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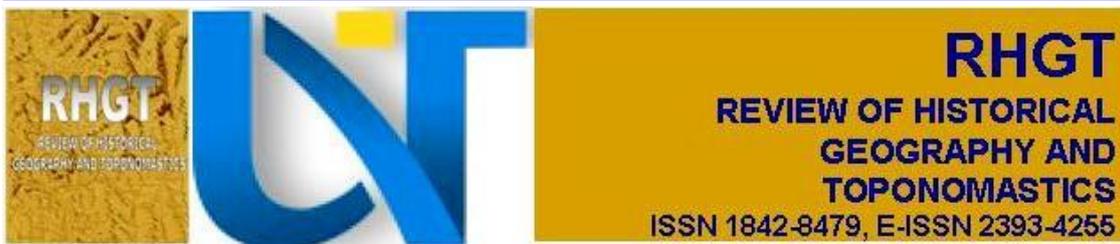
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THE ORIGINS OF NAMING PROCESS: TOPONYMIC ARCHAEOLOGY OF TWO INDO-EUROPEAN PLACE NAMES

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is the reconstruction of the remote naming process and toponymic stratigraphy of the place names Bistagno and Sessame, proposing two new etymological reconstructions for them, in order to recover the prehistoric origins of the two toponyms, taking into account previous interpretations and hypotheses. Aim of the paper is also to highlight possible paretymologies inherent in the two place names. Bistagno and Sessame are two small neighboring villages of prehistoric origins located in North-Western Italy, Piedmont, at the border between the current Provinces of Alessandria and Asti. Since the origins of their names are still disputed, this paper would like to shed some light on their toponymic stratigraphies, investigating both of them in-depth.

Key words: Prehistoric Indo-European Naming Process, New Convergence Theory (NCT), Bistagno, Sessame, Toponymic Stratigraphy

1. INTRODUCTION

Bistagno and Sessame are two small neighboring villages of prehistoric origins located in North-Western Italy, Piedmont, at the border between the current Provinces of Alessandria and Asti. The origins of their names are still disputed. The toponymic stratigraphy of those remote denominations has still to be investigated in-depth. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the remote naming process and diachronic onomatopoiesis of the place names *Bistagno* and *Sessame*, proposing a new etymological reconstruction for both of them, with the restitution of the prehistoric origins of the two toponyms, taking into account previous proposals and hypotheses. Aim of the paper is also to highlight possible paretymologies involving the two place names.

2. PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

Bistagno (*Bistàgn*, in the local Piedmontese dialect, geographic coordinates 44°39′40″N 8°22′17″E) is a small village (17.59 square kilometers) located in North-Western Italy, Piedmont, in the current Province of Alessandria. The place (175 meters above sea level) lies about 70 kilometers South-East of Turin (the Piedmont's administrative center) and about 35 kilometers South-West of Alessandria. Bistagno borders a number of other small villages, all located between the Provinces of Alessandria and Asti: Sessame (AT), Castelletto d'Erro (AL), Melazzo (AL), Monastero Bormida (AT), Montabone (AT), Ponti (AL), Rocchetta Palafea (AT), and Terzo (AL). The village is located at the confluence of the two branches of the Bormida river, the Spigno (Monferrato)'s Bormida and the Millesimo-Cengio's Bormida. The hydronym *Bormida* (< *borm-*) has probably pre-Indo-European origins and a number of places situated along the river's course are really ancient settlements (from, at least, the Neolithic, but also from the Upper Paleolithic)[1].

Sessame (*Sisàm / Siàm*, in the local Piedmontese dialect, geographic coordinates 44°40′18″N 8°20′16″E) is another small village (8.45 square kilometers) located in North-Western Italy, Piedmont, in the Province of Asti. The place (325 meters above sea level) lies, as well as Bistagno, about 70 kilometers South-East of Turin (the Piedmont's administrative center) and about 30 kilometers South-East of Asti. Sessame borders other small villages located between the Provinces of Alessandria and Asti: Bistagno (AL), Cassinasco (AT), Monastero Bormida (AT), Ponti (AL), and Rocchetta Palafea (AT). Bistagno is an ancient (prehistoric) center located where the two above mentioned branches of the Bormida river converge, in an area favorable to human settlement, due to the presence of an important watercourse. Also Sessame is an ancient (prehistoric) village located at the top of a steep hill overhanging the Bormida river, ideal place to find natural shelters and for the extraction and processing of stone (the hill on which the settlement rises is composed of tufaceous rock and/or marl, also called 'river stone').

