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CAESARIANA IN LUCANIA: UNVEILING THE HISTORY OF A PLACE THROUGH ITS NAME

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***Abstract:** So far, the ancient *statio of Caesariana* in Lucania has not been precisely located, and we know very little about it. Various sources that mention this station agree that it existed; however, they do not fully agree on its location. The lack of a modern city that claims to have originated from this settlement may have deterred historians and archaeologists from researching the topic further, despite the intriguing nature of the settlement's name. This article aims to reconstruct the history of this ancient settlement through an extensive and multidisciplinary approach, starting with the study of the toponym. It identifies the exact site where *Caesariana* was located on the Tyrrhenian Lucanian coast near *Nerulum* (modern-day Lagonegro). This research provides a clearer picture of the demographic distribution and sociocultural context of the region in Italy during the Augustan Age.*

***Key words:** Place Names, Caesariana, Ancient Lucania, Historical Cartography, Toponymic Systems*

1. INTRODUCTION

Place names are a constitutive element of the identity of a place, and the study of such names offers us a powerful tool for investigating how populations interact with their environment (Cantile 2016; Helleland 2012). Thus, a place name that appears on an ancient map provides us with both geographical and cultural information (Vasardani et al. 2013). Just as all other manifestations of human culture have evolved, place names are also subject to change. Changing political, economic, linguistic and religious conditions are all good reasons for changing or resemantising place names (Morazzoni et al. 2023). Thus, the diachronic analysis of place names informs our understanding of how populations have adapted the ways in which they interact with the environment over time. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to reconstruct the evolution of a place

name in detail, which is why many place names appear opaque to us today, after the ability to glimpse the path that they took to reach us in that form has been lost.

Lucania (southern *Italy*), however, contains one place for which the motivation of the name has been so pervasive that it has survived for two thousand years, even if it has been translated into different toponymic forms. Thus, the possibility of retracing this long ‘toponymic route’ in literary sources and historical cartography facilitates the reconstruction of the geographical and socio-cultural coordinates of that place, the history of which can thus be regained.

2. BACKGROUND

The area covered by this study is a coastal territory that is located in southern *Italy* at the convergence of three modern regional districts: *Campania*, *Basilicata* and *Calabria*. In antiquity, this area was located entirely within the *Lucania* region (which was named in accordance with the Italic population that occupied it before Romanisation). This area is orographically characterised by the proximity of the *Apennines* to the coast (*Mount Sirino* is one of the highest peaks of the southern *Apennines*), which is rocky, jagged, and interspersed with small flat stretches at the mouths of the rivers (*Bussento*, *Noce* and *Lao*). This region features many wooded areas and springs and has been inhabited for ages (De Lorenzo 1911). Before Romanisation, this area was under the control of the *Magna Graecia* city of *Sybaris/Thurii*, as evidenced by the coins of *Pyxous* (*Buxentum*) and *Sirinos* (*Mount Sirino*), on which the Sybarite bull is depicted; these coins can be dated from approximately 560 BC (Horsnaes 2011). The region’s strategic position in southern *Italy*, where land routes to *Calabria* intersect a natural route between the *Ionian Sea* and the *Tyrrhenian Sea*, entailed that these places came into contact with Roman civilisation as early as the 4th century BC (Fronza 2006). In 317 BC, two Roman consuls (Gaius Junius Bubulcus and Quintus Aemilius Barbula) directed their militias against *Nerulum*, encircling and conquering it after a bloody siege (Liv. 9.20.9).

