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ANCIENT NAMES ORIGINS.
WATER ROOTS AND PLACE-Names IN THE
PREHISTORIC LIGURIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: Ancient Names Origins. Water Roots and Place-Names in the Prehistoric Ligurian Context. This paper outlines a new applied epistemological aspect of the so-called Convergence Theory, that is aimed at develop a potentially “homogeneous” vision between the different approaches in the field of the Indo-European Linguistics. This work tries to “reconstruct” a sort of Italian and European “macro-area” (or “micro-area”) characterized by places names linked to the word-root *alb, with a delineation of the “semantic steps” produced, over the centuries, by the same word-root, following a potential all-embracing approach. It seems that Paleo-Ligurian place names of the type Alba, Old European river names Albis and the like, as well as their ablauting forms Olb- (> Orb- in Romance Ligurian), do not reflect directly the proto-Indo-European adjective *albho-, ‘white’; rather, they all seem to continue a pre-proto-Indo-European extended root *Hal-bh-, ‘water’, cognate with the Sumerian halbia (> Akkadian halpium, ‘spring’, ‘well’, ‘water mass’, ‘water hole’). A further analysis of the same *Hal-bh-, moreover, leads to a comparison with the proto-Indo-European root *Halt-, ‘nourish’. The proto-Indo-European suffixed form *HwaH-r-, ‘water’, then, exhibits a similar diffusion.

Key words: Convergence Theory; *alb-; *Hal-bh-; Liguria; Olbicella; European Prehistoric Toponomy.

Cuvinte cheie: Teoria Convergenţei; *alb-; *Hal-bh-; Liguria; Olbicella; toponimie preistorică europeană.

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

To my mother
2. THE ROOT *ALB-, OLBICELLA, AND THE “WATER TOWNS”

There are extremely ancient toponymic designations that not always can be reconstructed from roots directly attested in historical languages belonging to the Indo-European linguistic family. It should be considered, in the context of the same Indo-European, the possibility of the existence of “double roots”, explained the each from Indo-European traditions properly called and the other integrated, instead, from the documentation of different families of languages.

The factual means may have been made up both by contacts and “osmotic movements” (in both directions, to the Indo-European from the non-Indo-European and vice versa), and by common genealogical heritage (with all the reserves required by the discussion of the relations of “kinship” of the Indo-European family, of course). Such cases are found especially within groups of words in the field of Onomastics and, perhaps in a greater percentage, in the ambit of Toponymy (Toponomastics), as a privileged sector of the “substratistic” recognitions.

The issue we would like to address here concerns the nomen loci Olbicella. Olbicella is a suburb of Molare (municipality located in the North-Western Italy – Piemonte –, now in the Province of Alessandria, near the city of Ovada, on the road that leads from the Southern Piemonte to Genova, the chief town – administrative centre – of Liguria)\(^1\), situated along the Orba river, next to the Ortiglieto's lake.

DANTE OLIVIERI, in his Dizionario di Toponomastica piemontese\(^2\), wrote, about Olbicella: «Olbicella, fr. Molare, Aless. Forse forma in parte dialett. equival. ad un *Albicella, dal n. pers. germ. ALBIZO?». The derivation proposed by the Italian scholar, Olbicella < / = *Albicella < Albizo, is part of the traditional practice that enhances, for etymological purposes, the observation – widely seen in the micro-Toponomastics – of the use of anthroponyms in order to coin local denominations, but in this case it is – because not accompanied by equally or even more sustainable alternatives – too much apodictic, as well as almost all the toponymic reconstructions that trace back the origin of a nomen loci (of higher “size” than one individual or gentilitial property) to a proper name of a person of any origin, according to the possibilities offered by the historical and linguistic local stratigraphy, without even an attempt of comparison with names that, being verifiable – or falsifiable – on both “levels” of the “sign” (thus – even within the limits of explicable of a geographical name – also on the semantic ambit, by definition excluded in the deonomastic formations, where the etymology is not relevant), would set the hypothesis at a higher epistemological level. It provides, however, an interesting indication about the ancient reconstructed form of the place name, Olbicella: *Albicella (fig. 1).

The root of the etymon of the nomen loci, in fact, is precisely *alb-. Now we're going to explain why, trying to provide a linguistic contribution to the correct return of the original meaning of some place names and hydronyms of the Ligurian area (exactly the cultural and linguistics area of the formation of nomina locorum such as Olbicella, in the North-West of Italy) and outlining the existence of a “family” of place names that we like

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1 Cf. PERONO CACCIAFOCO 2003a: 15.
to call (on the basis of the not only Indo-European root that is at the origin of their development) “Water Towns”.

Figure 1: Olbicella and the surrounding area

We have evidence of common elements – albeit remote (already in the Indo-European age) –, in the cultural and linguistic ambit, between the ancient Ligurians (Ligures) and the (contemporaneous) historically known inhabitants of the Western Europe, at least in part, as the Celts. A macroscopic toponymic isogloss concerns the Britannia (perhaps only in the Southern area, in origin); it is believed (and the hypothesis is very convincing) that Albión, the nomen of ancestral origin of Britannia, is connected with the Ligurian toponymic forms Albium and Album. The toponymic root of the name is common, being, in fact, *alb- < Indo-European *albh-. From Albium and Album derive – in the ancient and also “contemporary” Ligurian Toponymy –, among others, the homologous (homophone and homograph compared to the second lemma) forms Album, Album Inganum, Album Inganaunum, Albingaunum, ‘Albenga’, Albium (homologous, homophone, and homograph compared to the first lemma), Albintimilium, Album Intimilium, ‘Ventimiglia’ (with this kind of toponymic reconstruction), Albuca (in Gaul and in

6 Cf. Strabo, Περίπατος IV, 6, 1-2 and, on Albingaunum and Albintimilium, see Gianattasio 2007: 136.
Ancient Names Origins. Water Roots and Place-Names in the Prehistoric Ligurian Context

Aquitaine 7, Alba, in Italy, Piemonte, now in the Province of Cuneo, Alba Heluorum, in Provence, Alba, now Arjona, in Spain 8.

