

Territorial identity and place names

LAURA CASSI*

Abstract

Though territorial identity is very difficult to define, this report tries to do it by investigating place names, considering both as dynamic phenomena. Many different research fields can apply to territorial identity, but surely the toponymic ones can 'say' much about it, mostly referring to ancient and densely populated areas like ours. Examples will be discussed, with reference to Tuscany, showing the great content value of the Topographical Map of Italy edited by the Italian Geographic Military Institute to highlight historical population dynamics as well as social and economic features which have characterized the territory over the centuries.

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What is territorial identity? Defining it is a difficult task. However, place names are surely one of the most important components of territorial identity. These are both dynamic phenomena, even though, this is not the principal reason for their relationships.

Though many examples could be mentioned, I will limit myself to place names in the Florentine area. Of particular interest, it has been densely populated since ancient times. The place names chosen are referred to in linguistic and geographical terms.

In the early 1960s, a well-known linguist, Pelio Fronzaroli, studied Florentine region place names. He grouped these place names in terms of their etymological origin: four groups were identified, pre-Latin, Latin, Germanic, and neo-Latin. The neo-Latin ones are especially numerous: linguistic stratification clearly highlights the historical population dynamics in our area.

Many years ago, Silvio Pieri, another well-known linguist, identified numerous Etruscan toponyms, such as Corolla, Stella, Mècchio and so on; Mècchio can be compared with the Latin name Vico and Vicchio (vicus, a social grouping or village); for example, from paleo-Mediterranean words we have Monte Albano, from alba, stone, height; from some Mediterranean words we also have the name Arno (arna, sunken bed of a river); Greve from the Mediterranean base grava, gravel; Parga from barga, hut; Falterona from shovel, roundness, bump; even the place names derived from Mediterranean paleo words are quite numerous.

Another very interesting example concerning the linguistic stratification of place names is given by Alberto Nocentini, a glottologist as well known as those I mentioned above, who recently studied the toponymy of the Casentino region (internal Tuscany), offering many significant elements to illustrate the historical

* Università di Firenze (Italia).

identity of this area from a diachronic point of view, as Fronzaroli did for the Florentine one.

Some hydronyms north of the River Arno indicate links with ancient Ligurian populations; they could be evidence of Ligurian settlement in the Arno region, later occupied by the Etruscans: here we have Stura, also to be found in Liguria and Piedmont, and in Northern Europe; Tavaiano, from *tav-*, also present in France and Scotland; Ombrone from an Etruscan personal name: in ancient times this was the name by which the Ligurian populations identified themselves. Among the names of Latin origin, we recall the praedial ones, derived from the name which indicates the person to whom the landed property was assigned. The praedial names are numerous and often end in *-ano*, from the Latin *-anus*, so they are easily identifiable, as in the cases of Gricigliano, Grecilio's field, Ponzano, Ponzio's field, Samprugnano derived from Sempronianu, that is Sempronius' field (on the official map Saint Prugnano erroneously appears). Other praedial names are: Terzolle, Serpiolle, Marignolle and so on; other Latin names originated in Roman landmark computation, and indicate ancient road layouts like Via Cassia, on the right bank of the River Arno. So, starting from Florence (Florentia, a greeting name), we have: Quarto (Fourth mile from Florence), Quinto (Fifth), Sesto (Sixth), Settimello (Seventh). Others refer to Roman centuriation (a grid system by which the Romans divided up cultivable land), such as Quarrata from *quadrata*, Cintoia from *centuria*, Colonnata from *columna*; and again, Gonfienti from *confluentes* (a small stream joining with the River Bisenzio), Compiobbi from *compluvium* (the River Sieve flows into the Arno). Though far fewer than the Latin names there are a number of Germanic ones: they probably refer to Longobard settlements and mostly concern hills and mountains: Monte Perlo (Mount Perlo), Colle Barucci (Barucci Hill), Monterinaldi, Montughi We also find: Barone, Baroncelli, Ghiffia, Cafaggiolo (land reserved for hunting by the lord), Gualdo (wood, wald) and many others.

Obviously, historical linguists are mainly interested in ancient names, while geographers are mainly interested in the mass of neo-Latin names since these names, as a whole, can offer the reading, the portrait - one could say - which the inhabitants, inspired by the physical and human landscape characteristics that over the centuries have caught their attention, have drawn up of their territory. Geographical studies on the neo-Latin place names etymological meaning, can surely highlight many social and economic features which over the centuries have characterized a particular territory.

In the area we are dealing with, neo-Latin names are the most numerous and refer to soil morphology, like Poggio Alto (high hill); hydrography, like Padule (swamp), Fontesecca (dry source); vegetation, like Monteloro (laurel mountain), Lecore (holm oak wood); animals, like Gamberaia (a place where shrimps can be fished), Cerbaia (woods where deer live); settlements, like Tavarnuzze (small taverns along ancient roads), Casellina (small house); industrial activities, Calcinaia (a place where mortar was produced); old social organization, like Case Comunanze (common house) and so on.

All these, more or less old names, allude to the (more or less distant) past and therefore to an identity that has taken shape over time. The place names on

the official maps resemble a traditional world which today has undergone great changes, or even disappeared altogether.

