

DESCENT INTO
THE REALM OF THE DEAD



ON LOCATION



PHOTO: SISTEMA MUSEALE DI ATENEIO DELL'UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PALERMO

The late Gothic Palazzo Chiaramonte in Palermo, also called *Lo Steri* (Fortress Palace), has a checkered history. Today, it is one of Palermo's tourist attractions, but in the 17th and 18th centuries, the *Steri* was the center of the Inquisition court and its dark prisons. People of various religions and backgrounds were imprisoned here; the walls of the cells are covered with drawings – multiple layers of them in some cases. Depictions of religious scenes are accompanied by maps and inscriptions in many languages, including Italian, Sicilian, Hebrew, Latin, and English.

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The picture shows Christ's descent into the underworld, iconography that is still very significant today, especially in the Eastern Orthodox Church. During the time between his death on the cross and his resurrection on Easter night, Christ descends into the realm of the dead. There he redeems the souls of the righteous – personified here by the patriarchs of the Old Testament – from the jaws of Leviathan, the biblical monster that devours sinners. A small gate on the left side of the drawing symbolizes the entrance to the dungeons. The inscription below corresponds to the one written on the gate to Hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, usually translated as "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." However, Christ gives believers hope for redemption.

Housed at the Kunsthistorisches Institut (Art History Institute) in Florence, the project, called Graffiti Art in Prison, is an international partnership led by the Università degli Studi di Palermo to explore both historical and contemporary graffiti and murals. It delves into places of captivity, deprivation, and censorship – prisons, concentration camps, psychiatric clinics – and the creative reactions to these environments: material, physical, psychological, political, social, religious, spatial, and temporal.