On a peculiar morpho-syntactic pattern in the adaptation of Levantine place names into Early Modern Italian[1]

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Abstract

With a few exceptions, Italian endonyms of towns and cities are typically not preceded by a definite article. It is then noteworthy that the Italian names of important Levantine harbours to be found in Mediaeval and Early Modern travelogues are often preceded by the article (*Il Cairo* < *al-Qāhira*, *La Canea* < *Chaniá* in the island of Crete, *Lepanto* < **L'Epanto* < vernacular Greek *(N)épaktos* for Classic Greek *Náfpaktos*: see Migliorini 1927). What is more striking is that a numbers of city names such as *Le Smirne* = Smyrna and *Le Gomenizze* = Igoumenitsa have been integrated into Early Modern Italian as plurals, as shown by the articles that go along with them. The same adaptation pattern can be found in the names of some Greek and North-African islands, as for instance *le Marlere* = Ereíkoussa, *le Gerbe* = Jerba and *li Gozi* = Gozo. In this paper we aim to investigate the genesis of this unusual toponymic paradigm.

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1. Introduction

As already observed by Pellegrini (1996: 1376), «en italien les noms de lieux [...] se sont presque toujours fixés sans article, en particulier les noms de villes». Out of the 8092 Italian *comuni* (the basic Italian administrative divisions) existing today, if we exclude place names of foreign origin like *La Thuile*, only 8 require a definite article, which is feminine and singular in the totality of cases. This percentage increases if we take unofficial, dialectal or regional forms into account (in 1863, the established form of *Morra* became *La Morra*, see *DI* 2,615). In the field of microtoponymy, though, we still find a significant number of such structures: «[…] casi di toponimi articolati sono offerti da nomi di piccole località, in cui è trasparente il nome comune che ne costituisce l'etimo» (Serianni 1988: 150). E.g. *La Strada* (Ravenna) 'the road', *L'Olmo* (Perugia, Florence) 'the elm tree', *La Villa* 'the farm' (Bolzano). This recurrent pattern, and possibly the influence of the definite article itself, have caused folk etymology to work particularly hard in making articulated non-transparent place names immediately understandable to the speakers, as in the case of *la Spezia* 'the spice' (but prob. < **villa Aspetia* or *Alba Spetie*; cf. Gasca Queirazza et al. 1990: 345). We will see later how this tendency applies to articulated exonyms. Even rarer are plural articulated endonyms, which exclusively refer to little villages or non urban areas: *I Forni* (Grosseto) 'the ovens', *Le Casette* 'the little houses' (Ascoli Piceno, Padua), *I Dossi* 'the rises' (Piacenza), *Le Castella* 'the castles' (Catanzaro).

In Ancient Italian articulated toponyms, both singular and plural, were more common than today: in the first centuries of the Italian language we find *Labadia* (see *DI* 1,172), *la Cattolica* (12,227: «a la Catholica»),[2] *la Porretta* (Sacchetti, *LIZ* 3.0: «n'andò poi al Bagno alla Porretta»), *la Torre* (see *DI* 1,401) today respectively *Badia* (Bolzano), *Cattolica*

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[2] The following Old Italian toponyms associated with two numbers are to be intended as quoted from Sanudo's *Diarii* (Fulin et alii 1879-1903) with number of volume and page. The distribution of small and capital initials does not necessarily reflect the handwriting of the manuscript.

(Rimini), *Porretta Terme* (Bologna)*, Caserta,* occasionally as result of a false segmentation (4,610: «soto la Tisana» for *Latisana*, Udine).

2. Articulated exonyms

The processes through which endonyms and exonyms come into existence are inherently different: neglecting this fact, or worse, keeping exonyms out of the limelight, can prove tricky. This hasty attitude is probably at the roots of the contradictory statement that we can read in Rohlfs 1966-69: § 649: «In taluni casi tuttavia nomi di città provenienti da nomi comuni hanno conservato l'articolo sino ad oggi: *la Spezia*, *la Mirandola*, *l'Aquila*, *la Roccella*, *la Porretta*, *la Bastia*, *l'Aia*, *la Mecca*, *il Cairo*».