So, does toponymy have no relation to current events? Well, it would be wrong to assume that toponymy has only links with the past. Just think of the new place names following the reclamation along Italian coasts in the 1930s or the very recent ones linked to the tourism phenomenon in Sardinia.

So, if we have lost some ancient names, referring to traditional activities, others have appeared, suggested by new activities, like tourism. The new names may well appear as a foreign body in an ancient context, such as Costa Smeralda (the Emerald Coast), Turquoise Coast, Butterfly Bay, Eden Rock. However attractive they may sound, they have nothing to do with the past and traditional activities. However, territorial identity is also changing and today tourism in Sardinia is certainly part of it and we can say the same for other new names.

Returning to the Florentine area, where the toponymic corpus is the result of different word layers, I should like to give an example highlighting how the traditional scattered settlement offers readings that we can qualify as 'identification spies'. Many specificities are recalled in the toponymic corpus, both from a synchronic point of view and from a diachronic one. Under the synchronic profile there emerges a careful reading of the physical and cultural landscape, under the diachronic one the presence of ancient, secular and modern names stands out.



Fig. 1 - A stretch of the Bisenzio Valley.

In figure 1 we can see a stretch of the Bisenzio Valley where there are many personal names from the Roman period, like Vaiano, Sofignano, Savignano, Spicciano; others are names of Saints from the Middle Ages, like Gaudenzio and Benedetto; others still belong to the families that had extensive possessions during the Renaissance centuries, like the Guicciardini. Many other names are evidence of human activities, like Fornaci (furnaces), Calcinaia (place where mortar is made), Fabbro (blacksmith), like Poggio dei Mandrioni (livestock hill); activities and forms of agricultural management that are no longer exercised today, like Poderino (little message); settlements, like Mulinaccia (ruined mill), Torricella (little tower), Sala (Germanic term to indicate little settlement); soil forms, like Montaùto (mountain which has a sharp form); landslides, like Poggio Macia; hydrography and sources, like Rimaggio (major stream), Fontanelle (small springs); vegetation, like Querceta (oak forest), Fosso del Boscone (stream flowing in a large forest); position with respect to cardinal points, like Spazzavento (place exposed to the wind), animals, like Volpolaccio (place where foxes live, or an impervious place, where only foxes can live). I have mentioned only a few, but many others are equally significant and, mind you, they are all located in a small territory.

Place names are therefore identifying spies because, despite them mostly originating from simple observations, that is from common names, the passing of the centuries gives them an added value, as shown by the toponyms Guardia and Filetta, located on two opposite sides of the Bisenzio Valley, indicating - in the early Middle Ages - two guard posts, Germanic the first (Ward), Byzantine the second (Filetta comes from the Greek fulak): history gives them an unquestionable identity meaning. I should like to conclude with some other place names near Florence: Mezzòsso (half bone, a poor old message), La Selva (wood, but now there is no longer a wood), Podere Spedale (hospital message, a place where hospitality was given along an ancient road to Rome), see figure 2.

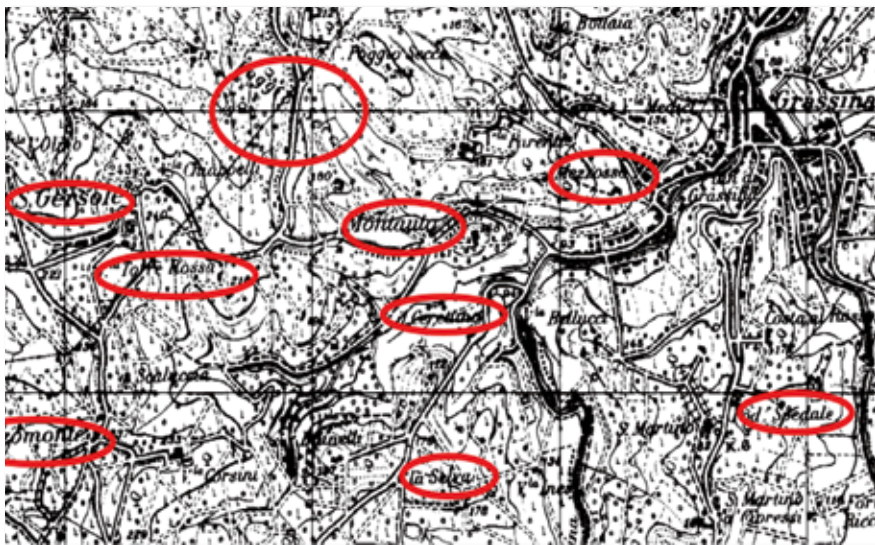


Fig. 2 - Some place names near Florence along an ancient road to Rome.

In conclusion, place names are at the same time photographs and environmental portraits, a representation of a real world and real way of life, but also an interpretation of reality itself and sometimes even an expression of a virtual reality, produced exclusively by the perception of the generations that over the centuries have followed one another in the same territory.

Obviously many other studies can apply to territorial identity, but surely the toponymic ones can 'say' much about it, mostly in ancient and densely populated areas like ours.

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