Section 9 Cultural aspects

Chapter 23 Toponyms as carriers of cultural heritage: the history of place names

Tjeerd Tichelaar

23.1 Localized history contained in place names

A special and extremely valuable aspect of geographical names is the localized history they contain. Unless a toponym is deliberately replaced, it generally changes in appearance through time because of evolutionary and revolutionary changes of language, writing and pronunciation, but essentially it stays the same. The meaning a name carries when it is first applied may seem lost at first sight, but somewhere inside its iconic image and sound, in a fossilized form maybe and only extractable by the trained eye, it remains there to tell its own unique story to anyone who can see through the scars of time. Al-Iskandariyyah (Alexandria) in Egypt, Kandahar in Afghanistan, İskenderun in Turkey are surviving witnesses of local achievements of Alexander the Great, the names of Silifke and Antakya (Antioch) and several Ladiks in Turkey, as well as al-Lādhigīyah (Latakia) in Syria, commemorate members of the Macedonian dynasties founded by his generals that held sway right there. Oxford and Cambridge tell a story of river crossings in medieval times, important enough to make settlements grow into towns. Town names ending in -chester or -caster in England echo the presence of Roman legions initially responsible for the growth of these towns.

Older toponyms unveil images of local circumstances that no longer exist: natural environments that disappeared, plants and animals no longer around, economic, social and political systems for long replaced; they allow us to trace migrations and to reconstruct boundaries of which no material traces remain. Exactly because they are tied to fixed spots in space, the historical information geographical names contain is a priceless supplement to documented history and archaeological evidence.

23.2 Ancient toponyms: a special class of cultural heritage

Although geographical names are subject to deliberate, often politically motivated change and replacement and are newly devised whenever a new geographical object needs to be named, many of them subsist many centuries. They prove resistant to events like wars and natural disasters all but obliterating the objects they originally describe. Like ghosts of the deceased, they sometimes keep hanging around the locations where they were once brought to life, and not uncommonly find a new body in which to dwell. Some toponyms constitute a category of cultural heritage of nearly unmatched ancientness.

Geographical names sometimes embody a population's historical roots, or even a location's history preceding the presence of the ancestors of those living there now. They are valued by historians, historical geographers and linguists for the light they may shed on a past otherwise dark, for the window they may provide to look back beyond the beginnings of history.

Apart from actual, verified historical details, legends and popular anecdotes often at some time in the past got attached to them. Even if proven untrue, these played or still play a role in the connection people perceive with locations in geographical space.

23.3 Time-resistant ancient names

Most commonly, ancient names over the centuries change in appearance following language change when control of the land and everything on it, including the named objects, passes from one ethnolinguistic group ('people') to another. Names also tend to change beyond recognition as a consequence of the evolution of phonetic, grammatical and syntactic details of languages and their writing conventions. In some cases, however, names seem to have survived all what happened to their environment practically unchanged. The map below shows some of the many hundreds of place names in Italy dating back more than 2000 years: the coloured names printed in roman type are currently still (or again) written in exactly the same way as in ancient times.

What strikes us when looking at the map in figure 23-1 is the impressive diversity of cultures that left their traces in names still in use today, most of them now forgotten and, to the eyes of the unknowing, for long disappeared. Also, the distribution of these hidden heirlooms still gives us a clue of the geographical range of the cultures leaving us their names: Etruscans in the central peninsula, Illyrians and Venetes in the east, Celts in the north, Greeks and Phoenicians in the south, Romans and other Italic peoples nationwide: they all contributed to what we call Italy and Italian today. What also may surprise us, is that exactly among the surviving ancient names in Italy originally Latin names seem to be a minority.

Staying in Italy, the persistence of geographical names may be demonstrated by some examples of toponyms surviving the demise of the objects for which they were designed. The Etruscan city of Caisra, one of the biggest and most important places in Italy by the 6th century BCE, survived as a small provincial town into Roman times under the Latinised name Caere, but started to become abandoned as it fell victim to outbreaks of



language largely unchanged.

malaria and Saracen raids after the 6th century CE. By then its name had been transferred to the local bishopric, for which a new see was built 9 kilometres to the east. The new settlement was named Caere Nova ('New Caere'), which now resounds in the name of the village of Ceri. By the 13th century the old city had become a ghost town known as Caere Vetus ('Old Caere'), a name it retained when it became resettled in the 17th century: in modern Italian, this became Cerveteri.

