

Interview / Entrevista

## Interview with Maria Giovanna Arcamone: a journey through Onomastics and Toponomastics

*Intervista a Maria Giovanna Arcamone: un viaggio attraverso l'onomastica e la toponomástica*



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### Presentation

Prof. Arcamone's contributions to the studies of onomastics and toponymy in over half a century of incessant work are truly invaluable. One only needs to consider her pioneering work on Lombard toponyms or her decisive contribution to the Italian literary onomastic scene through the founding of *il Nome nel testo* with the late Professor Davide De Camilli and Professor Donatella Bremer. But this is obviously an infinitesimal drop of an important author that has been able to inspire generations of scholars not only through her essays and books but also with a never-ending reflection on research methodology. This interview allows us to revisit some of the stages of the key moments of Professor Arcamone's extraordinary lifelong research. Through her work, she has demonstrated that the study of names is not simply an inert academic subject, but rather a way to better and deeply understand the complex world in which we live.

### LINHA D'ÁGUA

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Maria Giovanna Arcamone is a retired Professor at University of Pisa (UNIFI), Italy. She still undertakes several tasks and is remembered for organizing the unforgettable ICOS Congress in Pisa (2005), as well as for her current activity in various agencies linked to onomastic studies.

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## Patricia Carvalhinhos and Giacomo Giuntoli:

Although your favorite subject is anthroponyms, can you tell us about the history of toponymy studies in Italy?

### Maria Giovanna Arcamone:

I should note that, in addition to anthroponyms, I deal and have always dealt with toponymy, as well as occasional exploration of other name categories (objects, animals, celestial bodies, brand names, etc.), and literary onomastics

As far as anthroponyms are concerned, I have collected and studied the anthroponymy of the Lombard age (Italy, VI-IX centuries and beyond up to our modern surnames) in the context of Germanic Philology. I have also studied modern Romance surnames as part of the PatRom project conceived and directed by Dieter Kremer (Trier-Leipzig). Additionally, I have examined names, surnames, and other types of names through the Onomastics and Literature Association (O&L), that I founded in Pisa in 1993, along with Davide De Camilli and Donatella Bremer. O&L organizes an annual Literary Onomastics conference on various topics at different Italian universities.

Regarding toponymy, I have conducted research on Italian place names of Germanic origin, and successfully identified the etymology of several previously obscure Italian place names. Among the toponyms of Longobard origin, I recall here Altopascio, the name of a Tuscan municipality in the province of Lucca, notoriously in close contact with the Longobards, interpreted in the past as “high pass”: this explanation did not hold up because the place is actually low in elevation and the palatalization of *passo* that became *pascio*. Through examining documents dating before the year 1000, I was able to ascertain that this place was first called Teutpassio and that it corresponded to a Teutpassio of southern Tuscany, in an area where there had also been Longobards. By analyzing its etymology, I was able to determine that Teutpassio can be traced back to \*theudō-baki- meaning “public stream or river where a toll was paid”, which aligns with the fact that there is a stream in the area that had a different name in the past. In German, the language closely related to Lombard, the corresponding toponym is Diebach.

Furthermore, I have also examined Italian toponyms in general, particularly those of Tuscany, a region where I spent my childhood in the province of Lucca, and later moved between Florence and Pisa. The other toponyms that I have researched are situated in the provinces of Florence and Pisa, as well as those in the province of Siena. In particular, I conducted a study on the choronym Garfagnana, an important sub-region of Lucca. Its name "Garfagnana" means "territory of a quadrifinium", and its etymology reflects the region's significance during the classical era, as it encompassed four cities: Lucca, Luni, Modena, and Reggio Emilia.

To understand the current state of toponymy studies in Italy, I recommend checking the RION magazine, an Italian magazine of onomastics founded in 1995 by Enzo Caffarelli under the patronage of Luca Serianni. For information on the previous period, you can refer to Fiorenza Granucci's *Bibliographic Handbook of Italian Toponymy* (Department of Linguistics, University of Florence, 1988), Giovan Battista Pellegrini's *Italian Toponymy* (Milan, Hoepli, 1990), and the *Dictionary of Italian Toponymy* (Turin, UTET, 2005).

