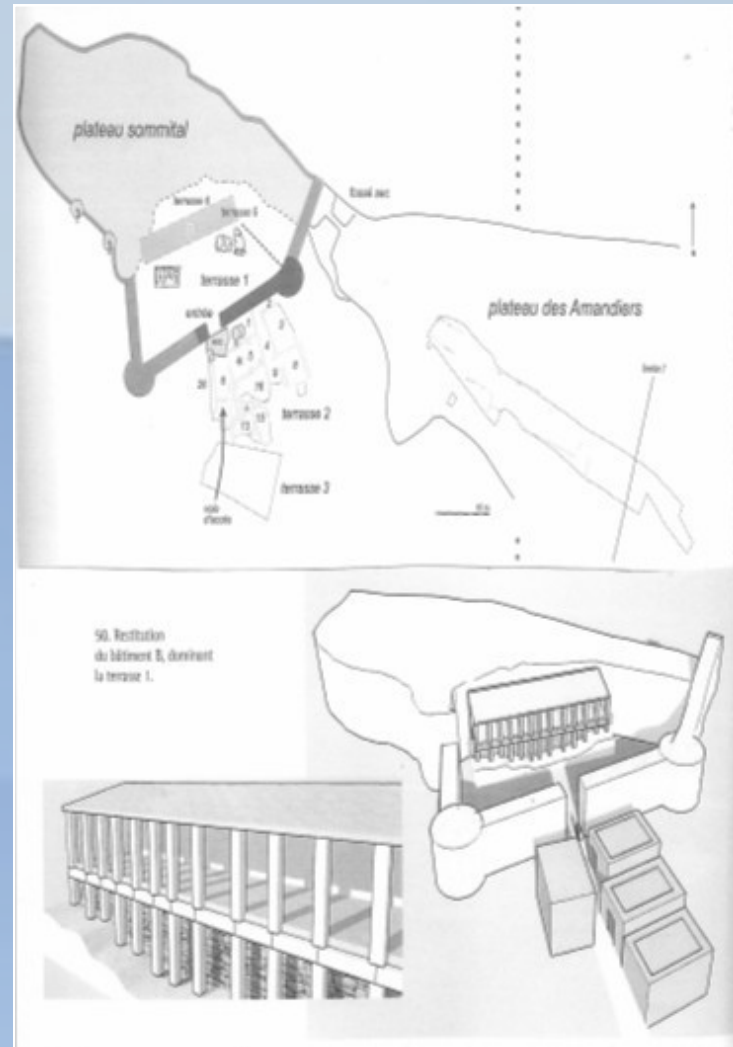


Roquepertuse - Celtic War Shrine or Saluvii Sacred Site?

Oppida and Sanctuary

Roquepertuse is a iron age site located in the region of Provence, Prehistoric north-west of modern day Marseille. The sites iron-age name isn't known, and was most likely lost and forgotten after its final destruction in the 2nd Century BC. The site had been consistently inhabited since the 5th century BC and had face destruction multiple times. The oppida is believed to be the oldest part of the site, with the sanctuary, temple and sculptures dating a afterwards . The Oppida was believed to have been inhabited by the Saluvii, who are sometimes considered Celto-Liguran by some ancient historians (Koch 2006)(Green 1995), although this is somewhat debated (Collis 2003).



Reconstruction of the Sanctuary site

behind by a steep cliff that jutted upwards, and from the left and the right by two large walls. The sanctuary itself has different interpretations. Some works believe that it may be the product of the infamous head trying to intimidate the enemy, others believe the heads to be offerings to a war god in the form of the cross-legged statues known as Acroroupi. Others believe to be a local for of an ancestral cult

