BORDER AREAS IN ANCIENT EUROPE: A CASE STUDY FROM NORTHEASTERN ITALY

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Abstract: Some geographic regions in the world are dense of diachronic linguistic overlapping. The etymological analysis of their place names is, consequently, complex. In this paper, we selected two villages from the mountains of Northeastern Italy, Velo d'Astico and Arsiero, located in an Alpine border area, as elements of a case study inherent in the naming process connected with the interactions of the local inhabitants with their territory. The Alps, a quite wide area of Europe, attracted human groups with different genetic and linguistic origins at least since the Neolithic and, probably, already from the Mesolithic. After providing a set of possible etymological solutions for the two place names, we introduce an explanation linked to archaic religion and ancestral cults in the specific border area, a territory where the transition (at the level of movements of population and of naming processes) is both an opportunity and a source of instability.

Key words: Indo-European Toponyms, Hillforts, Alps, Mines, Hydronyms, Ancient Religion, Veneto, Arsia, Artumes, Border Areas

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines some plausible etymological reconstructions for the names of two villages from Northeastern *Italy*, *Velo d'Astico* and *Arsiero*. This study provides us with the opportunity to recall some concepts related to the forms of settlement common in *Europe* across a time-span of more than two thousand years, from the late Bronze Age, i.e., 13th-12th century BC, to the Middle Ages. The analysis of local

toponyms, according to a Historical Toponomastics approach[1], is indispensable to recognize traces of original place names from remote times, when written documents were rare or absent, especially in the context of small and peripheral settlements. We have to wait for the 10th century of our era to find written references inherent in the places objects of our analysis, in Northern *Italy*. This is due to the spread of written records of administrative documents since then and to the effort of preservation of archives in urban sites. The related documents witness transfers of lands or definitions of the areas of influence of feudal lords or religious authorities.

Our research is a significant case study in Historical Toponomastics and partly fills the gap inherent in Alpine Toponymy and in the etymological study of local place names, with the aim of a better understanding of ancient settlement dynamics and population movements in prehistoric and proto-historic times, and the related linguistic processes developed among the groups of the early inhabitants of those peripheral lands. This work mainly provides the current panorama of studies with two original contributions: first, the research of correlations between the geographical configuration of places (orography, natural resources, hydro-geo-morphology in general, landscape, etc.) and their history and cultural significance, starting the reconstruction at least from proto-historic times; second, the evidence that the cultural uniformity of our days is the result of multiple processes of diachronic overlapping, often violent, of populations which were bearers of different languages and traditions, distinctive of the high degree of ethnic and cultural diversity of the ancient inhabitants of *Europe*.

Toponyms are a product of the culture of the naming subjects (the speakers), and provide us with indispensable insights into significant aspects of local geography, prehistory and evenemential history, topography, landscape, and intangible heritage[2]. In border areas, they also allow us to highlight very specific cultural exchanges and language contacts among different (but possibly related) ethnic groups.

2. STUDIES ON LOCAL TOPONYMY AND HYDRONYMY

Research on the Toponymy of minor inhabited centers in Northeastern *Italy* has not been an attractive subject to academics for some centuries; only since the beginning of the 19th century Gaetano Maccà, a local scholar, started to focus on this specific context; he developed a systematic reconstruction of historical events in mountain villages of the province of *Vicenza*[3].

The topic was similarly analyzed by Modesto Bonato in a historical book on the *Asiago Plateau*[4]. About a century later, the writer Antonio Brazzale Dei Paoli described local minor inhabited centers with a captivating approach, very attentive to social communities and popular traditions[5]. Recent studies propose a complementary and valid recovery of the history of Alpine territories through the support of Archeology (both Landscape Archeology and the study of material culture), which provides data on the geo-morphology of the mountains from prehistoric times, on the economic activities in Antiquity, and on religious sites and rites[6].

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[1] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., Cavallaro, F.P., (2023), pp. 46-79.

[2] Cf. Creţan, R., (2000), *passim*.

[3] Cf. Maccà, G., (1803, 1814, 1816), *passim.*

[4] Cf. Bonato, M., (1857), *passim.*

[5] Cf. Brazzale Dei Paoli, A., (1989), *passim.*

[6] Cf. Gambacurta, G., (2013), *passim.*

The results of these analyses must always be compared with the surrounding macro-context, represented, in *Europe*, by major civilizations, i.e., the Greeks, the Etruscans, and the Romans. Additionally, other recent studies propose a new investigation of the dynamics of settlement and population in cross-border regions, with the interaction of ethnically mixed peoples[7], and demonstrate the strong influence of geographical proximity on the manifestations of cultural proximity[8].

3. METHODOLOGY

The first step to understand a toponym may be represented by the assessment of its paretymology, if it is attested. Sometimes, folk etymologies of place names are supported by the images that we can find in the coats of arms of the local municipalities and by popular oral traditions[9]. A further step towards a more rigorous and structured analysis aims at the recovery of the linguistic roots of the target place name and proposes a possible reconstruction of the ancient lexical unit.

In *Europe*, generally, this process is developed in the context of Indo-European languages and Proto-Indo-European (the non-attested and reconstructed prehistoric language at the origins of most of the languages spoken in the *Old Continent*), although, in specific areas like the *Alps*, the option of contributions from Etruscan and Raetic (that are very different from Indo-European) cannot ever be neglected. Such study cannot be completed without the support of the Comparative Method, with a convergent approach, based on linguistic, historical, cultural, and anthropological elements. By epistemologically moving across a precise historical context, it is possible to connect diachronic events with the local places under examination. This process is intensive and qualitative in nature[10].

A complementary approach expands the investigation towards a large / larger geographical area which includes toponyms and hydronyms possibly similar and/or related to the place names objects of the analysis. This macro-comparison is justified by the hypothesis that similar names in distant areas underwent a similar linguistic evolution and development, and that the toponyms in themselves reflect common features of their territories. This process is extensive and quantitative in nature, and involves the comparison of a number of place names[11]. A toponymic etymological reconstruction has to consider and recover the historical-phonetic and historical-phonological development of a place name (and/or its Historical Morphology), through the application of the Comparative Method, and to test the derived (eminently) morphological reconstruction against the Historical Semantics of the place name itself, to assess possible matches with the hydro-geo-morphology of its territory, the prehistoric, proto-historic, and historical events which characterized its region, features of the landscape, more or less documented settlement dynamics, and the related material culture[12].

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[7] Cf. Creţan, R., Covaci, R.N., Jucu, I.S., (2023), *passim.*
[8] Cf. Berceanu, I.C., Popa, N., Creţan, R., (2023), *passim.*
[9] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., Cavallaro, F.P., Kratochvíl, F., (2015), pp. 29-47.
[10] Cf. Tent, J., (2015), pp. 65-74; Perono Cacciafoco, F., Cavallaro, F.P., (2023), cit., pp. 8-18.
[11] Cf. Tent, J, (2015), cit, *ibidem*; Perono Cacciafoco, F., Cavallaro, F.P., (2023), cit., *ibidem*.
[12] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., Cavallaro, F.P., (2023), cit., pp. 49-50.