Another notable example is the story of the city of Capua. This ancient place, its name also revealing an Etruscan past, was in the 3rd century BCE the secondlargest population centre in Roman Italy. In 851 CE, the city was burned to the ground by Saracen mercenaries sent by the Lombard usurper of the principality of Benevento to which it then belonged, after which a new city was built at the remains of the old Roman town of Casilinum, five kilometres down the Via Appia. The name Capua was consequently transferred to the new site, the location's former name going into oblivion. After a couple of centuries, the ruins of the old town came back to life, when some farmers settled around the old church of Santa Maria Maggiore, the only structure that had survived the Saracen attack. To honour the ancient site, in 1861 the town was renamed Santa Maria Maggiore Capua Vetere ('Old Capua').

Some similarities between the ancient and modern names in Italy are the result of recent renaming as a purposeful policy to boost national pride by reminiscing the glorious Roman past. In Sicily, the Greek town of Akragas had received the Latinised name Agrigentum when it was seized by the Romans in 210 BCE. At the time Arabic was the dominant language in Sicily, roughly from the 9th to the 11th century CE, the place was referred to as Kerkent, a name that was Sicilianized to Girgenti after the Arabic dominance passed. Girgenti was replaced with Agrigento, the modern Italian version of the Roman name, in 1927. Other examples of ancient Latin names that were recently revived are Tuscania (Toscanella until 1911), Tarquinia (Corneto until 1922) and Aprilia (a new town laid out in 1936).

23.4 The transfer of names from language to language

At the moment a name is given to an object, the language of the name-giver provides both the elements needed and the structure to join them together. The elements consist of semantic and morphologic units units of meaning and form - called words and *morphemes*. The former are the smallest units that may occur independently, the latter even smaller particles, like suffixes and affixes forming part of or joined to them. The structure is provided in the form of a set of rules called *grammar*, that defines the way the language can be used to convey (communicate) meaning. An important constituent of grammar is the syntax, determining the way words should be linked together into larger semantic conglomerates. Most names start their existence as such a semantic conglomerate.

The linguistic abracadabra above may easily be clarified by picking the first name that comes to mind. For instance: Stratford-upon-Avon. This English town that became world famous as the birthplace of William Shakespeare clearly consists of three elements, which are, obviously in accordance with some syntactic rule specifically applying to English names, separated by hyphens. Two of the elements start with a capital, the one in the middle does not: again a syntactic rule. As a capital initial letter is commonly used in (Roman) written language to denote that a word is either the beginning of a sentence or a name, we get the idea that both 'Stratford' and 'Avon' are names in themselves, and 'upon' is not. We need to know that 'upon' is a preposition, meant to establish a situational link between 'Stratford' and 'Avon'. Both of the remaining elements of this name also enclose a meaning for

themselves, which at the time of the name-giving must have been considered important: this meaning had to ensure that upon mentioning it would make clear which geographical object was meant, without anyone needing to point at it.

'Stratford' appears to be an Anglo-Saxon (Old English) name, consisting again of two semantic units, namely strat and ford. 'Strat' is adopted from the Latin word strata, meaning 'paved road'. It was a Latin (Roman) name for something the Romans made and left behind for the Anglo-Saxons, who did not know it themselves and, as they seem to have done with other Roman things, ignored it except when they could make use of it. The paved road referred to was in this case the Roman road from Alcester (ancient Alauna) to Tiddington, both of them Celtic settlements fortified by the Romans. 'Ford' is an Anglo-Saxon word that still exists in modern English, meaning 'part of a river shallow enough for people to cross it'. So 'Stratford' was obviously the place where one would cross the river when following the Roman road. If one would mention this, anyone would know which site was meant without someone having to go there and point at it.

The addition 'upon Avon' became necessary when the place became important enough to be mentioned to people who might also know other places where Roman roads crossed rivers, or other towns named 'Stratford'. To these people the mentioning of 'Stratford' alone might not provide enough information. The name 'Avon' itself is Celtic; it simply means 'river'; it is still the name of a couple of English rivers, including the one flowing through Stratford-upon-Avon.

