Nesonyms and Power in Historical Cartography. The Denomination of Islands as an Act of Domination

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1. *Introduction*

Islands, indeed the lowest ones, have fascinated man since ancient times for their semantic versatility. Some have been inhabited, some have been visited, some have remained inapproachable, but nearly all have been represented in cartography, both to understand their distribution in the ocean and to honor them by their names.

The analysis of the toponymy of the islands allows us to understand the nuances of the territorialisation process of the places. It is well known that the naming of a place is the first stage in this process, defined as the symbolic control of the territory, which is followed by the material control and the organisational control of it (Turco, 1988). While it is true that, in mainland contexts, the delimitation of a territory, the current administrative carving out derives from a bottom-up action, where «the smallest localities [...] have traditionally endowed themselves with a territory, to which they have given boundaries and which they have surrounded with land of undivided use», starting from the naming of places (Cerreti, 2007, p. 51, translated by the Author); for islands, this is – generally speaking – a process that is initially heterocentric and only later self-centred, due in part to the historical depopulation of these small strips of land in the middle of the sea. The island is therefore named from the outset, in all its variations and mutations, whether it is actually reached or only seen and observed on the horizon, and in some cases even when it is only imagined (D'Ascenzo, 2015 and 2021).

Island places are named when the process of material control of the territory begins, both by sea and by land, when fishermen begin to frequent its waters and inlets, when the first settlers settle along the safer coasts, when military garrisons continuously guard the island, that is, when the island community takes shape.

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As the sedimentation process takes shape, the transformation or evolution of the detailed toponymy may occur, depending on the evolution of the settled social contexts (tab. 1).

Tab. 1 – Relationship between stages of territorialization and island toponymy.

Phase	Control of territory	Island toponymy
Denomination	Symbolic control	Naming *the* island
Reification	Material control	Naming the places *on* island
Structuralization	Organizative control	Toponymy evolution (Permanence, transformation, oblivion)

Source: Developed by the author from Turco, 1988.

2. *Historical Cartography and Place Names*

This pattern, however, can be considered valid at a basic, or primitive, stage of exploration and peopling, that is, when the islands are depopulated, and in general can be referred to past eras. Moreover, it is good to consider that the phases of this process are not clearly consequential, but, depending on the contexts, may change even fading one over the other (Turco, 1988). When, then, we are dealing with forms of exploration and peopling, or conquest, which we can define here as advanced and complex, we can observe a further process, which can be made to fall under the forms of colonialism or imperialism. The external actor who identifies and names the island does not take into account pre-existing self-centered designations, let alone the presence of social groups, whether autochthonous or allochthonous, but of previous settlement. This dynamic pertains to all processes of new control of territories, but it appears well evident and illustrative with regard to islands, associating the use of historical cartography as an instrument of crystallization of new toponyms, which are also instrumental in defining the ownership of these strips of land (Boria, 2007).

As is well known, historical cartography today is one of the sources available to the geographer for the study of toponymy in its historical dimension as well (Cassi, 2015; Cantile, 2016), which also highlights it as an intangible cultural asset and strong identity element (Aversano, 2006; Cassi, 2009; Cantile, Kerfoot, 2016). Historical cartography today can bear witness to acts of naming in order to dominate; the map, then, as a political tool, insofar as it can convey semantic values beyond the topographic drawing. If at first the toponym passes appear as a simple label in the vicinity of a place, placed to distinguish it from others, in a process of deconstructing the map (Harley, 1989), which goes to analyse the semantic value beyond the topographic drawing alone, it is possible to recognize toponymy as a sign – intangible – of spatial appropriation (Rombai, 2010; Cantile, 2016). It is, therefore, a

political and cultural act that the author of the map performs in order to demonstrate a possession and transmit the information to those who will enjoy the map. On the other hand, passing from hand to hand papers can be copied, even mistakenly, and place names be conveyed by persisting to mutations over time and spread, sometimes almost unconsciously, in process and cultural inherent by the denominator/dominator. So, it is not only the explorer or cartographer who initiated this process, but also the European, and Western cultural centers in general, who mapped and defined the names and ownership of these territories. In this sense, it is good to keep in mind the different forms of linguistic possession of the territory, which occur through different modes of appropriation, also depending on purposes (Cantile, Kerfoot, 2016 and 2022).