3. POSSIBLE TOPONYMIC INTERPRETATIONS AND PARETYMOLOGIES

3.1 *Bistagno*

A widespread interpretation of the place name *Bistagno* is oriented towards the possible derivation of the toponym from a hydro-geo-morphological feature of the village's territory, namely the confluence of the two branches of the Bormida river. Bernardino Bosio[2] stated that the place name is linked to the union of the two 'Bormidas', the *Millesimo-Cengio* (originated in North-Western Italy, Liguria, in the current Province of Savona) one and the *Spigno* [Monferrato], originated in North-Western Italy, Piedmont, in the current Province of Alessandria) one. The two river's branches converge in a place located at around one kilometer from the current Bistagno's center, but administratively already belonging to the territory of Sessame, in

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a hamlet of that village called *Galloni*. That locality, even if really close to Bistagno (currently situated in the Province of Alessandria), already belongs (being part of the Sessame's jurisdiction) to the current Province of Asti (on the right bank of the Bormida river, there – between Sessame and Monastero Bormida –, the hamlet called *Gringàvoli* rises, where the union is already completed).

Bosio segmented the place name as **bi-* + **-stagno* (*Bi-stagno*), giving it the meaning of 'double pond' (*stagno* is the Italian word for 'pond'). That 'double pond' would derive from the confluence of the two Bormida's branches. The medieval denomination[3] varies from *Bistagnus* (960 AD) to *Bestagnius* (991 AD, the year of the foundation of the Saint Quentin's Abbey in Spigno Monferrato[4]). *Bistannus* (*Bistanno*, 1052 AD) is probably a graphic variant of the more common forms. Bosio does not give other explanations for this reconstruction that seems quite simplistic. At the level of a toponymic paretymology is the hypothesis proposed by Pietro Massia[5], according to which the place name would derive from the very rare Roman gentilitial (originally Ligurian) *Vestanius*, possibly derived, in its turn, from *Vesta* or *Besta* (*Vestia* in the Turin's area, as attested in CIL V 7031). This reconstruction is really weak, being, more than anything else, a paretymology.

Dante Olivieri[6] has pointed out the high frequency of toponyms similar to *Bistagno* in North-Western Italy, especially in places characterized by marshy soils. The scholar mentions, among others, *Bestagnum*, on the Orta Lake (North-Western Italy, Piedmont, currently in the Province of Novara), *Bestagno*, hamlet of the Pontedassio municipality (North-Western Italy, Liguria, currently in the Province of Imperia), and a *Bestagnu*, hamlet of the Pigna municipality (North-Western Italy, Liguria, currently in the Province of Imperia)[7], located in an "uncultivated area, with a high forest". Giovan Battista Pellegrini adds to this list the place name *Bestagno*, locality belonging to the Sospello / Sospel municipality (South-Eastern France, Alpes-Maritimes Department, near the Italian border and not far from Monte-Carlo)[8].

According to Olivieri, *Bistagno* was, already from Antiquity, a sort of 'common' topographic term (*bistagno*) explainable, in his hypothesis, as a pejorative variant of the Italian word *stagno* ('pond') characterized by the *bis-* prefix, intended not as 'double', but, indeed, as a pejorative marker[9] and combined with the same Italian word *stagno*, 'pond', 'marshy land', with derogatory semantic value. The possible meaning of the toponym as 'swampy place' would be linked to the hydro-geo-morphology of the Bistagno's territory, describing a settlement located at the confluence of the two branches of a river (the Bormida river), with the possible development of ponds and marshy areas. This solution does not seem completely acceptable in order to explain the origins of the place name, since it combines diachronically different linguistic layers (at least Latin and Italian) and it does not go back in time to the pre-Latin origins of the place name, leaving unexplored the remote naming process of the toponym. Moreover, the current village of Bistagno, located on the Bormida river, was founded only in 1253

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[3] Cf. DTI, (1999), p. 81, s.v. *Bistagno*.
[4] Cf. Bosio, B., (1972), cit., pp. 21, 35, and 135-138, l. 28 of the Latin text (*Bestagnio*).
[5] Cf. Massia, P., (1923), pp. 41-53.
[6] Cf. Olivieri, D., (1965), p. 93, s.v. *Bistagno*.
[7] Cf. Petracco-Sicardi, G., (1962), p. 63.
[8] Cf. Pellegrini, G.B., (1990), p. 203.
[9] Cf. Rohlfs, G., (1969) [III], § 1006.