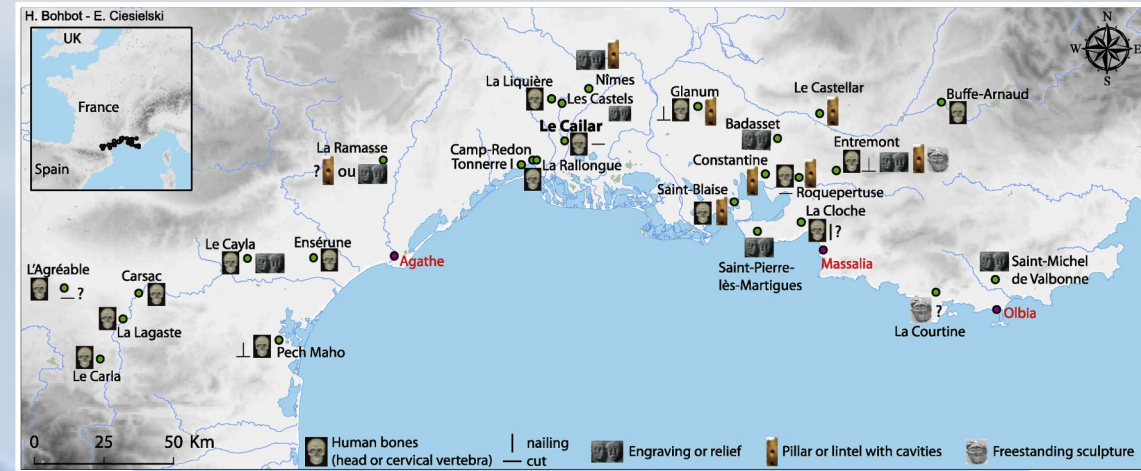
There is some scholarly discussion of Roquepertuse having a fortified wall surrounding it. Due to the destruction by the Roman conquest very little evidence remains. Although it is certain a wall surrounded the structure in the sanctuary, it is difficult to identify whether the site had any formal fortifications (Provost 1996). Ross (1970) describes how the sanctuary at Roquepertuse was must have held great importance as a religious site. The fortifications of the site are rarely discussed by authors such as Green (1995), who's main concern is with the religious meaning of the site. However if there was a form of fortified wall, then it could be argued that the Saluvii living here most likely had a form of organised militia or fighting force. This also implies that the site itself may have been warriors to dedicate such a sanctuary.



Drone photo of the Roquepertuse ruins

Head cult or Ancestral worship?

The severed heads, or the 'têtes coupées', found at Roquepertuse are often used to support the idea of head hunting, and the sub-sequential idea of a 'head cult' being a common practice of the local religion (Heinz 1997) (Kristiansen 1998). The main problem with this view held by many modern scholars, is that there is little to no evidence to back up such claims. As Collis (2003) suggests, fascinations with the human head are a world-wide phenomena, and the decoration and display of them is a very common religious practice, with modern examples still seen today.



Map showing the iron age sites with similar head motifs

The concept of Celts using heads as trophies of war is supported by ancient historians such as Polybius (Hist 3.67.3), Diodorus (Library 5.29.4-5), Strabo (Geog.4.4.5). These accounts are backed up by archaeological evidence as seen on coins or in statues (Maier 2000). Nevertheless, it is not clear whether depictions of Celtic decapitation arose from the external view of so-called Celtic people or were an actual emergence of the indigenous peoples practices. Scholars such as Green (1995) and Heinz (1997) believe that the display of heads and skulls was most likely for the mockery and intimidation of the enemy or as some offering to an unnamed war God. These views encounter many problems as, there is very little ancient evidence for any specific God desiring such worship, nor can all sites, which involve the display of heads be simply explained as intimidation or mockery. It becomes clear when looking at Roquepertuse that the ancient literary evidence of head cults does not align with what is displayed at the site.

At Roquepertuse there is a private, local sanctuary, built along-
side an oppidum (town/village). The heads and skulls found
come in numerous forms but are frequently painted or, less fre-
quently, have been carved or engraved (Ghezal et al., 2018) (Provost
1996). This decoration mirrors other nearby sites, including Entremont,
where heads are displayed with care and even sometimes with offer-
ings (Collis 2003) and these particularities are rarely found outside of
the area known as Provence (Green 1995). The skulls at Roquepertuse
show varying displays treatment, some have been embalmed or su-
persized in clay, whilst others appear to have gone through some form
of excarnation (Provost 1996). It is unknown when exactly the exposure
occurred, as the head may have been left exposed at another site or
specific religious area beforehand. What is known is that the heads
were inserted into the porticos after they were fully cleaned, due to
the fact that the niches appear to have been specially carved to fit
the fully emaciated remains (Coignard and Coignard, 1991) (Provost
1996). As the Skulls receiving such meticulous care and being dis-
played in a private local sanctuary it is highly unlikely that the display-
ing of heads at Roquepertuse is for reason of intim-
idation and insult to enemies, nor do they seem to
be the heads of enemies defiled and offered as
sacrifice. (Collis 2003). Roquepertuse sanctuary is
most likely the display of an indigenous religious
belief of the Slauvii (Koch 2006). Haussler
(2012), argues that such monuments are the result
of an ancestor cult, related to the local oppidum,
although it this theory does not entirely account
for the site being used by multiple oppidum (Koch
2006) in the area, as there do not seem to be
enough heads to represent such a population.



