

**GEOGRAPHY AND PLACE-NAMES.  
ECHOES OF THE TRADITIONAL AGRICULTURAL WORLD IN THE  
PLACEN NAME OF TUSCANY**

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**Abstract**

One century ago, geography studied the place-name especially to find its own terminology. Today, the geographical approach in the toponymic study is especially useful for awakening the sense of belonging to place. An interesting example of the contribution that the place names can offer to study the local identity is represented by the names related to the traditional rural world. The place names of areas such as Tuscany are expressive indicators of local identity.

**1. Introduction**

The application of geographical studies to place names, despite its many interesting aspects – it suffices to consider their reflections on the landscape in toponomastics or in the contribution that toponyms can make in reconstructing environmental features of the past, for example the extension of wooded areas or the layout of ancient trails and roads, to mention but two - has never been particularly exploited in Italian geography. Nevertheless, a good number of excellent studies have been carried out, such as G. Ricchieri's and O. Marinelli's in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and those directed by O. Baldacci and A. Sestini in the second half of the twentieth.

It should be noted that early twentieth century studies of Italian geography were dictated mainly by the need to define a strictly scientific approach to geographical studies by providing it with a suitable vocabulary. As a result, research into dialectal geographical terms have made significant headway (see bibliography) with the investigations of Baldacci's students in the 1970s, which explored these terms as they exist in various Italian regions. Sestini then promoted a series of projects on particular types of geographic phenomena and on the entire toponymic corpus of a single area in order to investigate the relationship between its geographical landscape and its place names.

In Tuscany - inspired by the effacement of micro place names due to the waning of the traditional economy - researches have tended to focus on the criteria for defining geographical indicators in the collection of place names and on the criteria for revising place names in large-scale cartography.

At the end of the 1990's, more or less contemporarily with the breakdown of micro toponyms, place names gained full entitlement as a part of Italy's cultural heritage, as they bear upon both the many traditional aspects of territorial organization and the perception that centuries of generations have had of their living environment. These considerations are clearly manifest in the areas of ancient settlement typical of Italy. The drafting of criteria for the collection and recovery operations which have been conducted in several parts of the Italian territory (for example in the province of Trento) are a demonstration of this.

A personal memory. In the early 1980's it took considerable effort for me to reconstruct the toponomastic mesh of a small Apennine valley whose settlement consisted mainly of scattered houses, but nowadays almost all the houses bear signs with their own names.

It should be noted that large-scale maps have been a key document for identifying and collecting names relevant to various categories of geographic interest. I refer in particular to IGM maps on a scale of 1:25000, a document which even today is irreplaceable, albeit not without errors. In the past, research was slow and difficult, but today's modern technologies have made it possible to speed up the collection and construction of themes. But the researcher's care and attention are irreplaceable. Forty years ago it took me two years to collect the place names linked to the natural vegetation in Tuscany, while last year it took only fifteen days for a student, Federica Frondizi, to achieve the same results of forty years ago.

Notwithstanding the researcher's commitment and the gis technologies that make it possible to set DB and construct thematic maps with ease, I repeat that these devices cannot replace the scientific expertise needed not only to read and interpret a theme but also to realize its very construction.

Geotoponomastic studies can now receive a fresh impulse from the affirmation of certain principles, such as assigning primary importance to a territory's historical memory as a fundamental component of development based on sustainability. A territory's historical memory is believed capable of promoting mechanisms of awareness and self-recognition in the local population, thus enhancing the ability to interpret the traces left by centuries of generations. And what component of historical memory is more effective than place names in representing the human perception of a living environment by the populations that have succeeded one another down through the ages?

An interesting example of the contribution that the place names can offer to the study of 'local identity is represented by the names related to the traditional rural world.

The place names in ancient settlement areas like ours, in fact, are the result of a centuries-old perception of their living environment by the different waves of settlers in a given territory. For example, today's Tuscany has some pre-Indo-European names and many Etruscan, Latin, Neo-Latin, and Germanic names.

In addition to landscape, the toponymic corpus of areas inhabited since ancient times is also a palimpsest of signs and meanings, not just as the result of different languages but also that of the large number of conceptual categories of which that

corpus is an expression. The names applied to the most varied geographical referents, such as watercourses, forms of soil and settlements may refer in fact to the most diverse objects and phenomena. For example, the names of settlements, to cite an object that par excellence possesses a proper denomination, may be suggested by vegetation (Casa Faeto), hydrography (Riomaggiore), forms of soil (Montenero), family names, and so on.