In *Tabula Peutingeriana*, near *Nerulum*, the *statio* (or *mansio*) of *Cesernia/Ceserina*, is reported to have been located 7 miles north of the town of *Blanda* (see Figure 1). This coastal location has been confirmed by the finding—in the *Ravenna Cosmography* (IV, 32)—of the site named *Cessernia/Cersenia*, which is located between *Buxentum* and *Blanda*. Interestingly, Guido of Pisa named this *statio* twice, first as *Cessarnia*, between *Buxentum* and *Blandas* (*Blanda*) (Geogr. 32), and then in a doubled form, i.e., *Cesernia* and *Veneris*, located between *Blandas* (*Blanda*) and *Buxonia* (*Buxentum*) (Geogr. 74). This split also occurs in the *Ravenna Cosmography* (V, 2). In any case, here, we face toponymic variants that certainly refer to the same site (López García 2024). In fact, the nearby town of *Nerulum* also exhibits similar variability in the same sources: we find it listed as *Nerulos* in the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, as *Nerbulos* in the *Ravenna Cosmography* (IV, 31) and as *Herbulum* in Guido of Pisa's *Geographica* (43).



Figure 1. Fragment of segment VI B of the Tabula Peutingeriana, depicting the Lucanian Tyrrhenian coast near *Nerulum* (*Nerulos*)
(source: https://tp-online.ku.de/treffer_it.php)

Unfortunately, while *Nerulum* also appears with this precise name in other sources (Liv. 9.20.9; Suet. *Aug.* 4.2), thus confirming the exact toponym, this coastal *statio* is not mentioned elsewhere. Notably, a very similar toponym, *Caesariana*, is mentioned in the same area in another itinerary, namely, the Itinerary of Antoninus. Among those mentioned, this itinerary source is the oldest (Adams & Laurence 2005, 22) as well as the one that correctly reports the place name *Nerulum* (Parthney & Pinder 1848, 50). However, with regard to the reliability of topographical information, the Itinerary of Antoninus has already been proven to be deficient, as is the case elsewhere in the Roman Empire (Greco 2020, 25-29; Fodorean 2017; Fodorean 2015; Wheeler 1920). In fact, although it always places *Caesariana* in the immediate vicinity of *Nerulum*¹ the Itinerary does not report this *statio* along the coastline but rather along the inland road leading from *Capua* to *Reggio Calabria*. Many topographers have obviously already assumed that such similar toponymic forms must all refer to a single settlement (Romanelli 1815, 24, 379, 394-395; Guandalini 2001, 221-222), but these differences have undoubtedly hindered the precise identification of its location, as research has not been able to make full use of the information provided by the toponymic element. Table 1 presents the sites where *Caesariana* has hitherto been proposed to be located.

¹ Abraham Ortelius (1596) reports '*Caesariana, Antonino circa Nerulum, Lucaniae urbem*'.

Table 1. Proposed locations for the *statio* of *Caesariana* in *Lucania*

Site	Straight-line distance from <i>Blanda</i>	Ref.
<i>Serra la Città (Rivello)</i>	16 km	Racioppi 1889, 371-372; Lacava 1891, 21
<i>Sapri</i>	20 km	Miller 1916, 351-352
<i>Buonabitacolo</i>	40 km	Bracco 1962
<i>Lagonegro</i>	21 km	Battisti 1964, 282
<i>Vibonati</i>	25 km	La Greca 2010
<i>Lago Sirino (Nemoli)</i>	18 km	Libertini 2023, 51

3. METHODOLOGY

While on a modern map, the correspondence between the name of a place and its location is geometrically defined by its geographical coordinates, in ancient literary, itinerary and cartographic sources, this correspondence is expressed through qualitative spatial representations (Vasardani et al. 2023; Murrieta-Flores et al. 2019; Liu et al. 2009). The place name itself is a valuable source of information, as it expresses the identity of the place in question as it was perceived at that time. In the present study, all ancient sources that mentioned *Caesariana* were critically analysed to extract information that could be useful for determining its precise location. The results thus obtained were then cross-referenced with historical, archaeological and topographical data from that location to verify their accuracy.

