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Finding Fudduni

Sicilian intangible cultural heritage as a floating signifier

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ABSTRACT | This paper examines the memory, identity, and contemporary significance of Petru Fudduni, a semi-legendary Sicilian folk poet of the 17th century, among local people in Palermo. Building upon archival and field research we conducted in January-February 2025, we argue that Fudduni is a ‘floating signifier’ that acquires different meanings depending on the socio-cultural values of the people who remember him and his stories. Ultimately, his legacy sheds light on the different ways local people view Sicilian culture and identity, reflecting at once the different souls and characteristics of Palermo: working class and aristocracy; the sacred and the profane; low culture and high art.

Keywords: Cultural heritage; floating signifier; Palermo; Sicilian ethnography; Sicilian literature.

Introduction

Our project aims to rediscover and promote the stories of Pietro Fudduni – the most popular Sicilian folk poet of the 17th century. Although some of Fudduni's poems and stories were transcribed and republished in the 20th century, the majority of his work survives only in the oral folk tradition and particularly in the memory of Sicilian-speaking elders. Recently, scholars have recognised Sicily as a postcolonial subject that has suffered from decades of centralisation and exploitation of resources on the part of both the Italian state and organised crime (Berruto 2018). Following the forced annexation of Sicily in the second half of the 19th century, the Italian kingdom systematically marginalised the local culture and language, which began to be associated with educational inferiority, backwardness, and a lack of opportunities. Unlike other postcolonial contexts, Sicily has been particularly slow to protect and valorise its unique linguistic and cultural heritage. As a result of this, a significant portion of the vast reservoir of Sicilian folk stories is now endangered. Motivated by the desire to rediscover and preserve this heritage, our project involved ethnographic research in the Sicilian capital city of Palermo to collect and transcribe Fudduni's stories.

Who was Petru Fudduni? This initial question guided our research. We collected a vast number of secondary resources and then conducted qualitative interviews with local scholars, journalists, poets, writers, priests, public figures, as well as lay people (including Paola's grandparents and relatives) in Palermo. After collecting local people's voices, we started to appreciate the high heterogeneity of their accounts, and also the presence of some recurring themes. We begin to wonder: why do some people remember him as a literate, a genius, and a rebel, while others as a person of low education and intelligence? Some scholars have acknowledged these contradictions and claimed that Fudduni's figure itself is a construction of many theories and legends and that it would be not only impossible but also misleading to attempt an accurate reconstruction of his profile (Caruso 1977).

Nonetheless, we believe with Scordato (1991: 103) that this difficulty should not be taken as a reason for rejecting the challenge. Indeed, understanding the popular and scholarly construction of this folk poet can reveal important insights into Sicilian culture and society. In this paper, we bring together our findings and connect them with the available literature on Fudduni and his work. We start with an overview of the figure of Fudduni and then discuss his memory and legacy. We then proceed to discuss the cultural meaning and significance of the figure of Fudduni in contemporary Sicily through an analysis of some key comments by our informants through the theoretical framework of the 'floating signifier', as formulated by Marcel Mauss [1904] (1972), Lévi-Strauss [1959] (1987), and Stuart Hall (1997).



*Figure 1. A view of the city of Palermo.
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A contested identity

One of the most striking discoveries that we made during our field research in Palermo related to the contested identity and memory of Fudduni. Most of the existing scholarship on Fudduni highlights the fact that he is a semi-legendary figure shrouded in mystery. Very little is known about Fudduni's life, however, most sources agree that he was born at the beginning of the XVII century in the Capo district, a working-class area in the historic centre of Palermo, from a family of 'pirriaturi' (stone cutters or quarrymen) (see Mongitore 1714, 1742; Palmeri 2011). The name Pietro, which evokes 'pietra' (rock), could therefore be interpreted as a reference to Fudduni's profession and social status as a 'pirriature'. The etymology of his last name, however, is much more contested as Fudduni can be interpreted as either another potential reference to his ancestors' original professional activity (Fudduni would derive from 'fullone', an archaic way of describing wool spinners) or a nickname reflective of Pietro's character and personality (according to this latter interpretation, Fudduni would be a distortion of 'fuodde' or 'folle', namely 'mad').

