Geographical aspects of place names research. An overview

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This is simply an overview because the themes are so numerous that to cover them all would be impossible. I have therefore restricted my paper to an introduction, leaving fuller treatment for a publication due to appear in the near future (Fig. 1 and 2).

Toponymy is a field of research requiring differing skills and indeed, as Giovan Battista Pellegrini truly defined it, a "disciplinary crossroads", with the linguist's fundamental job of recovering etymology as the starting point.

That premised, it should be remembered that when locating geographic places and landmarks, giving names to the surface of the earth is primarily a practical requirement to distinguish one place from another. Names then become a means of orientation, with the advantage over geographic co-ordinates of their immediacy and ease of recognition. There is an example both evocative and significant in its apparent simplicity in Jules Verne's novel *The Mysterious Island*, where the first thing the castaways do is to give names to places; from this Christian Jacob (1992) derives a telling example to illustrate the naming procedure as the first act of a community settling on an area of land, a procedure through which its members can communicate and therefore initiate the process of organisation. It follows that the system of naming is as old as mankind, a product of the mind par excellence, but dictated by custom, and regulated by complex logic as well as sensitivity to the symbolic value of a name.

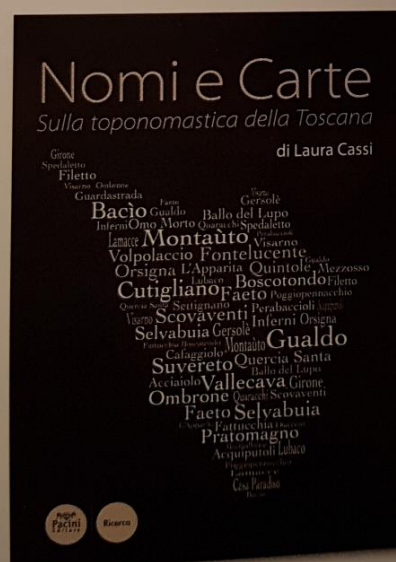Angelo Turco has written evocative pages on the process of denomination

Fig. 1 *Names and Maps. On the toponymy of Tuscany (Pacini Editore, Pisa, 2015).*

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Names and maps. On the toponymy of Tuscany

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Fig. 2 The Index of the book.

and territory as a cultural archive, discerning in this process the stage of symbolic control over territorialisation through which 'natural space' becomes territory: order assigned to space.

But toponyms - created for practical purposes – are interesting in themselves, since their original meaning may offer clues to the rediscovery of certain conditions, aspects and functions, thus contributing to the study of the functional organisation of land in the past. As the antiquity of place names may even indicate references to chronologically very remote environmental conditions, it becomes evident how relevant the potential contributions of toponymy can be to our knowledge of territorial evolution. Allusions, both wide-ranging and significant, include ancient hydrographic characteristics, woodlands, old routes, abandoned economic practices and past settlements. It should also be said that as well as reflecting natural diversity, the frequency of place names over any given area of land principally depends on the intensity and details of its appropriation.