The initial assumption rests on the well-founded hypothesis, in analogy with findings concerning the nearby *Nerulum*, that the original form of the place name was the one attested in the oldest source (Antoninus), i.e., *Caesariana*. The *Tabula Peutingeriana*, supported by the Anonymous Cosmographer from Ravenna and by Guido of Pisa, provides detailed qualitative information concerning its location: *Caesariana* was located along the coast just 7 miles (i.e., just over 10 km) north of *Blanda*. Thus, we have topological information (a settlement along the Tyrrhenian coast of *Lucania*; between *Blanda* and *Buxentum*), directional information (north of *Blanda*), and metric information (7 miles away from *Blanda*). Since *Blanda* was definitely located at the mouth of the *Noce River*, near *Tortora* (Mollo et al. 2021), and *Buxentum* was located at *PolICASTRO Bussentino* (Bencivenga Trillmich 1988), *Caesariana* must have been located along the coast of *Maratea*. At this point, after having reconstructed the historical and cultural context in which that toponym probably emerged in those very places (thus allowing us to understand the 'sense of place') (Haris et al. 2023), a topographical and cartographic study of this restricted coastal area was conducted to

trace how the original meaning of this toponym adapted over time. The same approach was taken in other areas in which the same motivation for naming could have been produced (Tent 2015; Nash 2015). Finally, the archaeological literature related to the area in question was reviewed to verify the existence of material evidence consistent with the proposed hypotheses with the goal of determining the most precise and well-founded location for the site.

4. RESULTS

4.1. *An Identifying Place Name*

In the earliest approaches to their classification, a conspicuous class of place names was identified that could be traced back to commemorations of important historical or mythical figures or deities (Stewart 1945). This method of attributing names has been extensively adopted in many cultures and across all periods; one need only consider *Тольяти* [*Tolyatti*], *Washington*, *Ἡράκλεια Σιντική* [*Heraclea Sintica*] or *Mont-Saint-Michel* as examples. Thus, it is clear that this need for commemoration has always been a strong motivation for naming places. In some circumstances, the precise mechanisms that drove the naming process are well documented, as in the case of *Augusta Praetoria* (today *Aosta*) (Bertarione & Magli 2015). Toponyms of the *Caesariana* type flourished in large numbers in Roman times in all places in which it was deemed necessary to celebrate an emperor, in places that he frequented or at which he had achieved military victories, or even more simply, to mark the presence of imperial possessions, from *Caesaromagus* (now *Chelmsford*, UK) to *Caesarea Maritima* (Israel) (De Camilli 2017). Even in the Middle Ages, toponyms such as *fundus Caesarianensis* or *massa Caesariana* were present in *Italy*, especially near *Rome*, for which this origin is considered to have been established (Kajava 2022, 69).

Multiple data confirm that the Lucanian coastal area was closely connected to the first emperor and Caesar par excellence, Octavian Augustus. In fact, we know from Suetonius that Octavian was given the cognomen of *Thurinus* at birth, as his ancestors hailed from a *pagus* in the territory of *Thurii/Sybaris* (Suet. *Aug.* 2.3, 7.1). Sources testify that *Nerulum* was the town where Octavian Augustus' paternal grandfather had practised the profession of banker, and before him, in that same area, his great-grandfather was a rope maker (Suet. *Aug.* 4.2; Wardle 2014). The link between the coastal areas of *Lucania* and Octavian Augustus is also confirmed by the adjective *Iulia*, with which the town of *Blanda* was named in epigraphs after the 1st century AD (La Torre 2003, 121; Angeletti 2012, 107-118).² Numerous other epigraphic sources testify to a close link between the Julio-Claudian family and the town of *Buxentum* (Gallo 1996, 96-114). Thus, a plausible motivation that could justify the presence of a city named *Caesariana* was present and clearly related to the origin of Octavian Augustus' ancestors (Blair & Tent 2021). However, in those places today, we find no

² In mediaeval toponymy, this designation gave rise to the place name *Julitta*, which was used on the Aragonese Maps to refer to the outskirts of *Tortora* (La Greca 2023, 121).

philologically recognisable outcome of that toponym. One would think that the name of this settlement had died out alongside any memory of its existence.

