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United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names
Romano-Hellenic Division

3rd International Scientific Symposium
Castel dell'Ovo – Napoli [Naples] – Italia [Italy]
22nd-24th September 2021

Permanence, transformation, substitution and oblivion of geographical names

Edited by

Andrea Cantile and Helen Kerfoot

IGMI – Firenze 2022

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Some thoughts on permanence, transformation, substitution and oblivion of geographical names in Italy

ANDREA CANTILE*

Abstract

The title of this year's symposium uses four nouns, permanence, transformation, substitution and oblivion, as a formula that tries to summarize the possible phases of the existence of a toponym.

In the following pages some thoughts will be proposed which, starting from the description of some cases concerning the Italian territory, will highlight the role of cartography and the cartographer in the dynamics of conservation, transformation, replacement and forgetting of place names over time. In closing, some brief concluding remarks will then be proposed which will try to trace a map of the most urgent actions needed in the toponymic field in Italy.

Keywords: permanence, transformation, substitution, oblivion, pentima, starza.

Permanence / “longue durée”

Permanence, or, better said, the “longue durée”, testifies to the resistance of a geographical name to political, cultural, and economic changes and even to traumatic events, which have occurred in the course of history. Other times, permanence is only an apparent phenomenon because it is the result of the voluntary restoration of oldest, forgotten or marginally used names to pass on the memory of ancient origins, dictated by a desire sometimes elitist.

Among the many place names that have remained more or less unchanged, some toponyms remain almost intact, from ancient times to the present day, with changes that have, at times, very little affected the form and pronunciation. They are toponyms that

“semblent doués d’une vitalité propre, puisée aux racines qu’ils ont poussées dans le langage populaire. [...] Ces noms ont cela de particulier que, sans avoir jamais servi de divisions politiques, sans avoir l’appui d’une consécration officielle, ils se maintiennent par la seule force de l’usage; ils continuent à être employés concurremment aux désignations de départements ou de provinces dont se servent aussi les habitants. Ils méritent par là de former une catégorie spéciale, une famille au sens que les naturalistes prêtent à ce mot” (Vidal de la Blache, 1904, p. 12).

Their genesis derives from the well-known daily relationship that has been

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established over the centuries between man and the environment, in the process of creating the territory, products of a “popular geography”

“[...] qui, dans sa naïveté, est toujours expressive, et qui, dans son domaine restreint, est moins sujette à faillir que la géographie des savants. Les habitants que les ont créés ou adoptés, n’ont pas été guidés par un autre besoin que celui de noter ce qui se rapportait à leur existence, à leurs occupations quotidiennes, ce qui peut-être, en certain cas, avait ému leur imagination. On peut ainsi se rendre compte des traits physiques qui les ont principalement frappés dans le pays qu’ils occupent. Ils ont nommé ce qu’ils utilisaient; et cela permet de voir quelles sélections ils ont opérée parmi les possibilités géographiques au milieu desquelles ils étaient placés” (Vidal de la Blache, 1904, pp. 16-17).

This relationship between man and his territory has therefore generated the denomination of many places, which Paul Vidal de la Blache, called “pays”, or choronyms, by virtue of which places were denoted and people were characterized, with their particular “ways of life”:

“[...] un ensemble d’habitudes, plus ou moins conservées [...] les modes de culture, de nourriture, le vêtement ou du moins la coiffe des femmes, les formes de langage [...] une sorte de vocabulaire topographique spécial” (Vidal de la Blache, 1904, p. 14).

However, some of these names have lost semantic transparency and, with their opacification, the documentary value that they could have expressed becomes evanescent. This phenomenon derives, as is known, from the loss of linguistic-semantic value and from the assumption of a “simply and purely denotative function” (CONSANI, 2008, p. 26), caused by the alternation of different linguistic groups on the same territory, or by the “Deformations to which popular use subjects them in an attempt to make them intelligible” (BORTOLOTTI, 1981, p. 235), or by corruption deriving from erroneous transcriptions in notarial deeds, land registers and maps.