Imagination also plays an important part in coining place names. Traditional denominations concede very little to the banal, and references to 'bello' (beautiful) are generally used to mean 'useful'. Only recently have names appeared merely as decorative labels, references to insignificant aesthetic values, attributed to new, exclusively residential settlements, thus lacking any connection with subsistence on the land. An exemplary case of territorial marketing exists in Sardinia, where numerous names newly assigned to tourist settlements, albeit to emphasise the beauty of the locations, have been coined on the basis of a generic aesthetic model. The touristic image is a powerful agent in coining place names: *Val di Luce* ("Valley of Light") has replaced the less alluring *Valle delle Pozze* ("Valley of the Pools", at Abetone in the Tusco-Emilian Apennines), *Riva degli Etruschi* ("Etruscan Coast") in Maremma, *Costa Smeralda* ("Emerald Coast"), *Costa Dorata* ("Golden Coast") and *Costa Turchese* ("Turquoise Coast") in Sardinia (Fig. 3).
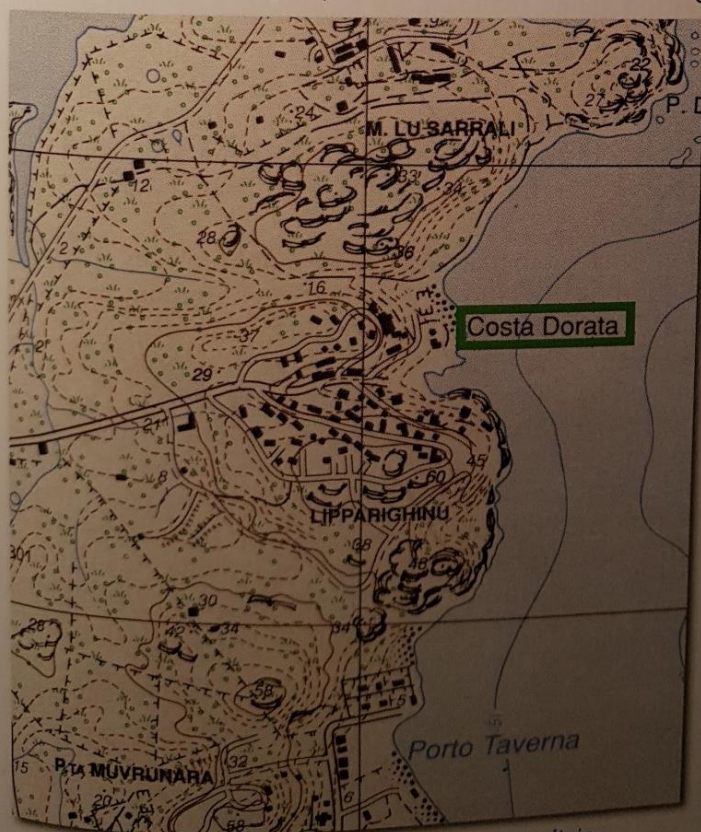

Fig. 3 Costa Dorata (Golden Coast) in Sardinia.

This might even be called 'commercialisation' of the landscape. The frequent use of metaphor is further evidence of the importance of perception when assigning a place name: names such as *Omomorto* ("Dead Man") and *Femminamorta* ("Dead Woman") suggested by relief profiles in the territory go beyond the mere appearance of the land, illustrating how toponyms can be conceived as both photographs and portraits of the environment (Fig. 4).
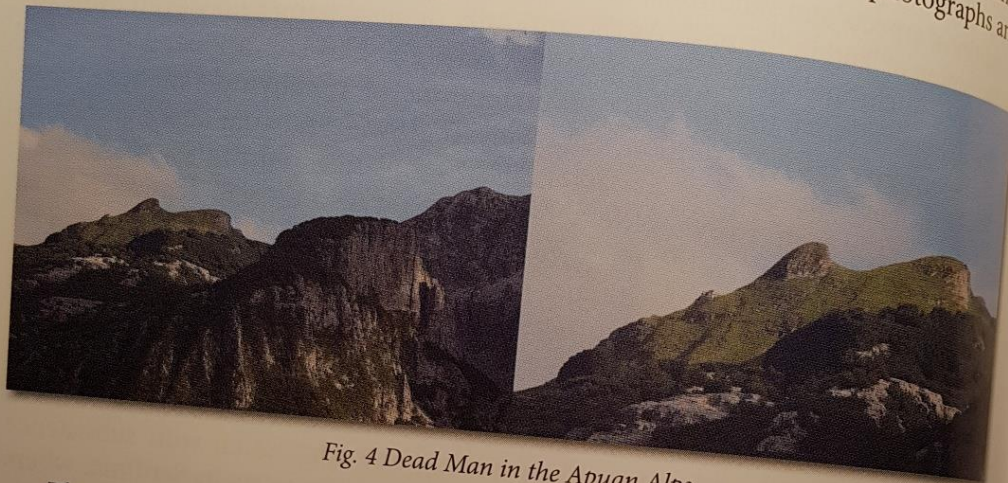

Fig. 4 Dead Man in the Apuan Alps.

The way generations of humans have perceived environmental characteristics collectively indicates that toponyms are an expression of their common knowledge and one of the most evident manifestations of the spirit of a place, constituting basic elements in the identity and dynamics of a territory. They are therefore fundamental components in the historical memory of the land, a function now also recognised as a process of development which stimulates awareness and recognition among the population.