GIACOMO DEVOTO also reports 9, as of possible Ligurian matrix (or influence in the onomastic formation), the place name Albona, Istriran town located a few kilometers away from the sea. All of these names are attributable directly to the root *alb- and to a simplex form that is Album. But Album is not primarily linked (we will verify later as it is a “shift” of meaning compared to the original) to the Latin albus, ‘white’. It derives, instead, from the root *albh-, that is the basis, for example, of the Germanic hydronym Albis, the nomen of the Elbe river. All these nomina indicate settlements on waterways, on rivers, lakes, and seas, in practice loci situated near water (and even hydronyms, names – in fact – of referrals that coincide with the iconym: waterways, watercourses).

What interests us here is that as the root *albh- is the basis of the hydronym Albis, nomen of ancestral origin (as a paleo-European hydronym) of the Elbe river, so it is the generative component of some of the many names (ancient and “contemporary”) Olbia that denote, like all the other nomina developed by the root *albh-, places located on canals, rivers, or seas (fig. 2). Olbia, the oldest colony of Miletus, on the Black Sea, for example, had, as epichoric nomen, Olbia (without variants), derived from the root *albh- with vocalic ablaut (apophony) of the initial [a-] in the grade of the [o-] timbre (the root *olbh- is equivalent, on the lexical level, and it is derived, in the morpho-phonological ambit, from the base *albh-) 10. Olbia is witnessed, as a place name, in Britain, on the right side of the Bug River (in Ukraine), in Provence 11, in Italy (in Sardegna), and elsewhere – in very different latitudes, therefore –, in Lycia and in Hellespont; especially in the case of the Hellenic colonies, of course, it was inevitable a motivational overlap with the auspicious Greek adjective òlbios (òlbios, female olbia, òlbia) 12. If we remain within the ambit of nomina linked to the root *albh- and to the meaning of “water”, it may be interesting to remember that Albula was the ancient name of the Italian river Tevere (Tiber, Latin Tiberis). Albīōn, the nomen of ancestral origin of Britain – from which we started in this reasoning –, denotes, therefore, the largest island on the English Channel, a locus, then, situated on the water and surrounded by water 13.

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7 On Albua, in Gaul and in Aquitaine, see FRANCISCO VILLAR, La complessità dei livelli di stratificazione indoeuropea nell’Europa occidentale, in AA.VV. 2001: 217.
8 Cf. ALDA ROSSEBATIANO, in DTI 1990: 14, s. v. Alba.
9 Cf. DEVOTO 1974: 36.
10 The Greek “reception” Olbia in relation to the antecedent Indo-European *Olbhīyā presents the same characteristics (in the rendering of the vocalism /o/ and of the occlusive /h/) of the “near” Boryshēnēs < Indo-European *Bhoru-stēnēs, ‘murmuring among the spruces’ (personal comment by Prof. Dr. GUIDO BORGHI).
11 See, on Olbia in Provence, GIANATTASIO 2007: 159.
13 It is necessary to remember that the name Albīōn is generally taken also to refer to the coastal white chalk cliffs (with, however, a close link to the notion of “water” and to the “white” color, see PEROONO CACCIAFOCO 2008: passim), although alternative interpretations include ‘hill’ (POKONNY), ‘world’, ‘light’ (METHO) and ‘white metal land’, ‘tin land’ (BRODERICK). See, about these interpretations, PEROONO CACCIAFOCO 2008, 2009: passim.
The reconstruction *albh- (with */bh/ required by the Germanic */b/ in *Albiz, 'Elbe', 'Elba') is, however, not the only considered in the doxography. GIOVANNI SEMERANO, among the other supporters of the origin of the root *alb- by a non-Indo-European linguistic “family” (in the theory of this Author this “fact” is postulated by definition, since he denies the same existence of the Indo-European), proposes a derivation from the ancient Akkadian ḫalpium (from the Sumerian ḫalbia 14), ‘well’, 'spring', 'mass of water', 'water