In these cases, far from falling into useless paretymological reconstructions, if the study aspires to bring out a “testimony”, it must necessarily move “on the abscissas and ordinates of time and space, that is in adherence to the historical-geographical reality [...] in continuous contact with history, with prehistory, with archaeology, with anthropic geography and with philology” (BATTISTI, 1963, p. 38).

The following example concerns a place mentioned in the famous placitum titled *Placito di Sessa Aurunca*, dating back to the year 963, and therefore contemporary with the more famous *Placito Capuano*, considered the birth certificate of the Italian language. In the *Placito di Sessa Aurunca* was transcribed the sentence pronounced by the judicial authority for the legal attribution of title to some land (PROIETTI, 2018 and 2019) and, among various place names mentioned in the placitum, attention is particularly drawn to a place indicated as “*ecclesia sancte marie ubi sunt ipse pentome maiori*” [Church of Saint Mary where the same major sloping lands are]. In consideration of the numerous place names dedicated to *Sanctae Marie*, the noun *pentome* becomes decisive for understanding

to which of the many churches dedicated to Saint Mary the placitus referred.

The historical-cartographic analysis of the series of maps available at the IGMI Map Archives offers the opportunity to ascertain the following.

In the *Carta dei dintorni di Napoli alla scala 1:20,000* [Map of Napoli's surroundings at the scale of 1:20,000], created between 1836 and 1840, in the Reale Ufficio Topografico of Naples (ROT) [Royal Topographical Office of Naples], there were still traces of two very similar names Rivo di Pientima [stream of Pientima] and Fosso della Pientima [ditch of Pientima] (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Royal Topographical Office of Naples, Map of Napoli's surroundings at the scale of 1:20,000, 1836-1840 (IGMI, Map Archives, order number 46-11, armoire 93, folder 74, doc. 8).

In the *Map of Neapolitan and Sicilian provinces at the scale of 1:50,000*, published by the Italian Topographic Military Institute (which became Italian Geographic Military Institute in 1882) in 1876, we find also other similar names Mass.a Penturi [Penturi farm] and the same R. Pientima [Pientima stream] and R. Penturi [Penturi stream] (Figure 2).

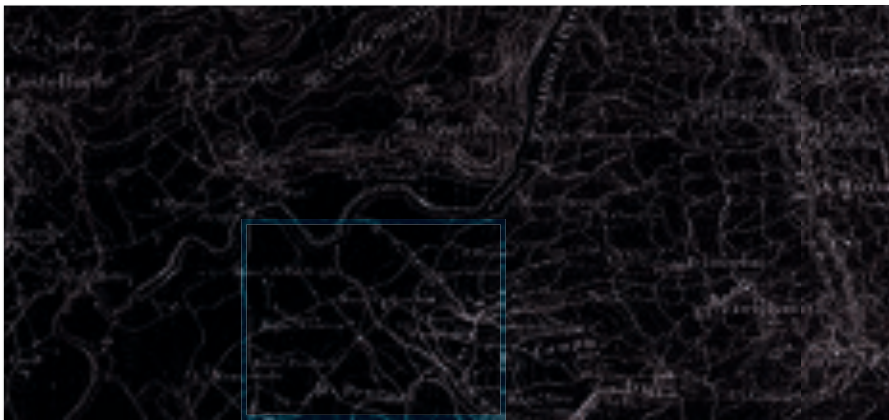


Figure 2. Italian Topographic Military Institute, Map of Neapolitan and Sicilian provinces at the scale of 1:50,000, published in 1876 (IGMI, Attilio Mori Library, 3A, 7-8).

In the *Topographic map of Italy at the scale of 1:25,000*, published by the Italian Geographic Military Institute (IGMI) in 1942, all these names disappear (Figure 3), and in the new edition of the same map published in 1957 only one of them (the hydronym) reappears slightly deformed [R. Pientina] (Figure 4), and remains unchanged even in the latest 2007 edition (Figure 5).



Figure 3. IGMI, *Topographic map of Italy at the scale of 1:25,000*, sheet no. 172 I N.E., Suio (1942).