AD, during the Italian Middle Ages. Previous (prehistoric) settlements are, conversely, attested on the hills surrounding the current center[10], for example where now it is possible to visit the hamlet called *Roncogennaro* (450 meters above sea level) and in the area called *Cartesio* (clear prehistoric – proto-Indo-European – place name derived from the PIE root **kar- / *kal-*, meaning 'stone carved by water'[11]). Neolithic human settlements (with findings dating back also to the Upper Paleolithic) are attested along the entire course of the Bormida river[12], so also in the Bistagno's area, but the idea of an original and/or remote single inhabited center located on the watercourse could be mistaken. It is necessary to take into account the possibility of the prevalence of settlements, in that territory, on the hills, as shelters for the men of stone.

Claudio Beretta seems to support the hypothesis linked to the notion of 'swampy land', connecting the place name *Bistagno* with a water root and/or proto-form **ang- / *-agn-* meaning 'water' and connected to 'water places'. According to Beretta, *Bistagno* would be, therefore, a *vicus ad aquam* and the segmentation of its name could be the following, **bi-st-agn-o*, with the root **agn-* indicating 'water' (specifically the 'flowing water' of a river, stream, torrent, watercourse)[13]. Beretta offers other examples of this possible toponymic remote structure. He analyzes, for example, the hydronym *Bisagno* (in the Ligurian dialect *Besagno*, *beˈzaɲu*, a stream – 25 kilometers – of Liguria, North-Western Italy, flowing through the city of Genoa – the administrative center of the Region – and ending its course in the Ligurian Sea), segmented as **bi-s-agn-o*[14]. The same analysis is applied to another Ligurian place name (mentioned above), *Bestagno*, restituted as **be-st-agn-o*[15].

This reconstructive series is strengthened by a further Beretta's remark on another place name of that area, *Spigno* (Spigno Monferrato, a village located in North-Western Italy, Piedmont, currently in the Province of Alessandria, situated on the course of the Bormida river and at the origins of the name of one of the two branches of that watercourse, the *Spigno's Bormida*). According to Beretta, *Spigno* can be segmented as **s-p-agn-o*[16], with the stem **agn-* as the marker of its nature of *vicus ad aquam*. This hypothesis can find a match with / in the New Convergence Theory (NCT)'s pattern[17], according to which the etymological reconstruction of *Spigno* could be the following:

Spigno < (Proto-)IE **agn-* (**ang- / *gn-*), 'flowing water', 'river' **s-* + *-p-* + **-agn-* (+ *-o*) → **s-p-agn-(-o)* → **spagno* → **spigno* = *Spigno*[18],

with passage and 'closure' – perhaps due to the local dialect – of the central vowel of maximum opening, *a*, in the front closed non-rounded vowel, *i*, passage that is also explained through the loss, by speakers and 'naming subjects', over time, of the original meaning of the place name and with the 'adaptation' to a more 'verifiable' and

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[10] Cf., e.g., Colla, E., (1982), *passim*.
[11] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2015a), pp. 121-138.
[12] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2011), cit., pp. 3-20, with bibliography.
[13] Cf. Beretta, C., (2003), p. 305, n. 3151.
[14] Cf. Beretta, C., (2003), cit., p. 301, n. 2026.
[15] Cf. Beretta, C., (2003), cit., p. 295, n. 0570.
[16] Cf. Beretta, C., (2003), cit., p. 306, n. 3184.
[17] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014a), pp. 79-98.
[18] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014b), pp. 118-119.

understandable seme, linked to the concept expressed by Latin *spīnĕus*, 'thorny', generating a widespread paretymology (*Spigno* = 'thorny place')[19]. Just like other toponyms of that area, as *Squaneto*, *Squagiato*, and *Saquana*, also *Spigno* could be interpreted as a *vicus ad aquam*'s name characterized by a (Proto-)Indo-European 'water stem'. The denomination *Spigno* would derive, following this interpretation, from a (Proto-)Indo-European root and/or proto-form **agn-* (**ang- / *gn-*) / **-agn-*, meaning 'flowing water', 'river', preceded (as, among others, *Squaneto*) by a 'prefix' ('formant consonant') *s-* with the insertion of a *-p-* (perhaps euphonic).

