

## **Early “Celtic” identities in the Northern Italy and High Adriatic**

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to investigate the Celtic presence in Northern Italy and the High Adriatic during the phase prior to the historical invasion of 388 BC. According to the classical sources, at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Celtic communities crossed the Alps and settled in Italy. For ancient writers, this incursion was considered to be a brutal event, but archaeological evidence shows a different situation, suggesting that the Celtic presence in Italy can be traced back to the previous centuries. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Northern Italy was organized into large cultural entities which show close relations with the communities north of the Alps, based on the long-distance exchange system. In this diversified context, we observe the progressive diffusion of Late Hallstatt and La Tène elements. We will focus on the example of Adriatic Veneti earrings, found on both sides of the Adriatic Sea. Metal artifacts are an optimal field to reflect on this type of investigation. Their presence shows us the amplitude of individual mobility and allows us to deepen our knowledge about the strategies of cultural transfer, of the transmission of models and of the circulation of people and goods.

*Keywords: Iron Age, individual mobility, Celtic immigration, Hallstatt, La Tène.*

### **Introduction**

According to historiographical tradition, the years 390-386 BC were characterized by a large-scale migration of Celts, when a group of Senones crossed the Alps into Italy, invaded the Po Plain and inflicted on Rome one of the most bitter defeats of its history (DS., XIV, 113-117; Plut., Cam., 15, 32; Pol., II, 18, 2; Liv., V, 35-55). Classical texts describe this incursion as a brutal event. Those texts paint a vivid picture – and include anecdotes tinged, at times, with irony – of Κελτοί, Γαλάται, *Galli*, who crossed the Alps in large numbers, shaking up the Peninsula. These narratives are closely related to Roman history (Lejars 2005, 30-31). They are influenced by a variety of factors, including the historical context, the current political propaganda, and a chronological

gap of a few centuries between the events described. Sometimes, myth intersects with history. For example, there is the Gallic citizen named Helico from Pliny the Elder: while practicing the *ars fabrilis* in Rome, he carried dried figs, grapes, some samples of oil and wine to his homeland beyond the Alps. A desire for these products gave the Gauls the justification they needed to declare war (Pliny the Elder., Nat. Hist, XII, 5).<sup>1</sup> The timing of the invasions also raises a problem, as it is based on the synchrony of specific historical events (Bourdin 2012, 594-595 with source references).<sup>2</sup> Archaeological sources point to a different situation: the first traces of a Celtic presence in Northern Italy appear at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and increase over time. At the beginning of the Iron Age, Italy was organized into large cultural entities that enjoyed privileged relations with societies north of the Alps, via a long-distance exchange network (Frey 1987, 11-12). Epigraphic sources confirm that such contacts do take place at an early stage – at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC – as ostensibly witnessed by the Rubiera cippus II and the Castelletto Ticino inscription (De Marinis 1991, 96; Verger, 2015, 78).

### **Celtic people before the Celts?**

The identity of the Gauls and their migration to Italy have long been studied for over a century, thanks to the abundance of archaeological evidence, epigraphic and literary sources. Even if classical writers are relatively unanimous in dating the great wave of immigration at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, archaeological data reveal a much more complex and multifaceted reality: according to these data, the movement of individuals from the north of the Alps was already underway during the previous century (Verger 2015, 151). Over the last twenty years, a number of studies have focused on the identification of Celtic artefacts among the Italic populations, giving priority to the analysis of regional series.<sup>3</sup> However, the greatest attention has been directed to the Celtic groups who settled in Italy between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC. For that reason, before determining the impact of the arrival of the Celts and their integration into local Italic communities, it has been essential to analyze this phenomenon during the previous century, by identifying all the archaeological traces that anticipate the migrations and trying to solve a 100-year-old problem: how should we explain the “Celtic” finds in Italy during the century before the migrations? In order to understand the extent of the Celtic presence in Northern Italy, it was essential to re-approach their identity and relocate the artefacts found in their cultural context, by a complete re-examination of old archaeological excavations and the associated material.

The so-called “Celtic” migrations gave rise to many publications, conferences and exhibitions. For several decades now, the spread of artefacts from local traditions outside their original territories has been a matter of interest to Protohistory. Culture historians explained the presence of similar artefacts as the result of moving human groups. The analysis of the territorial distribution of these finds led archaeologists to ask whether the possessor of an object belonged to a Celtic or Italic group. In fact, archaeological remains have often been interpreted in parallel with an ethnic identification.