The only aspect of Fudduni's life we were able to independently verify, by consulting the Episcopal Archives of Palermo's Cathedral, was his death, which took place on 22 March 1670. During our field research, we also spent significant time and resources in an attempt to track down Fudduni's grave. Eventually, however, we discovered that the small church within which Fudduni had been buried in 1670 (Santa Maria dell'Itria) was bombed by the allies during WWII and as a consequence of that, all buried remains were lost.

The contested nature of Fudduni's memory and identity is further exacerbated by the type of work attributed to the poet. Several scholars (such as Pitre 1868, 1871, 1872, 2021; Cocchiara 1925; Di Mino 1947; Mannino 1977; Girgenti 1975; Zinna 2003; Favaró 2016; Giurleo 2020) have conducted

historiographical and anthropological studies on Fudduni's place within Sicilian culture and folklore. Most of the poems and stories that survive in the Sicilian oral tradition characterise Fudduni as a defender of the people, particularly the lowest classes, against the abuses and arrogance of the clergy and aristocracy. This strand of Fudduni's work is often characterised by a simple and crass lexicon and foregrounds the mythical intelligence and irreverence of Fudduni himself, who is often at the centre of these stories. From this point of view, in Sicilian folklore, the figure of Fudduni is comparable to that of Giufá. However, while Giufá is famous for his legendary stupidity, Fudduni is a quintessential symbol of folk wisdom and resourcefulness. The figure of Fudduni is also comparable in many ways to Homer, as his stories were orally retold and modified from one teller to the other, but then often ascribed to a mythical author (Fudduni himself), while in other cases pre-existing folk stories were attributed to him.

The other strand of Fudduni's work is characterised by written texts that deal with spirituality and religiosity, published in the 17th century. Most of these texts are still preserved in Palermo's libraries and archives (see Fullone 1629-1686 in reference list) but are not as well known to contemporary Sicilians. At the time of its publication, Fudduni's most famous religious text, the epic poem dedicated to Saint Rosalia (*La Rusulia*), written in 1651, played a crucial role in popularising the figure of Santa Rosalia, who until then was not recognised as a major saint by the popular classes of Palermo. *La Rusulia* – which was commissioned by the city Senate – references a number of high cultural texts, including Greek mythology and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581), suggesting that Fudduni had an extensive education. In turn, the commissioning of *La Rusulia* represents clear evidence of the fact that Fudduni was in close contact with the cultural and political elite of the city and, to a certain extent, he served its political interests.

The ambiguous and contradictory facets of Fudduni's identity are reflected in the widely contrasting memories and accounts we collected during our fieldwork. While some of our interviewees claimed that Fudduni was one person, for others, Fudduni was a name used by two or more poets. According to other interviewees, Fudduni did not exist at all. It was particularly interesting to note that beliefs about Fudduni's identity were informed by the socio-cultural values of the people we interviewed. To the question, 'who is Fudduni?', a man in his thirties working on a construction site responded: 'I am too young, you have to ask my father', thus signalling his understanding of Fudduni as a figure of the past. Another man in his fifties said that he had a vague recollection of him and that he was a historical figure who lived in the 1800s. These temporal 'misplacements' of Fudduni in the history of the city are not casual, as we believe they reveal a desire to locate the figure in a past that is not so distant, and that in some ways is still accessible, whether through the memory of the living elders, or by recollecting more recent historical events.



Figure 2. The street where Fudduni was born which is named after him.

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Ethnographic Accounts

For Don Cosimo Scordato, a priest who is socially active in some of the most disenfranchised areas of central Palermo, Fudduni was a single individual who started as a crass and irreverent folk poet and gradually transformed, acquiring a spiritual maturity that allowed him to write sophisticated poems such as *La Rosalia*. In our interview with Don Scordato, the transformation of Fudduni is consistent with the psychological development of a ‘sinner’ who, through several life experiences, gradually redeems himself. This conception of Fudduni, in turn, is consistent with Don Scordato’s deeply religious beliefs and desire to help the local community. Together with Emanuele Amorello, Don Cosimo Scordato was responsible for adapting *La Rusulia* into a musical, the *Rosalia Festinans*, performed in 2024 as part of the official celebrations of Palermo’s patron saint. According to Scordato, by promoting Fudduni’s work through the contemporary adaptation of the *Rosalia Festinans*, it is possible to reflect on current social issues. Scordato also talked about the importance of ‘recreating a circuit of cultural communication so that the poet becomes popular again, and the people feel redeemed’. This was possible especially because Fudduni was both a literary poet of high standing and a folk poet who wanted to please ‘his people’ (from a lower socio-economic background):

‘Fudduni è un poeta popolare e anche letterario; anche con le poesie religiose tocca le corde delle persone. Vuole piacere ai letterati ma non vuole dispiacere la sua gente’ [lit. Fudduni is a popular and also literary poet; even with his religious poems he touches people’s hearts. He wants to please the literati but does not want to displease his people].