The meaning of place names is considered in relation to three fundamental determinants of human settlements:

- the productive activities developed to support the groups of residents;
- the opportunity to control the territory around the settlement, in particular the surveillance of and on the communication roads;
- the cultural and religious elements of the community.

These components are at the origins of the 'making' of many place names. The villages selected for this research are indicative, because they belong to an area which, for more than three thousand years, has been a melting crucible for different linguistic and cultural ethnic groups. This was especially true in proto-historic times, due to the coexistence of Celts, Raetians, Veneti, Etruscans, and Ancient Greeks. The same phenomenon of population overlapping resurfaced after the fall of the Western Roman Empire (476 AD), with the arrival of new ethnic groups: Goths, Lombards, Francs, and Normans. This cultural and linguistic heterogeneity has an enormous impact on the definition of place names and, often, determines a redefinition of toponyms at the local level, with a process which has to be assessed on a case-by-case basis and which is, sometimes, not completely understood yet.

This research gave us the opportunity to investigate the possible presence of a specific linguistic group in a well-defined area in a determined moment in time in the past. It would have been impossible to obtain the related findings from historical texts or documents, because they simply do not exist, and the results local Archeology is providing us with are not comprehensive and consistent. Indeed, in the geographical area once occupied by the *X Roman Regio*, corresponding to the territory object of our research in Northeastern *Italy*, the places under the stable influence of Celts, Veneti, and Raetians have yet to be clearly defined and located. Plinius the Elder writes that *Vicenza* and *Padua* were belonging to the Veneti, while *Verona* was Raetian and Celtic, and gives us a macro-definition of the settlements which, sometimes, is not intrinsically consistent with the known administrative areas[13]. The study, analysis, and reconstruction of local place names can shed some light on the distribution of peoples in those areas in relatively remote times, corroborating the historical records and solving some issues of interpretation.

4. THE SITES

As mentioned above, in this study we consider two villages from the *Veneto* Region, located in the province of *Vicenza*, in Northeastern *Italy*, midway between *Verona* and *Padua* (as it results in Figure 1).

The first inhabited center is *Velo d'Astico* (geographic coordinates: 45°47'21.48" N 11°22'07.32" E), raising 346 meters above sea level. It is a small village (2,200 residents in 2020), with three hamlets, *Lago*, *Meda*, and *Seghe*. *Astico* is the name of a river flowing nearby. The second inhabited center is *Arsiero* (geographic coordinates: 45°48'N 11°21'E), raising 356 meters above the sea level. It is another small village (3,000 residents in 2020), with one hamlet, *Castana*.

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[13] Cf. Pliny the Elder, (1855), *passim.*