The research I have carried out in the last few years allows us to reflect on the true nature of these material traces, which shows early relations between the two sides of the Alps and the Adriatic Sea. As issues of ethnicity have never been far away from archaeology – and migrations have often been a simplistic solution to explain a complex problem – I decided to adopt a different approach. In the past few years, I have focused on Northern Italy. The chronological range selected precedes the historical Celtic migrations and covers the period from the end of the 6th to the beginning of the 4th century BC. The corpus includes Late-Hallstatt and Early La Tène artefacts, and other related elements, spread across central and Northern Italy: the territory of the Golasecca culture, Padanian Etruria and the Adriatic Veneti should be highlighted.

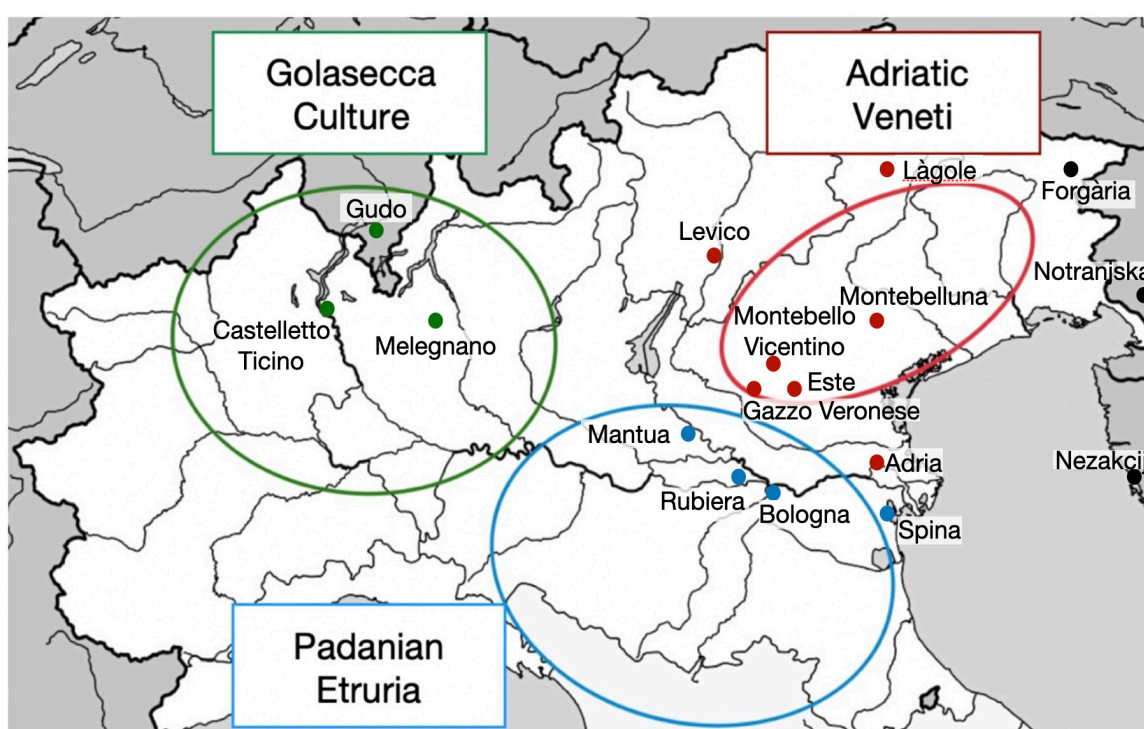


Fig. 1. Northern Italy: Golasecca culture, Adriatic Veneti and Padanian Etruria with main sites mentioned in the text

This method enables me to carry out comparisons in areas on the borders: e.g, the Alps, Adriatic coast, and Corsica. Iron Age cultures were open to foreign influences. These cultural entities are extremely interconnected, and the funerary contexts display a variety of features: Etruscan, north-Alpine and Mediterranean. Epigraphy and onomastics confirm the presence of Celtic speakers integrated into Italic communities. These people may have generic names describing them as foreigners, such as *Eluveitie* of Mantua,<sup>4</sup> or *Keltie* and *Treute* of Spina.<sup>5</sup> At other times, their names suggest that they had been part of local society for a long time and over several generations. The best-known example is *Tival- Bellen-* who lived in Padua at the end of the 6th century BC (Gambacurta 2013, 32-33).

Finally, we have the archaeological sources, where the variety dominates the ceramics, metalworks and iconography as well. Metalworks in bronze and iron, such as fibulae and clothing adornments, are the most interesting for the purposes of this study. Metal objects, related to everyday activities and found outside the area of origin, can be considered as bearers of regional identities. This is based on the premise that these objects, which are less spectacular than, for example, imported vases, have little commercial value outside the area of production. For this reason, in the archaeological literature they are the preferred anthropological and cultural markers for identifying the origin and status of their owners. The artefacts involved are items of personal adornment and offensive – and defensive – weapons. They occur both near settlements and in funerary and votive contexts of the cultures mentioned above. They are not only objects; rather, they can become symbols that represent social value.<sup>6</sup> Each material has been studied individually and in relation to its context, in order to identify recurring kinds of assemblages with “Celtic” elements.

