

## How did the genus name *Valonia* (*Valoniaceae*, *Chlorophyta*) originate?

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The chlorophyte genus *Valonia* C.Agardh, 1823 is familiar to phycologists and aquarists alike. Its species often have glassy thalli that look like a handful of green soap bubbles, giving them a common name ‘bubble algae’. Its perhaps most famous representative, *Valonia ventricosa* J.Agardh, 1887, takes this to extremes with a spherical thallus that can be the size of a squash ball and which is often referred to as one of the world’s largest cells (Tunnell & al., 2007).

*Valonia* species are relatively common in warmer waters, and it is perhaps easier to find them than it is to discover how the name originated. Some authorities have stated that the name is ‘after Valoni, an Italian botanist’ (e.g., Bold & Wynne, 1985) or ‘after the Valoni, an Italian race’ (e.g., Chapman, 2013). No evidence for the existence of such a botanist or a race can be found.

Whence, then, the name? The genus *Valonia* was created by Carl Agardh (1785–1859) (Agardh, 1823), but he adopted the name from a publication of the naturalist Giuseppe Ginanni (1792–1753) that translates catchily as ‘114 plants that grow in the Adriatic’ (Ginanni, 1755). Like most things, the title sounds better in the Italian in which it was published, posthumously, as Ginanni’s last work.

In describing the species that we now call *Valonia aegagropila* C. Agardh 1823, Ginanni does something suggestive. *Valonia* is one of only a couple of species to which he gives a common name: ‘*Valonia, o Favagine verde*’ (‘Valonia, or the green Favagina’, where ‘Favagina’ is a mediaeval grouping of sessile sea organisms that look like honeycombs; Grapaldi, 1494). It seems reasonable to infer that the name *Valonia* was, therefore, in common use when Ginanni was writing.

In fact, since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Persons residing in Turkey, 1673), the word valonia has been used to refer to the acorns and acorn cups of *Quercus ithaburensis* subsp. *macrolepis* (Kotschy) Hedge and Yalt. (Hedge & Yaltirik, 1981). The word is almost forgotten now, but these acorns are rich in tannin and, before the advent of chemical tanning methods in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, were a familiar and important feedstock for the leather-making industry. ‘Valonia oaks’ grow in the countryside around the Eastern Mediterranean and in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century valonia was one of the Ottoman Empire’s more valuable exports (Bailey, 1940). Ginanni was writing in Ravenna, one of the major cities of Romagna, and the tanneries of the Romagna region relied heavily on tannin extracted from valonia (Royal Italian Commission, 1862).

The visual similarity between a handful of acorn cups ‘gathered in a green state’ (“W.W.E.” 1850) and a thallus of *Valonia aegagropila* makes this etymology a wholly convincing one and it was advanced in Fortunato Naccari’s *Flora Veneta* (Naccari, 1828), whose sixth volume states: ‘*I pescatori gli danno il nome di Valonia anco perchè trovano in questa pianta una qualche somiglianza coi frutti del Quercus Aegilops Linn.*’ (‘Fishermen give it the name of Valonia also because they find in this plant some resemblance to the fruits of *Quercus aegilops* Linn.’). *Quercus aegilops* Linnaeus is now treated as a synonym of *Quercus ithaburensis* subsp. *macrolepis*.

A final question is why ‘valonia’ means ‘acorns or their cups’. Here, however, the etymological trail leaves us irresolute (Lacaita, 1920). Naccari argues for a derivation from the Greek word for acorn, *balanos* (βάλανος; Naccari, 1828), and is supported by the O.E.D. (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1973). However, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* disagrees, arguing instead for a

derivation from the mediaeval European forms (*Valonia vel sim.*) of the Greek name *Aulōn* (Αυλών) of the city where the oak trees grew and which is now the Albanian city of Vlorë (Encyclopædia Britannica, 1911). The variant spellings for the city ('Vallonia' in Landino, 1492; 'Valonia' in Calepino, 1523; 'Velonia' in Calepino, 1550) and the tanning material ('Vallonia' and 'Valonia' in Pacioli, 1494; 'Velonia' in Bauhin & al., 1650) have tracked each other for around 500 years and the commercial importance of the oaks of 'Vallona' was highlighted in the Venetian Senate when considering whether or not to abandon the city to the Ottomans in 1690 (Garzoni, 1705). All of this suggests that we should not rule out the pleasing possibility that the chlorophyte genus *Valonia* is, indirectly, named after the area in which it was first described, rather than after the Greek word for acorns.

Either way, I hope future phycologists waste as little time as possible looking for the elusive Signor Valoni or for the lost archaeological sites of a non-existent Italian tribe.

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