Both sites are located in the valley of the *Astico* river, in the area of the *Prealps*, between the *Summano* mount and the *Asiago Plateau*. Going up the *Astico* river from the plains, the watercourse starts flowing within a deep riverbed among steep gorges, in the municipalities of *Piovene* and *Chiuppano*. The riverbed opens, further upstream, to a wide conch, the so-called '*Arsiero* conch', where the two villages are located, distant less than two kilometers from each other, as highlighted in Figure 2. *Velo d'Astico* is ubicated on the slopes of *Monte Summano*; its municipal coat of arms represents a sail over the water (in Italian, *Velo* is similar – but not semantically equivalent – to *vela*, 'sail').
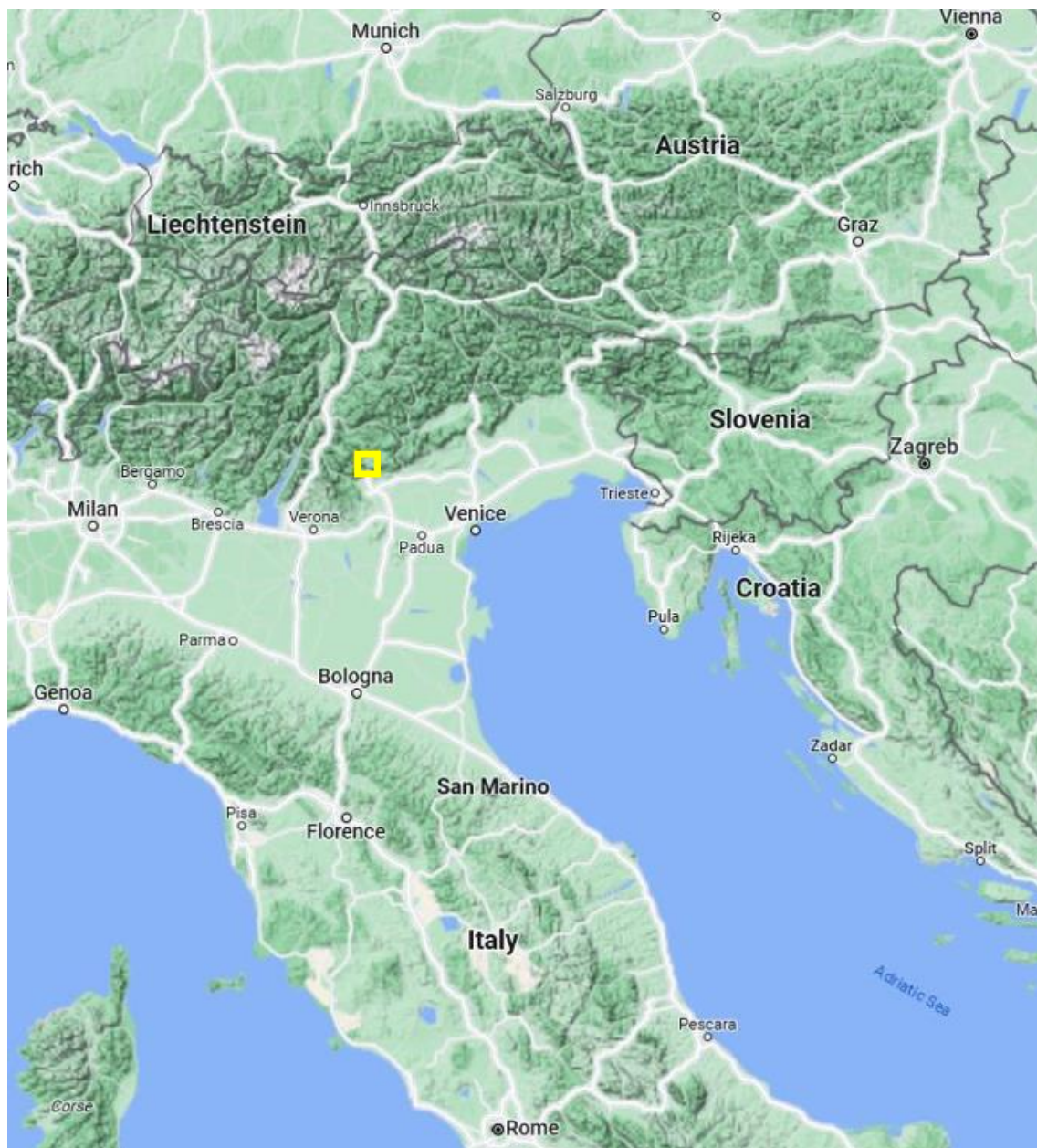
Figure 1. Northern *Italy* and the position of the two sites (yellow square).
Source: Adapted from Google Maps, 2023
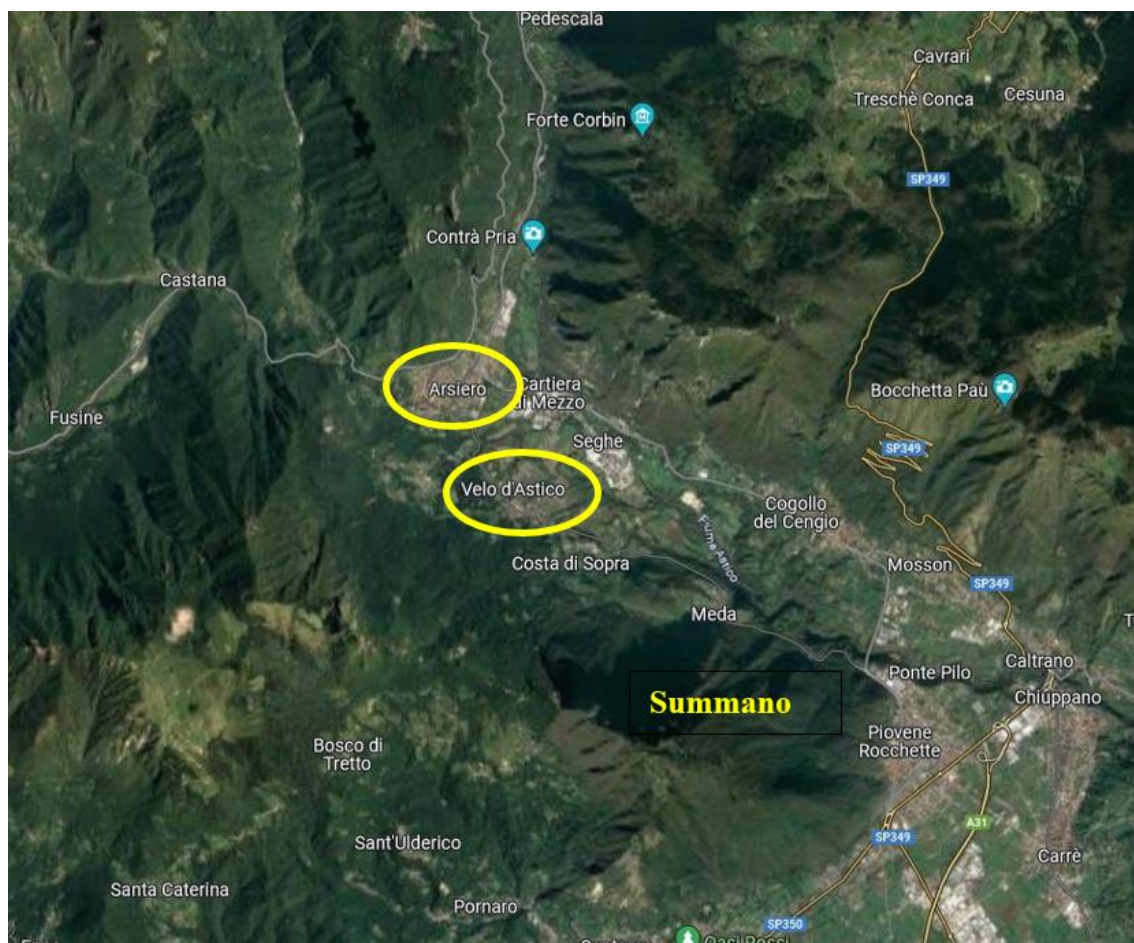
Figure 2. detail of the area highlighted in Figure 1: *Arsiero* and *Velo d'Astico* villages.
Source: Google Maps, 2023

The neighboring village of *Arsiero* is situated along the river *Posina*, very close to its junction with the *Astico*, on a small climb on the slope of the mountain. The micro-economy of this inhabited center was traditionally connected with agriculture, processing of woods with the production of charcoal, and a Medieval tradition of water mills. This source of energy has for a long time been used to grind cloths and soft wood to obtain paper. Forging of metals and paper production constitute an old tradition in *Arsiero*'s territory. The municipal coat of arms represents a burning trunk, with two flames on the sides. Valleys in the *Prealps* mountains of *Vicenza* show traces of human settlements since prehistoric times, and archeological findings from the 4th millennium BC have surfaced in the *Bocca Lorenza* grotto near *Santorso* and in some grottos locally called *covoli* in *Lastebasse*, in the upper *Astico* valley[14]. From the 5th to the 3rd century BC, prior to the Roman occupation, dating back to the 2nd century BC, offers of votive objects with inscriptions in Raetic have been found in sanctuaries of the *Prealps*[15].

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[14] Cf. *Lastebasse*, (2023), *passim*.
[15] Cf. Whatmough, J., (1923), *passim.*

Raetic was a language widespread, in the 1st millennium BC, across the *Alps*, from the Venetian territory to Southern *Germany*, including parts of *Austria* and *Switzerland*.

Most of the texts in this language are short inscriptions on votive offers; some words are, presumably, similar to lexical units from the Etruscan language. The two main sites of diffusion of writing examples in Raetic are *San Zeno*, in *Trento*'s area, and *Magré*, in the *Valley of Leogra*, less than 20 kilometers far from *Velo d'Astico*. There was a Raetian settlement near the *Astico*'s valley in *Rotzo*, a mountain village located on the *Asiago Plateau*. These valleys were strategic stations, to reach the mountain pastures and woods during the Summer, and places for the exchange of products towards the *Adige*'s valley, the *Tyrol* area, and the mountain passes towards Southern *Germany*. Another significant feature of these settlements located in this stretch of the *Prealps* is represented by mines, mainly of metals. The most important mining area, there, is located among *Magré*, *Torrebelvicino*, and *Valdagno*, with mines of zinc, lead, silver, and iron in the *Posina*'s valley. Another iron mine was attested in *Caltrano*, at the entrance of the *Astico Valley*. *Arsiero* had a mine of kaolin, a white rock used to produce pottery and, later, in the paper industry. Silver was dug from mines in *Tretto*, at the opposite side of the *Monte Summano*, coming from *Arsiero*. In the village of *Santorso*, near the *Tretto*'s area, there are traces of proto-historic furnaces for metal melting and of the settlement of a Roman military unit, probably with the tasks of controlling and protecting the trades of metals[16].

