

Ameglia, a Celtic settlement?

The site.

The archaeological site at Ameglia on the Ligurian coast certainly attracts a rightful attention when discussions of the nature and expressions of ‘Celtic’ culture arise. The purpose of this fourth-century BC coastal town is almost self-explanatory, being situated in natural harbour on the Ligurian sea somewhat equidistant between the major Etruscan urban centres of the classical period and the Greek colony at Massalia (Haeussler, 2007, p. 55), Ameglia would have provided a well-connected, safe haven for trade. Trade was of great importance for the neighbouring Gollasecca culture, itself producing increasingly large quantities of La Tène style goods by the late fourth century BC, and the new wave of transalpine ‘Celtic’ people settling the Po valley (Moscati, 1991, pp. 195-196). The source of Ameglia’s significance in relation to our enquiry stems from the grave goods found at this community’s necropolis situated in Carfaggio, where many La Tène artefacts have been unearthed in an otherwise typically Ligurian and Italic burial setting (Moscati, 1991, p. 227).



Box Burials at Ameglia.

The Ligurians and the ‘Celts’: a distinction?

Here the early geographer Hecataeus of Miletus is demonstrating that some sort of distinction was made between the Ligurians and the ‘Celts’ by the late sixth century BC in Greek literature. Multiple etymologies for the name ‘Ligures’ have been put forward. these ranging from the suggestion that it is an indigenously invented toponymical formation based upon the area’s marshes (Lamboglio, 1957, p. 12), to the more recent proposal by Garcia that it is an ethnonym of purely Greek origin, stemming from the local peoples harp-like, high pitched voices (Garcia, 2012, p. 31) and transmitted through the trans-Mediterranean trade networks. Either way the early adoption of this term for the inhabitants of this area is likely to be responsible for a general Greco-Roman distinction between the supposedly indigenous ‘Ligurians’ and the perceived immigrants of ‘Celtic’ origin (Haeussler, 2013, p. 83). Whilst Grenier noted in 1940 that identifying the Ligurians and the Celts as incoherent cultural groupings had some level of difficulty due to the two groups “having almost the same language and the same origin” (Grenier, 1940, p. 163), with more modern archaeology we can cast aspersions on this claim. We know now that there is an area of low-density early La Tène, Italo-Roman or Massalian finds of cultural significance in Liguria from the late fourth-century BC (Haeussler, 2007, p. 55). Thus this raises the question of why were the majority of societal elites in the rest of this region not utilising early La Tène prestige goods yet we find them in Ameglia?



Representation of late La Tène warrior

Archaeological contents of Ameglia.

What are we finding at Ameglia?

The Archaeological record at the Carfaggio necropolis confirms that fifty-four burials had been conducted there in the specifically Ligurian practise of entombing cremated remains into a cassetta littica (Haeussler, 2013, pp. 83-84), yet some of the grave goods are analogous to those found in the ‘Celtic’ Po valley settlements in the La Tène B1 period (Moscati, 1991, p. 227)

The La Tène grave goods .

A large number of sets of identifiably La Tène B1 period weaponry has been unearthed at Ameglia, highlighting a range of artistic expressions typically found in the transalpine region (Moscati, 1991, p. 294). Significantly, swords in the ‘Waldalgesheim’ style have been found (Haeussler, 2007, p. 55), these are unlikely to have been manufactured locally as the core distribution of swords in this ‘vegetal’ style is usually centred north of the Alps. Thus what does this sword represent? In answer to the suggestion that these weapons are merely being adopted by the indigenous Ligurians (Moscati, 1991, p. 227), I would state that this implies that they are solely prestige items signifying a higher socio-economic class. However the fact that all of these swords have been buried after the ritual bending or ‘decommissioning’ of the blade, a feature that is common across a significant number of La Tène B1 sites and indeed continues well into the next millennium, shows us that these weapons were in the possession of individuals who would conducting this definitively culturally ‘Celtic’ ritual act. Furthermore in the case of these swords representing a prestige good, one would not expect to find the large numbers of spears, helmets and shield bosses of La Tène B1 influence and design present as this can only be demonstrative of an organised military system (Haeussler, 2013, p. 85) as we find in the ‘Celtic’ settlements of the Po valley REF. Here we can see many features of a culturally ‘Celtic’ society, however this weaponry can never be representative of anything more than just one facet of an inhabitant of Ameglia’s cultural identity. Also found at Ameglia are tombs containing the cremation remains of women adorned with typical early La Tène style male brooches, the graves also contained attire better suited to an Italo-Ligurian or Tusco-Ligurian context (Haeussler, 2013, p. 85).



Necklet and Bracelets from Waldalgesheim, Mid 4th century BC (Gold)

Cultural identities.

These finds of clear La Tène influence beg the question of the identity of the inhabitants of Ameglia. We must be enthusiastic in relinquishing our notions of objects of certain origins signifying corresponding ethnic identities, and whilst it is more than likely to be true that there was some form of culturally ‘Celtic’ people settling in Ameglia in the late fourth century BC it does not stand to reason that they could have stayed culturally homogenous. As with many trading settlements we find that the local inhabitants, be they indigenous or not, will undertake a natural process of cultural bricolage (Haeussler, 2013, pp. 84-85) creating a new culture irrespective of the ethnic ties of the inhabitants. This process can be envisaged at Ameglia, with trade goods of ‘Celtic’ origin flowing southwards through the harbour, coming from the multitude of contemporary settlements further north in the Po valley and into the Mediterranean markets and vice-versa. Thus the availability of goods that can be used as social status markers to the inhabitants of Ameglia would have been vast. This is confirmed by the presence of Massalian and central Italian wine amphorae alongside Etruscan and Northern Etrurian luxury pottery inside the tombs (Haeussler, 2013, p. 85). The ability of the societal elite of Ameglia to define the symbols and markers of their status through the utilisation of such a wealth of luxury goods, from personal adornments to luxury dietary goods to expensive imported pottery created new ways of expressing power and privilege. By merging local ‘Ligurian’, ‘Celtic’, Etruscan and Massalian features the inhabitants of Ameglia have demonstrated the creation of their own unique culture that does indeed share similarities with distinctly ‘Celtic’ cultures but also incorporates others.

Is Ameglia not a ‘Celtic’ site?

The key to this question is whether or not the inhabitants of Ameglia saw themselves as part of the ‘Celtic world’. Whilst it is impossible to know for lack of literary evidence, this settlement certainly interacted with the ‘Celtic world’. I would agree with the notion that Ameglia provides the societal elite of the Po valley with a port on the western Mediterranean coast and was probably therefore a site of strategic importance. Despite being on the periphery of the ‘Celtic’ settlement of the Po valley, Ameglia is still interacting heavily with it and simultaneously acting as part of it therefore we can class Ameglia as a site of ‘Celtic’ significance.

Image Credits:

1. Box burials from the Ligurian necropolis at Ameglia, 2015. [Accessed on: 07.01.19, 12.36, via: <http://www.cittadellasperzia.com/Val-di-Magra/Sarzana-Val-di-Magra/Gli-studenti-guide-di-eccezione-alla-181661.aspx>].
1. Figure H, as part of : Wise, T. & Hook, R., 1982. Armies of the Carthaginian Wars 265-146BC. 1st ed. London: Osprey Publishing.

BAL26142, Necklet and bracelets from Waldalgesheim, mid 4th century (gold), Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn: Bridgeman Image.

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