4.2. A Unique, Recurring Toponymic System

However, an examination of the toponymic context of that area and its diachronic evolution revealed that, at the locality of *Santa Venere* [*St Venus*] of *Maratea*, the medieval coastal tower present there (*Torre Santa Venere*) was shown on a 15th-century Aragonese map as *Torriane dello Imperatore* [*Emperor's Tower*] (Figure 2) (La Greca 2023, 121). This fact immediately highlighted this place, since it was precisely the emperor Gaius Julius Caesar Octavian Augustus, nephew and testamentary heir of Julius Caesar, who had been the main promoter of the cult of Venus, progenitor of the *Gens Julia*, with the propagandistic aim of reinforcing the myth of the divine origin of his family, his power and *Rome* itself (Aparicio 2013). Beginning in 27 BC, the attribution *divi filius* [*son of the divine*] appeared on all coins and epigraphs commemorating him (Menichetti 2018).



Figure 2. The *Torriane dello Imperatore*, located between *Sapri* and *Maratea*, as shown on the Aragonese Map. Naples State Archive, Iconographic Office 64 (formerly Farnese Archive, 2114, no. 1). Courtesy of the Italian Ministry of Culture

Adding to the weight of this finding was the identification, in another of the Aragonese Maps of the Kingdom of *Naples*, which dates from the second half of the 15th century and was rediscovered in the 1980s, of a toponymic exchange that mirrors that of *Maratea*. This map depicts the island of *Ischia* and presents the place names in a rather ancient form (Valerio 2007). The promontory southwest of *Forio* (*Forillia* on the

map), beyond *Citara beach*, appears to be marked as *Prom. Cesareo* (Figure 3A) instead of the modern toponym *Punta Imperatore* (Figure 3B) (La Greca 2023, 43, 218-219). This toponymic alternation (i.e., the change from referring to Caesar to referring to the Emperor) is once again easily justified by the fact that Octavian himself was a frequent visitor to the Campanian archipelago (Di Franco 2022). The presence of the toponym *Citara* in those same localities of *Ischia* is thus clearly traceable to the appellation of Venus Cytherean (born on the island of *Cythera*). Thus, the toponym *Santa Venere* of the not-too-distant Lucanian coast is proposed once again, albeit with a slight variation. The finding of similar toponymic outcomes that result from similar motivations for naming and, moreover, are subject to the same diachronic evolutions in two different places represents the 'litmus test' that reveals that the initial methodological assumption made in the present study, i.e., identifying *Caesariana* with *Cesernia/Ceserina* and placing it on the coast, was correct.



Figure 3. *Punta Imperatore* (island of *Ischia*) on both the Aragonese Map (A) and in modern cartography (B). Figure 3A is reproduced with permission of Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Moreover, awareness of the fact that *Punta Imperatore* referred to that specific Emperor was preserved in modern times in the island's cultural tradition. In the 19th century, Giuseppe d'Ascia wrote about the '*Water of Citara on the southern beach of Forio, below Capo Imperatore: this water has been praised since time immemorial, as evidenced by an inscription found on the site, which proves that at the time of Augustus, a certain Cappellina bathed in these waters and thereby strengthened her hair, for which she consecrated a votive monument to the nymphs who were the guardians of that spring*'; furthermore, '*this water has been very famous since ancient times and is said to be called Citara water thanks to a temple here dedicated to Venus Cytherean*' (1867, 45, 57). In that text, a precise reference is made to an Augustan-era epigraph found at this site that reveals how the cult of Venus was practised there at that time.³ The identification of an important historical figure with his political attributes and the resulting religious implications, alongside the link between that same figure and certain

³ Exhibit CIL X, no. 6793, which is kept in the Archaeological Museum in Naples. See Petracca & Tramunto 2013, 183.