Veneti and Celts are attested in the plains near this area between the 7th and the 2nd centuries BC. The Roman rule was well-defined at least from the 1st century BC and determined the passage, in written texts, between local languages and Latin. The crisis of the Western Roman Empire opened the way, in the 5th century, to the invasions of Huns and Goths. With the Lombards, a Germanic tribe (like the Goths), the control of the territory became capillary and stable, and this left in *Veneto* many toponyms clearly recognizable, like *Fara Vicentina* and *Motta di Costabissara*. Between the 12th and 13th century, in the mountains of *Vicenza*, *Verona*, and *Trento*, the local religious authorities called settlers from *Bavaria*, in *Germany*, to occupy some mountain villages which were almost uninhabited. These communities introduced in the area a dialect of Old German called *Cimbro* (*Zimbar*), which has nothing to do with the Cimbrian tribes (*Cimbri*) defeated by the Romans in the 2nd century BC. The reconstruction provided in this paper takes into account the diachronic overlapping of the different languages just mentioned and their influence on toponymic naming processes, with the aim to identify the language at the origin of the two analyzed place names.

5. ETYMOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS AND RECONSTRUCTIONS

5.1 Velo d'Astico

The first attestation of *Velo* is findable in a privilege by the emperor Otto III to the Bishop of *Vicenza* in 1035. Later on, in 1084, the emperor Henry IV of Franconia (1050-1106) offered the castle of *Velo* to the church of *Vicenza*[17]. Latin inscriptions form 1290 and 1305 call the castle *Castrum de Vello*, with double /l/[18]. The territory of

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[16] Cf. *Santorso*, (2023), *passim.*
[17] Cf. Maccà, G., (1814), cit., p. 292.
[18] Cf. Maccà, G., (1814), cit., p. 300.

Velo was strategically significant, because a marble cave and an iron mine were active, there, in the 13th century[19]; in the small village of *Fucina*, near *Posina*, a fief of the *Vellii* earls, iron metalworking was developed[20]. These activities add to the importance of the area as a road across the mountains. Four were the main paths connecting the valley of the *Adige* with the *Veneto* plains, passing through the *Valsugana*, the *Astico Valley*, the *Posina Valley*, and the *Vallarsa - Val Leogra* valleys. Both *Velo* and *Arsiero* are located in a strategic position at the junction between the *Posina Valley* and the *Astico Valley*, as shown in Figure 3.
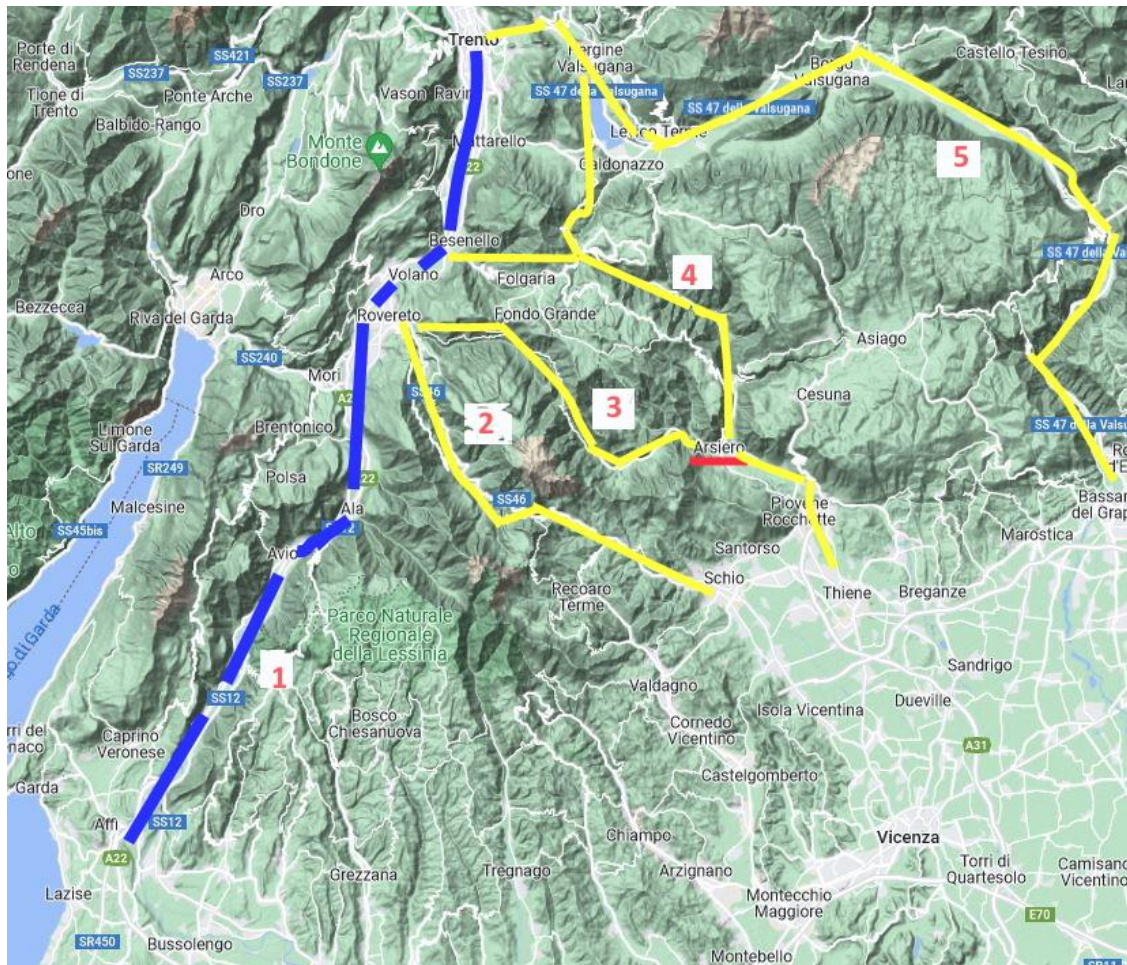
Figure 3. Main paths between the plains of Central *Veneto*, on the right, and the valley
of the *Adige* river (1), *Val Leogra* and *Vallarsa* (2), *Posina*'s valley (3),
Val d'Astico (4), *Valsugana* (5).
Adapted from Google Maps, 2023

     In the Middle Ages, the initial area of the *Astico Valley* was dotted by several castles aimed at controlling its access, like the castles of *Meda*, *Velo*, and, probably, also *Arsiero*, in correspondence with the elevated area where now the main church of the village is located. *Velo* had a special administrative role, during the Middle Ages, as it represented the headquarters of the earl of *Velo*, the feudal administrator of vast areas in

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[19] Cf. Maccà, G., (1814), cit., p. 8.
[20] Cf. Maccà, G., (1814), cit., p. 89.

the valley and in the near plateaus of *Tonezza* and *Asiago*. Maccà (1816) mentions a captain *Bonzilio di Velo*, in 1388, in charge of protecting the border of the mountains of *Vicenza* and the passes from *Germany* to *Vicenza*[21]. Since the Middle Ages, and up to a stretch of the 20th century, the areas of *Trento* and *Tyrol* were under the political rule and influence of German and/or Austrian authorities.