It is thus clear that the name of this town really started as a semantic conglomerate, even though today its meaning to most people is simply 'Shakespeare's birthplace'. The Roman road became forgotten, its asphalt successor being not special enough to be mentioned, and the ford lost its importance once bridges were built. The addition 'upon Avon' remained worth mentioning because of the existence of another Stratford, located in the Greater London conurbation.

23.5 The relevance of dead and disappeared languages

Because toponyms generally (although not always) outlive their creators, locally vanished and even 'dead' languages are not per definition deprived of their importance from a toponymic point of view. Dead languages often leave their traces both in the vocabulary of their living successors and, much more so, in geographical names. This is a well-known fact to historical linguists, who make indeed grateful use of toponyms in their efforts to reconstruct so-called protolanguages (disappeared common ancestors of modern languages belonging to the same family), as well as trace substrates, residues of local predecessor languages in unrelated immigrant successor languages. Especially hydronyms (water names) have a reputation of being very ancient, often ancient enough even to antedate the presumed 4th and 3rd Millennium BCE Indo-European immigration into Europe. These substrates are held responsible for a major part of the diversification between the branches of the Indo-European language family. The vocabulary of the Germanic languages, for instance, is thought to contain a large number of pre-Indo-European words, maybe inherited from the thriving 4th Millennium BCE society that built the numerous tumuli and megalithic graves in north-western Europe. Also, the Greek geographical generic term meaning 'sea', *thalassos*, is supposedly of pre-Hellenic and pre-Indo-European (by the ancient Greeks themselves labelled 'Pelasgian') descent - suggesting that this famous seafaring people was not yet so familiar with the sea at the time it reached its present homeland.

A quick survey of the geographical names in a wellknown country like the United Kingdom will further illustrate the arguments expounded above.

The nationwide official language of the United Kingdom is English. Besides English, the dwindling Celtic languages Welsh and (Scottish) Gaelic also have official status on a sub-national level. English is a Germanic language, which developed from the closely related languages of Anglian and Saxon immigrants in the 5th century CE. In the part of the kingdom currently called England, Anglo-Saxon and neighbouring continental Germanic invaders, earlier than their Germanic language(s), presumably superseded a mixed Roman and Brythonic Celtic aristocracy ruling a partly Romanised, but largely still Celtic (Brythonic) speaking population. The part of the Brythonic population most strongly opposing assimilation with the Anglo-Saxon language and culture fled the Germanic invaders to take refuge in present-day Wales, the border area of England and Scotland (Cumbria and Strathclyde), the southwestern peninsula of England, and the peninsula of Armorica (thereupon renamed 'Britannia minor', Little Brittany) in continental Gaul (currently France). In Scotland, at the same time, a Pictish population speaking an as yet unknown language that had taken refuge there for the Roman invaders of the island, four centuries earlier, were gradually superseded by so-called Goidelic Celts (Gaels, Scoti) invading their homeland by sea from Northern Ireland. The Brythonic and Gaelic newcomers in Scotland were, although both Celtic, distinctive enough not to understand each other's language.

Starting from the 8th century, new Germanic immigrants invaded the country: Norwegian and Danish Vikings took possession of and effectively colonized large parts of both Scotland and England, to be eventually (in the 11th century) expelled again by the Anglo-Saxons. Even before the last Norwegians were ousted, however, Anglo-Saxon dominance itself came to an end by an invasion of yet another Viking aristocracy: this time already Romanised (French-speaking) Normans, from what had recently come to be known as Normandy successfully claiming the English throne.

At present the English language is, apart from being the only nationwide official language, the mother tongue of more than 99% of the native inhabitants of the United Kingdom. But before Anglo-Saxon or English prevailed, Pictish, Brythonic Celtic, and Latin were for centuries the languages of both aristocracy and (part of) the common people, as were Gaelic Celtic, Norwegian, Danish and French (the latter mostly of aristocracy) after the introduction of Anglo-Saxon. The imprint of some of these languages on the geographical names of the British Isles is at least as large as Anglo-Saxon/English: the large majority of names in Scotland is of Gaelic origin, except in Strathclyde, where many names are either Brythonic or Anglo-Saxon, and in the Northern and Western isles (Shetland, Orkney and the Hebrides), where almost all names are of Norwegian descent. The islands were Norwegian from the 8th until the 15th century, which was long enough for a new variety of the Old Norse language to develop there (Norn, spoken in Orkney until the 18th century).