places, thus produced an extraordinary toponymic system, which proliferated both along the temporal axis (on the diachronic plane) and along the spatial axis (by reproducing itself in other places). The presence of two different references to this site (*Cessarnia* and *Cesernia-Veneris*) in the Unknown Ravennese (7th century), which are repeated by Guido of Pisa (12th century), can at this point be interpreted as a snapshot of the moment when the memory of Caesar began to fade, flanked (and then, as we shall see, replaced) by the reference to *Venus Genetrix* during the Middle Ages, which occurred gradually and in a very particular way. This interpretation is confirmed based on the analysis of one of the oldest chorographic maps of *Italy* that has survived to this day, which was drawn on parchment by the Franciscan monk Paolino da Venezia in the first half of the 14th century (Codex Vat.Lat.1960, 286r; detail shown in Figure 4).



Figure 4. The Tyrrhenian coast of Lucania in the Codex Vat.Lat. 1960 (south-up map orientation). By permission of the Vatican Apostolic Library

Along the coast, near *Nerulum/Lagonegro*, the following place names, in fact, appear after one another, arranged from north to south (i.e., from bottom to top on the map): *Palanudho* (*Cape Palinuro*), *Policastron* (*Policastro Bussentino*), *Saprin* (*Sapri*), *Maratea*, *San Nicola* (*San Nicola Arcella*), *Scalea*, *Belvedhor* (*Belvedere Marittimo*). In addition, another place name located somewhere between *Sapri* and *Maratea*, which some would prefer to read as *Dine* (*Dino Island*) but would, however, be misplaced and located before *Maratea* (Almagià 1929, 68). However, a comparative calligraphic analysis of that legend and others included in the same document reveals incontrovertibly that in no way can it be read *Dine*; instead, it turns out to be *Dive* and thus represents another blatant toponymic reference to the *divi filius* [son of the divine] of those places.⁴ Moreover, it is located precisely between *Sapri* and *Maratea*, where the locality of *Santa Venere* with its tower is located, which would later be referred to as

⁴ Keys relating to *Santa Severina* in *Calabria*, *Lagonegro* in *Basilicata*, *Iovenazo* (*Giovinazzo*) in *Apulia*, *Avezano* (*Avezzano*) and *Monte Duno* (*Monte d'Ugni*) in *Abruzzo*, *Ravenna* in *Emilia Romagna*, and *Madalun* (*Maddaloni*) in *Campania* are specifically accounted for.

Torrione dello Imperatore in the Aragonese Maps. Interestingly, as centuries passed and the link between Octavian Augustus and those places was lost, the toponym's identifying value weakened (shifting from *Caesariana* to *Torre dello Imperatore*) until a real exchange of identity occurred, shifting from Caesar to *Dive* (the goddess Venus) and then to *Santa Venere*, which is a hagiotoponym that cannot be traced back to a church or cult present there but is rather evidently the result of the simple Christianisation of the pagan goddess.⁵ Similarly, on *Ischia*, a change occurred from *Promontorio Cesareo* to *Punta Imperatore*. The place name *Cetara*, on the other hand, did not need to be Christianised, as the reference to the pagan goddess was sufficiently veiled.

4.3. The Localisation of Caesariana

Thus, this toponymy analysis and a critical study of historical, literary, itinerary and cartographic sources indicate a location of *Caesariana* that lies in the locality of *Santa Venere* in *Maratea* (Figure 5).