In my doctoral thesis, I identified three different recurring phenomena concerning the association of “Celtic”, or North Alpine,<sup>7</sup> material with the assemblage, under three study conditions: 1. The artefact is part of a prestigious assemblage. It reveals the presence of Celts who are perfectly integrated into the local elite, or it was adopted by non-Celts who ascribed to it a role in displaying rank through the accumulation of exotic goods. The most glaring example is a group of tombs of the Arnoaldi necropolis in Bologna in Padanian Etruria (Papi 2020b, 81-94). A typological and stylistic study of the objects in these tombs has revealed the coexistence of three cultural horizons: a metallic ensemble of La Tène tradition (swords and openwork belt-hooks), local items from daily life (local pottery, gaming tokens, clothing accessories) and some imported Attic vases of very high quality, such as volute-craters.<sup>8</sup> We found a similar situation in Spina. 2. The artefact was only adopted by certain groups of the population. It is often re-designed. It loses its original function and purpose. It becomes part of a context of a different gender, or is treated as an *ex-voto*.<sup>9</sup> This is the case of the openwork belt-hooks: functional elements of La Tène sword suspension, which, despite their originally masculine nature, are adopted by the wealthier Italic female population in association with selected products, such as gold and silver objects and imported vases (Papi 2021a, 78-95). 3. The artefact progressively appears in all the masculine and feminine tombs of the population and replaces traditional local objects. Several necropolises of the Golasecca-Bellinzona facies correspond to this pattern. The Gudo necropolis is a good example. Initially, a smooth diffusion of “Celtic” elements appeared in the masculine contexts: Early La Tène fibulae joined the traditional types (Certosa X-n and X-m) and replaced them gradually. They finally became the only type used during the La Tène B1 period. In contrast, feminine contexts show more ancient fibulae as far back as two or three generations: their use had stopped, but they were eventually used again and reveal large traces of *ab antiquo* repairs.

Several factors can explain the presence of exogenous products on a site. The archaeological evidence, involving the trade of goods or the movement of individuals, can sometimes be difficult to quantify. Migrations leave physical traces that must be

tempered with a range of other considerations, for example the acceptance of new traditions for a more rapid integration, or a distinction in self-identity between the private and public spheres (See Burmeister 1996, 15-16).<sup>10</sup>

Migrations are a recurrent theme in ancient literature, sometimes reaching mythical proportions, as mentioned above. Another example is *Ver sacrum* (“sacred spring”): a religious practice of ancient Italic communities that resulted in a large-scale movement of people as a process of conquest or settlement. Livy draws on this mythic background in explaining the “journey” of the legendary Celtic conquerors Bellovesus and Segovesus, at a time thought to be contemporary with Tarquin the Elder. Sent by Ambigatus – king of the Bituriges – in quest of new territories, the two brothers were responsible for the first Celtic movements.<sup>11</sup> Although the migratory practice of *Ver sacrum* is commonly accepted among the Samnites and the Picentens, it does not match with the presence of north-Alpine artefacts found in Italy before the 4th century BC and so does not solve the problem. There is no archeological evidence for invasions or mass migrations into Italy in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. If we exclude the idea that a gradual migration existed, we must therefore consider other possibilities.

Personal mobility is a hypothesis.<sup>12</sup> Over the past decade, research on human mobility has helped to paint a more dynamic picture of European protohistory (Cicolani 2017). The success of these studies lies in the attempt to overcome the “closure” inherent in the very concept of “archaeological culture” and to explain the changes – typological and technical – observable in the archaeological sources through the circulation of individuals and groups, which contributed to direct contact between different populations (Bourdin 2012, 519-521). Based on a marriage, craft or commercial purpose, personal mobility is now at the heart of explanations for the spread of goods and knowledge in the Iron Age. One example: the impact of gender archaeology on Italian studies has largely re-evaluated the role of women in ancient societies. According to the model conceptualized by Kristian Kristiansen, women’s mobility due to marriage would be demonstrated by the presence of clothing elements far from the native environment (Kristiansen 1981, 254-255). In this sense, it would be possible to explain some of the distribution of these objects by the practice of exogamous marriages. Matrimonial strategies in Protohistory have been highlighted even more recently: intermarriages used to forge political alliances led Casini and Chaume (2012, 231-237) to explain the spread of personal items of the Golasecca type outside the territorial limits of this culture. Epigraphic evidence from Este and Padua also bear witness to this process.