From the root **agn-* (**ang- / *gn-*) derives the Latin word *amnis* (**agno* = **anno*) 'river', 'stream', 'torrent', 'watercourse' (and also 'flowing water', 'river current'), since the forms **agn-*, **ang-*, **am-*, and **an-* are equivalent among themselves and share the same meaning. *Agno* (< **agn- / *ang- / *gn-*) is the name of an Italian stream flowing in the current Vicenza's Province (Veneto, North-Eastern Italy), a strongly Celtic area in its toponymy, filtered by the aforementioned Latin word *amnis*, 'watercourse' (a term that has no Romance developments except in toponymy), through the reconstructed form **amniu-*, deriving, in any case, from the prehistoric root **agn- / *ang- / *gn-*. From this stem descends, on the other hand, also the Italian word *stagno* 'pond', 'mass of stagnant and swampy water, little extended and shallow'[20]. The possibly Proto-Indo-European root **agn-*, shared by *Bistagno* with hydronyms as *Bisagno* and place names as *Bestagno*, *Bestagnu*, and *Spigno*, in an area (current Piedmont and Liguria, North-Western Italy) populated already between Upper Paleolithic and Neolithic, can be considered as an important stem involved in the prehistoric naming process of that territory. *Bistagno* and the other mentioned hydronyms and place names sharing the root **agn-* can be, therefore, part of a well-established prehistoric toponymic system developed in the ancient Liguria's territory in Proto-Indo-European times, linked to the notion of 'water', in particular to the concept of 'flowing water', 'river water'.

3.2 *Sessame*

The Medieval tradition gives only one form, without variants, for this toponym, *Sexamus*, starting from the year 1127[21]. A really questionable interpretation links this place name to the sesame plant (Latin *sesamum*, Italian *sesamo*), with an evident problem in the accentuation[22]. This hypothesis is a paretymology derived from the difficulty to etymologically reconstruct this toponym.

Giovanni Martina has interpreted the place name as a syncope deriving from the Latin expression *(ad) sexagesimum lapidem*, spatial remark indicating the distance of Sessame from Turin (*il sessagesimo miglio dal capoluogo piemontese*, "the sixtieth mile from the Piedmontese administrative center")[23]. According to Goffredo Casalis, "the place where the two Bormida's branches converge is called 'the unions' (*le giunte*). Sessame, where (beneath the village) this union happens, means 'junction'

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[19] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014a), cit., p. 93.
[20] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2014a), cit., pp. 93-94.
[21] Cf. DTI, (1999), cit., p. 621, s.v. *Sessame*.
[22] Cf. Moriondo, G.B., (1789-1790), vol. I, 472, p. 63.
[23] Cf. Martina, G., (1951), p. 122.

(*congiungimento*) in German"[24]. Casalis was referring to the German expression *sich sammeln*, 'to gather', 'to converge'. It is quite evident the fact that also this hypothesis should be considered highly questionable, at the level of a toponymic paretymology.

Dante Olivieri called "impenetrable" this place name, proposing, just as a possibility among others, a derivation from an alteration of the Proto-Indo-European root **sal(s)-* (Latin *sāl*, Italian *sale*, Ancient Greek *ἅλς*)[25], meaning 'salt', 'brackish water', plausibly justified by the presence, in the Sessame's area, of sulphureous / sulphurous springs (that are more common, in any case, in the territory of Acqui Terme – North-Western Italy, Piedmont, currently in the Province of Alessandria –, close to Sessame, but different in its geo-morphology)[26]. Looking at the Sessame's hamlets and at their names (*Albareto*, *Asinari*, *Caldana*, *Castagnola*, *Collina*, *Fermone*, *Galloni* – where the two branches of the Bormida river converge, at the border with the Bistagno's territory –, *Giardinetto*, *Malerba*, *Penna*, *Ponticello*, *San Giorgio*, *San Rocco*, *San Pietro*, *San Sebastiano*, *Tarditi*), indeed, it is possible to focus on the place name *Caldana*, locality where a wellspring is attested. *Caldana* is a micro-toponym widespread in North-Western Italy, generally associated with the presence of a sulphureous / sulphurous spring. The name of the Sessame's hamlet, therefore, could indicate the relevance attributed by 'naming subjects', already in ancient times, to that 'hot spring'. The hydronym *Bormida*, the name of the river flowing in the Sessame's territory in proximity of the confluence of its two branches, moreover, derives from a remote, possibly Pre-Indo-European, root, **borm-*, meaning 'hot water', 'warm water'[27]. The Bormida river had, probably, its name from the presence (in particular, as mentioned above, in the territory of Acqui Terme) of a number of 'hot springs' along its course. Besides these more or less speculative reconstructions, it could be possible to propose, for *Sessame*, two other etymologies[28]:

- from the Proto-Indo-European root **sĕk-*, meaning 'to cut', 'section', 'to dissect'[29]. This root can be effectively linked to prehistoric archaeological findings from the Bormida river's area, like stone axes and knives with arrowheads (flint)[30]. Similar finds have been extensively unearthed in the Acqui Terme's territory and in the Bormida's Valley, to which Sessame and Bistagno belong. If **sĕk-* in *Sessame* is interpreted as 'cutting tool', it is possible to highlight a connection of the toponym with the prehistoric stone axes and knives found in that area. However, the 'cutting practices' performed with those Neolithic utensils should not be linked directly to agriculture. In that case, indeed, the most common tool would have been the scythe / sickle, widespread during Mesolithic and Neolithic. Those utensils could be, rather, connected with carpentry. **sĕk-* would mean, in that case, 'to saw', 'woodworking' (one of the specific meanings of the Latin verb *sĕcāre*, Italian *segare*). This interpretation would connect those stone axes and knives to activities as

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[24] Cf. Casalis, G., (1833-1856), vol. II, p. 339, and vol. XX, p. 10.
[25] Cf. Pokorny, J., (1959-1969), pp. 878-879.
[26] Cf. Olivieri, D., (1965), cit., p. 321, s.v. *Sessame*.
[27] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2015b), cit., pp. 342-356.
[28] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2009), pp. 15-24 and notes 5 and 6.
[29] Cf. Pokorny, J., (1959-1969), cit., pp. 895-896.
[30] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2011), cit., pp. 3-20, with bibliography.

carpentry. It is necessary to highlight, anyway, the typical ritual and ornamental value of the most ancient stone axes (especially the biggest ones, unsuitable for practical activities) probably already from the Upper Paleolithic. However, smaller stone axes / hatchets for chopping wood were later widespread starting from Mesolithic in Northern Europe and during the Neolithic in all Europe, with the lexicon of Indo-European languages witnessing this phenomenon. In Ancient High German, for example, the word for 'knife' is *sahs* (< PIE *sĕk-*);

- in connection with the arrowheads found in the Bormida river's area near Sessame, it could be possible to link the place name also to the Proto-Indo-European root *sag-*, meaning 'to seek', 'to track', 'trail', 'to chase scenting', at the origins, for example, of Breton *saez / seaz*, Welsh *saeth*, and Latin *sagitta* (Italian *saetta*, 'thunderbolt', with transparent semantic shift), all meaning 'arrow'[31]. The PIE root *sag-* could also be the stem of the name of *Sagunto* (Spanish: *saˈɣunto*; Catalan: *Sagunt - saˈɣunt*; Valencian: *Sagunt - saˈɣunt*; Latin: *Saguntum*), a historical town located in Eastern Spain, currently in the Province of Valencia. However, the origin of that place name is disputed, being believed (but without any precise evidence) to be derived from a Proto-Indo-European root *seg-*, plausibly meaning 'to sow', 'seed'[32], as *Segontia* (the current *Sigüenza*) and *Segisama* (the current *Sasamón*), with Iberian ending (and with transparent or, at least, possible link to the notion of prehistoric agriculture). Both those towns, as well as Sagunto, are pre-Roman inhabited centers with settlements attested already during the Neolithic. In order to hypothesize the connection between the toponym *Sessame* and the PIE root *sag-*, however, it would be necessary to explain the historical phonetic of the place name in relationship with that stem, but it could be a 'bumpy ride'. The same reasoning is applicable to the PIE root *seg-* in relation to the same place name.

4. TWO NEW ETYMOLOGICAL PROPOSALS

Since the above mentioned reconstructions are not completely convincing, it is now possible to propose two new alternative solutions in order to establish the etymology of place names *Bistagno* and *Sessame*. They both derive from a very interesting and fruitful discussion with Dr Guido Borghi (University of Genoa, Italy) about these two place names[33]. These new additional proposals can be considered as a contribution to the etymological studies on the prehistoric toponymy of ancient Liguria. The comparison among these two new reconstructions and the previous hypotheses can shed new light on the remote naming processes involving the two places, disclosing the indubitable prehistoric origins (as settlements and toponyms) of Bistagno and Sessame.