The northern and eastern parts of England show a mixture of Danish - for instance names on -bv (= 'farmstead, village') - and Anglo-Saxon, while the southeast is predominantly Anglo-Saxon. In the southwest the Brythonic element is dominant. All through England a Brythonic substrate is eminent, although least so in settlement names, as are remains of Latin like the formerly generic elements caster or chester (Lancaster, Manchester - from castra = 'fortress') and port (from *portus* = 'harbour' or *porta* = 'gate'). Wales is almost completely Brythonic: the Anglicised forms of Brythonic (Welsh) names were with the recent emancipation of the Welsh language returned to their original state, and English names reverted to their Welsh counterparts. In Cornwall in Southwest-England, the Cornish (Brythonic) language, actually extinct (a 'dead language') since 1777, is presently being revived and granted official status next to English on a local level:

some Cornish place-names are correspondingly being restored.

The English language itself lost much of its original Anglo-Saxon character because of all subsequent invasions, causing the grammatical structure to be simplified and the vocabulary augmented with a large amount of Scandinavian and French words. Pronunciation was heavily influenced as well. Geographical names were in writing often adapted to the language passing by. An appealing example is York, going back on a Brythonic personal name Eburos (meaning 'yew man'), maybe the owner of an estate with yew trees where the Romans built a fortress they consequently called Eburacum. The Anglo-Saxons, ignorant of this meaning, transformed the name through etymological misinterpretation ('folk etymology') into Eoforwic, meaning 'wild boar settlement'. The Vikings taking over the place from the Anglo-Saxons contracted the first part of the name, without bothering for a possible meaning that they didn't understand anyway, into 'Hjor', while they thought to understand the second part as the similar sounding Norse generic 'vík', meaning 'bay': not very appropriate for the inland town, but the combination Hjor and vík occurred in their Scandinavian homeland as well. They were the last to bother at all: the Anglo-Saxons ousting the Danes, just before they themselves had to accept francophone Norman rule, left the name as it was remodelled by the Vikings: Hjorvík. The Anglo-Saxon tongue would ultimately erode this into what it is now: York.

The process of subsequent transformations of names illustrated by the case of York shows the significance of 'dead' as much as 'living' languages to the development of geographical names. The 'erosion' ultimately yielding the present form of the name does not follow a random path, but is dependent on the phonological characteristics of the 'new' language (the Anglo-Saxon dialect of Yorkshire) as compared to those of the 'old' language (medieval Norse or Danish). The regional settlement history, as it also culminates in the local dialect, is decisive. Latin *castra* thus used to evolve into *caster* in the areas of Northern England staying for long out of the grip of the Anglo-Saxons, but tended to become *chester* or *cester* in the more thoroughly anglicised parts of the country. It is thus the phonology of the dialect, not the official language, which determines the ultimate form of the name.

23.6 Vanished identities preserved in names

Geographical names more often than not antedate the national entities we discern today. In Europe, for instance, most of the state-based nations Europeans currently derive their identity from (British, French, Germans, Italians, Poles, Dutch, Danes and so forth), crystallized between the 17th and the early 20th centuries, with processes of nation-building peaking in the latter half of the 19th century. Dominant state languages became national, official and standardized, while vernacular 'between the lines' became suppressed. In the geographical names populating the redrawn map, the actual diversity as of old nevertheless persevered. The wealth of regional culture and history fossilized in the names, so to say. A nice example can be observed in France (see figure 23-2).