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### **Patricia Carvalhinhos and Giacomo Giuntoli:**

Tell us about the organization of the 22nd international congress of ICOS (International Council of Onomastic Sciences) in 2005.

### **Maria Giovanna Arcamone:**

I requested the mandate to organize an event during the 21st ICOS (International Council of Onomastic Sciences) Congress held in Uppsala in 2002. We submitted the request in three languages, with me presenting in English, Prof. Davide De Camilli in French, and Prof. Donatella Bremer in German. We provided a brief description of the University of Pisa, the city, and its surroundings, with a special emphasis on the coastal areas. To prepare ourselves, I organized briefings with onomastics scholars who had participated in previous ICOS congresses and were among the best in the field, such as Ernst Eichler, Isole Hausner, Botolv Helleland, Dieter Kremer, Bill Nicolaisen, Rob Rentenaar, and Mats Wahlberg.

The congress was a success, with more than 500 participants registering to attend. It was held from the end of August to the beginning of September 2005, spanning an entire week. Participants could be easily identified by the green cotton bags we distributed containing the program and other materials. These bags, later called "green bags," became one of the trademarks of the congress. We created several sections linked together by a

common theme: "Names in Space and Time." The literary onomastics section stood out, being particularly rich in speeches and discussions.

A total of five volumes of Proceedings have been published – comprising 3,849 pages in total! However, some material could not be published due to both lack of funds and time constraints. During the congress, there was an excellent dinner held in Tirrenia, a seaside resort located very close to Pisa, at a beautiful hotel with a swimming pool. We called a small orchestra and the congress participants danced for a long time – we even sang! Some even stayed up late to enjoy the sea air!

The congress participants took the usual congress trip to Lucca and Pistoia, passing through Pescia and Altopascio, which are place names of Longobard origin, as I explained in my previous response. Even though almost twenty years have passed since then, we still continue to receive compliments and thanks for the organization of the congress and the quality of the contributions presented.

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### **Patricia Carvalhinhos and Giacomo Giuntoli:**

Are you currently involved in any ICOS-related committees or activities? What is your perspective on the advancements made in onomastic and toponymic research in Europe?

### **Maria Giovanna Arcamone:**

Yes, we are still active in ICOS. I am part of the editorial board of the journal "Onoma" and I am often asked to serve as a referee for the acceptance of articles not only in "Onoma" but also in other European journals of onomastics. Prof. Bremer is involved in the section dedicated to onomastic terminology.

Our activity in Pisa focuses on the organization of O&L conferences, as I mentioned earlier. One of the key figures of the Association is Prof. Bremer, who, with the assistance of various talented colleagues, including Serena Mirto and Giorgio Sale, manages the magazine *il Nome nel testo* and handles relationships with authors and referees. Besides publishing the most valuable contributions presented at the congress, the journal also publishes other essays by Italian and foreign scholars. The series of studies *Nominatio*, founded and edited by the association, is also noteworthy, with about fifteen volumes currently available.

The importance of place names in literary onomastic studies should not be underestimated. In fiction, place names play a crucial role as they not only circumscribe

the environments but also contribute to characterizing the characters. Additionally, they often evoke works from the past or belonging to other civilizations.

From Pisa, we maintain relationships with other European associations of onomastics, such as the French Société française d'onomastique, the German Deutsche Gesellschaft für Namenkunde, and others, including the Romanian initiatives directed by Oliviu Felecan with his conferences and publications. Lastly, through PatRom and O&L, we also stay informed about what is happening outside of Italy.

In my opinion, the level of toponymic studies in Europe has reached an excellent standard and has given rise to lively and ongoing discussions. While the Covid pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine have slowed down progress in this field, they have not diminished the interest in place names and other branches of onomastics in Europe.

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### **Patricia Carvalhinhos and Giacomo Giuntoli:**

If the toponymy of a place is the mirror of a culture, what can you tell us about the ancient toponymy of Italy? Do you have any examples that are particularly close to your heart and you would like to share with us?

### **Maria Giovanna Arcamone:**

Italy is a land with a rich and ancient culture, owing to its long history of habitation and the constant influx of new peoples throughout the ages. Thanks to its central location in the Mediterranean, Italy continues to attract migrants today from both the South (Africa) and the East (Middle East). In the past, the peninsula was also settled by people arriving from the North (such as Germanic and Slavic tribes) and from the West (including the Normans and Spaniards).

