. This document is among many analysed by Fabio Truzzolillo (2013a), in an outstanding thesis whose publication is long overdue. The whole statute is reproduced in an appendix to the thesis.
18. ASME, CassRC, *Sentenza Cama Quinto + 23*, 27 aprile 1934, b. 443.
19. ASME, CassRC, *Sentenza istruttoria contro Abrami Giuseppe + 51*, 25 maggio 1938.
20. Martino remains open-minded on the origins of the word *'ndrina*, suggesting that it could be related either to *'ndrangheta*, or to the word *malandrino* (criminal). One other possibility is that it derives from the name for the room in some prisons reserved for members of criminal associations, the *malandrino*.
21. One candidate is the lawyer and, later, Socialist parliamentary Deputy of the late 1940s of this name, but his archive contains no trace of any such manuscript.
22. According to Trumper et al. 2014, the word was mentioned in the *Gazzetta di Messina e delle Calabrie* in 1932, in the form *ndrangata*. If this is true, then Geraci's manuscript may have drawn also on the press. However, having

consulted this newspaper, I was unable to find the reference. In response to a communication from the author, neither Nicaso nor Trumper could provide a reference for this citation, and both attributed it to the other. In the absence of any substantiation, this reference must be regarded as unreliable.

23. Trumper 2010. Trumper has elaborated his thinking in a number of other places: Trumper 2009; Dionesalvi 2011; Trumper et al. 2014.

24. Katan 2008. For the implications of mafia culturemes for legal translation see Whithorn 2014 and Caliendo and Scotto di Carlo 2019.

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Italian summary

L'articolo utilizza fonti d'archivio recentemente scoperte degli anni '20 e '30 per criticare l'approccio etimologico attualmente dominante alla storia della parola 'ndrangheta usata come nome della mafia calabrese. Secondo studiosi come Paolo Martino e, più recentemente, John Trumper, le origini della parola nel greco antico forniscono la prova che l'organizzazione criminale che oggi chiamiamo 'ndrangheta avrebbe origini che risalgono a molti secoli fa. Inoltre, secondo Martino in particolare, le connotazioni lusinghiere della parola 'ndrangheta (coraggio, valore marziale, virilità) indicano che la 'ndrangheta come fenomeno sociale si radica originariamente negli stessi valori positivi, e che solo in una fase successiva degenera in qualcosa di puramente criminale. In questa sede si sostiene invece che il lavoro di Martino e Trumper rappresenta un'estensione in gran parte priva di prove dell'etimologia nel campo della storia. Analizzando fonti d'archivio provenienti dai processi penali condotti negli anni '20 e nei primi anni '30, e inquadrando nel contesto dello stato attuale della storiografia e della criminologia in materia di 'ndrangheta, l'articolo sostiene che, mentre ulteriori fonti potrebbero sempre offrire nuove prospettive, sono probabili due conclusioni: che l'uso della 'ndrangheta come nome per la mafia calabrese sia iniziato all'incirca nel periodo in cui è apparso per la prima volta nelle fonti documentarie; che i primi ad adottarla siano i mafiosi stessi.