14 The Sumerian ḫalbia and the Akkadian ḫalpium have also (if not primarily, originally) the meaning of “water”, that is an “all-embracing” meaning linked also to the *sema* of “frost” – water freezes –, fact attested – at different latitudes – in several composed place names of the semantic type “cold / iced-water”, in Italian, for example, Acquafrredda. The Sumerian and Akkadian forms have also a chromatic meaning that is not only linked to “white”, but also to “greyish”, and that is also related to the notion of “water”, as the colour of the “bed of a river washed away by the water” or, indeed, of “ice”, “frost” (in Italian brina). So, we have some semantic steps always attributable to the original notion of “water”. In the Convergence Theory system, that is the “foundation” of this paper, the semantic “passages” linked to the same root are fundamental in order to explain the dynamics of the re-use of specific word-roots in the Indo-European from other linguistic “families” (like the Semitic). Very important, in this context, can be the work The Semantics of Colour. A Historical Approach (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2012 = BREGAM 2012), by C. P. BREGAM. I’m not a “supporter” of the GIOVANNI SEMERANO’s Theory, but in the Convergence Theory some SEMERANO’s etymologies are important in the explanation process of the possible contacts between different linguistic “families” in remote ages (equally relevant is the Paleolithic Continuity Paradigm, in Italian Teoria della Continuità, by Prof. MARIO ALNEI and his Teamwork). The “passage” from non-Indo-European Linguistic “families” to the Indo-European concerns not only the roots and the derived words or place names, but also the semantics of the same words and place names, also in rapport to the geo-morphological context of the analyzed place names. Inherently in the semantic step “water” -
hole' 15. This form, then, would have been transferred to the toponymic system of the Indo-European languages, on the one hand remaining unchanged in the root *alb- (in the SEMERANO’s perspective with the two variants, without [-l-], *ab- and *ap-) 16 and, on the other hand, with the additional homologous basis derived from the vocalic replacement of [a-] with [o-], *olb-, *orb-, with [r-] from [-l-] by rhotacism (linguistic phenomenon peculiar, *alb- and *ab- / *ap- (cf. POKorny 1959-69: I, 51) is a proto-Indo-European root more ancient than the radical forms leading to alba in the meaning of “city”, “town”, and equivalent to the root *alb-, that expresses the notion of “water” (cf. Alini 2000: 539). In Gallic, for example, the root *alb-, *ap- (this latter from *ak-`) means “river”. It is witnessed, inter alia, in the Gallic form *Abona (cf. Lewis / Pedersen 1961: 38). It is also known a Bastetanic town called *Abula (Southern Spain).


Leaving aside the negation a priori of the Indo-European and the consequent lack of justification for the connection between *alb- and *ab- / *ap-, the comparison established by SEMERANO – especially with the Sumerian *halia – imposes a broadening of perspective. A root then partly specialized in chromatic meaning and, in any case, become an integral part of the toponymic and hydronymic Indo-European system, shows to have even more remote origins. This consideration could explain, thus, the formation of nomina – like those listed above – of places located in the closeness of watercourses, water canals, rivers, lakes, or near the sea (fig. 3). Thanks to this linguistic “fact” it is possible to overcome effectively the simplification (sometimes misused by the scholars in the ambit of Toponymy and Toponomastics) that combines almost all the nomina locorum formed by the *alb- root to the Ligurian-Roman radical (the same definition is ambiguous) alba 17, ‘city’, ‘town’, surely applicable in some cases (and we will explain why), but not connectable, in the context now outlined, with the place names we have mentioned. The Ligurian bases from which the form alba would be derived, in fact, would be *albo-, *albio-, and *alba- in the meaning, exactly, of “city”, “town”. Our discussion, however, leads to take a step back. The *hₐalbh- root, originally “water”, is used to indicate – applied to a place name – a locus, a “locality” situated in the closeness of water. In the Indo-European, then, we are also witnessing a semantic transition. *Hₐalbh-, from “water” and, therefore, in Toponomastics, from “place located in the closeness of water”, takes, in fact, the extensive and generic meaning of “place”, “city”, “town”. In the transition from an onomastic system connected to the first anthropization to the later ones, until the proto-

“white”, it is attested, in this area, also from the series of the composed place names of the type Acquabianca (‘White-Water’), a sort of “alternative” form compared to Acquafrredda (Cold / Frozen-Water), studied, among others (but without the contribution of Historical Phonetics), by CLAUDIO BERETTA (cf. Beretta 2007: passim). The Convergence Theory mitigates the “pan-Semitic” view of GIOVANNI SEMERANO and, on the other hand, the “pan-Indo-European” view and applies the Historical Phonetics to the semantic etymological reconstructions, taking into account different positions and epistemological approaches.

16 *Ab- / *ap- (cf. Pokorny 1959-69: I, 51) is a proto-Indo-European root more ancient than the radical forms leading to *alba in the meaning of “city”, “town”, and equivalent to the root *alb-, that expresses the notion of “water” (cf. Alini 2000: 539). In Gallic, for example, the root *alb-, *ap- (this latter from *ak-`) means “river”. It is witnessed, inter alia, in the Gallic form *Abona (cf. Lewis / Pedersen 1961: 38). It is also known a Bastetanic town called *Abula (Southern Spain).
17 See, for example, on the name Albera Ligure, Italian place located in Piemonte, now in the Province of Alessandria, Lamboglia 1946: 79-81 and GIULIA PETRACCI-SICARDI, Liguri e Celti nell’Italia settentrionale, in AA.VV. 1981: 71-96 and PETRACCI-SICARDI / CAPRINI 1981: 12 and 33.
urban phase, over the centuries, the semantic characterization related to the concept of “water” has been lost. Characterization coming back, however, in the places located in the adjacency of the watercourses (loci that constitute the numerical preponderance, considered the fact that the proximity of the same loci to the waterways is fundamental to the birth and development of a village or a town), places like Olbicella. Their names are composed by the old and not exclusively Indo-European (stricto sensu) root \( *_{h}albh- \), that has preserved the original meaning.\(^{18}\)