At the time of Caesar's campaign in Gaul just over 2000 years ago, Gaulish society was divided over numerous Celtic, Celto-Ligurian and Aquitanian tribes and alliances, some of which were more powerful than others but none had succeeded in lastingly unifying a significant part of Gaul. Under Roman rule too their dividedness remained a characteristic feature of the Gauls. The tribes of old became *civitates*, more or less autonomous communities bound together by common laws and each living within their own territories delimited by the Roman provincial authorities and governed from their own capital. The names of the capitals became typically connected to the names of the *civitates*, which were the same as the names of the former tribes, especially when they were common Gaulish names of which many homonyms occurs, like Noviomagus ('new market'), Noviodunum ('new borough') or Mediolanum ('centre of the plain/territory'): in this case they functioned as epithets to discriminate between homonyms, for instance Mediolanum Eburovicum ('Mediolanum of the Eburovices', now Évreux; Mediolanum Santonum ('Mediolanum of the Santones', now Saintes). By the 4th century CE the tribal epithet (Eburovicum, Santonum) had in many cases replaced the original name as the common appellative by which the place was known. The result of this was that both the name of the *civitas* – as the originally 'ethnic' administrative unit typically became a diocese after the Christianization, its name usually lived on after the Franks finally brought unity to Gaul in early medieval times – and its capital became derived from the name of the tribe, but three or four centuries intervened so the derivations followed different roads. The name of the Atrebates thus lived on in the regional name Artois and the city name Arras; the Baiocassi in Bessin and Bayeux; the Cadurci in Quercy and Cahors; and so forth. The map shows the tribal names in their Roman Latinised form (red italic), the derived regional names (black italic) and the city names; note that the word city (French cité) itself is derived from Latin civitas.

Below the map in figure 23-2, the derivations are listed in a table. In this table, the current French demonyms (word indicating the inhabitants of a city or region; mostly they are geographical adjectives as well) are included in the last column. In some cases, these retain the original form of the Latin tribe names: inhabitants of Bayeux are still called Baiocasses, those of Corseul Curiosolites, those of Langres Lingones.

23.7 Of people, activities and circumstances gone by

A nation's collection of geographical names is like a geographical information system storing all that passed by in the different parts of its national territory. A wealth of geo-referenced bits of heritage that collectively recollect how nation and land became what they are today.

The oldest geographical names currently still in use echo the sounds of languages sometimes long forgotten, thus proving that the people speaking these languages were actually present at the named locality at some point of time. The city of Aswan in Egypt was represented by hieroglyphs with the phonetic value swnt.t (Swenett), logographically thought to designate 'trade' or 'market' in Early Egyptian of the Old Kingdom of the early 3rd millennium BCE, where it functioned as a border settlement trading with Nubia. The hieroglyphs representing the name of present-day Asyut read z3jw.tj, its meaning resting unveiled. Many European river names, as well as names of mountain ranges and some settlements, are on the grounds of linguistic comparison (they don't match Indo-European phonological schemes) assumed to be at least of similar age, although no written documentation was handed down. Vestiges of unknown ancestors are they, of cultures we have no memory of. Cultures that did leave traces of textual evidence and material artefacts impressive enough for us to nickname them 'cradle of civilization'. also left us toponyms the sounds of which can still be heard today, even if the languages they belonged to went out of use thousands of years ago. Turkish Adana was Adaniyya, Tarsus Tarsa in the language of the Hittites; Iranian Shush was Ŝuŝan in Elamite, Ilam was the Elam of the Sumerians; Syrian Dimashq (Damascus) was Dimašga in the Akkadian tongue, Turkish Nusaybin Naşibīna. Even when original meanings cannot be retrieved, identifying

the language alone suffices to tell us something that stirs the imagination.

The information contained in names originating in better known languages presents us with a complete history of a region's settlement and cultivation, economic development and political fortunes, wars and migrations and natural environment.

Figure 23-2: Names of French towns and regions derived from former Gaulish (Celtic, Celto-Ligurian and Aquitanian/Iberian) tribes.