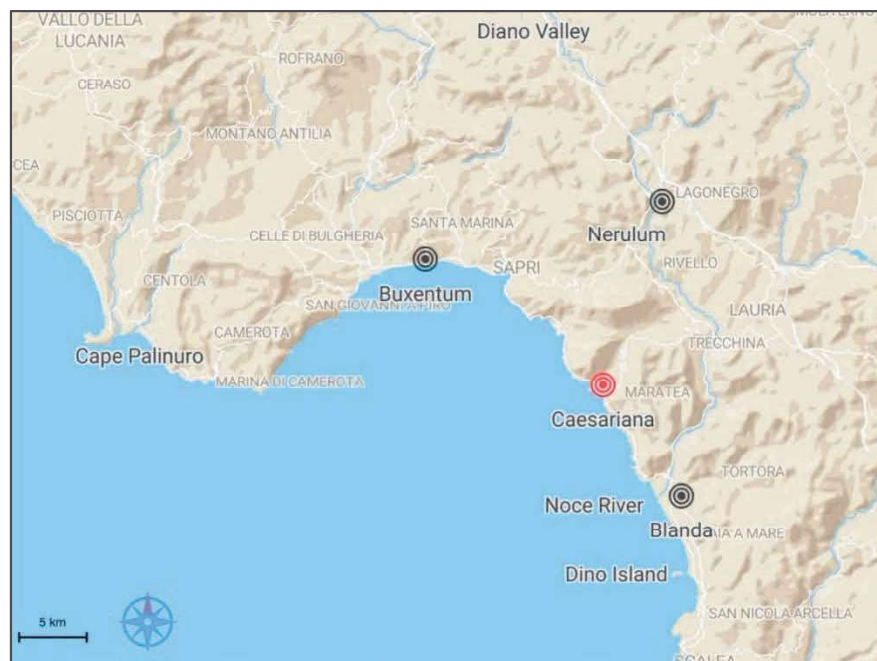


Figure 5. Reconstructed map of the Tyrrhenian coast of ancient Lucania
(Map data extracted from Open Street Map database, 2024)

If we combine these suggestions with the archaeological evidence reported by Andrea Lombardi in the 19th century, we must no longer speak of a convergence of clues but rather of a true concordance of probative evidence. The Lucanian historian and archaeologist described his observations in the *Santa Venere* district, which he specifies as being located ‘*a mile away from Maratea and half a mile from the sea: there, in fact,*

⁵ A similar process took place at *Paestum/Poseidonia*, where the name *Santa Venere* was superimposed on the preexisting temple of *Venus Iovia* in the Middle Ages (see Torelli 2020).

several ancient ruins can be seen, including those of a small temple in opus reticulatum in addition to what remains of a number of private buildings as well as a mosaic floor on the estates belonging to the Salesian nuns and the Latronico family. Here, as well as in the surrounding areas, countless tombs containing clay vases of a certain value and a non-negligible quantity of idols, cameos, medals as well as other ancient artefacts have been found in recent years' (Lombardi 1836, 182). The reported presence of structures in reticulated work allows the small temple reported by Andrea Lombardi to be dated with certainty to the Augustan Age (Adam 2005, 254). Finally, he even confirms the accuracy of the distances reported in the Tabula Peutingeriana, declaring that at that time, 'it had pleased some amateur of local history to locate Blanda six miles beyond Maratea in the area of Castrocuoco and on the right bank of the river Grande, alternatively known as Fiumara di Tortora, due to the discovery of some ancient ruins' (Lombardi 1836, 183). The total number of miles between the river Noce (the Fiumara di Tortora), near which Blanda was located, and Santa Venere was therefore seven.⁶

4.4. The Origin of a Mistake

This discovery of the correct location of *Caesariana* makes it possible to formulate a plausible hypothesis regarding the reasons for its erroneous position in Antoninus' Itinerary, which in fact reports it not along the coastal route but rather along the inland road between *Vallo di Diano* [*Diano Valley*] and *Cosenza*. The area of *Lagonegro* is the one in which these two routes are nearest one another, just over 10 km apart (Greco 2020, 52-53), and this situation could certainly have led to a copying error, thus leading to the 'jump' of this toponym from one road to the other. This type of error must have been quite frequent in the transcription of routes. For example, the Ravenna Cosmography contains an erroneous interpolation of *Abelinon* (*Avellino*) between *Nuceria Constantia* (*Nocera Superiore*) and *Picentia* (*Pontecagnano Faiano*) along the road from *Capua* to *Cosenza* (Geogr. Rav. IV, 34).⁷ This reconstruction also explains the southwards slide of the locality following *Caesariana*, namely, *Nerulum*, which is located 30 km farther south in Antoninus than in Tabula Peutingeriana (Greco 2021). However, since the structure of Antoninus' Itinerary is such that an interpolation could not be allowed to go unchallenged (at the beginning of each route, its total numbers of miles is marked), a subsequent copyist was required to reset the variance of the total to zero by readjusting certain distances and deleting another site (*Crater Flumen*), which was located along the road to *Cosenza*, that he considered to be somewhat less important.⁸ Thus, even the *statio* of *Caprasis/Caprasia* ultimately shifted, according to Antoninus' Itinerary, a good 16 miles closer to *Cosenza* than the Tabula Peutingeriana reports.⁹