For the etymology of *Velo*, Maccà suggested two options: first, according to another scholar, Marzari, *Velo* would have been named after the Roman proper noun *Velleio*, or from the phrase *Velli Romani*[22]. The reference to an anthroponym is an immediate solution, but sounds like an 'easy' paretymology. The second option is a reference to the Latin word *vellus*, indicating 'the woolly coat of a sheep', possibly in connection with the land, a place covered by grass. The name *Velo*, with a single /l/, could be related to place names of Central and Southern *Italy*, specifically from *Latium* and *Campania*, in comparison to the Ancient Greek town of *Velia*, founded by the Greeks in the 5th century BC, or to the marshy area called *Velia* in the *forum* of *Rome*, to the *Velino Mount* near the ancient *Avezzano Lake*, and the *Velino* river, which generated a vast marsh near the town of *Chieti*, drained by the Romans with the implementation of a channel near the *Marmore* waterfalls[23]. All these names might be related to the Greek form ἔλεία = 'wet area', 'marsh'. However, the form *Vellum*, in all the Medieval references to *Velo*, excludes this meaning.

A different solution may be derived through a comparison with other similar toponyms from the *Alps*: in the province of *Verona*, we can find *Velo Veronese*, located on the *Lessini Mounts*. This village is called *Vellum* in a document dating back to the year 1287, hence it is reasonable to postulate a common origin for the name[23]. In the area surrounding *Velo Veronese*, remnants of Bronze Age hillforts called, in Italian, *castellieri*, can be found, and an ancient fortification with a tower was situated in this village, probably since Roman times[24].The possible etymology indicating a field covered in grass is still reasonable, but alternative origins are plausible. The Indo-European root *ṷeg-*, 'to weave', 'to connect', is related to Latin *velum*, 'tissue', 'sail'. *Velum* is a Classical Latin word, derived from the archaic form *vekslon*, and its diminutive is *vexillum*, meaning 'flag'. Although it is difficult to justify this with linguistic evidence, it is possible that the Medieval name *Vellum* was related to *vexillum* or to a similar form, like *velillum*, and the toponym would be, in this case, inherent in a *vexillatio*, a military Roman detachment of a legion and auxiliary corps, composed of less than 1000 soldiers and directed by a *praepositus,* a lesser commander. This organization had a standard, the flag, to represent its identity, symbolically so relevant that sometimes the detachment was indicated only with the name *vexillum*. A local military detachment in *Velo d'Astico*, similar to the example of *Campo Romano in Santorso*, would be coherent with the control of the territory in Roman times[24].

The clear attestations of Celtic sites along the valleys, before the arrival of the Romans, open to the option of a pre-Latin origin for the name, possibly from the Proto-Celtic proto-form **wello*, 'good', 'desirable'[25]. The Celtic hypothesis is acceptable,

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[21] Cf. Maccà, G., (1814), cit., p. 37.
[22] Cf. Maccà, G., (1814), cit., *ibidem.*
[23] Cf. *Lake Velinus*, (2023), *passim.*
[23] Cf. *Velo Veronese*, (2023), *passim.*
[24] Cf. *Velo Veronese*, (2023), cit., *ibidem.*
[24] Cf. Marquardt, J., (1891), *passim.*
[25] Cf. Pokorny, J., (1959), p. 411.

because, in the same area, other toponyms with a probable Celtic origin can be found, e.g., the names of some places like *Brogliano*, *Malo*, and *Cima Marana*[26]; for this mountain, which has a sanctuary on its top, the name could be related to an epithet meaning 'great', prerogative of a Celtic god. Other places have similar names in the regions of the *Alps* which were under Celtic and Raetian influence, for example *Vello*, on the *Lake of Iseo* (*Brescia*), which is located near *Marone*[27], and *Velloi*, in the *Alto Adige* territory[28].

5.2 Arsiero

The name of the village of *Arsiero* is attested for the first time in the year 975; the Medieval texts show the Latin form *Arserium* or the Vulgar form *villa de Arserio*[29]. The first paretymological explanation of *Arsiero* can be connected with the Latin verb *ardeo*, *ardēre*, 'to burn', and the past participle *arsus*. The local Medieval dialect used the words *àrso* and *arsìo* to express the same concept of something burnt or dry, and the coat of arms of the municipality corroborates this explanation with the representation of a burning trunk[30]. The mountains around *Arsiero* are karst, and this means that most of the water penetrates the soil because of a karst effect. Torrents are rare, but, in the valley where *Arsiero* is located, there is abundance of water and rains are typical of its fresh and wet climate[31].

There is no historical evidence of a Medieval fire event in the settlement of *Arsiero*, nor of a sack with related destruction. The notion of 'fire' could be linked to the presence of forges for metals or of connected metallurgic procedures, but this is a simple speculation. Archeologists have found evidence of ritual fires in proto-historic and Roman times on a sanctuary situated at the top of *Monte Summano*, but not in *Arsiero*. An investigation of the geo-morphological features of the ancient settlement suggests an alternative option represented by the Greek term ἄρσις, -εος (*arsis, arseos*), indicating 'elevation', 'elevated place'. Naturally, Greek has never been a language spoken in *Arsiero*'s area, but Ancient Greek is, nonetheless, useful, in the Indo-European context, to analyze ancient etymologies of words from other languages belonging to the same language family, like Venetic, Celtic, and Latin. The hypothesis inherent in 'elevated place' could indicate that the first settlers of *Arsiero* chose a small elevation in the valley, a common choice, in *Europe*, during the Neolithic and proto-historic times, because of the prevention of damages produced by floods and because it allowed to monitor and control the surrounding lands, providing shelter and good protection against enemy attacks.

It is, now, interesting to spend some words for *Monte Maggio*, a mountain located in *Arsiero*'s area. Its name is only apparently compatible with the Italian word for the month of *May*. The relation with the Celtic proto-form **magyo*, 'great'[32], or with

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[26] Celtic **mrogi-*, 'territory', 'field', Latin *brogae*, for *Brogliano, *mālo-*, 'to praise', for *Malo*; cf. Matasović, R., (2009), pp. 255 and 280; for *Cima Marana*, see the following note.

[27] Celtic **maro-*, 'great', is the proposed root for *Marone* and *Cima Marana*, cf. Matasović, R., (2009), cit., p. 258.

[28] This village, not far from the *Tyrol* region, dominates and controls the *Adige Valley*, like *Velo d'Astico*.

[29] Cf. Maccà, G., (1814), cit., p. 5 .