It should point out, also, that the nomina locorum derived from the root \( *_{albh-} \) are part of a series of place names known on the basis of common names of various historical Indo-European languages, both in relation to water, such as \( *_{war-} \), ‘water’, ‘river’, ‘rain’, \( *_{pal-} \), ‘stagnant water’, ‘puddle’, ‘backwater’, \( *_{mar-} \), ‘lagoon’, ‘sea’, and indicating characteristics or qualities of water or of water currents, such as, for example, \( *_{tar-} \), ‘strong’, ‘penetrating’, \( *_{ais-} \), ‘fast’, and, indeed, \( *_{albh-} \), ‘light’, ‘white’.\(^{19}\) In the common Indo-European, then, in addition to these roots, the radicals \( *_{ab-} \) and \( *_{ap-} \) always express, originally, the concept of “water”. So, the Latin albus derives from \( *_{albh-} \), but the origin of this color name descends from a characteristic related to water, to the water “color”, precisely. The late Indo-European basis \( *_{albh-} \) derives in turn, thus, from the root not only strictly Indo-European \( *_{h}albh- \), that means “water”. It is, therefore, outlined the semantic transition that leads to the stratification of different meanings for the same root in the passage from the ancient and remote phases of the Indo-European to the late-Indo-European, \( id \ est \) the pre-proto-Indo-European \( *_{h}albh- = \) ‘water’ and, extensively, ‘place

\(^{18}\) On the other hand, it is recognized, for example, the almost sure paleo-Ligurian origin of the place name Alba of the town of Alba, located in Italy (Piemonte), now in the Province of Cuneo, Roman municipium in the Augustan age, colony in the II century, parish in the V century (cf. Giulia Petracco Scares, in Petracco Scares / Caprini 1981: 33), Alba Pompeia after 89 BC, probably in honor of the consul Gnaeus Pompeius Strabo. Nino Lamboglia (in Lamboglia 1946: 79-81) and Giulia Petracco Scares (in Petracco Scares / Caprini 1981: 12 and 33) attribute to the place name the meaning of “capital city” / “administrative centre” (città capoluogo). This sense is plausible, however, only as a further development of a different onomatonic origin linked directly to the pre-proto-Indo-European root \( *_{h}albh- \), connected to the meaning of “water” and, specifically, of “place situated in close proximity of water”. Alba, in fact, is located for the most part of its extension on the right bank of the Tanaro river and there is no doubt about the atavistic link between the town and the same Tanaro river. Alba was inhabited in remote age, already in the Neolithic, at least from the VI millennium BC (and grew further during the Copper Age – Eneolithic – and the Bronze and Iron Ages, cf. Pessina / Tine 2008: 47, 56, 99, 119, 130, 132, 143, 148, 231-232, and 250-251 and Brettì Sestieri 2010: 39 and 42-43), and it was precisely in this chronological ambit that the place name “took shape”, nomen derived from the root \( *_{albh-} \) and showing a “town built near water”, on the Tanaro river, in this case. Strabo (cf. Geographica IV, 6, 2) associated the place name Alba to the onomyn Alpes, pointing out – very loosely and too roughly – that the Ligurian cities were founded often on the heights. In this case (and in many others), however, the assertion of Strabo does not seem to make sense, because Alba is located 172 meters above sea level, in a broad flat valley now surrounded by the splendid hills covered by vineyards of the Langhe and Roero. Nothing to do, thus, with the heights, while the fact of being located along the Tanaro river reports, however, the undying bond of the city with water. About the origin of the onymon Alpi (that is not the subject of this work. It will be analyzed here, therefore, marginally), Latin Alpīs, singular (especially poetic) Alpis, Greek \( \alpha λπα \), a derivation from a root \( *_{alps-} \), perhaps a variant of a radical \( *_{alb-} \) meaning “mountain”, “hill”, “stone”, is controversial. \( *_{Alb-} \) indicates “water” and it is difficult to connect this form to the meaning of “mountain”. It is, however, plausible to derive the onymon Alpi from another lemma (in all probability wrongly discarded by the most of the scholars), the Gallic form \( *_{alpis} \), \( *_{alpā} \), mountain pasture, nominal lemma with the Central Celtic suffix \( *_{p-} \), \( *_{pā} \), derived from the pre-proto-Indo-European root \( *_{h}alp- \), ‘nourish’ (cf. LEI, 1979 II: 11, 210 ff. The root \( *_{h}alp- \), peculiarly, is connected, in turn, with water and with the fish that is nourishment for men obtained from the same water).


situated near the water’ → Indo-European *[hₐ]albh-, ‘white’ 21, originally indicating the light / clear color of water and, then, ‘white’, considered as a generic color, Latin albus ~ *albhā (late-Indo-European form), understood as ‘city’, ‘town’, simplified meaning derived from the pre-proto-Indo-European *hₐalbh- in the and along with the sema ‘place situated near water’. It should be noted, in this regard, as mentioned above, that the original nomen of the Italian Tevere (Tiber, Latin Tiberis) river was Albula and, as a variant of the manuscripts in Dionysius Periegetes (and in the related commentary by Eustathius) and in Stephanus Byzantinus, Alba.