Italian toponymy contains numerous traces of the diverse peoples who have inhabited Italy throughout its history. The place names that date back to the earliest periods, belonging to peoples whose language is no longer known to us, are often difficult to interpret. However, it is generally believed that these names served as designations for the places themselves, providing a kind of verbal snapshot of the locality. For instance, Rome may have originally been the general name for the river that would later come to be called the Tiber.

The numerous studies on Italian place names have been able to trace the origins of Italian place names, shedding light on the ethnic groups that have settled in Italy over time. In Giovan Battista Pellegrini's manual, which was mentioned in a previous answer, these toponyms and their corresponding languages are presented in detail, ranging from Phoenician to Etruscan, and from Greek to Latin. These languages form the basis for many of the micro-toponyms found in Italy, while the macro-toponyms – such as the names of cities, large rivers, major mountains, and large lakes – are generally of pre-Latin origin. For example, the name Milan comes from Celtic roots and means "the city located in the middle of a plain," while Genoa derives from the same Celtic root as the Swiss city of Geneva, designating "the city situated at a bend or fold in the coast."

There are also place names that have their roots in anthroponyms. For instance, Aosta derives its name from the emperor Augustus, while Potenza and Florence have toponyms of transparent Latin origin. Naples, Palermo, and other cities in Sicily and southern Italy, on the other hand, have Greek origins. In fact, there are two layers of Greek toponyms in Italy: the older ones, dating back to the pre-Christian era, such as Agrigento, and the Greek-Byzantine ones from the late imperial period, such as Riace.

As mentioned in a previous answer, there are numerous places in Italy that reflect the influence of Lombard culture, which spread across the country from the 6th century AD. These places are often of medium or modest size, and their toponyms reflect this history. For instance, there are numerous places called Gaggio, Gazzo, or Cafaggio, depending on the region, which likely indicated the presence of bandits or hunting parties. In Tuscany, one can find places called Péscie, Pésciole, or (Al-to)-pascio, as well as Amiata, which all bear witness to the Lombard presence. Similarly, in Piedmont and the province of Lucca, there are places called Aramengo and Aramo, respectively, that attest to the social and military penetration of the Lombards, who had migrated from beyond the Alps. These toponyms offer persistent reminders of the Lombards' enduring impact on Italy's culture and history.

Sicily is replete with toponyms of Arabic origin due to the strong presence of this population on the island: Caltanissetta. In northeastern Italy, we encounter toponyms of Slavic origin, such as Gorizia, while in the northwest, there are toponyms of French origin, such as Saint-Vincent and Courmayeur, reflecting the proximity of Slavic languages to the east and French to the west.

In short, the rich and varied toponymy of Italy demonstrates that the country and its culture are the result of a synthesis of many different cultures. This may explain Italy's famous creativity, which is recognized around the world.

### **Patricia Carvalhinhos and Giacomo Giuntoli:**

São Paulo, the city that is home to the University of São Paulo and this journal, is known for having one of the largest populations of Italians and their descendants outside of Italy. Many cities in the southern region of Brazil have adopted names in honor of Italian cities. How do you perceive this love for place names?

### **Maria Giovanna Arcamone:**

This love for place names is evident in all communities that have migrated to distant lands and can be traced back to ancient times. The Americas are replete with such examples, both in the north (as evidenced by the works of the Florentine geographer Laura Cassi) and in the south, as you mentioned. And I have personally observed this during my four business and study trips to Argentina and Brazil.

I believe that this love for place names is a natural and noble feeling present in human beings, and it extends beyond us as well. Even animals, although they don't give names to places, try to return to their place of birth. For us humans, when we cannot return to our country of origin, we create a semblance of it through the naming of places. This helps us recreate a sense of familiarity and makes it easier to detach from our homeland.

Moreover, I think that there should be a global collection of toponyms repeated overseas. Although there are partial works available, a more comprehensive and systematic approach would be valuable.

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### **Patricia Carvalhinhos and Giacomo Giuntoli:**

Tell us a little about "deanthroponymic" toponyms, i.e. those that derive from people's names. How does this phenomenon occur?