[30] Cf. Candiago, E., (1982), p. 17.

[31] Minimum rainfall 59 mm/month in the dry period, January and February. Retrieved on July 27, 2023, at https://www.meteoblue.com/it/tempo/historyclimate/climatemodelled/arsiero_italia_3182789.

[32] Cf. Matasović, R., (2008), cit., p. 253 .

Latin *maius*, 'great', is more than a phonetic similarity. The Romans called *Maius* the father of the gods, *Iūpiter* (or *Iuppiter*) and, on the basis of this, a connection between the mountain and the deity can be postulated. The tendency to control valleys with castles, common in the Middle Ages, has very ancient origins, as archeological evidence from the *Pass of Malga Campetto*, over the village of *Recoaro* (*Vicenza*), for example, demonstrates[33]. Indeed, passes and valleys in the *Prealps* were controlled strategically since the Bronze Age. *Arsiero*, located along a road to the mountains, was, topographically, a transition place. Ethnically, in the Iron Age, it was at the ideal border between Veneti and Raetians. Evidence of metal trade has been documented in the valley of *Leogra*, e.g., a piece of copper dating back to the 1st millennium BC, extracted from the mines of the *Adige*'s valley. This is not surprising, as the prehistoric man *Ötzi*, who lived two thousand years earlier and whose body was found in the *Alps* about 150 kilometers north of the place, had a copper as produced with metal from Southern *Etruria*.

During the Bronze Age, the number of settlements suggests that, in *Europe*, the population increased, in comparison to the previous millennia, and long routes of exchange of goods in the continent were established[34]. This is consistent with a capillary distribution of bronze attested by archeologic findings: the alloy requires a mix of copper and tin and, while the first metal was extracted from many sites in *Europe*, tin was rare and found only in a few regions. In the area we are analyzing, the nearest mines were in *Tuscany* and *Sardinia*. Bronze requires, generally, a long-range exchange, to be produced, and its diffusion coincides with the presence of efficient weapons, swords and spears, and with times of social changes and settlement dynamics. Especially during the 12th-10th centuries BC, many fortified sites appear in almost all *Europe*, from *Scotland* to *Spain* and from *Italy* to *Denmark*. The hillforts are placed on hilltops and are protected by artificial banks, ditches, and timber palisades. Their shape is approximately elliptical, with an axis of about one hundred meters or less, and they offer shelter to the dispersed rural population, also stocking reserves of food. They generally do not include the entirety of a village and its activities, as opposed to the *oppida* from the Iron Age. These sites are, indeed, too high on a hilltop and protected by a relatively 'narrow' wall, but are large enough to contain the essential elements of a village[35].

Hillforts in Northern *Italy* have contributed to the generation of many toponyms of the type *castellaro* and *castelliere*, in particular in the *Liguria* region (Northwestern *Italy*). In the *Veneto* region (Northeastern *Italy*), hillforts are attested near *Velo Veronese*, as mentioned, in *Arzignano*, in *Valbona* on the *Euganei Mounts*, and in the upper valley of the river *Piave*. Differently from areas like *Great Britain* and Central *Europe*, in *Italy* the distribution of hillforts has not been extensively studied with topographic observations yet, and a research in this direction could provide us with interesting discoveries. Linguistically, in some cases, a connection of hillforts with related place names can be highlighted, represented by the Indo-European root √*areq- (*arx-), 'to protect', alternatively √*h₂ĕrk-[36]. In Ancient Greek, the verb ἀρκέω (*arkeō*), *arceo*, *arcēre*, in Latin, indicates the actions of 'keeping away', 'protecting',

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[33] Cf. De Guio A., Migliavacca M., (2009), *passim*; De Guio A., Migliavacca M., (2010), *passim*.
[34] Cf. Guillaine, J., (2011), *passim.*
[35] Cf. Trevor, P., Stewart, A., Alastair, O., (2008), *passim.*
[36] Personal comment by Professor Guido Borghi.

'preserving'. The corresponding noun, *arx*, *arcis*, can signal the presence of a 'fort', or a 'castle'.

The name *Arserum* is, potentially, similar to *arceo*, but, phonetically, is not immediately derived from the corresponding Indo-European root. Giovanni Da Schio proposed an etymology, for the toponym, connected with *arceo* and with the Etruscan motto *arse verse*, which was inscribed in proximity of the main door of Etruscan houses. *Festus*, a Roman grammarian from the late 2nd century, explains that the phrase means *averte ignem*, 'keep away the fire'. Ultimately, Da Schio is unable to propose a meaningful solution for the etymology of the toponym, unfortunately[37]. Several place names, with a relatively coherent areal distribution, are morphologically similar to *Arsiero* and should be investigated to ascertain if they share the same etymology. They are, among others:

- the village of *Arsié* (*Belluno* province), located on a plateau, along the Roman road going from the city of *Altino*, on the *Venice* lagoon, to *Augusta*, in *Germany*;
- *Arsiera* (*Belluno* province), a hamlet with a small group of houses in the mountains, residence for shepherds and miners of the *Val Inferna* site;
- *Vallarsa*, connected with the *Adige Valley*; a village called *Arsa* is attested, there, in a 17th century map[38];
- *Arsego*, a village in the plains of *Padua*, where the Romans realized the subdivision of the territory called centuriation[39]. The toponym is believed to be associated with a small river flowing in proximity of the village[40];
- *Arsia*, a river flowing in *Istria*, along the border between the *X Roman Regio* of Northeastern *Italy* and the Illyrian lands. This river is attested in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, one of the most ancient geographic maps from the *West*[41];
- the *Silva Arsia*, a small wood, possibly a sacred forest (*lucus*), located along the route leading from *Rome* to the Etruscan city of *Veii*, venue of a famous battle with the Romans[42];
- *Arsita*, near *Teramo*, in the *Abruzzo* region, site of a castle since 1085[43];
- other minor Italian places called *Arso*, *Arson*, and *Arse*, but historical sources inherent in their possible original names and in their history are missing, unfortunately.