The pattern that we will try to outline here used to be common in Ancient Italian. Between the 14th and 16th centuries, we find a definite article preceding the names of many Levantine harbours and islands: *il Cairo* = Cairo (Egypt), *la Canea* = Chania (Crete), *la Prevesa* (4,317: «de la Prevesa») = Preveza (Epirus), *la Cefalonia* = the island of Cefalonia / Kefallonia in the Ionian archipelago (2,139: «la Zefalonia»), Early Modern Ven. *el Zaffo* (1,645: «dal Zaffo») = Jaffa (in Palestine), etc.; they seem to have been particularly common in 16th century Venetian, even if this perspective may be influenced by the fact that in some earlier possible sources, such as portolan charts, definite articles would not usually be transcribed. Moreover, many other cases are likely to remain doubtful due to the uncertainties of ancient writing, chiefly in the usage of the apostrophe. In one of the chief monuments of Early Modern Venetian, the *Diarii* of the Venetian historiographer Marin Sanudo (composed between 1496 and 1533), we find *la Janina* (2,559: «da la Janina») = Janjina (Dalmatia), *el Zonchio* (2,1124: «sopra el Zonchio») < Gk. *Ζόγκλος* = Pylos (Peloponnese), *el Tenedo* (23,143: «uno castelo e loco su l'ixola di Candia, chiamato el Tenedo») = Tenedos (today Bozcaada, an island in the Ageaen sea), *el Cogno* (27,601: «al Cogno») < Gk. *Ἰκόνιον* = Konya (Anatolia), *la Trapezonta* (30,84: «el bassà de la Trapezonta»; see *DI* 4,633-34 for the idiomatic expressions «perdere la Trebisonda» or acting «a la Trebisonda») = Trabzon (Black Sea), etc.

Most of the articulated exonyms of the Levant can be interpreted as calques of the local forms of the toponyms: e.g. *il Cairo* < Ar. *al-Qāhira*, *la Prevesa* < Gk. *ἡ Πρέβεζα*, *la Canea* < Gr. *τὰ Χανιά.* This explanation is of course particularly fitting for all Greek place names, since the presence of an article preceding a toponym is normal in this language (see *Θεσσαλονίκη* = Thessalonica, *ἡ Κύπρος* = Cyprus, etc.). Some cases can be explained as an erroneous segmentation of the local form, for instance *la Liça* (see *DI* 2,623) < Gr. *Λαοδίκεια*, *la Vrana* (27,179: «a la Vrana») < Croatian *Lovran* (Istria), *el Zir* (26,282: «la impresa del Zir») and *el Zer* (26,433: «ritornar al Zer») < Ven. *Alzer* (Algiers), etc. For other exonyms, one would be tempted to put forward phonetic similarities with common names: *la Brazza* (2,962: «conte di la Brazza»; Cr. *Brač*) can recall Ven. *brazzo*, pl. *brazza* 'arm' (Cortelazzo 2007: 220). At some point, the use of the definite article preceding Levantine exonyms must have been both extremely common and occasionally misunderstood, as is shown by those cases in which the article has been conglobed to the noun: *Laiazzo* (Domenichi 1551: 733: «il golfo di Laiazzo») = Ayas (a port in Lesser Armenia), *Legena* (4,83: «a Legena») = the island of Aegina (in the Saronic Gulf), *Lepanto* < dial. Gk. *Επακτος* = the port of Naupactus [Náfpaktos] (according to Migliorini 1927).