Figure 4. IGMI, *Topographic map of Italy at the scale of 1:25,000*, sheet no. 172 I N.E., Suio (1957).

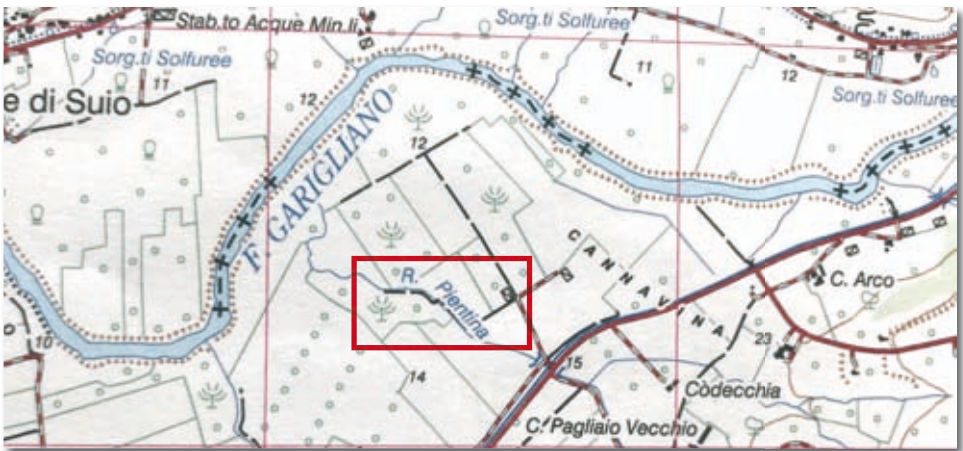


Figure 5. IGMI, *Topographic map of Italy at the scale of 1:50,000*, sheet no. 416 II, Sessa Aurunca (2007).

From interpreting these maps we can state that, until the end of the 19th century, it was still possible to understand the location of the places indicated by these terms and it was also possible to understand the genesis and the meaning of the term *pentome* and reconstruct the linguistic path that the transformation of the term has followed in the last thousand years. In particular, it was possible to understand that the Latin term *pendēns* [sloping] was first transformed into the Medieval Latin *pèntome* [sloping land], from which was derived the vernacular terms *pèntima* or *pièntima* [sloping ground], in use in some municipalities of central-southern Lazio and in the municipality of Olevano Romano in the form *penteme* (CONTI, 1984, p. 219), and the Neapolitan *pèndema* [rocky wall] (SALZANO, 1989, p. 185). Furthermore, by examining the morphological characteristics of the territory, it was also possible to easily understand the form *pènturi* [sloping ground].

The appearance, disappearance and reappearance of these toponyms constitute a phenomenon of considerable interest from which we can deduce how the millennial permanence of these minor toponyms is perpetuated without any form of legal protection, as happens for toponyms with administrative value. It is due both to the preservation of semantic transparency and to the shared and conscious use by resident populations. But all this shows once again the great responsibility of surveyors involved in activities for cartographic purposes.

If the toponyms in question had no longer appeared in the maps of IGMI, it could have been inferred that they had fallen into disuse and then into oblivion. The reappearance, even of just one of them in subsequent maps, instead shifts the attention from the use of toponyms on site to the methods of collecting toponyms.

From what has been shown so far it is, therefore, clear that the total elimination of the toponyms in question in the 1942 map depended only on an inaccurate toponymic survey, conducted in a climate of emergency (second World War). The reappearance of one of the toponyms, on the other hand, constitutes proof of a toponymic permanence, which emerged thanks to the better attention of the topographer engaged in subsequent activities.

The case of the toponym taken from the *Placito di Sessa Aurunca* is, ultimately, one of the many examples of millennial permanence, which does not only concern geographical names of known historical importance and of municipalities, subject to specific legislative provisions that crystallize their form and pronunciation, but also concerns many minor toponyms, which, without any form of legal protection, have retained their original denotative and connotative functions, in the long term.