It is difficult to think of these place names as a consistent toponymic system, which would require the association of common etymological origins, derived from common historical developments and contexts[44]. It would be more reasonable to associate some of them with some others, on a case-by-case basis, and to group them by homogeneous clusters could help to achieve a better interpretation of their possible mutual relationships. Additionally, the reference to *arce* intended as 'fortress' could be

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[37] Cf. Da Schio, G., (1850), p. 12.
[38] Cf. *Map of Verona and Vincenza* (Hondius, 1626), private collection.
[39] Cf. Bosio, L., (1984), *passim.*
[40] Cf. *San Giorgio delle Pertiche*, (2023), *passim.*
[41] Cf. *Tabula Peutingeriana*, (2023), *passim.*
[42] Cf. Livy, T., (1964), 2.6-7
[43] The Medieval name is *Arseta*, cf. Antinori, A.L., (1971), *passim*
[44] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., Cavallaro, F.P., (2023), cit., pp. 19-22.

acceptable only for three places, *Arsiero*, *Arsié*, and *Arsita*, but this would be still a very weak hypothesis, because not strongly documented. Indeed, where a river flows, it is difficult to think of a (hilltop) fortress or the memory of a fire. An etymological attempt of reconstruction can lead to a connection with the Proto-Indo-European root ²√*eres-*, 'to flow'(~ √*h_1ĕrs-*)[45], which could indicate the name of a river or of a place located in the vicinity of a river, and most of the examined places show this feature. Another plausible Proto-Indo-European root that could be connected with this type of place names is √*h_aŭĕr-*, 'wet'[46], related to the Ancient Greek verb ἄρδω (~ ἄρσω), (*[h]ardō ~ [h]arsō*), which could explain river names like *Ardo*, a body of water flowing near *Belluno*, in the *Veneto* region, or *Arda*, in the *Apennines* near *Piacenza*. Da Schio highlighted the fact that most of the *ars*-type toponyms were located in border areas, and *Arsiero* is one of them[47]. This kind of border is often at the transition between plains and mountains, or in geo-morphological contexts like the *Vallarsa*'s one, between the territories of *Vicenza* and *Trento*. A border implies the concept of 'defense', and, therefore, the notion foreshadowed by the Latin verb *arceo* surfaces again.

6. FURTHER HYPOTHESES

A sub-group of the above-listed examples includes names with evident Roman or pre-Roman origins, like the hydronym *Arsia* and the toponym *Silva Arsia*. The *Arsia* river flows along an ancient border, while the *Silva Arsia* is located near the area that separates *Rome* from *Veii*. Ancient Italic populations shared many traditions, as shown by Venetic, Celtic, Oscan, and Etruscan inscriptions, with connections still surviving during the Roman rule. The Etruscans had the tradition of protecting border areas by giving a deity the duty of their supervision[48]. The borders could be of different kinds, vertical borders separating earth and sky, located on the top of some significant mountains, perhaps isolated and well observable from the plains. These places were, traditionally, under the protection of the most important Etruscan god, *Tinia*. The Romans replaced it with *Iūpiter* (genitive *Iovis*), and produced toponyms as *Monte Giovi*[49] or, as proposed earlier, *Monte Maggio* (*Maius*).

Prehistoric sanctuaries, not far from *Arsiero*, could have been located on the top of mountains for a similar reason: for example, the sanctuary of *Cima Marana*, in the upper valley of the *Chiampo* river, and the *Monte Summano*. On the summit of the *Summano Mount*, near *Arsiero*, archeological findings have revealed that the original deity was a 'mistress' of wild beasts, a goddess of fertility and of the dead, similar to the Mycenaean *Potnia Theron* and the Greek *Artemis* the hunter. In Roman era, a wild male god, similar to *Heracles*, was added[50]. The name *Summano* looks typically Etruscan, but was probably imported into the area by the Romans, as shown by recent archeological evidence. The theonym is findable in the toponym *Monsummano*, in *Tuscany*, province of *Pistoia*; the identity of this god is clearly revealed by the Latin writer Plautus (254-

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[45] Cf. Pokorny, J., (1959), cit., pp. 336-337; personal comment by Professor Guido Borghi.
[46] Cf. Pokorny, J., (1959), cit., pp. 80-81; personal comment by Professor Guido Borghi.
[47] Cf. Da Schio, G., (1850), cit, pp.12-14.
[48] Cf. Edlund-Berry, I.E.M., (2006), *passim.*
[49] In the *Campania* Region, it is possible to find *Monte Giovi*, near *Salerno*; in *Tuscany*, *Monte Giovi*, in the province of *Florence*, *Monte Giovo*, in the province of *Lucca*, *Montegiovi*, in the provinces of *Arezzo* and *Grosseto*.
[50] Cf. *Monte Summano*, (2023), *passim.*

184 BC), in his comedy *Bacchides*, 7th act, when a character calls for the protection of many gods, like *Sommanus*, the Latin name of the Etruscan deity of the infernal world, responsible of the passage of the souls to the underworld after death[51]. The Etruscan name of this god was, probably, *Sur*, and was similar to the Faliscan *Soranus Pater*, at the origin of the oronym *Soratte*, denomination of a mount located North of *Rome*, where the tradition of the *Hirpi Sorani*, priests dressed with wolf skins, developed. It is evident that, in addition to *Tinia*, in the Etruscan religion there were many gods involved in the protection of the territory.

The cult of an infernal god is related to the mining activity in the *Summano Mount*; the Neolithic tradition required rites of propitiation to a specific deity of the underworld prior to accessing natural resources. Mining supplies precious metals, and it is interesting to observe that the Ancient Greek god corresponding to *Sommanus* is *Pluto*, whose name is fortuitously similar to $\pi\lambda o\tilde{v}\tau o\varsigma$ (*plūtos*), 'wealth'. A second kind of 'border' is represented by the passes among mountains, places which, often, were very dangerous and required the protection of *Iūpiter*. Indeed, two mountain passes between *Italy* and *France*, the *Little Saint Bernard* and the *Great Saint Bernard*, were dedicated to *Iūpiter Poeninus*. *Poeninus* was a Celtic god that the Romans considered equivalent to *Iūpiter* also in another important site, the pass between the *Umbria* and *Marche* regions, along the *Via Flaminia*. The *Tabula Peutingeriana* indicates that there was located a temple dedicated to *Iūpiter Penninus*. This is probably the place of the discovery of the *Tabulæ Iguvinæ*, a large and important religious text written in the Umbrian ancient language (3rd-1st century BC)[52].

Near *Arsiero*, we can find a pass called *Zovo*, which could be a remnant of the name *Jove / Iovis* (the latter, as mentioned, is the genitive of *Iūpiter*), or which could be connected with the Italian term *giogo*, meaning 'joke', which describes a pass. A third kind of border protects sacred places, like in the surroundings of a sanctuary, and it defines the limits of cultivated fields. Sacred places, in the proto-historic period, simply included a wood (*lucus*, in Latin), and their borders were supervised by the Etruscan *Selvans*, or the Latin *Silvanus* (the god of a *silva*, 'wood', 'forest'). When responsible of fields, this god was called *Selvans Tular* by the Etruscans, as *tular* means 'border' and indicates a 'signalling stone' placed to identify it. The border gods were called *Termini* by the Romans and *Terminos Deivos* by the Veneti. We cannot exclude a remote connection of Roman *Silvanus* with the village of *Camposilvano*, located in the *Vallarsa*, or with *Camposilvano* near *Velo Veronese*, and other Italian places and place names.