3. *Denominate to dominate. Forms of linguistic possession*

A first form of linguistic possession is the adjectivization of an island or archipelago, which often occurs because of geographical or administrative issues. Consider the Tuscan Archipelago, defined as such because it is close to the Tuscan coast and, at the same time, pertains administratively to that Region. The same adjectivization can change over time, either officially or merely customarily, depending on political intent or other cultural dynamics. The Ponziane Archipelago is so called in reference to the largest island – territorially and demographically – among those forming it, Ponza. In the past, these islands were referred to even more explicitly as the Ponza Islands or the Ponze Islands, declaring their belonging to them (fig. 1). In 1934, with the founding of Littoria, a new provincial capital promoted by the Fascist Regime and located in the center of the Pontine Plain, the islands were annexed to the new administration and called the Pontine Islands. This definition, which never officially came into effect, remains in common usage, indistinctly with Ponziane in Ponza, but predominantly in Ventotene, the second inhabited island, in order to free itself from the domination of its cousin island (fig. 2) (Gallia, 2020).
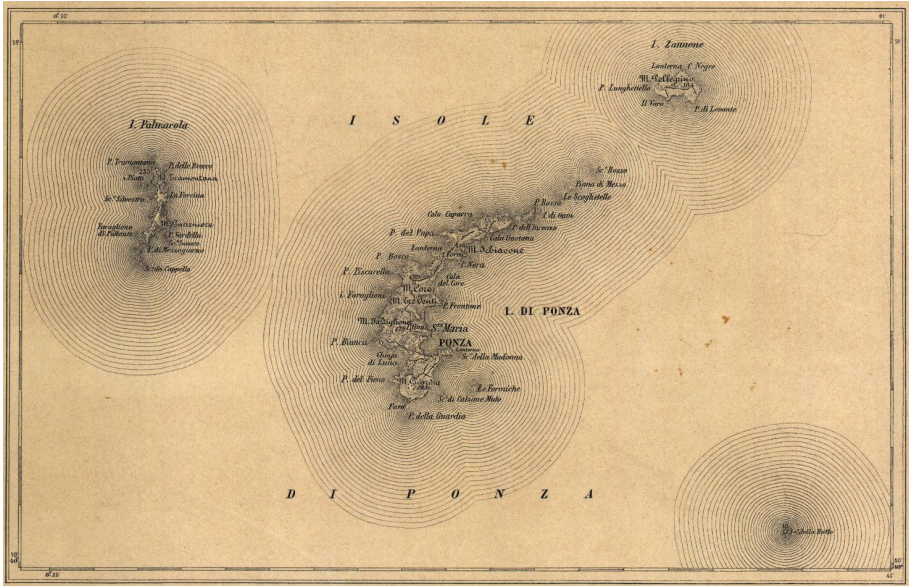
Fig. 1 – *Isole di Ponza*, in IGM F. 170 Terracina, 1883, detail.

Source: Maps Collection, Giuseppe Caraci Geocartographic Lab, University of Roma Tre, Rome, Italy.

Fig. 2 – *Mappa delle Isole Pontine, Provincia di Latina*. S.d.

Source: Private collection.

In other cases, appropriation occurs indirectly, not through toponymy, but through an additional specification, referring, for example, to a universally recognized myth, character or event: Ithaca is the island of Odysseus. Homers tales, for example, alternate this solution with toponymy to define the belonging of an island, whether it is a social group, a king or a geographical element.

When the Portuguese began to settle along the African coast and the Spanish landed in the Caribbean islands, belonging became appropriation, possession and, therefore, domination.

Christopher Columbus named Española – diminutive and possessive at the same time of Spain – the island where he first landed, which later became Hispaniola according to the Latin tradition proposed by Bartolomé de las Casas.

The reassertion of the homeland place-name in newly discovered/explored/possessed territories by means of allomorphies, polyrhematic gematria, diminutives, vezzeggiatives is quite frequent throughout history. Likewise, a process of duplication of Old-World toponymy takes place in new lands, such as New Spain, which, however, is a continental land, New Holland, New Caledonia, New Zealand, New Amsterdam, and so on (fig. 3). This process is, yes, related to the appropriation of a newly discovered territory, but it also allows for the maintenance of a continuity of identity and, therefore, fosters its recognition – even with some comfort – by newcomers, repurposing the name, adjectivalized, of their place of origin.

Fig. 3 – *New Holland* in Aaron Arrowsmith's *World Map*, 1799.
Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, 15294.000.

In the broad process of exploration of the seas to discover unknown and uninhabited patches of land, the entry of competing players such as the Dutch, British and French among all, is also reflected in the naming of these new territories. Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with aftershocks in the following century as well, we witness the appearance on maps of numerous islands, scattered across the oceans and of the most diverse sizes, isolated or grouped in archipelagos. These are the subject of a fairly continuous process of naming, renaming, reaffirmation of previous toponym or claiming. Effective dominance over an island territory was also guaranteed by the mere toponymic attestation crystallized on paper. And in a game of power – or demonstration of – translation from one language to another, justified by the different audiences for which it was intended, was a geopolitical instrument of reaffirmation of rights over a given strip of land, albeit isolated in the middle of the Pacific or squeezed between Antarctic ice.