Transformation, substitution and oblivion

Transformation, substitution and oblivion of geographical names are instead widespread phenomena, due to different causes that have been perpetuated since time immemorial, causing sometimes radical changes in the toponymy of small and large territories, with very similar effects. Among the countless examples of this kind, two cases in the remote past concern Troy and Mycenae. The first one is recalled by the brief citation of the Lucanian epos placed in the epigraph at beginning of this volume, which dramatically highlights the fragility of many

place names cancelled after the destruction of Troy, in whose site nature had resumed control and nothing more remained of the past greatness of the ancient city. The second case concerns instead the events told by Thucydides about the radical transformation of the Mycenaean nomenclature, caused by the invasion of the Dorians at the dawn of Greek history.

In the Italian territory, the vicissitudes undergone by place names, as a result of continuous struggles for conquest, which took place from antiquity to the 19th century, can give only a vague idea of the number of changes, replacements and oblivions that have occurred in the course of about three millennia, generating, among other things, a large number of opacifications in many place names still in use today.

A remarkable, vast toponymic and odonomastic transformation intervention, carried out throughout the national territory with the involvement of the Parliament and the Municipal councils concerned, took place shortly after the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. As part of a general reorganization of the administrative structure of the country, mergers and divisions of municipalities were made, new names were introduced and some toponyms were transformed, considered “causes of misunderstandings and embarrassments” (DE SANTIS, 1924, p. 356).

The misunderstandings were determined by various cases of homonymy and required the introduction of decrees aimed at eliminating the ambiguity of double or triple denominations, issued between 1862 and 1864. This was true for many toponyms, the best known of which were Torino (in Piedmont and Abruzzo), Lucca (in Tuscany and Sicily), Livorno (in Tuscany and Piedmont), Capri (in Campania and Sicily) and Prato (in Lombardy and Tuscany).

In some cases, it was instead chosen to determine a kind of “ennobling” of the old medieval toponyms, corrupted by popular use, recovering ancient local traditions and linking the new names to documented historical facts and, sometimes, to simple legends. Among the numerous transformations of this kind, I limit the examples to the most obvious cases only.

In the province of Catania, the municipality of Centorbi [one hundred orbs] was transformed into Centuripe [one hundred steep coasts], with the royal decree of March 15, 1863.

In the province of Principato Ulteriore (Benevento), the municipality of Montemale [mount of evil] was transformed into Santarcangelo [Holy archangel], with the royal decree of October 26, 1862.

In the province of Terra di Lavoro (Caserta), the municipality of Fossaceca [blind pit] was transformed into Fontegreca [Greek source], with the royal decree of August 21, 1862; the town of Schiavi di Formicola [slaves of Formicola] was transformed into Liberi [free], with the royal decree of August 24, 1862 (Statistica del Regno, 1865, pp. 273-322; see also, in this volume CONTI, pp. 179-186). In Umbria, the town of Canemorto [dead dog] was transformed into Orvinio (linking it to the memory of the ancient Sabino-Roman centre, *Orvinium*, cited by Marco Terenzio Varrone and Dionysius of Halicarnassus), with the royal decree of March 29, 1863.

A clear celebratory purpose instead animated other changes of denomination. The municipality of Sogliano (in the province of Otranto) was transformed into Sogliano Cavour, with the royal decree of November 13, 1862, about a year after the

death of Camillo Benso, Earl of Cavour, the first prime minister and protagonist of the unification of the Kingdom of Italy. In Gaeta, what was previously the hamlet of Borgo, with a royal decree of February 18, 1897, was elevated to the status of municipality and took the name of Elena, in honour of Princess Elena of Montenegro, married to the crown prince, Vittorio Emanuele III, in the previous year (DE SANTIS, 1924, pp. 356-397).

In the odonomastic field, instead, there was the birth of a multitude of denominations praising the Savoy and, more generally, the Italian Risorgimento epic. There was no city or small inhabited centre that was not equipped with at least one street or square dedicated to the September 20th, the day of the famous Breccia di Porta Pia [Breach of Porta Pia] and the consequent conquest of Rome by the Italian Army, to Giuseppe Garibaldi, to Camillo Benso Earl of Cavour, to Vittorio Emanuele II of Savoy, in whose honour the previous memory of the places had been cancelled.