The last kind of border considered here is the political and administrative one. In pre-Roman and Roman *Italy*, the clashes among neighboring tribes were common and continuous, and the different ethnic groups (e.g., Romans, Latins, Etruscans, Oscans, Umbrians, among others) were often in war, before the establishment of the Roman rule. To protect these borders the Etruscans invoked the support of a powerful goddess, *Artumes*, with a name borrowed by the Greeks and that appears in the 5th century BC, from the coastal settlements of *Etruria*. This goddess, like *Artemis*, is characterized by archaic features and represents the wild nature and the fertility of animals and vegetation. *Artemis* uses a spear to hunt deers and bears, and her followers, in some rites, dress as deers and bears. We know that the symbolic identification of prey and

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[51] Cf. Plautus, T.M., (1849), *passim.*
[52] Cf. Paolucci, P., (1966), p. 27.

hunter originated in Prehistory[53]. The Greek *Artemis* had the epithet Ἀγροτέρα (*Agrotera*), 'wild', and her name is connected with ἀρταμέω (*artameō*), 'to tear the prey to pieces'.The Etruscan *Artumes* was called also *Aritimi*, a form very similar to the name of the Etruscan village of *Artimino*, located on a hilltop near the bed of the *Arno* river, South of *Florence*. With reference to the traditional Etruscan territory of the *dodecapolis*, or the Etruscan 'Twelve Cities League', *Artimino* is effectively situated in an area of transition with lands occupied by Ligurian tribes. The suffix *-mino*, in *Artimino*, is probably not a diminutive form, like Latin *-minus*, but a reference to Μήνη (*mēnē*), an epithet of the Greek goddess of the moon. In the Italic tradition, the Roman goddess *Diana*, identified with *Artemis*, is also the goddess of the moon, while in the archaic Greek mythology the moon, satellite controlling the ancient calendar, was connected with the deity called *Selene* (Σελήνη), representing the 'plenilune'[54].

In the Celtic world, often in contact with the Etruscans, we can find the goddess *Artio*, very similar to *Artumes*, represented, in Roman times, as a female figure standing in front of a bear[55]. Thinking again of the toponym *Arsia*, which might be connected with the Proto-Indo-European root √*h_1ĕrs-*, 'to flow', 'to be on the movement'[56], a specific aspect of the ancestral goddess *Artemis* may come to mind. She was restlessly hunting animals, like the prehistoric hunter gatherers. However, *Arsia*, if interpreted according to the notion of 'protection', can also be considered as a Latin epithet of a water nymph; its etymology could be connected, therefore, also with the Latin verb *arceo*, 'to protect'.

The need for territorial protection in ancient *Europe* was common also among the Germanic tribes: the Roman historian Tacitus, in his *Germania*, a description of Germanic populations living beyond the *limes* ('border') of the Empire, mentions a local god *Alcis*, whose name could be related to the Proto-Indo-European root √*aleq-*, √*alx-*, 'to protect'[57]. In Ancient Greek, we can find the word ἀλκή (*alkē*), 'strength', 'protection', and, possibly, a connection can be established also with the verb ἠλέξω (*ēlĕxō*), 'to keep away'. √*aleq-* is a possible variant of the similar root √*areq-*, with a switch between the liquid consonants /l/ and /r/. Hence, *Alcis* and *Arsia* could be two alternative forms of the name of a deity offering protection.

7. CONCLUSION

This study provides its readers with an original contribution to the understanding of etymological and historical elements involved in the 'making' of the names of ancient settlements located in border areas between prehistoric and proto-historic times in *Europe*. Border areas show to be very significant, in Historical Toponomastics, and, generally, provide scholars with unique contexts and clues to analyze naming processes in connection with settlement dynamics and language contact. Our methodology is convergent, in that it associates the historical analysis with Historical Linguistic, Comparative Mythology, Landscape Archeology, and Historical Geography to reconstruct the etymologies of place names from a culturally and geo-morphologically well-defined area. The possible restitution of the origins of the analyzed place names is

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[53] Cf. Càssola, F., (1994), *passim*.

[54] Cf. *Selene*, (2023), *passim.*

[55] Cf. Kaufmann-Heinimann, A., (2002), *passim.*

[56] Cf. Pokorny, J., (1959), cit., pp. 336-337.

[57] Cf. Hickie, D.B., (1845), p. 60.

not only a work in Diachronic Onomastics, but also opens a path towards a better understanding of a multitude of aspects of prehistoric and proto-historic *Europe* in mountainous regions, e.g., the significance of metallurgy over millennia and a common pattern in the adoption of similar (even consistent) defensive solutions, the hillforts, sort of precursors of the castles in the European Middle Ages. Through this approach, an ideal parallel between the instability of the Late Bronze Age and the Middle Ages, in some areas of *Europe*, can be highlighted, instability which determines the adoption of similar solutions for territorial management and protection.

The etymological reconstruction of the two village names, which are the objects of the case-study of this paper, is, naturally still open to discussion and to enhancement, and, indeed, we proposed some alternatives to the main interpretations. For instance, on one hand, *Velo d'Astico* was grouped with other examples of the '**vell*-type', from Northern *Italy*. A connection with a military settlement from Roman times can be hypothesized, as well as a more ancient Celtic origin, which can make us wonder whether the borders of expansion of the Celts in the territory of the Veneti should be reconsidered. *Arsiero*, on the other hand, opens a discourse inherent in the morphological convergence, over time, of toponyms which are, apparently, similar, but which might have been generated from different etymological origins, while, in all the proposed solutions, common hydro-geo-morphological elements can be found, like the presence of rivers and of natural resources in the related territories.

In both cases, the settlements are characterized by a stable geographic position in a valley, in an area of transition from the plains to the mountains. A critical component to be ascertained, which would require more analysis and documentary support, is the exact identification of the diachronic origins of the names of the two inhabited centers, task which is extremely difficult, since the only elements useful to the analysis come from the names of the villages themselves and, therefore, are essentially linguistic. At the general level, our paper shows how border areas (in the case of this study, from the *Alps*), which, at a first glance, might be considered to play a marginal role in the historical development of territories and populations, attracted settlers from very remote times, because of the opportunities of exchange of goods (and ideas) they offered and because of their strategic positions. For these reasons, they were carefully administered and protected and, possibly, they also contributed to the development of original (and not always only local) cults.

The proposed results are, clearly, only a starting point for future research, but provide an exhaustive contribution to the understanding of borderlands, by highlighting specific features of two places that, throughout a long part of their history, were located in a transition area between different cultural and ethnic contexts. As shown by Creţan *et al.* (2023), "the countryside is often associated with ideas of immutability and resistance to the types of change that characterise urban areas"[58], and this seems particularly true for rural mountainous areas. In this paper, we demonstrate that those same areas and, specifically, their inhabitants are able, over time, to develop original socio-economic solutions on the basis of the opportunities and options offered by the diachronic overlapping of different traditions, ethnicities, cultures, societies, and languages.

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[58] Cf. Creţan, R., Covaci, R.N., Jucu, I.S., (2023), cit, p. 93.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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