Focusing on Fudduni's individual personality as a determinant to shape his creations, Patrizia D'Amico – who leads the activities of the ethnographic Museum Pitre – talked about how Fudduni's life influenced the writing of *La Rusulia*. According to D'Amico, it was precisely Fudduni's difficult life that would have made him capable of writing with such depth. Others, like Fabrizio Lupo, a professor of dramaturgy and scenography at the Academy of Fine Arts of Palermo, reflected on the figure of Fudduni as representative of the city's dual spirit. For Lupo:

‘Petru Fudduni incarna la doppia natura di Palermo, quella dei lavoratori e quella della cultura antica elitaria, l'anima colta della città esoterica (la città del sole).’ [lit. Petru Fudduni embodies the dual nature of Palermo, that of the workers and that of the ancient elite culture, the cultured soul of the esoteric city].

In a similar vein, Sicilian poet Nino Barone sees Fudduni as a ‘hero poet’ capable of ‘giving voice to the needs of the poor.’ He told us that, in the past, there have been other poets who have fulfilled this role. For example, Giuseppe Schiera, who, during the Fascist regime, lived in the working-class neighborhood of Tommaso Natale and considered himself ‘the factory of *lu pitittu*’ (lit. the factory of hunger) due to his poverty. Schiera, like Fudduni can be seen as a type of poet engaged with social problems who continued the legacy of the 17th century folk poet. From this point of view, therefore, we could talk of many ‘Fuddunis’ (the original one and his spiritual ‘heirs’). Barone also pointed out that today there is more knowledge, more access to learning resources, everyone posts on social media and perhaps there is less need for poets speaking on behalf of the people. For Caruso (in Mannino, 1977) in Sicily everyone today ‘has become the Fudduni of themselves’, in other words ordinary people are aware of social problems and able to speak for themselves.

Differently, some of the people we interviewed stressed how the figure of the Rosalia as depicted by Fudduni can be a way to raise awareness among people on current societal problems. For example, Ornella Giambalvo, an academic and leader of the educational centre Parco del Sole, made several reflections on the way in which Fudduni's Rosalia can be reread in a modern key in terms of female emancipation. Furthermore, we found that many believe that cultural initiatives, including the revival of past figures, such as that of Fudduni, and of new ones, are crucial to preserve Sicilian culture, language and identity. For example, Professor Giovanni Ruffino, who chairs the regional commission for the promotion of Sicilian cultural heritage, stressed the importance of institutions and new figures, such as poets and academics in promoting a cultural heritage in danger of extinction. For some participants, like Salvo Piparo, a local comedian who performs Fudduni's stories (thus preserving their memory) the folk poet represented both a ‘*maschera*’ (comparable to a *Commedia dell'Arte* character) and a powerful metaphor of familial bonds. For Piparo, Fudduni evoked the memory of his grandfather, who used to tell him his stories as a child and for the actor, telling Fudduni's stories means preserving some of those intergenerational memories: ‘*le storie si ri-raccontano per stabilire un senso di appartenenza, per reinventarsi e rimanere*’ [‘stories are retold to establish a sense of belonging, to reinvent themselves and remain’]



*Figure 3. An interview session.
Photo by Josh Smiech ©*

By contrast, for other interviewees such as Antonio Fiasconaro, a former journalist of *La Sicilia* (one of the major local newspapers), Fudduni never existed as a historical individual, and he should be considered as a mere symbol of popular wisdom and wittiness. Some of the people we interviewed argued Fudduni did exist but that he was illiterate and therefore emphasised the less cultured aspect, according to which he would have been incapable of writing poetry, and therefore he should be remembered as a ‘madman’ and a ‘joker’. Through responses such as these, interlocutors seem to distance themselves from his figure as they associate it with a Sicilian folk culture, which is perceived as less desirable, due to both Fudduni’s humble origins and his use of Sicilian language vis-à-vis Italian.