Secondly, in Tuscany, primary activities have played an important role in the construction of place names, not only because agricultural activities are the organizational basis of rural areas, but also because the sharecropping system, which began in the fourteenth century, favored a wide distribution of the population and thus the formation of a large number of place names.

It is worth noting that today, after the almost complete disappearance of traditional agricultural methods, there is a general belief that the historical memory of rural areas plays a significant role in the definition of milieu, thus facilitating the processes of self-recognition by local populations.

For all of these reasons, as part of a series of researches dedicated to the cultural heritage of the rural world and to the role of historical memory in the processes of local development, a few years ago Monica Meini and I undertook to compile the traditional agricultural terminology of Tuscany, with specific reference to terminology that in our opinion was likely to have generated place names.

Starting with a basic list of terms about the organization and arrangement of soils and crops, contained in Cassi's and Marccaccini's repertory of 'Geographical Indicators' for Toponymic Indexing (1998), which comprised more than a hundred language and dialectal agricultural terms related to the territory of Italy, a great number of sources were detected.

First of all, E. Sereni's *Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano*, Eugenio Canevazzi's *Dizionario di agricoltura* (1889), and Paul Scheuermeier's *Atlante lessicale toscano, Il lavoro dei contadini* (1980); then the repertories of Gerhard Rolfs, Pietro Fanfani's *Vocabolario dell'uso toscano* (Firenze: G. Barbera, 1863), Giuseppe Rigutini's *Giunte ed osservazioni al Vocabolario toscano* (1864), Idelfonso Nieri's *Vocabolario lucchese* (1901), Ubaldo Cagliariitano's *Vocabolario senese* (1975), Giuseppe Fatini's *Vocabolario amiatino* (Barbera, 1953), Giuseppe Malagoli's *Vocabolario pisano* (1839), Ottaviano Targioni Tozzetti's *Relazioni*, up to the *Cultura contadina in Toscana*, edited by Renato Stopani.

By limiting the choice to the terms likely to have toponomastic links, we collected over 3000 lemmas, which, in collaboration with Valeria Santini, were submitted for verification in the toponomastic database (1:25000 maps) of the Military Geographic Institute, for the purpose of identifying the place names referable to them.

Despite the wide range of the terminologies we collected, representing only a part of existing corpus, and despite the fact that the mass of toponyms refers to geographic features of the rural world, the toponymic data were relatively modest, except for certain types of designations, such as those deriving from terms related to cultivated vegetation and forestry.

Faced with the many toponyms linked to the cultivation of olives and vines (along with their variant and derived forms), to mention but two especially important cultivated plants of the Tuscan environment, and the remarkable group of names related to forestry (ronco, ranco, debbio, rasiccia, etc.), i.e. the set of terms related to agriculture, such as tools or household goods used by farmers, or to farming

methods, etc., did not produce significant results in terms of numbers, especially when compared with the number of toponyms produced from other conceptual matrices, such as natural vegetation, forms of soil, and settlements.

Indubitably, many of these terms – it is sufficient to recall the 36 items related to the yoke, as well as those related to parts of the yoke, as gathered by Stopani - could hardly have a toponymic bearing, since the coining of a place name follows a logic that requires a certain 'density' of the word matrix in terms of 'visual imprint' or at least the capacity to characterize the object to be named. It is evident that the presence of arboreal vegetation, a characteristic shape of the soil, an architectural element, or a person's name can easily suggest a place name, while an herb, a specialized tool or a specific function such as a technique of grafting, are unlikely to function as conceptual matrices. No wonder then that, except for a small number of lemmas, such as those relating to reservoirs for "collecting water after their deviation from the river bed through artificial channels," such as *conserva*, *bottaccio*, *margone*, *gora*, most have produced only a few place names (e.g., *presura*, *cigliere*, *archetta*, *arcile*, *magolo*, *tramezzo*).

There remains, however, the fact that - even though the 36 terms relating to the yoke or to different kinds of rakes, to cite but one instance, did not contribute to place names - the terminological and toponymic corpus related to traditional agricultural activities is a significant component of cultural identity, especially in times like the present, when, in addition to the waning of the traditional agricultural economy, the local populations are only in part autochthonous. Therefore, the historical memory of rural areas can act as an inter- and intra-generational bond and stimulate processes of awareness which, through an improved perception of their territories, can contribute to mechanisms of autonomous development. And if the direct descendants of the native population have the primary responsibility for conserving the historical memory of rural areas, knowledge of their traditions can be useful also for the 'new' populations of our territories.