As already noticed by Rohlfs (1966-69: § 644), some Levantine articulated exonyms are morphologically plural even if referring to single and undivided entities, not unlike classical *pluralia tantum* like *Ἀθῆναι* (Athens) and *Λουπίαι* (Lecce). These must be considered and interpreted differently than the parallel plural articulated toponyms of Italian cities and islands, for the obvious reasons that the latter are always derived from common nouns (see § 1), while this cannot be the etymological root of their Levantine counterparts. As expected at

this chronological stage and in sources which vacillate between Italian and Venetian, the examples of this morpho-syntactic pattern present a vast number of variants, both graphical and phonological, most of which are not taken into account here, not to mention more noticeable fluctuations attributable to folk etymology. Some examples worthy of further examination are: *le Smirne* = Smyrna (İzmir, on the Aegean coast of Turkey; see § 3), *le Gomenizze* = Igoumenitsa (Epirus; see § 4), *i Zerbi* and *le Gerbe* (Jerba, an island in front of the Tunisian coast; see § 4), *le Foje* (1,398: «a le Foje»), *le Foglie* (16,194: «lontano da le Foglie una zornata»), *le Zoie* (15,547: «a le Zoie») = Focea (Foça, on the Aegean coast of Turkey), *le Brulle* (4,347: «a le Brulle»), *le Barulle* (12,156: «a le Barulle»), *le Burle* (26,424: «a le Burle») and *li Brulli* (10,110: «per via de li brulli») = al-Burullus (Northern Egypt), *le Marlere* (4,111: «fino sopra le Marlere») = Ereíkoussa (an island north of Corfu), *le Spezie* (4,250: «a le Spezie») = Spetses (an island in the Saronic Gulf), *le Cadene* (2,1020: «al luogo di le cadene») = Cetinje (Montenegro). More forms seem to be found exclusively in Marin Sanudo's *Diarii*, and probably in its sources: *li Casi* (2,981: «in li Casi») = the island of Kasos (Dodecanese), *li Gozi* (25,59: «sopra li Gozi») = the island of Gavdos, to the south of Crete, *le Seres* (5,670: «a le Seres e Salonichi») = Serres (Greek Macedonia), *le Sfeze* (5,695: «a le Sfeze») = Sfakia (on the Southern coast of Crete, despite the identification with *Fez* in the index, vol. 5, p. 1116), *le Pigne* (23,108: «a le Pigne») = Bāniyās (Syria). See also *le Cefalonie* = Cefalonia in a public announcement published in Rome in 1572 (Crifò 2008: 99).

In the case of some nesonyms, we may suppose a collective use of the name of the main island in order to indicate the surrounding ones as well (see, for instance, *le Cefalonie* = Cefalonia and Ithaca, *i Casi* = Kasos, Armathia, and Makronisi; but not *le Gerbe*, since Jerba is not surrounded by islets). Also, the possibility of an adaptation of an original plural in the source language cannot be ruled out. In at least a couple of names of harbours, the plural results from an ellipsis of a Romance descriptive toponym, as in the case of *le Spezie* 'the spices' > Gk. *οἱ Σπέτσες*. Cortelazzo (1986) analyzed the interesting class of Greek toponyms to be found in Greek portolan charts and derived from Italian names of animals: so arose in Italian *le Quaie* 'the quails' (also *porto di le Quaie* or *porto Quaglio* > Gk. *ΠόρτοΚάγιο*, ib.: 507-08), cf. Gk. *Καβαλίνες, Καβάλλοι* '(islands of) the horses' (ib.: 506) and *Πορτζέλοι* 'piglets' (ib.: 507).

In all other cases, a different explanation is needed.