The Indo-European, on the other hand, has not drastically and totally lost the meaning of the root *hₐalbh- and, on the contrary, it has preserved this in different variants. The Hittite lexeme alpa-s, ‘cloud’ 22, whose connection with the Indo-European *albhos, ‘white’ (formally possible in the hypothesis of an antecedent *hₐalbhos-s), was rejected for semantic reasons (since «alpa- is predominantly associated with rain and thunder» 23), finds in the iconym ‘water’ an unexceptionable etymology 24. If, then, we analyze *hₐalbh- as an “extending root” *hₐal-bh-, we can also recognize an “equable” of this in *hₐal-eu-, ‘disorderly wander’ 25, root of hydronymic use and, in the appellativic meaning, passed to indicate the hydromel (mead) and the beer 26.

In addition, according to Mario Alinei (as part of the Paleolithic Continuity Paradigm / Paleolithic Continuity Theory / Teoria della Continuità) 27, the root *alb- can be connected to the proto-Indo-European radical *al-, that is evidenced with the meaning of “feed”, “nourish” in the Italic area (Latin alô, ‘feed’, ‘nourish’), in the Celtic ambit (Old Irish alim, ‘I nourish’), and in the Germanic areal (Old Icelandic ala, ‘feed’). This semantic feature inherent in the notion of “feed”, “nourish”, however, is closely linked to the concept of water, because (always according to Alinei and in the context of the Paleolithic Continuity Paradigm) this root would be easily connectable with the Germanic name of the eel, German Aal, English eel, Old High German and Old Saxon āl, Old Frisian ēl, Netherlandish aal, Old Icelandic áll, Danish and Swedish āl. Apparently devoid of etymology in the traditional reconstruction, in the Paleolithic Continuity Paradigm it is, instead, directly connected to the introduction of fish in the nutrition of the Upper Paleolithic and, therefore, to the aforementioned root *al- in the meaning of “feeding”, “nourish”, in this case related to the concept of “feeding / nourish through the fish”, a nourishment evidently derived from the water and plausible, in a so remote age, as a new element of the diet only in places located in close proximity to watercourses or to the sea. Thus, there is a close relationship – that is a sort of formal priority of the one and of semantic necessity of the other – between the radicals *al- and *albh, up to the point to be, these two forms, variants of a single root referable to the notion of water and, for what

21 An excellent recent book on the historical color semantics is Biegam 2012 (particularly relevant is Chapter 11, Prehistoric Colour Studies: 169-83).
22 This is not the only meaning that has been proposed. Melchert (cf. Harold Craig Melchert, Hittite antaka-“loins” and an Overlooked Myth about Fire, in AA.VV. 2003: 281-88 and, especially, 285) suggests also “faintness”, “weakness”.
24 Personal comment by Prof. Dr. Guido Borghi.
concerns the Toponomastics, to the toponymic indication of a place situated close to a watercourse or to the sea. The root *alb- regains, in this reconstruction, two fundamental aspects, the pre-proto-Indo-European origin (that corroborates the recovery of the Semerano’s comparative hypothesis, with the inclusion of the Sumerian) and the ancient and direct link with the ancestral notion of “water”. The origins of the root seem, so, with valid plausibility, pre-proto-Indo-European and can be placed in a macro-genealogical “axis” of a probably Nostratic 28 radical, as regards the antiquity, and coming, therefore, in the final analysis (with an adequate areal coincidence between the theories on the Indo-European Prehistory and the iter of the Akkadian according to Semerano), from the Near and the Middle East. The Indo-European, then, has retained in its own onomastic system the root, producing the same radical in the above listed variants and giving rise, over the centuries, to the transformation of the original meaning of the root that still is reflected, by the way, in many place names, especially – in Italy – in the Ligurian area, as Olbicella (< *Olbikellā).

Figure 3: The location of the territory between Southern Piemonte and Liguria

28 Aharon DolGOPOLSKY reconstructed an ancestor for the pre-Indo-European *albho- as *halho or *galho (the “triangle” indicates an unknown vowel), meaning “white”. The scholar gives more cognates, including Hamitic and Semitic words for “milk”, and a Dravidian root meaning “clear (of liquids)”. Cf. DolGOPOLSKY 1998: passim.
4. *ALB-, ORBA, AND URBE

The *alb- root, moreover, is yet expressed – as outlined above – in the *olb- variant (from which many of the place names Olbia in the ancient and also in the “contemporary” world derive and from which the nomen loci Olbicella descends). It is – as mentioned above – a linguistic phenomenon typical of the Ligurian area the transformation of [-l-] into [-r-] (rhotacism), here – precisely – in post-vocalic context and before bilabial consonant, and, therefore, the root *olb- is equivalent, in this case, to the Romance (Ligurian) radical *orb-. This consideration leads us to an interesting observation inherent in the nomen of the Orba river 29, that flows (among many other places, before debouching, at the end of its course, in the Bormida river) precisely in the territory of Olbicella and close to the lake of Ortiglieto. The first known attestation of the hydronym dates back to 1137 and the handed down form is Urba 30, then replicated in 1176 by the wording «[…super fluvium Urbae […]» 31. Concerning the etymological explanation of the hydronym, the proposed derivation from the Latin urbs appears simplistic and meaningless. Already Serra 32 considered the pre-Latin origin of this nomen and held it close to other equivalent hydronyms of the Ligurian and Gallic territories (exempli gratia Orba, Orge, Orbs). And the same Serra had the right intuition (although he did not arrive to the proper deduction, leaving the explanation of the hydronym in the vagueness of the pre-Latin substrate), because the nomen fluminis Orba precisely derives from the root *alb-, apophonic / ablauting variant of the root *alb-, ‘water’, with the transformation – typical, as mentioned, of the Ligurian-Romance linguistic area where the torrent flows – of the [-l-] into [-r-] in *orb-.