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[31] Cf. Pokorny, J., (1959-1969), cit., pp. 876-877.
[32] Cf. EI, (1929-1952), A. T. 41-22, s.v. *Sagunto*; Pokorny, J., (1959-1969), cit., p. 887.
[33] This note is to thank very much Dr Guido Borghi for his kindness and for the outstanding ideas he always generously provides in investigating prehistoric toponymy.

4.1 *Bistagno*

In Celtic, *-ăgnŏ(-)* is a typical diminutive suffix. In Old Irish, it is attested the form *ᶦbesān*, mainly interpreted as 'pheasant'[34]. The possible unexceptionable linguistic antecedent of this term is *bĭst-ăgnŏ-s* (from Proto-Indo-European to Celtic), plausibly meaning 'little pheasant'[35]. That form could also derive from a (PIE > Celtic) adjective in *-i̯ŏ-*, *bĭst-ăgn-i̯ŏ-n*, indicating 'something linked to the pheasant' or '(a/the territory) of the pheasant(s)'. The meaning of 'pheasant', for the gloss *ᶦbesān*, is controversial. The fact that the word indicates specifically a 'pheasant' is not granted. It is more prudent to state that *ᶦbesān* describes a specific kind of bird, being, therefore, an ornithonym. The species defined by the gloss could also indicate, therefore, another kind of bird. A zoonymic place name so remote in the diachrony of its naming process can be interpreted according to a wide range of possibilities, from – keeping the meaning of 'pheasant' – 'the place with pheasants' to 'the place linked to the (well-known) event connected with the pheasants', to 'the place of the Pheasants' People' – or 'the place of the people eating pheasants' –, to 'the place of people worshipping the totem of the pheasants (or 'of the Pheasant god')'. All these are possible etiologies that cannot be etymologically excluded.

To establish the kind of bird indicated by *bĭst-ăgnŏ-s* and/or *bĭst-ăgn-i̯ŏ-n*, it should be necessary to know the paleo-ornithology of the place (Bistagno) in different prehistoric (and proto-historic) times; conversely, in order to investigate the possible varieties of bird species described by the gloss *ᶦbesān*, it should be necessary to know the paleo-ornithology of prehistoric (and proto-historic) Ireland. That would be decisive also in establishing the paleo-semantics of a word / ornithonym so far linked to an unidentifiable (or non-transparent) bird / species.

Going more in-depth into the above mentioned Beretta's hypothesis connected with the root / proto-form *agn- / *-agn-*, it is useful to point out the fact that the hydronym *Agno* could not simply indicate the generic notion of 'water', but, rather, some specific 'characteristics' of water, as, for example, the 'water's speed' or the 'water's color' (as it happens for the *alb-* root[36]). This because the *agn-* root could have been 'semantically specialized', over time, in order to indicate specific 'features' of the water. This note is useful in order to highlight the dichotomy between the possibly Proto-Indo-European proto-form *agno(-)*, considered as derived from the root *agn-*, and the Celtic (< PIE) form *-ăgnŏ-* that is a typical diminutive suffix. *bis(-)*, in Celtic, is a well-known word / element meaning 'finger' (Breton *biz*, Welsh *bys*, Cornish *bes / bis*, 'finger', and *bisou*, 'finger-ring' ≈ Breton *bizou*, 'ring with a gem' > French *bijou*)[37], widespread as well as *agno-* (diminutive and also lexeme). They cannot be ignored, therefore, as possibly involved in the *Bistagno*'s etymology. However, the existence of a whole word *besān*, in Old Irish, is statistically more relevant. An analogical example: in Italian, the form *gravi'dãnʦe* is immediately interpreted through the lexeme *gravidanze* ('pregnancies'). Only if *gravidanze* would not exist, the attention of the interpreter would focus on the alternative (basically

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[34] Cf., among other sources, eDil, (2013-), s.v. *1 besan*
(http://www.dil.ie/print_edition?letter=B&column=88).
[35] Personal comment by Dr Guido Borghi.
[36] Cf. Perono Cacciafoco, F., (2013), pp. 7-25.
[37] Cf., e.g., Koch, J.T., (2006), p. 1396.