3. From *Smirna* to *Smirne* via *Le Smirre*

A very interesting case is presented by the Italian name for Smyrna, the well-known harbour on the Aegean coast of Anatolia corresponding to the modern city of İzmir in Turkey. The Latin name of the city, *Smyrna*, an adaptation of the Greek *Σμύρνη*, is at the basis of the Italian *Smirna* (see *DI* 420), which can be found already in a text dating from the late 13th century, i.e. Bono Giamboni's translation from Latin into Tuscan of Paulus Orosius' *Historiae adversus paganos* (*TLIO*Mat). The same form *Smirna* appears frequently in the 14th century, for instance in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and in Boccaccio's *Trattatello in laude di Dante*, and later on in Renaissance and Baroque poets such as Pietro Bembo, Giovanni della Casa, and Giambattista Marino (*LIZ* 3.0). However, *Smirna* is not the only form occurring in Medieval and later texts. A plural variant *Smirne* is also to be found both in chronicles and in travelogues, but very seldom in poetic compositions. The form *Smirne* has survived to the present, while *Smirna* becomes rarer and rarer after the 17th century and does not seem to occur anymore after the first half of the 19th century (*LIZ* 3.0). As a result, since the occurrences of *Smirna* are mostly contained in translations from Latin and in poetic texts, it is considered likely that the form is a Latinism; on the other hand, the plural *Smirne*, which in Old and Early Modern Italian is very often preceded by the feminine plural article *le*, is likely to have been the most common form from the Middle Ages on.

How to explain, then, the variant *(le) Smirne*? There is no extralinguistic reason why this toponym should have been adapted as a plural, since Smyrna in the Middle Ages was a pretty compact city, not a dispersed urban area with multiple centres (and, in fact, the name of Smyrna is singular in all other Romance languages). One might think, then, of an influence of the corresponding Greek form *Σμύρνη*, but this hypothesis is readily rejected, both phonetically, because *Σμύρνη*'s final vowel is -*i* and not -*e* as in Italian, and morphologically, because *Σμύρνη* is a singular (see Gk. *ἡ Σμύρνη*). The question gets even more problematic if we consider other variants that were common in Medieval Italian vernaculars, most of which were plurals just like *le Smirne*. For instance, a form *(le) Smirre* often appears in 14th century texts, not only in Florentine literary prose (in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Giovanni Villani's *Cronica*: see *TLIO*Mat), but also in bureaucratic documents, such as the official letter addressed from the city council of Ragusa (nowadays Dubrovnik) to the two merchants Mate de Mençe and Piero de Piçinegi in 1347, for which the local variety of Venetian was employed (Dotto 2008: 281 [66.7]). The variant *Esmire* without article is used once by the Tuscan writer Binduccio dello Scelto in his translation of Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* dating from the first decades of the 14th century (Gozzi 2000: 477): the corresponding toponym in the French original is *Isaure* 'Isauria (a region of Asia Minor)' (Constans 1904-1912: IV, 11, verse 23287), which has been probably misread as *Ismire* or *Ismirne* and translated as *Esmire*. A slightly different variant, *Esmirre* with a geminated vibrant, occurs frequently in an anonymous chronicle from Rome dating from the same century and is regularly preceded by the feminine plural article (Porta 1979: 337).

If we take a closer look at the chronology of all these variants, we realize that the form that has survived until today *(le) Smirne* is actually less old than *(le) Smirre* and *(le) Esmirre*, the latter ones already occurring in the first half of the 14th century, while *Smirne* starts circulating a few decades later. In fact, an isolated occurrence of *Smirne* appears besides the singular *Smirna* in the already mentioned translation of Paulus Orosius by Bono Giamboni dating from the second half of the 13th century (Tassi 1849: 17), but the edition of this text by Francesco Tassi is old and not very reliable. As a result, since all other occurrences of *Smirne* are concentrated in texts dating from the second half of the 14th century on, the form to be found in Tassi's edition is likely to be a banalization for *Smirna*. More evidence that *Smirre* and *Esmirre* are older than *Smirne* is provided by phonetics, since the assimilation of the consonant cluster -*rn*- to -*rr*- is characteristic neither of Tuscan nor of Venetian: therefore, a derivation of *Smirre* from *Smirne* is not regular at all and needs further explanation. On the contrary, the Latin form *Smirna* and its vernacular counterpart *le Smirre* might well have merged into a new form *(le) Smirne*, phonetically similar to the Latin etymon and morphologically plural like the vernacular form.