So, the root *alb- is the basis not only of the place name Olbicella, but also of the hydronym Orba. Moreover, there is a sort of “point of union” between the place name and the hydronym, represented by another hydronym, Orbicella, an affluent of the Orba river in which debouches precisely near Olbicella. The form Orbicella, variant of Olbicella and the nomen of the affluent of the Orba river, is the linguistic trace of the equivalence of the root *alb- > Romance *orb- in the place name Olbicella and in the hydronym Orba and is evidence of the rhotacistic phenomenon of transformation of the [-l-] into [-r-] typical of the Ligurian area. Thus, there is a very close relationship, in the ambit of the onomastic affinity (when not of direct equivalence), between the names Olbicella (with preservation of /l/ from the chancery tradition), Orbicella (with receipt of the rhotacism, having been made official later, because of the lesser importance of the referent), and Orba, as well as a close morpho-phonological relationship exists between the pre-proto-Indo-European radical apophonic variants (dating back to a possible Nostratic origin and ancestrally sourced from Near / Middle East), then become Indo-European toponymic formations, *hₐolbh- → *hₐolbh- (> *olb-).

The Medieval form Urba in the Orba hydronym attests a “change” from the initial [o-] to [u-] that indicates, inter alia, the loss (occurred in much older ages), in the

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29 This is the «[…] Orba selvosa […]» in the celebrated ode Marzo 1821 by the famous Italian poet ALESSANDRO MANZONI. Cf. ALESSANDRO MANZONI, Marzo 1821, v. 19.
30 Cf. AA. VV. 1899-: CXIII, 38, 53.
31 Cf. AA. VV. 1899-: XXIX, 74, 94.
32 Cf. Serra 1931: 126.
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speaking – and writing – subjects, of the ancestral meaning of the nomen, dating back, plausibly, to a pre-proto-Indo-European appellativic source, then transferred in the toponymic use by the local Indo-European. Due to a casualness, however, the form Urba, that recalls the Latin urbs, ‘city’, ‘town’, has the same meaning of the above mentioned Indo-European basis *albhā, derived from the root *albh-, when the sema, by that time, passed to indicate (from “place on the water”, “water town” = *albh-) the simplified and generic notion of “city”, “town” (> *albhā).

The same reasoning has to be developed inherently in the place name of the village of Urbe, that is located (in Italy – Liguria –, now in the Province of Savona) in the valley of the Orba river (in the upper basin of the watercourse). The place name coincides (with the variant of the initial [o-] / [u-]) with the hydronym Orba and derives from the same root, being equivalent the same place name and the hydronym 33. The oscillation of the radical form *albh- > *orb-, with the rhotacistic transformation of [-l-] into [-r-], is recognizable even in the nomina of two of the small hamlets that make up the municipality of Urbe (that is a “scattered” and “composite” village), Martina d’Olba and San Pietro d’Olba (here the graphic [-l-], perhaps conservatively, for official use, perhaps accidentally, in the chancery stratifications, takes precedence over the [-r-], in an alternation already found about the place name Olbicella and the hydronym Orbicella).

We have to note, moreover, that Urbe, as a municipality, is formed, as well as by these two hamlets, also by the small localities of Acquabianca (*albh-, ‘water’, *albho-, ‘white’ → *albh[o]-albhā, ‘light / clear water’, ‘lucid water’, ‘white water’, almost a “translation” of the radicals involved in a decisive way in the toponymic and hydronymic development of the nomina of the area under our consideration) and of Vara Inferiore and Vara Superiore. The onomastic basis of the two hamlets called Vara is *war- (*wer- / *wer-, *wor- / *wur-), root of the common Indo-European meaning “water”, “river”, “rain” 34 and that is, moreover, the radical of the nomen of the Vara river, the longest watercourse in Liguria, flowing entirely in the territory of the Province of La Spezia and that gives the name to the homonymous valley (Val di Vara). The place name Vara (of Vara Inferiore and Vara Superiore) and the hydronym Vara have remote origin and are part of a “Mediterranean” onomastic system characterized prima facie by the phonetic sequence [-a-] […] [-a-] 35. Since the diffusion of this specific kind of names in [-a-] […] [-a-] is much more extensive than the Indo-European traditional and conventional areas, it seems plausible the fact that these place names and hydronyms date back to an ancient period, and, thus, pre-late-Indo-European (in the case of the root *war- in the form Vara and, in general, of the “Mediterranean” phonetic sequences [-a-] […] [-a-], we are witnessing a regular transformation starting from Indo-European laryngeals in position of syllabic core or adjacent to short vowel: *wārā < *hwahₐ-rahₐ, 36 or even, in Celtic, from *[H]woh-rah₂, 37). Among the numerous examples of place names and hydronyms derived from the root

33 Cf. DTI 1990: 676.
37 Cf. Falileyev 2007: 30, with bibliography.
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*war-*, proving the system of double [-a-], we can mention again, in order to be brief, the nomen of the town of Varallo 38 (Italy – Piemonte –, now in the Province of Vercelli), in the Vallesia, situated at the confluence of the Mastellone torrent with the Sesia river, and the name of the Varàita torrent, that debouches into the Po river. The notion of “water”, in these cases, is always present and, in particular, it is the concept of the “river water” and of the “rainwater” that feeds rivers and torrents and that allows the life of the villages and of the towns that arise near the watercourses. So, the meaning of “water” is repeated throughout all the toponymic series of the loci that contribute to form the municipality of Urbe, as well as in the hydronym Orba and in the place name Olbicella.