The reasons for geographic interest in place names are manifold: they offer clues to the history of the population of the land and its past organisation, particular ways of perceiving territory (metaphorical expressions), new denominations (the result of political strategies or territorial marketing, as in the case of names appearing in Sardinia, suggested by tourism over the last thirty years).

Place names can be studied geographically through a single toponym designating a particular fact or phenomenon (e.g. *Visarno*, an allusion to an ancient branch of the River Arno), or through a category of toponyms such as those conceptually relevant to woodland vegetation and connections with past and present mantles of vegetation, e.g. *Faeto* (Beech Wood) and derivative forms or settlements and roads (for example *Spedale*, an old term for Hospital, and derivations), or by examining the entire corpus of toponyms in one area for the purpose of investigating their relation to the geographic landscape of that same area.

In each such case of research, I wish again to emphasise the fundamental importance of the linguist in ensuring the exactitude of the chosen terms.

As examples of methodology, I would emphasise the criteria proposed for the definition of geographic indicators to record toponyms (Cassi Marcaccini, 1998) and for toponymic revision (see Cassi and Marcaccini 1991, on the correction and integration of place names on large scale maps).

For some years now toponomastic research has greatly benefitted from geographic information technology systems. Whether used at their lowest potential or at a level of greater complexity, these are a useful tool in the relatively rapid and simple production of databases built on georeferenced data, which may be analysed according to spatial relations and processes, thus enabling the production of thematic maps of use in further closely related studies.

The identification of the source of toponyms is fundamental in place name research based on an area of land chosen for investigation. Limited to the principal sources only – ancient and recent large-scale maps, written archival sources, guides, inventories and surveys – the ancient plats are of the greatest importance. I wish to point out that the maps showing the earliest experiments in geometric Tuscan Land Cadastre promoted by Pietro Leopoldo are a source of paramount importance for their accuracy in the survey of place name coverage, their extremely large scale, coverage of the entire grand-ducal territory and the period of their inception (the first decades of the 19th century). They are easily accessible on line thanks to the *Servizio Cartografico della Regione Toscana* (Cartographic Service of Tuscany Region).

To conclude, the extremely rich toponymy corpus of the ancient, densely populated territory of Tuscany is a concrete example to read some significative elements of the historical identity of land. In an extract of an IGMI map, at the scale 1:25,000, showing a section of the Bisenzio Valley north-west of Florence, not only do the numerous place names stand out, but also the variety of conceptual categories to which they refer, thus offering a markedly identity oriented reading. Indeed, many are the particularities recorded in the toponymy corpus. These are both synchronic, from which emerges a careful reading of the physical and cultural landscape of the territory – referring to the character of relief and in general to land formations, vegetation, hydrography, human settlement and activities – and diachronic, modern place names co-existent with those hundreds and thousands of years old (Fig. 5).

The names of people from the past, such as *Vaiano, Sofignano, Savignano, Spicciano, Moschignano, Ponzano,* and present such as *Guicciardini e Buonamici,* and names of saints, *S. Gaudenzio, C. S. Benedetto* are found alongside names testifying to ancient human activities, *Le Fornaci* ("The Furnaces"), *Calcinaia, Il Fabbro;* animal breeding, *Poggio dei Mandrioni;* agricultural work and administration, *Camponi, Il Poderino;* steads, *Le Case, Le Casacce, La Casina, La Colombaria, C. La Mulinaccia, Torricella, C. Sala di sopra e C. Sala di sotto;* land formation, *Poggio Pian del Monte, Massi Piani, C. Il Poggio, Montaùto, Poggio delle Colline, Poggio del Cotone* ("cotone": a term indicating a rise in the land), *La Lastruccia;* liable to landslides, *Poggio della Macìa* and here also perhaps neighbouring *Petrizzi;* hydrography and water sources, *Rimaggio, Ricavo, Fontanelle, C. Le Fonti, Fonti del Pero;* vegetation, *C. Querceta, Bosco del Rosso, I Faggi, Fosso del Boscone, C. L'Olmo;* exposure, *Spazzavento* (Wind Sweeps); animals, in some cases indicating particular characteristics of a place, such as *Volpolaccio.*