Among these many dilemmas, confirming Fudduni’s existence, at the Episcopal Archives of the Palermo Cathedral, archivist Marcello Messina showed us Fudduni’s death certificate. Messina told us that Fudduni must have been very wealthy to be buried in the crypt. We may ask ourselves: was he truly rich and not a ‘pirriature’? Or did he become richer thanks to his fame and the support of the Curia and the Senate? So many questions remain, but what interests us the most is that there are so many answers, and that the debate is still lively, bringing to the forefront some key issues about the local social and cultural lifeworld. From this point of view, it can be argued that Fudduni is a ‘floating signifier’. As signifiers

with a vague signified, ‘floating signifiers’ mean different things to different people, standing for many or even any signifieds. In anthropology, Lévi-Strauss [1959] (1987) postulated that symbolic contents establish the social world. For him, a signifier, as a symbol, would be able to shape social thoughts and behaviours. Before Lévi-Strauss, Marcel Mauss in his study of Polynesian society, pinned down the notion of ‘mana’ as a signifier referring to things that are exchangeable (see Mauss [1904] 1972; Lévi-Strauss [1959] 1987: 52; and Malabou 2024: 307).

Cultural theorists like Stuart Hall (1997) further deployed the concept of the floating signifier to explain fluid social constructs such as race, democracy, and freedom. Similarly, Roland Barthes (1977: 73) used the concept to refer to the fact that certain non-linguistic signs are so open to interpretation that they constituted a ‘floating chain of signifieds’, namely the concepts or meanings represented by the signifier. Democracy, for example is a classic example of floating signifier as it is used to refer to a wide range of ideologies and political systems, often characterised by conflicting interpretations. Democracy has a highly contested meaning as what one person considers a democratic society another might not. Similarly, Fudduni is a floating signifier able to hold together a ‘floating chain of signifieds’ as different people attach radically different meanings and interpretations to his figure and works. By remembering him and adapting his work, the local people make use of a signifier to affirm very specific meanings, which are representative of the local socio-cultural stratification, differentiation, and of the ambivalent disposition social actors have in regard to their social positioning. Differently from Lévi-Strauss, it seems to us that these meanings, in many ways precede the signifier, and at the same time take form and become evident in the very process through which signifier and signified come together. As we discuss in the next section, by remembering, rejecting, adapting, reusing, recycling, praising, or denying Fudduni’s work and his very existence, crucial processes of cultural exchange and identity-making take place.

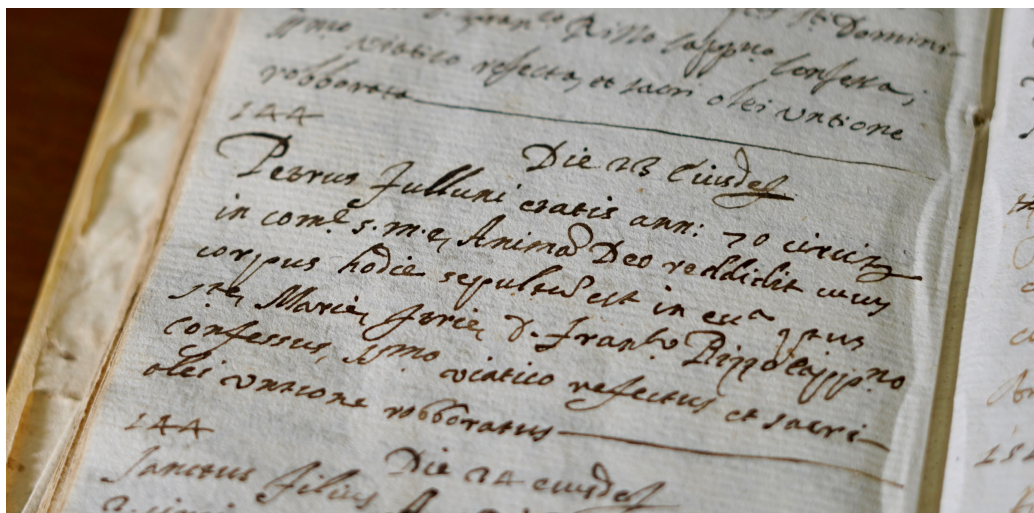


Figure 4. Fudduni’s death certificate.