5. *ALB- AND ALBISOLA / ALBISSOLA*

With reference to the root *alb-* meaning “water” and, within the ambit of Toponomastics, at the basis of place names indicating “towns / cities / hamlets / sites / villages located near water”, we could mention numerous nomina locorum derived by the same radical and it might be interesting (but it is not the subject of this study, also due to reasons of “extension”) to draw the distinction between the place names designating a “site located in close proximity to water” (in the original meaning of the root, therefore) and the nomina indicating a “city” / “town” (in the “new” generic and later sema of the same radical). It will be sufficient, here, only an example, concerning Albisola 39, town located in Italy – Liguria –, now in the Province of Savona. It is necessary to distinguish between Albisola Superiore, place of prehistoric origin founded by the Ligures Docilii 40 and independent – already in ancient ages – from the centre of Albisola Superiore. Writing about the same Albisola Superiore Giulia Petracco Sicardi 41 declares as Roman the origin of the nomen loci, from Alba Docilia, and alba would be, in this place name, evidence of the aforementioned Ligurian-Roman form alba in the meaning of “city”, “town”. This approach, however, leaves aside the fact that Albisola was founded, as mentioned, by the Ligures Docilii in prehistoric times and that the Romanization of the locus, therefore, could be much later than the creation of the place name. Albisola had in ancient times, by the Ligures Docilii 42, the nomen Alba, but not in the meaning of “city”. The sema of that prehistoric Alba was, instead, derived from the pre-Proto-Indo-European root *albh-, connected to the notion of “water”, and, therefore, the Alba of the Docilii wanted to indicate, originally, a “place situated near the water”, in this case near the sea (Ligurian Sea). On the other hand, the same Petracco Sicardi rightly points out how the Roman name Alba Docilia is mentioned, as the first attestation, only in the Tabula

38 Formed by a second Celtic element *allo-, 'precipice' (= Indo-European *plhso-, cf. Matasović 2009: 120-21), in reference to the rocky outcrop of the Sacro Monte (personal comment by Prof. Dr. Guido Borghi).
39 For a review of the toponymic issues relating to the place name Albisola, see Perono Cacciafoco 2003b: 22.
40 The territory of the Ligures Ingauni had, as main centre, the town of Albenga, Album Ingaunum, Albingaunum.
42 The Docilii were a Ligurian tribe allocated, prior to the Roman conquest, in a territory between Albisola (Italy – Liguria –, now in the Province of Savona) and Sassello (Italy – Liguria –, now in the Province of Savona). Their lands bordered those of the Sabazi and of the Statielli.
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Peutingeriana 41, a relatively late documentary source that nothing can suggest, therefore, about the antiquity of the name and, even less, about the original meaning of the same. So, we found, here, a very significant example of the semantic transition “water” > “town situated on the water” > “town” sustained over the centuries by the pre-proto-Indo-European root *hₐalbh-, merged in the onomastic system of the Indo-European languages (the paleo-Ligurian substrate of Latin, in this case). We note parenthetically that PETRACCO Sicardi derives the Docilia of Alba Docilia from a Roman gentilitial (family name) Dolcilius (that she says to be probably of Celtic origin), while it seems clear the derivation of the Docilia of Alba Docilia from the nomen of the Docillii, the Ligurian inhabitants – already in prehistoric times – of the original settlement of Albisola. The Medieval place name Albuzola (or Albizola) shows how the root *alb- has maintained, over the centuries, its strength, leaving out of consideration the nomen in the “free form” alba and that, despite the loss, in speaking – and writing – subjects, of the notion of the original meaning of the radical *alb- (and, probably, also of the basis alba), it is, de facto, the constituent element of remote origin of the place name. PETRACCO Sicardi 44 adds that the Medieval name of the locus, Albizola or Albuzola, is documented in the XII century. It seems to be, instead, older. The nomen is attested, in fact, for example, in the Charta of foundation and donation of the St. Quentin’s Abbey (Abbazia di San Quintino) in Spigno Monferrato (place located in Italy – Piemonte –, now in the Province of Alessandria), document dating back to the May 4th of the year 991, in the form Albuzola (and it seems well established, by now, that this nomen designates precisely Albisola) 45. In this toponymic variant the root *alb- shows, thus – even if lost and often misunderstood, in its original meaning, in the perception of the linguistic subjects –, its onomastic strength and the persistence in the structure of the nomen being part of this toponymic and hydronymic “family”. So, another place located on the water and, precisely, on the sea, takes the origin of its name from the Prehistory and from the ancient pre-proto-Indo-European root *hₐalbh-, ‘water’ (fig. 4).