Skull embedded into pillar

When looking at the artefacts from Roquepertuse one element that cannot be ignored is the seated, cross legged male statues, sometimes called 'accroupi' (Haussler 2012)(Coignard and Coignard, 1991). The position of the statues is sometimes compared to well known Buddha pose (Koch 2006)but there is evidence to make this connection anything more than circumstantial. The pose of a seated male is common within iron age art, and is depicted in multiple art forms all across Europe. Some examples from more northern regions of Europe can be seen on the Gundestrup cauldron (Koch 2006), on a relief statue inscribed as Cernunnos and as a bronze statue 'The God of Bouray', found in Essonne (Krausz & Coulon 2010). Statues can be found closer to Roquepertuse at Entremont and Glanum. These statues are almost exactly the same as the ones found at Roquepertuse, indicating that there was a specific local meaning and style for these statues, even if similar ones occur over Europe.

There is debate within scholarship as to the true meaning and purpose of the statues. Ross (1970) states that the statues are most likely a version of a Celtic war god, this due to the fact that the statues are all depicted in armour and are depicted as seated, normally a pose given to a deity. Green (1995) agrees that the seated statues are most likely divinities, as they are highly decorated and placed high up in comparison to the human skull inside of the pillars. The patterns on the Statues would have originally been painted and been geometric in design. These within themselves cannot be established as a marker of the divine, but they definitely show that these Acroupi were some of the most important pieces in the sanctuary (Barbet 1991).

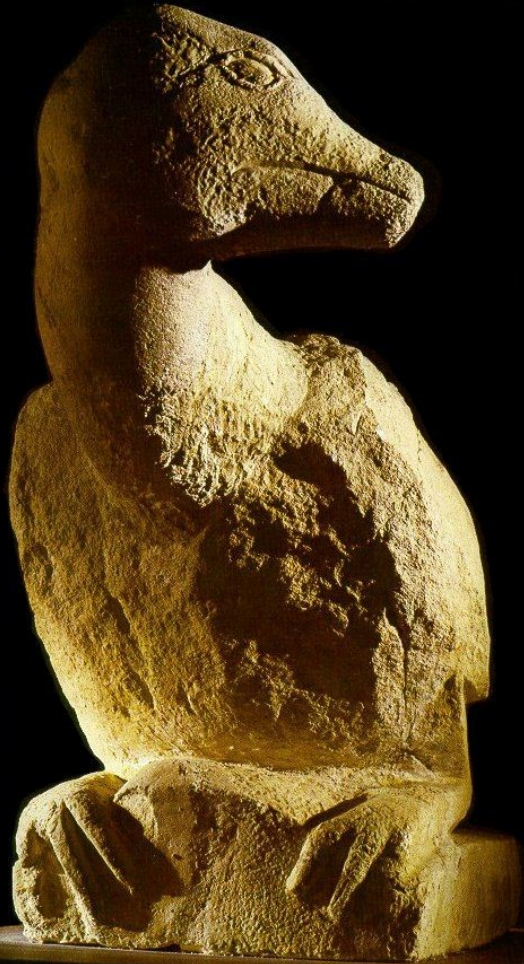
However there are problems with identifying these as lone war deities. One problem is that none of these statues have an inscription, nor do they share any solid iconography with an identified Celtic deity, other than their seated position (Heinz 1997). Whilst some scholars find the similar statues in Entremont and Glanum to be evidence of a reoccurring divinity (Delaney 1986) (Green 1995) it is unusual to not find any offerings or temples dedicated to any of these statues alone. More modern scholars seem agree that these are more likely an expansion on the idea of an ancestor cult, with the statues depicting the most honoured dead (Haussler 2012) (Collis 2006). Using such interpretations the statues are most likely representative of a Saluvii who has reached divine status through an action performed in either life or death. The statues at Roquepertuse are most likely linked to war and battle, as the iconography surrounding them is hard to attribute otherwise, but it is unlikely to be a depiction of a local war God.