Although most place names are the result of simple observation, they have gathered added value over the intervening centuries, and have become signposts to identification. Once again, this can be seen in the Val di Bisenzio, where the two toponyms *Guardia* and *Filetta,* located on opposite sides of the valley, indicate two
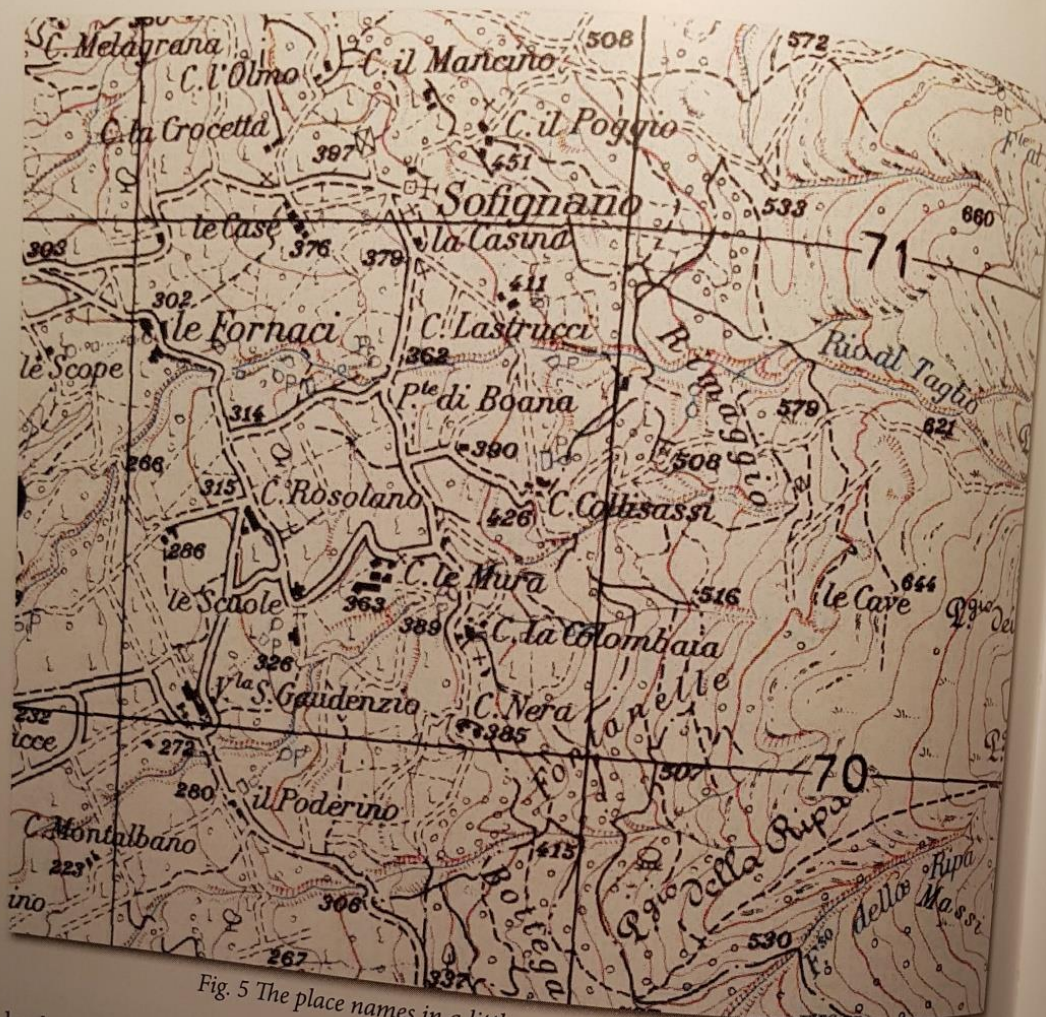
Fig. 5 The place names in a little part of the Bisenzio Valley.

lookout posts, the first Germanic ("ward"), the second Byzantine ("φυλακ"), to which history has conferred an indisputably significant identity.

Ultimately, it may be said that in the field of toponymy scientific analysis and a perceptive approach go hand in hand. Place names are both photographs and portraits of the environment, they are the representations of a reality of which they are also the interpretation, at times even the expression of a reality which is 'other', virtual, born also of our desires.

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