Fig. 4 – Pacific islands with explorers' indications, Evangelista Azzi's *World Map*, 1873.
Source: Private collection.

Immune to translation is – should be – the naming, with strong celebratory and political overtones, through the use of the sovereign's name. This ensures clear appropriation, but it is also a means of celebrating a sovereign so far-sighted as to be willing to finance such risky voyages with a low probability of success. To Philip of Spain, for example, the naming of the Philippine Islands is dedicated. Also, to Spanish rulers, but Bourbon, an archipelago east of Madagascar is dedicated.

Sometimes dedications are generated by allomorphies, apparently errors, intended by the cartographer to transform a toponym to celebrate their sovereign. This is the case, for example, of Louise – or Marie Louise – island, east of the Horn of Africa and not far from the Seychelles, discovered by Vasco da Gama in 1502 but explored by Joseph-Marie Collas, Knight of Roslan in 1771 aboard the ship Louise (Hagan *et alii*, 2010), which Evangelista Azzi, a cartog-

rapher at the court of Maria Luigia of Parma, deliberately renamed Luigia in honor of his own sovereign (Castaldi, Gallia, 2023).

Other forms of naming with proper names have the intent, yes, celebratory, but with respect to characters or events of the past, as is customary in the toponymic and odonomastic spheres.

Also, in the Indian Ocean, the archipelago to which Marie Louise Island belongs is dedicated to the A[l]mirante, Admiral Vasco Da Gama, the first – European – explorer of those seas (fig. 5).
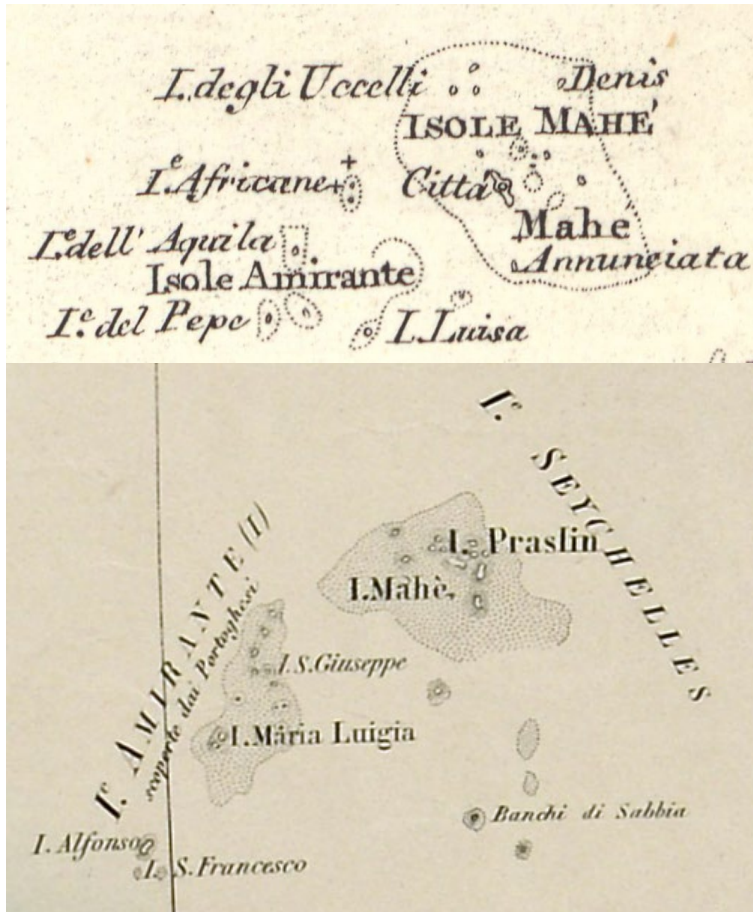

Fig. 5 – The Islands of the A[l]mirant with Luisa Island in Raffaele Mancini's *World Map* (1838), above, and Maria Luigia Island in Evangelista Azzi's *World Map* (1873), below.

Source: Raffaele Mancini's *World Map*, 1838, David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, 10406.000. Evangelista Azzi's *World Map*, 1873. Private collection.

The two Christmas Islands, one in the Pacific and one in the Indian, are named after the day they were sighted or scouted, celebrating a Christian holiday. Similar dynamics apply to Easter Island.

Other designations are meant to celebrate the commander of the expedition that discovered those territories, and this dynamic can be heterocentered, when posterity or European scientists decided on the naming, or self-centered, when it was the explorer himself who named the island or archipelago after himself to attest not to his possession but to the merit of that feat, such as the numerous designations dedicated to James Cook (fig. 4).