### **Maria Giovanna Arcamone:**

This type of toponym is common and has several motivations:

a) The need to identify a place, which is usually sparsely inhabited and has few distinctive natural characteristics. In such cases, the name of the person or family who resides there is used.

b) Toponyms can also have celebratory value for a prominent personality, either locally or globally known. These names can be attributed to heroes who have fallen in wars, martyrs, and geniuses of art, politics, and religion. These names are often found in the names of streets, institutions, schools, hospitals, trade unions, and newly established settlements. For instance, Aosta and Margherita di Savoia in Puglia, which is named after the queen consort of the king of Italy, Umberto I. Similarly, Ludwigshafen am Rhein in Germany is named after Ludwig of Bavaria.

c) It designates a property of considerable size which takes the name of the owner's family, especially if noble; they are frequent in city palaces and also in well-kept countryside, e.g., Castelnuovo Berardenga (Siena) from the Berardenghi family.

d) It derives from the name of the saint to whom the local church is dedicated.

e) It derives from the name and/or surname of the owner of a commercial establishment, or from an anthroponym chosen by the operator, but different from their own name and that of his blood relatives.

Underlying all these toponyms is the importance attributed to the strength of proper names as designators of identity.

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### **Patricia Carvalhinhos and Giacomo Giuntoli:**

What is your favorite project and what are you currently working on?

#### **Maria Giovanna Arcamone:**

In the field of onomastics, my current favorite project is focused on literary onomastics. This branch of onomastics investigates the choice and function of proper names (anthroponyms, toponyms, and other names) in literary works. This project aims to consolidate and honor the Onomastics and Literature Association (O&L), which I co-founded in Pisa in 1993 with two esteemed colleagues, Davide de Camilli (who is unfortunately no longer with us) and Donatella Bremer. Both of them have written invaluable works on this type of research. Professor Bremer is also a pillar of the Association, as she manages relationships with the authors of the articles and monographs published in our magazine *il Nome nel testo* and in the *Nominatio* series. I have already mentioned all of this in a previous response.



I am currently investigating the works and proper names of authors such as Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, for whom I believe I have identified the meaning behind the title of his most famous work, *The Leopard*. This article has already been reviewed by four foreign journals. Additionally, I am examining the works of Dario Fo and Grazia Deledda to evaluate the effectiveness of proper names and their functions in some foreign language translations.

My current project involves the search for Italian place names of Lombard origin. Several common names have already been identified, such as Cafaggio/Gaggio/Caio "bandita" < germ. \*gahagja-, Gualdo "forest" < germ. \*walda-, and Péscia "stream" < germ. \*baki-. Typically, these toponyms are derived from simple common names, but there are also some derived from compound common names, such as Aramo and Aramengo, which I mentioned in a previous answer. These names come from \*harja-haima- meaning "headquarters of the army," a term that was used to translate the Latin *castrum*.

The purpose of my research is to enhance our understanding of Lombardic Germanic culture, which has only been discerned through Lombard loanwords in Italian, limited chronicles, and scarce private documents from the Lombard period that still exist today.

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### Patricia Carvalhinhos and Giacomo Giuntoli:

To conclude the interview, we would like to ask if you have any practical advice for young researchers interested in pursuing onomastic research.

### Maria Giovanna Arcamone:

Here are some practical tips:

- a) Begin by acquiring expertise through consulting the Proceedings of the ICOS congresses and articles in onomastics journals that deal with topics of study or interest.
  
- b) Those who specialize in anthroponymy require excellent knowledge of the phonetics and morphology of the language or dialect of the place from which the proper names being studied originate. They also need extensive knowledge of the military, political, and social history of the region and familiarity with previous studies and the largest possible number of anthroponyms and their variants.

c) Those who specialize in toponymy, in addition to the aforementioned, require excellent geographical knowledge of the designated places, since toponyms often depict snapshots of the area's nature, cartographic knowledge, and an understanding of the history of the landscape.

d) Those who specialize in literary onomastics require excellent knowledge of the author, their entire body of work, their era, the places they lived, and previous criticism, including literary, linguistic, and onomastic. Additionally, it's important to collect the names of the other novels written by the same author when analyzing the names in a novel.

Best wishes and greetings to all.

Maria Giovanna Arcamone,  
Florence, January 27, 2023