wrong) analysis *gravi'dãnʦe = gravi danze* (*gravi + danze*, 'heavy / serious dances'), since *gravidanze* is a whole word completely corresponding to *gravi'dãnʦe*, while *gravi* and *danze* are two different elements (as **bist-* and **(-)agno-* for *Bistagno*, if compared with *besān < *bĭst-ăgnŏ-s ≈ *bĭst-ăgn-i̯ŏ-n*). According to Dr Guido Borghi, moreover, it could be possible that the name of a place crossed by a river preserves the ancient denomination of the same river in the specific / related stretch of the watercourse. The section of the Bormida river crossing Bistagno, therefore, could have been indicated by local speakers, already in remote times, through the *Bistagno* place name (in this case an original hydronym then transferred to the toponym). That paleo-denomination would have been etymologically connected with Old Irish *besān*, 'pheasant', '(a specific kind of) bird', from (Proto-)Celtic **bĭst-ăgnŏ-s (≈ *bĭst-ăgn-i̯ŏ-n*) and, for somewhat reason, to the idea of a place 'inhabited', at least in remote times, by (or linked to) a specific species of local birds[38]. All the above mentioned postulates are possible because of the etymology of the place name and it would be arbitrary to exclude some of them without other available elements for the reconstruction. Etymological solutions are, often, a spectrum of possibilities and the Etymologist's work consists not in reducing that spectrum (of course, it is nice when the Etymologist can do it), but in completely delineating it.

4.2 *Sessame*

In Old Irish a word *sessam* (masculine) is attested. It means 'resistance' (etymologically 'to stand', 'to safeguard', 'to defend', 'to resist', 'to stand by')[39]. It is generally believed to be derived from the Indo-European (assimilable to Proto-Celtic) **sĭ-stă-mŏ-s (< *sĭ-stə-mŏ-s)*[40], but it could also have been originated from **sĭ-stā-mŏ-s (< PIE *sĭ-stăh_a-mŏ-s)*, continuing it. In this case, the sequence would be **sĭ-stăh_a-mŏ-s > *sĭ-stā-mŏ-s > *sĭssāmŏ-s > sessàm > sesàm* (*Sessame*, in the current Piedmontese local dialect is *Sisàm / Siàm*). The common Indo-European root for this form is **stā- / *stə-*, 'to stand'[41]. The meaning 'to stand' is only the etymological justification for the common word. The seme connectable with the place name should be the one (in any case attested) describing the notions of 'resistance', 'safeguard', 'defense', 'garrison', 'protection'.

That etymological explanation would effectively match the geo-morphology of the Sessame's settlement, since the village is located at the top of a steep hill (325 meters above sea level) rising on the course of the Bormida river, and, already from remote (prehistoric) times, it has been an almost inaccessible shelter and, therefore, an ideal defensive garrison. The meaning of *sessam*, through its Proto-Indo-European antecedent, is etymologically connected with the meaning of the Ancient Greek verb *ἵστημι* (and *ἱστάνω*), 'to stand' (Latin *stāre*, Italian *stare*), and its compounds as, among others, *συνίστημι* (meaning also, specifically, 'to have one's proper place').

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[38] Personal comment by Dr Guido Borghi.

[39] Cf., among other sources, eDil, (2013-), cit., s.v. *sessam*
(http://www.dil.ie/print_edition?letter=S&column=198).

[40] Cf., e.g., Comrie, B., (2009), p. 155.

[41] Cf. Pokorny, J., (1959-1969), cit., pp. 1004-1010.

As far as a possible time for the original *Sessame*'s naming process according to this etymological reconstruction, due to the ancientness of the normal grade form (*$*s\breve{\imath}\text{-}st\breve{a}h_a\text{-}m\breve{o}\text{-}s$*) – compared with the reduced grade form *$*s\breve{\imath}\text{-}st\partial\text{-}m\breve{o}\text{-}s$* –, it is possible to postulate the Indo-European age.

5. CONCLUSION

The toponymic stratigraphy of place names *Bistagno* and *Sessame* is extremely 'multi-layered'. This fact becomes particularly evident not only focusing on the different hypotheses trying to explain the remote naming process of the two villages, but also analyzing the different diachronic strata of each single etymological reconstruction. This paper has provided two new etymological interpretations of the possible origins of the two place names, allowing a comparison among these new hypotheses and all the previous positions. The naming process involving *Bistagno* and *Sessame* is surely remote, dating back, for *Bistagno*, at least to (Proto-)Celtic times and, for *Sessame*, to the Indo-European age, disclosing the indubitable prehistoric origins of these villages.

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