The saints of the day or to whom the crew was devoted named thousands of islands, even reiterating and repeating the name over and over again.

And when sovereigns, saints, explorers, and events were over and the longing for the home hearth returned, the names of the many wives left behind began to appear on charts, sometimes with little luck, other times with some persistence, as in the case of Adelia Land, now famous for the species of penguin widely distributed here. French explorer Jules Dumont d'Urville reached the Arctic land in 1840 and wanted to dedicate it to his wife who was so patient and accepting of his sea voyages, as he himself wrote in his travel journal (Dumont d'Urville, 1846; Duyker, 2015). In misinterpretations and translations, Earth became Island on some maps, until Antarctica in its entirety was delineated (fig. 6).
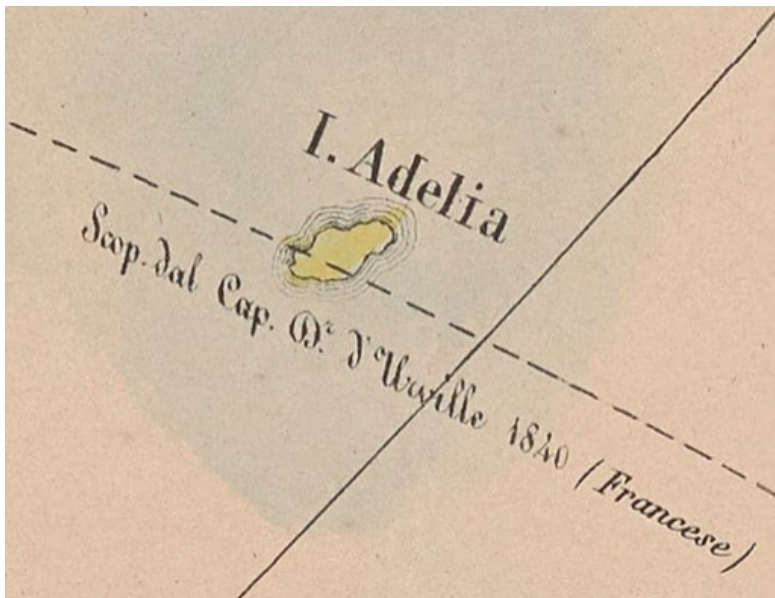

Fig. 6 – The island of Adelia, so erroneously reported in Evangelista Azzi's *World Map*, 1873. *Source*: Private collection.

Today, in an almost fully explored world, insular toponymy is a contentious element in the appropriation of a strip of land emerging from the sea, although diplomacy more often than not is able to derivate the issue of nam-

ing[1]. New applications of toponymy, not only in a regressive and historical reading, see turning our gaze to other spatial, exogeographical contexts, leading human societies to deal with the naming of places on non-terrestrial planets, applying the same dynamics of heterocentered appropriation just above[2].

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[1] Among the actors deputed for the resolution of toponymic issues are the United Nations working groups, including the Roman Hellenic Division, headed by Andrea Cantile (IGM and University of Florence).

[2] On the topic of exogeography, see the works of Annalisa D'Ascenzo (2010 and 2021).

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Semestrale di Studi e Ricerche di GEOGRAFIA

Nesonyms and Power in Historical Cartography. The Denomination of Islands as an Act of Domination

The act of naming coincides with the symbolic control of a territory. When this process occurs from outside and concerns island contexts, it often coincides with a form of domination. Historical cartography crystallises this phenomenon and allows us today to understand the dynamics of naming and domination of newly discovered and explored island contexts in the past. The paper aims to address this issue with some reflections.

Nesonimi e potere in cartografia. La denominazione delle isole come atto di dominazione

L'atto di denominare coincide con il controllo simbolico di un territorio. Quando questo processo avviene dall'esterno e riguarda contesti insulari, spesso coincide con una forma di dominazione. La cartografia storica cristallizza questo fenomeno e ci permette oggi di andare a comprendere le dinamiche di denominazione e dominazione dei contesti insulari di nuova scoperta ed esplorazione nel passato. L'intervento si propone di soffermarsi sulla questione con alcune riflessioni.

Nésonymes et pouvoir dans la cartographie historique. La dénomination des îles comme acte de domination

L'acte de nommer coïncide avec le contrôle symbolique d'un territoire. Lorsque ce processus se produit de l'extérieur et concerne des contextes insulaires, il coïncide souvent avec une forme de domination. La cartographie historique cristallise ce phénomène et nous permet aujourd'hui de comprendre les dynamiques de dénomination et de domination des contextes insulaires nouvellement découverts et explorés dans le passé. L'article vise à aborder cette question par le biais de quelques réflexions.