In some cases, the overzealousness of some municipal administrators led to the naming of streets and squares after people still alive or only recently dead (MASTRELLI, 1998, p. 437n).

The awareness of the mistake committed on the wave of post-unification enthusiasm led, after more than sixty years, to the adoption of regulatory measures that guaranteed the preservation of the memory of the places, but the process was still very long. With the decree of May 10, 1923, converted into the law of 17 April 1925, n. 473, and then with the law of June 23, 1927, n. 1188, an attempt was first made to stem the emotionality of measures that are too closely linked to contingency, by imposing government control over the activity of the municipalities, through the prefectures and the superintendents of monuments, and by introducing the ban on naming streets and squares “after people who have not been deceased for at least ten years” (article 2). In article 5 of the same law, it was also provided that “In the event of the removal of a recent name, the previous one or the one that is considered more important than the topography or history will preferably be restored”.

The provision that however gave a greater guarantee for the conservation of the memory of the places was constituted by the decree of the President of the Republic of May 30, 1989, n. 233, with which the regulatory framework was completed, specifying that, “In the event of a change in the name of the circulation area, the previous name must also be indicated”, thus introducing an important provision to safeguard the oldest odonymy (MASTRELLI, 1998, p. 437).

After this provision and following the promulgation of the law of June 8, 1990, no. 142, System of Local Autonomies, the Ministry of the Interior, with the circular of March 8, 1991, n. 10, identified the town council as the competent body in toponymic matters.

In addition to the toponymic transformations implemented as a result of laws and decrees, numerous other cases of special interest are linked to the interventions that have corrupted the place names, determined “in an attempt to make them intelligible” (BORTOLOTTI, 1981, p. 235), through popular usage and due to erroneous transcriptions in public or private documents, notarial deeds, land registers, and maps.

Among the many examples of this kind, a noteworthy case is linked to the



Figure 7. IGMI, Topographic map of Italy at the scale of 1:25,000, sheet no. 172 III S.E., Casal di Principe, published in 1957.



Figure 8. IGMI, Topographic map of Italy at the scale of 1:50,000, sheet no. 430, Caserta Ovest, published in 1993.

In addition, unlike what is reported in IGMI's maps, the current cadastral map (Sheet 6 of the municipality of Frignano) shows the local existence of the homonymous road titled Vicinale Starza del Conte [country road Farm of the Earl] (Figure 9), in which appears the term *starza* (instead of *stazza*), that in Neapolitan, means "farm, large farm" (SALZANO, 1989, p. 263; this lemma is also in the Great Dictionary of the Italian Language, 2018, vol. XX, p. 93) and was also used in the rural settlements of the lower Garigliano valley since the 12th century (CONTI, 1984, pp. 58-59).

Finally, if we consider that still in use locally is the locution *Starza o ponte* [Farm to the bridge] to indicate the place in question, we can deduce that the anomaly is



Figure 9. Revenue Agency, Directorate of the Land Registry, Provincial Directorate of Caserta, Cadastral map of the municipality of Frignano, at the scale of 1:2000, sheet no. 6, 2021 and its detail.