Photo by Alfio Leotta ©

Courtesy of the Archivio della Curia Arcivescovile di Palermo

Fudduni as a ‘floating signifier’

The notion of floating signifier aligns with the encoding/decoding model of communication formulated by Stuart Hall (1997). According to Hall, individuals are presented with messages that are decoded, or interpreted in different ways depending on their personal experiences, cultural background, and economic standing. Fudduni’s memory and stories have been transmitted through different registers throughout the centuries across a variety of social classes, locations, and people, with different political and cultural views. Fudduni’s identity as a signifier, then, has been multiform through the attachment of its legacy with a variety of folk stories and anecdotes that people have embraced in different ways. As a signifier, he is thus not ‘empty’, and his identity and stories offer multiple possible signifieds. While for some of our participants he was a real historical person, for others he was a symbol of the Sicilian working class. While for some Fudduni is a folk, almost political hero, for others he was a highly spiritual poet. Fudduni is at once a *Commedia dell’Arte* ‘mask’ and a symbol of Sicilian identity, he represents different, contrasting aspects of Palermo’s culture and society, and, as such, the analysis of his figure can shed light on the different ways local people view Sicilian culture and identity (see Tiné 2025).

One of the most effective illustrations of the idea of Fudduni as a floating signifier is found in Pino Caruso’s preface to Giuseppe Mannino’s *Petru Fudduni: i versi di un mito* (Petru Fudduni: A Myth’s Verses), a very popular collection of poems and stories published in 1977. In the preface to the volume, Caruso, a prominent Sicilian theatre and TV actor, tells an anecdote that occurred to him in post-war Palermo. In the story, Caruso is walking through the streets of the city when he notices a large gathering of men. As Caruso approaches, he asks ‘what’s going on?’ and one of the bystanders responds, ‘it’s Petru Fudduni!’. In reality, as Caruso makes his way through the small crowds, he discovers that the man at the centre of the gathering is Franco Franchi, a Sicilian actor who began his career performing comedic acts in the streets of the city. Franchi performed Sicilian working-class characters for working-class audiences. It is therefore not surprising that the anonymous bystander mentioned by Caruso in his story labelled him as ‘Petru Fudduni’, a quintessential symbol of Sicilian working-class humour and intelligence.

The idea of Fudduni as an a-historical, almost mythical symbol of ‘Sicilianness’ was confirmed in our field research, as many of our interviewees struggled to place Fudduni in a specific historical context, with many of them believing he had lived in the 19th century or even as recently as the post-war period. Further evidence of Fudduni’s status as a powerful floating signifier was provided by an interview with Silvana Arnone, a curator and guide of the Sicilian Ethnographic Museum Gioacchino Pitré. Like other participants in our field research, Silvana acknowledged that our project played a crucial role in reviving her personal memories of Fudduni. Despite the fact that Gioacchino Pitré, the founder of the museum, had conducted extensive research about Fudduni in the 19th century, Silvana’s knowledge of Fudduni was limited to childhood memories and sayings told to her by her grandparents. One of the sayings Silvana wanted to discuss with us, which is particularly relevant to our exploration of the folk poet as a floating signifier, was ‘mortu n’ Petru si ni fa n’ autru’ (Petru is dead, long live Petru!). This saying refers precisely to the fact that, in time, Fudduni became an anti-authoritarian symbol of the Sicilian working class, thus providing the

people of Palermo with the opportunity to identify themselves with a mythical, eternal character. Furthermore, it was particularly telling that Silvana herself, whose professional activity as a curator has been informed by cultural and political activism, decided to focus on this particular idea of Fudduni as a political icon.

As an author, in bringing together these different voices, stories, and literary styles, Fudduni brings together different perspectives on and from the local social context. He embodies the local fragmentations, contrasts, paradoxes, and stratifications. From the perspective of the people who remember him, these very dichotomies and contradictions are also evident and confirm not only the dual nature of Fudduni as an author, but also the dual nature of the city, and Sicilian ethnic identity more broadly. Their voices convey an ambivalent desire and a reticence to embrace Sicilian culture and identity. His legacy, then, reveals internal differences and stratifications, and is telling of larger issues around Sicilian identity.



Figure 5. Votive shrine to Santa Rosalia in front of Fudduni's alleged house.