⁶ However, Andrea Lombardi did not locate the *statio* of *Caesariana* in *Santa Venere* because he did not recognise the location of *Blanda*.

⁷ For more examples, see Stanco 1996.

⁸ Thus, the result of this arbitrary correction was the restoration of the total number of miles (455) between *Rome* and *Reggio Calabria*. See Parthney & Pinder 1848, 49-51.

⁹ In the Antonine Itinerary, *Caprasis*, is located 28 miles north of *Cosenza*, whereas in Tabula Peutingeriana, *Caprasia* is located 44 miles north of *Cosenza*.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Place names are the product of interactions between places and the human communities that inhabit them (Liu et al. 2024; Capra et al. 2016). Thus, the study of place names is an indispensable cornerstone of historical research into a site as well as the populations that have settled there over time (Garagulya et al. 2013). The ways in which place names are formed, sedimented and modified reflect the neurolinguistic and psychological processes that govern the functions of naming and memorising names (Ursini & Zhang 2023; Reszegi 2020; Müller 2010; Cohen & Burke 1993).

In the present study, the recurrence of similar toponymic systems was identified in two different places, which were united by the link between those places and the same important personality (Perono Cacciafoco & Cavallaro 2023, 1-23). However, this toponymic system recurs not only in space but also in time and is therefore two-dimensional; accordingly, it was possible to reconstruct the peculiar diachronic evolution that was clearly sustained by the persistence of memories (which gradually became more nuanced) of the same initial motivations that had led to the creation of the toponym *Caesariana*. Accordingly, this motivation for the name persisted in those places and in the popular consciousness until the end of the Middle Ages, shifting, as the centuries passed, into similar toponyms, both on the Lucanian Tyrrhenian coast, i.e., the area of origin of Octavian Augustus' family (Caesar>Venus>Deity>Emperor>St Venus and Empress),¹⁰ and on the island of *Ischia*, which was assiduously visited by that same personage (Caesar>Emperor and Cytherean). Different names for the same place that were generated based on the same motivation for naming are often found, especially in the case of place names that describe the physical characteristics of sites in composition with each other, such as *Tore Lake* ('Lake - Lake' in the *Fiji Islands*) (Tent & Blair 2019). The occurrence of this phenomenon in the case of eponyms, on the other hand, is quite exceptional and can be justified only if we consider the importance (both historically and sociocultural) of the personage to whom those places were ancestrally linked. Thus, we have shown how the original toponym has transformed and evolved into the current toponym, demonstrating that, in fact, toponymic continuity is preserved. This location is also fully in line with the other qualitative information reported by relevant sources.

The reproducibility of these findings, alongside the discovery in those very places of perfectly congruent archaeological evidence, reinforces the scientific value of the results obtained here and makes it possible to locate the *statio* of *Caesariana* in *Santa Venere* with certainty. Sometimes place names can help us piece together fragments of the history of a place.

¹⁰ Today, *Torre Santa Venere* is also known alternatively as *Torre Imperatrice* (Bixio 2008, 71). This further variation seems to be the result of the adjectivisation of the noun 'imperatore' [emperor] tuned with the feminine 'torre' [tower], which takes the final meaning of 'Imperial Tower', but it could also be derived from an implicit identification of Venus with the Empress.

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