But what is the origin of *le Smirre* and *le Esmirre*? The most plausible answer is the Turkish name of the city, i.e. *İzmir*, an adaptation of the Gk. *ἡ Σμύρνη* in which the last syllable has been taken to be a morphological element (see Tk. Genitive *İzmirin* 'of Smyrna') and subsequently dropped. It is highly plausible that in the early 14th century, when the Turkish dynasty of the Aydinids conquered Smyrna, thus provoking the reaction of the Christian forces coordinated by Pope Clement VI, the city, whose fame had immediately grown in all Western countries, began to be known under its Turkish name. Evidence for this assumption includes the Old Catalan *L'Esmira* (a form used by Ramon Muntaner in his chronicle: «Et de la Tira lo megaduc tramès missatge a l'Esmira, e de l'Esmira al Xiu», Casacuberta 1927-1951: 34, 20-21) and Middle High German *Ismira* (in Johann Schiltberger's *Reisebuch*: «Und die ander Stat und das land das dortzu gehört, ist gehaissen Ismira», Neumann 1859: 94), which are clearly derived from Tk. *İzmir* and not from Lat. *Smyrna*. If we suppose that – as in Old Catalan – the name of the city was given the definite article in its Italian adaptation, *İzmir* might well have become *l'Esmirre* through epenthesis of

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-*e* and gemination of the final consonant (as, for instance, in *Manzanarre* < Sp. *Manzanar* or in the anthroponym *Baldassarre* < Lat. *Balthasar*). *L'Esmirre*, then, might have been erroneously segmented as a feminine plural *Le Esmirre* or *Le Smirre*. Finally, the phonetic similarity between the new and the classical name of the city might have been responsible for the hybrid form *le Smirne*, which was soon to become the most common variant of the exonym.

4. *Le Gomenizze, le Gerbe*

There are at least two other feminine plural exonyms of the Mediterranean area which occur quite often in Old Italian. These are *le Gomenizze*, the harbour of Igoumenitsa in the Northern Greek region of Epirus, and *le Gerbe*, the island of Jerba in nowadays Tunisia. Unlike *le Smirne*, neither form can be found in Medieval texts, although their diffusion in Early Modern Italian is considerable (nowadays they are both obsolete). *Le Gomenizze*, for instance, apparently occurs for the first time in a public announcement published in Bologna in 1571 (Crifò 2008: 126). A year later the same form appears in two Venetian accounts of the war of Cyprus (1570-1571), these being Giovanni Pietro Contarini's *Historia delle cose successe dal principio della guerra mossa da Selim ottomano a' Venetiani* and Emilio Maria Manolesso's *Historia nova, nella quale si contengono tutti i successi della guerra Turchesca [...]*.Besides *(le) Gomenizze*, we notice a singular variant *Gomenizza* occasionally preceded by the definite article *la*, which is slightly older (since 1531, Fulin et al. 1879-1903: 55,401: «la Gomeniza»; see also, for instance, *la Gomenizza* in Marco Guazzo's *Historia di tutte le cose degne di memoria [...]*, first published in 1544; Guazzo 1544: 275) and much more frequent, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries. We can try to explain both forms as the result of an erroneous segmentation of the Greek name *Igoumenitsa*, just as in the case of *le Smirre* < *İzmir*. In order to do this, we have to suppose that *Igoumenitsa* was first adapted as **l'Igomenizza* and then segmented as *li Gomenizza*. The resulting combination of a masculine plural article and a feminine singular noun would have been regularized by declining either the article as a singular (*la Gomenizza*) or the noun as a plural. Strangely enough, though, a feminine plural originated, while we would have expected a masculine plural **li Gomenizzi*, of which we find no traces in the texts.