Photo by Paola Tiné ©

Conclusion

This project is important and timely because it aims to protect disappearing intangible heritage and actively ‘unforget it’ through its retelling by creative and digital means. This process is essential to the survival of a postcolonial subject, such as Sicily which has been slow to valorise its unique cultural heritage. In turn, the stories of Fudduni are key in this endeavour because they elaborate on core themes of Sicilian cultural and linguistic identity. Our research project plays an important role in reviving the knowledge of Petru Fudduni, a figure whose work and identity survive in the memory of an increasingly smaller number of elders. In 2025, we compiled and published some of the primary sources of our research project, including video-interviews, Fudduni's stories and rare archival material, in both a digital archive of our own design (www.fudduni.com) and a YouTube channel. Both platforms have played an important role in preserving and reviving the memory of Fudduni and his stories., Shortly after their launch, both the digital

archive and the YouTube channel attracted hundreds of visitors. Similarly, our research project gained significant media visibility as we were interviewed by both RAI, the national TV broadcaster, and by several regional and local newspapers.

One of the recurring themes of our research work was that participants demonstrated gratitude towards our efforts to preserve and promote the memory of Fudduni. Participants were particularly grateful for the fact that our questions prompted them to rediscover childhood memories associated with their parents and grandparents, who, in turn, had told them about the folk poet. However, while Fudduni still represents a powerful signifier of ‘Sicilianness’ and ‘Palermitannes’, the specific meaning associated with the folk poet varies significantly depending on the different socio-cultural values of our interviewees. Fudduni is therefore a floating signifier able to reconcile the different souls and characteristics of Palermo: working class and aristocracy, the sacred and the profane; low culture and high art. In bringing together these different voices, stories, and literary styles, Fudduni, as an author, also brings together different perspectives on and from the local social context. From the point of view of the people who remember him, and whose voices we were interested in, these very dichotomies and contradictions are also evident and confirm not only the ambiguous nature of Fudduni as an author, but also the dual nature of the city, and of the Sicilian ethnic identity more broadly. We believe, therefore, that remembering Fudduni is an act of ‘commoning’ the local heritage: in such a stratified context, the memory of Fudduni as a symbol of Sicilianness transcends divisions and unifies the local people under a common cultural heritage. Finally, we hope that the study of Fudduni’s place within Sicilian cultural heritage could also provide a blueprint for the study of similar forgotten folk figures in other post-colonial or marginalized cultural contexts.

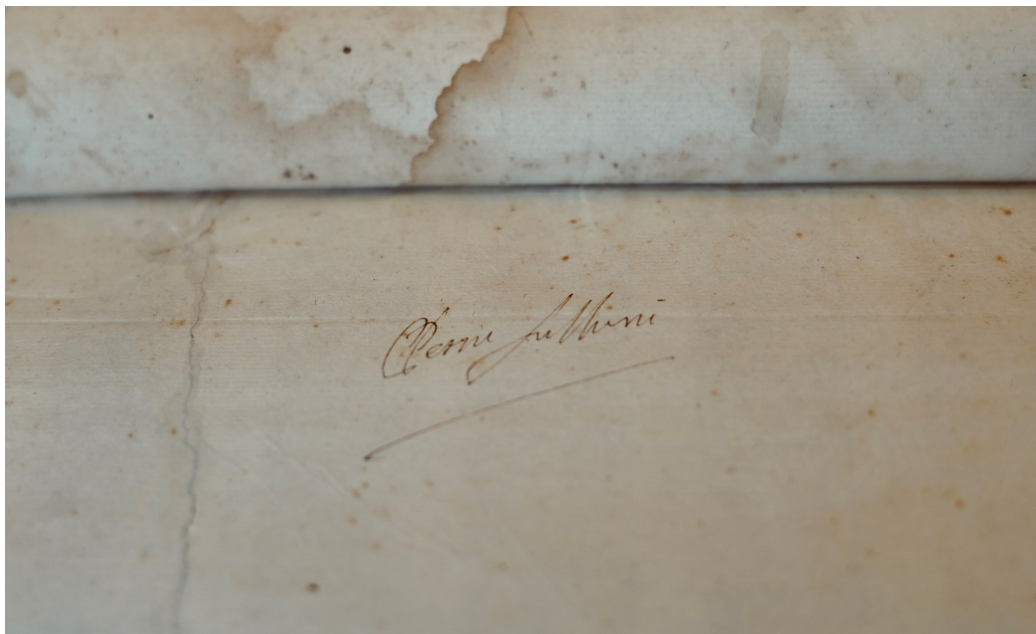


Figure 6. Fudduni’s name in a manuscript of the 1600s.

Photo by Alfio Leotta ©

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