Gaulish tribe	Derived regional name	Derived city name	Demonym of modern region/city name
Atrebates	Artois < Atrebatensis	Arras < Athrebate < (Nemetacum) Atrebatum	Artésiens (region); Arrageois (city)
Viromandui	Vermandois < (pagus) Viromandensis	Vermand	Vermandois
Ambiani		Amiens	Amiénois
Caleti	Caux		Cauchois
Bellovaci	Beauvaisis < Bellovaci	Beauvais < Bellovacis	Beauvaisien
Suessiones	Soissonnais	Soissons < (Augusta) Suessionum	Soissonnais
Remi		Reims < Remos < (Durocortorum) Rementium	Rémois
Mediomatrici		Metz < Divodurum Mediomatricorum	Messin
Catalauni		Châlons < (Duro) Catalaunum	Châlonnais
Meldi		Meaux < Meldis < Iantinum civitas Meldorum	Meldois
Silvanectes		Senlis < Silvanectis < Augustomagus Silvanectum	Senlisiens
Veliocassi	Vexin < (pagus) Veliocassinus		
Lexovii	Lieuvin	Lisieux < Noviomagus Lexoviorum	Lexoviens
Eburovici		Évreux < (Mediolanum) Eburovicorum	Ébroïciens
Durocassi	Drouais < Dorcassinus	Dreux < Drocas < Durocas < Durocassis	Drouais
Viducassi		Vieux < civitas Viducassensis	Viducasses
Baiocassi	Bessin < Pagus Baiocensis	Bayeux < civitas Baiocassium	Bessinois (region); Bajocasses (city)
Parisii	Parisis	Paris < Lutetia apud Parisios	Parisiens
Carnutes		Chartres	Chartrains
Tricassi		Troyes < civitas Tricassium	Troyens
Senones	Sénonais	Sens	Sénonais
Cenomani	Maine < (pagus) Cilimanicus	Le Mans < Ceromannos < civitas Cenomanorum	Manceaux
Diablinti		Jublains < civitas Diablintum	Diablintes
Abrincatui	Avranchin	Avranches < Abrincas	Avranchinais
Curiosolitae		Corseul	Curiosolites
Redones		Rennes < Redonas	Rennais
Veneti		Vannes < civitas Venetum	Vannetais
Andes/Andecavi	Anjou < Andecavum	Angers <	Angevins
Namnetes		Nantes < Portus Namnetum	Nantais
Turones	Touraine < civitas Turonensis	Tours	Tourangeaux
Pictavi	Poitou	Poitiers < Pictavis	Poitevins
Lingones		Langres	Lingons

Table 23-1 Comparison of the names of Gaulish tribes, derived regional names and city names and names an	region/city demonyms
--	----------------------

Gaulish tribe	Derived regional name	Derived city name	Demonym of modern region/city name
Bituriges	Berry	Bourges	Berrichons (region); Berruyers (city)
Ambarri		Ambérieu < Ambariacus	Ambarrois
Arverni		Auvergne < Arvernia	Auvergnats
Santones	Saintonge	Saintes < (Mediolanum) Santonum	Saintongeais (region); Saintais (city)
Lemovices	Limousin	Limoges < Lemovicas < civitas Lemovicum	Limousins (region); Limougeauds(city)
Medulli	Médoc < Medulicus		Médoquins/Méduliens
Petrocorii	Périgord	Périgueux	Périgordins (region); Périgourdins (city)
Boii	Buch	Biganos < Boios	
Vasates	Bazadais < Vasadés < (pagus) Basatensis	Bazas < Vasats [Gascon] < civitas Basatica	Bazadais / Vasadés [Occitan]
Cadurci	Quercy < Carcin [Occitan] < Cadurcinum	Cahors < Cadurcum < Divona Cadurcorum	Cadurciens
Vellavi	Velay		Vellaves
Sotiates		Sos	Sotiates
Gabali	Gévaudan	Javols < ad Gabalum	Gévaudanais (region); Javolais (city)
Ruteni	Rouergue < (pagus) Rutenicus	Rodez < Ruteni < civitas Rutenorum	Rouergat (region); Ruthénois (city)
Elusates	Eauzan	Eauze < Elusa	Élusates
Tarusates/Aturenses	Tursan < pagus Aturensis	Aire-sur-l'Adour < Atura	Aturins
Auscii		Auch	Auscitains
Beneharni	Béarn		Béarnais
Suburates	Zuberoa [Basque, = Soule]		Zuberotar [Basque]
Bigerri	Bigorre		Bigourdans
Consoranni	Couserans < Consoranni		Couserannais
Caturiges		Chorges < Cadorgas	Caturiges
Quariates	Queyras		
Brigiani		Briançon < Brigantio	Briançonnais
Vergunni		Vergons	Vergonais
Reii		Riez < Reii (Apollinares)	Réiens
Sentii		Senez < civitas	Seneziens
Vordenses		Gordes	Gordiens
Tricastini		St-Paul-Trois-Châteaux < St Pau de Tricastin [Occitan] < Noviomagus Tricastinorum	Tricastins