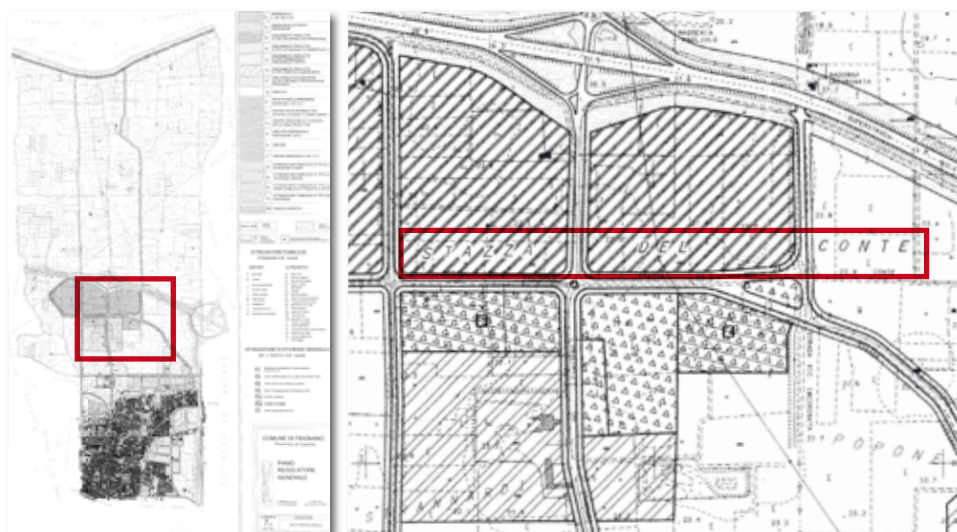


Figure 11. Town Plan of the municipality of Frignano, province of Caserta, and its detail.

Concluding remarks

Place names are a cultural heritage of inestimable value, to be preserved in all their forms, as they “reflect political, religious, social, economic events of all kinds” (ASCOLI, 1895, pp. 100-101).

Place names change over time for various reasons and the toponymy of a given region should not be seen “as a closed and rigid corpus, facing the past, but as a compact system, albeit variable and open to modernity and the future” (MASTRELLI, 2015, p. 16). From this is derived the right of settled populations to name their places and also to change their form, as well as the duty to preserve memory, because

“Un nom géographique n'est pas une étiquette, mais un témoignage. Qu'il aide à retracer les vicissitudes politiques et ethniques d'une contrée, cela va de soi. Mais on peut aussi, en certain cas, y trouver d'utiles enseignements sur les rapports du sol et des hommes” (Vidal de la Blache, 1904, p. 12).

It is necessary to create toponymic lists mainly taken from oldest cadastral documents, the importance of which had already been highlighted at the end of the 19th century (ASCOLI, 1895, p. 102), just as it is necessary to extend the collection of minor toponyms to all of Italy, including their dialectal forms, as in the research works promoted by professor Osvaldo Baldacci between 1978 and 1984 for the creation of the *Glossario di termini geografici dialettali della regione italiana* [Glossary of geographical dialectal terms of the Italian region] (DE VECCHIS, 1978; ARENA, 1979; MELELLI AND SACCHI DE ANGELIS, 1982; GIORDANO, 1983; CONTI, 1984).

In general, the entire Italian administrative toponymy and odonymy are both well protected by current regulations and are not objectively at risk of cancellation

or oblivion. However, there are still many cases of corruption of place names, due to various causes. Among these, the most easily identifiable and correctable is derived from transcription errors made by the cartographer in charge of toponymic collections for the preparation of the official map of Italy. However, many times, these are denominations that have entered in current use and are, therefore, assimilated in their current form.

The collection and treatment of place names with their correct transcription and pronunciation cannot be entrusted to the single responsibility of the cartographer. The toponymic revision of the Topographic map of Italy cannot be considered complete because, with the slow decommissioning of the Permanent Commission established in 1949 (CANTILE, 2004) and its subsequent suppression (CANTILE, 2016, p. 15), unfortunately the acquisition of incorrect or even invented toponyms has continued.

It is, therefore, urgent to resume the systematic revision of the whole Italian toponymic corpus, coordinated by a new National Commission for official Italian toponymy (CANTILE, 2007, pp. 282-283), with the necessary skills in cartographic, linguistic, geographical and historical fields and which works in close collaboration with similar bodies, established in each region and autonomous province.

With the hope that other precious indications for the protection of this intangible cultural heritage of humanity may be derived from this meeting and that the efforts we all have made over the years to spread the importance of correct use of geographical names and their transfer to future generations can be universally recognized as a fundamental prerequisite for peaceful coexistence between social groups in the same country and between neighboring countries, I declare open the Third International Scientific Symposium of the Romano-Hellenic Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

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