However, there are still issues with identifying these accroupi as famous ancestors or warriors alone. At the nearby site of Entremont saw female statues in this style, alongside male versions. Whilst it may have been possible for females to be soldiers there is no armour on the women and they have very peaceful expressions. Identifying these statues as warriors ignores the likelihood of reverence for another reason (Collis 2003) (Coignard and Coignard, 1991). The Problem with identifying the accroupi as synonymous with an ancestor cult is that not only are the statues design omnipresent in iron age Europe, there is also the issue that the statues were destroyed and deposited outside of the oppida, before the sites final destruction (Provost 1996). If these were such revered ancestors, it is unlikely that the local society would have deliberately discarded them, particularly with no evidence of them being replaced by newer or different statues. Perhaps these merely served as some form of decoration, who's importance wasn't that great and so their true meaning was lost.

Accroupi: Warrior, War God or something in-between?

Symbolism and motifs

There are some other statues and artistic motifs found at Roquepertuse. One of these motifs is the large stone goose that would have originally been placed on a lintel within the sanctuary (Provost 1996) (Collis 2003). Geese are typically viewed as symbols of war and protection from intruders, with some Celtic war goddesses being associated with the animal. (Green 1992). There are graves from iron age Europe, which have been identified as belonging to warriors, that contain either bronze or stone geese within them, due to them being aggressive protectors (Green 1989). The stone goose found at Roquepertuse could be evidence that the site itself was indeed dedicated to warriors, and is often taken as so (Ross 1970). In contrast to this opinion the Goose could be there merely as a protector to the sanctuary, and have little to do with the sites religious functions. There



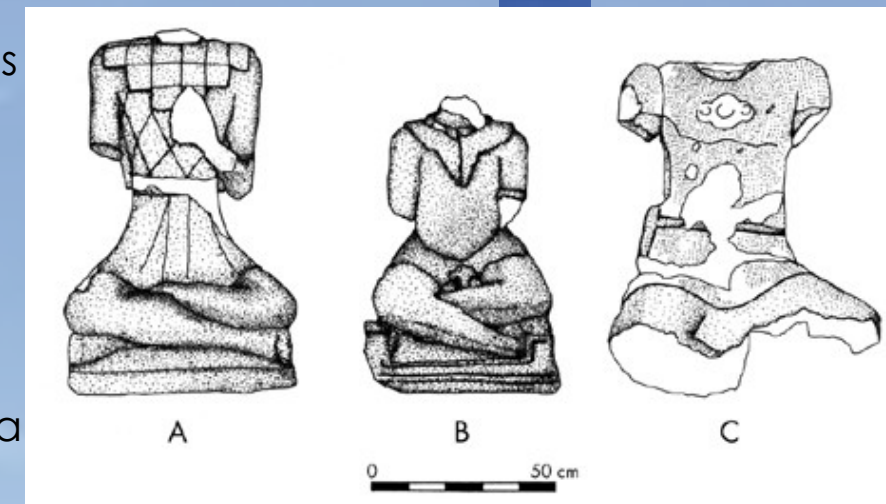
Large Stone goose found at Roquepertuse

was also other animal carvings found at the site, with a small frieze found in the sanctuary with four horses engraved into the stone. Again the debate in scholarship is based on whether these are done solely for the purpose of decoration (Collis 2003) (Delaney 1986), or whether these are a consistent motif of religious sites that have severed heads, accroupi and possible dead warriors (Coignard and Coignard) (Green 1989).

Conclusion

Overall Roquepertuse clearly has a major religious importance, not only to the people living within the oppida, but also to people living around it as well. It is unlikely such a site would have been used as a symbol of victory as no enemies could have seen this if it was inside of an occupied area. The Sanctuary within Roquepertuse is most likely an ancestral cult, as if the skulls and statues appear to have been treated with care and respect, and are closely situated to a population that would maintain the shrine. There is some evidence that the revered dead at this site were warriors, however most of the evidence is based on circumstantial evidence or surmised on the part of scholars. The similarities that Roquepertuse shows with Glanum and Entremont indicate that they most likely served similar purposes and were inhabited by the same society, but had each developed individual differences over time.

The deliberate destruction of the accroupi at Roquepertuse is most likely explained by this change of religious views over time.



Comparing accroupi: A Roquepertuse, B Glanum, C Entremont

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