41 The Tabula Peutingeriana is a copy dating from the XII-XIII century of an ancient Roman map that showed the military roads of the Empire. This document derives the name from the humanist and classicist Konrad Peutinger, who inherited the Tabula from his friend Konrad Beckel.
45 Cf. Bosso 1972: 19, 33 and 126-28 and, inherently in the issue of the effective presence of the place name in the Charta, see Perono Cacciafoco 2003b: 22.
In the Roman age the Liguria presents some well identified linguistic strata, Latin, Gallic (or, at least, an ancient Central Celtic with the complete – and completed – dephonologization of */ɸ/ < */p/ and labialization of */kʷ/ > */p/), the so-called Lepontic-Ligurian (Southern Celtic characterized by the residual traces of the phoneme */ɸ/ < */p/ in intervocalic position and by the sporadic persistence of */kʷ/), the paleo-European Hydronymic (“alteuropäisch”), and the Ligustic or paleo-Ligurian. The nomina more easily “explainable” are, of course, the Latin names (and the names of Latin origin). But the fact to want to bring back the Onomastics and the Toponomastics of the Ligurian area almost exclusively to the Roman age is a methodologically incorrect operation and it is also the cause of even obvious mistakes. Many nomina are, inherently in the origin, Celtic (Gallic or Lepontic), as – exempli gratia – Dunomarus. Others, instead, do not provide reliable evidences, if we remain within the ambit of the lexicon attested by the historical Indo-European languages. For example, in Albialus the *albh- basis (that is *halbh-) presents lexical and derivatives peculiarities that do not allow, concretely, a specific attribution to none of the above mentioned first three known strata. In addition, we have to note also the likely pre-proto-Indo-European origin of the root *halbh-, that is the radical *hal-bh- in the ancestral meaning of “water” (and, extensively, of “place located near water”) and then – in the common Indo-European – of “white” (understood as the light / clear color of the water) and in the generic meaning, in *albhā, of “city”, “town” (in the simplified notion derived from the extensive sema of the pre-proto-Indo-European basis *halbh-). FRANCISCO VILLAR says, about the Indo-European setting and on the extra-Indo-European comparability of the Generating water roots and place-names in the prehistoric Ligurian context.
Ligurian *nomina locorum* 47: o[...] The Indo-European elements are quite abundant, both in the anthroponymy, and in the toponymy. But we have no right to consider specifically Ligurian all the Indo-European names that do not belong to the other three historical Indo-European strata (Lepontic, Gallic, and Latin). Because nothing assures us that, in addition to those known, there has not been another or, even, others [...]}. It is precisely in this ambit that the hypothesis about the pre-proto-Indo-European origin of the root *halbh-* in the meanings, in the parallel forms, and in the derivations that we enucleated up to here takes heuristic significance.

6. *ALBH- / *OLBH- AND *ORBHO-

On closing, an onomastic note. Orba is also attested as the personal name of a sovereign in the Medieval Ireland. In this case, however, the *nomen* is not derived (although apparently homologous to that of the Orba river) from the root *albh- (*olbh-)*, but it descends from the proto-Indo-European basis *orbho-*, that means “orphan”, “forsaken”, “abandoned” 48, and that in the Celtic and Germanic areas (and only in these areas) takes the *sema* of “heir”, “legacy”, “heritage” 49 (Old Irish *orbe*, 'legacy ', *orbam*, 'heir', *comarbe*, 'co-heir', Gothic *arbja*, Old Icelandic *arfi* and *arfr*, Old High German *arpeo*, erbo, Middle High German *Erbe*, 'heir', Anglo-Saxon *ierfe*, Gothic and Old High German *arbi*) 50. In this case, therefore, the regal Irish name *Orba* means “heir”, “heir of the kingship” and, then, “prince” and, in consequence, “king”, and the proto-Indo-European and, then, late-Indo-European root at the origin of this name is not *albh-*, but *orbho-*. 

7. CONCLUSIONS

It seems, therefore, demonstrated that the name of the hamlet of the municipality of Molare (Italy – Piemonte –, now in the Province of Alessandria) Olbicella, the *nomen* of the village of Urbe (and of two of the localities that contribute to constitute it, Martina d'Olba and San Pietro d'Olba), and the hydronyms of the Orba river and of its affluent Orbicella derive from a common pre-proto-Indo-European root of remote origin and persistent over the time, *hₐalbh-*, indicating the notion of “water” and applied, therefore, to the formation of *nomina* of waterways / watercourses, or of areas located near the water (streams, torrents, rivers, lakes, and sea), root that discloses its morphology, in this case, through the equivalent apophonic / ablauting variant *hₐolbh-*, then developed through the passage – typical of the ancient Romance Ligurian area that “contains” the places designated by the analyzed *nomina* – of [-l-] into [-r-] in the form /orb-/. So, we have also found the equal persistence over the time of the proto-Indo-European (of the common Indo-European) root *h₂wah₂-r-*, indicating the notions of “water”, “river”, and “rain”, in the names of the *loci* of Vara Superiore and Vara Inferiore, hamlets of the “composite” village of Urbe, and in numerous other places situated in close proximity to watercourses and in hydronyms always part of the ancient Ligurian onomastic area. So, it is revealed, in this


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analysis, a panorama of “Water Towns” all joined by the same toponymic origin derived from the pre-proto-Indo-European root *hₐalbh- or from the basis *hₐwahₐ-, originally indicating the notion of “water”. It is, therefore, possible to recognize the existence of a toponymic and hydronymic “family” 31 that descends from the common pre-proto-Indo-European root *hₐalbh- (then subjected to the dephonologization of the laryngeal and morpho-phonologically transformed in the variants *albh-, *olbh- [> *olb- > /orb-], *albhₐ, *albho-, and, in terms of meaning [sema], in the sequences ‘water’ → ‘place situated near water’ → ‘place located on the water’ and ‘water’ → ‘clear / light water’ → ‘white water’ → ‘white’) and that incorporates in itself the names of the villages of Olbicella and Urbe and the hydronyms of the river Orba and of the torrent Orbicella.

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