The case of *le Gerbe* is even more problematic. This exonym is plural not only in Italian, but also in other Early Modern Romance languages such as Spanish (*los Gelves*) and French (*les Gerbes*). Moreover, in Medieval Italian texts a form *Gerbi* (*Zerbi*), which could be interpreted as a masculine plural, is very common: this form survives until the Early Modern period, when it is sometimes preceded by a masculine article in both the singular and plural (see, for instance, *al Zerbi* and *ai Zerbi* 'to Jerba' in Marin Sanudo's *Diarii*). A feminine variant *le Zerbi* is also to be found, not in Sanudo's *Diarii*, but in slightly later texts such as Marco Guazzo's *Cronica* (1553) and Alfonso de Ulloa's report of the war of Tripoli (Ulloa 1566: 53). In order to explain the Italian plural forms of the exonym, which are to be found from the 16th century on, we may take as a starting point the dialectal Arabic sequence *lī Jirba* 'to Jerba' and suppose that it was perceived as a plural, either masculine (*i Zerbi*) or feminine (*le Gerbe*). Of course, this explanation is problematic, since we would expect the masculine form to prevail due to the presence of *li*, just as in the case of *Gomenizza*. Moreover, it is bizarre that the presumed influence of the Arabic preposition *lī* left no traces in the Middle Ages, when the linguistic contacts between Southern Italy and North Africa were much deeper than in the Early Modern period. As a result, the origin of the Italian and Western Romance plural exonyms for Jerba is still very enigmatic. We can only remark that Fr. *les Gerbes*, which is mostly contained in 17th century translations from Italian, is probably a calque of It. *le Gerbe*, while Sp. *los Gelves* is likely to have a different origin due to internal reasons (its phonetic shape, which has been plausibly influenced by the local toponym *Gelves*

in Andalusia) and the general historical frame (the island of Jerba was occupied twice by the Spanish army in 1521-1524 and 1551-1560).

5. Preliminary conclusions

The diffusion of plural articulated exonyms referring to Levantine place names is a largely unknown phenomenon that deserves further investigation. This morpho-syntactic pattern seems to be the result of erroneous segmentations that occurred in the adaptation of a number of Mediterranean place names either beginning with *i-* (*le Smirne*, *le Gomenizze*) or, as in the case of *le Gerbe*, being possibly preceded by the Ar. preposition *lī*. Although one of these forms, *le Smirne*, already appears in late Medieval texts, this toponymic pattern becomes more and more frequent in the 15th-16th centuries, when it repeatedly occurs in Marin Sanudo's *Diarii* and in coeval chronicles, travelogues, and portolan charts, which were mostly written or published in Venice. Analogy seems to be responsible for those cases to which no possible phonetic explanation applies, characteristically names of cities like *le Foje*, *le Cadene*, *le Sfeze* and *le Pigne*, but also nesonyms like *le Marlere* and even limnonyms such as *le Brulle*. As hinted before, folk etymology plays an important role as well, and the majority of these toponyms closely resemble, or are omonyms of, Italian words, many of which belong to the semantic field of navigation. This is shown by the cases of *al-Burullus* > *le Brulle* 'the bare lands' or *le Burle* 'the tricks', *Cetinje* > *le Cadene* 'the chains (e.g. the chains barring entrance to an harbour)', *Foça* > *le Foje* 'the leaves' or *le Zoie* 'the gemstones' or 'the garlands' (Cortelazzo 2007: 1534-35), *Bāniyās* > *le Pigne* 'the pine cones', and even *le Gomenizze*, whose phonetic shape has been plausibly influenced by It. *gomena* 'sailing cable'. In this way, the unusual articulated plural exonyms have been made intelligible in the same way as the several endonyms following the same morpho-syntactic pattern. From the 17th century on, plural articulated toponyms become rarer and rarer and are gradually replaced by the corresponding singular forms. However, some traces of this toponymic vogue have survived to the present day, as in the case of *Smirne*.

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