Intermarriages probably facilitated contact and integration between different populations. But the spread of artefacts also coincides with the circulation of goods by trade, diplomatic gifts, or cultural and commercial activities (Bourdin 2012, 557). The same is true of the Greek vases and Etruscan bronze vessels found in the princely tombs of the Hallstatt cultures north of the Alps. These prestigious goods are found alongside others of more modest and domestic use. This association not only gives us a better idea of the diffusion of these “ordinary” products, but also, because of the very nature of these objects, makes it easier to understand the involvement in flows of exchange and contact of more modest sections of the population, such as merchants, craftsmen and



women, over and above the “elites” traditionally considered.

Another question is the “social effect” of human movements, particularly the multiculturalism that it produced. During the Iron Age, Northern Italy shows great cultural diversity, and artefacts of the north-Alpine typologies are part of an already variegated context. At the turn of the 4th century BC, the indigenous Italic populations do not disappear completely. In fact, some regions do not seem to be affected by the arrival of Celts: for S. Bourdin (2015, 553), “...this was a phenomenon that far from being a case of miscegenation, is quite the opposite.” The author cites, as an example, the numerous Etruscan inscriptions at Adria and Spina associated with a very rare distribution of La Tène artefacts. As my previous work has shown (Papi 2021b, 301-307), Celtic finds from the Etruscan harbors of the Po Delta are rare both in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and after the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. For the period we are interested in, the circulation of artefacts above all involves cultural transfers, but if the “receiving” populations adopt an artifact, its original meaning is not always maintained.

### **What do artefacts communicate?**

I have chosen to analyze metal artifacts because this object type includes a large number of categories that refer to very different semantic fields. Small personal items, such as fibulae, are used for holding together clothes. They belong to everyday use and are a common grave good, but sometimes fibulae are not just for function: they are designed to be an art piece and display the deceased’s wealth. Behind their variation we can see regional differences and a connection with issues of identity and gender. From an economic perspective, fibulae do not have a special value. However, they can be used as regional markers, to observe the movements of individuals. As the most widely used items of ancient costume, they are a kind of “guide fossil”. Their presence on archaeological sites is used to date stratigraphic levels, as their morphological characteristics evolve very rapidly. As they are a functional element, it is reasonable to assume that their diffusion mirrors the movement of people.

Sometimes, the deceased’s identity is expressed through the possession of certain objects, such as La Tène swords. The sword could reveal the military activity of its owner, but may also indicate the adoption of Celtic weapons by non-Celts. As Lejars (2020, 240) states, “...the sword is, along with the fibula, our main source of material evidence of the close links between the Celts of Italy and the communities of the northern Alps.” The same principle applies to the century preceding their arrival.

The presence of Late Hallstatt and Early La Tène artefacts highlights the special link between Northern Italy and the territories north of the Alps. Their archaeological interpretation allows multiple perspectives. The geographical spread of artefacts outside their original area evolves over time, and the spatial dissemination may depend on a number of factors, including commercial exchange, exogamous marriage, artisanal collaboration, etc.

It is clear, however, that Hallstatt and La Tène fibulae, weapons, and belt-hooks, found in Italy cannot be systematically interpreted as markers of migrations. They are

three fundamental sets of artefacts for measuring the archaeological visibility of the first Celtic groups in Northern Italy, but the reception of an artefact in another community involves more complex phenomena.

Weapons are charged with an identity value already in Antiquity, and their reception in another society can take place at different levels. Those items may retain their original function, or be re-elaborated by the receiving communities, as in the case of La Tène openwork belt-hooks (Stöllner 2014, 233). My previous research has shown how the reception of these hooks changes according to cultural area, being a symbol of social status in Etruscan-Padan and Veneto cultures (Papi 2020a, 328-329; Papi 2020b, 11). This phenomenon testifies to the attribution of a new symbolic charge: Italic cultures that received them appropriated the artefact, but not its original meaning.

### **In a Celtic way? A local style with Celtic influences between Italy and the Balkans**

There is, however, another factor, often left out: the local production of a number of elements that show a clear Celtic influence. The earrings produced in Veneto between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century are an example.



Fig. 2. Padua, necropolis Via Tiepolo, tomb 32/1990-1991. Silver earrings (Gambacurta and Ruta Serafini 2014, fig. 7)

Circular complex-ended or curled-ended earrings are not properly Late Hallstatt or La Tène artefacts but they do have distinctive north-Alpine influence. This local production in the Celtic style shows 28 earrings from fifteen different contexts, all of them in the Veneto region. Most of them are from funerary contexts (Este, Montebelluna, Gazzo Veronese). The typology is as follows: earrings are made of bronze, iron, silver or gold. Sometimes they have a complex termination with several globular beads, sometimes a simpler curled termination, as an “S”. The diameter varies from 4.6 cm to 9 cm. The most common are the complex-ended earrings, of which there are 18.

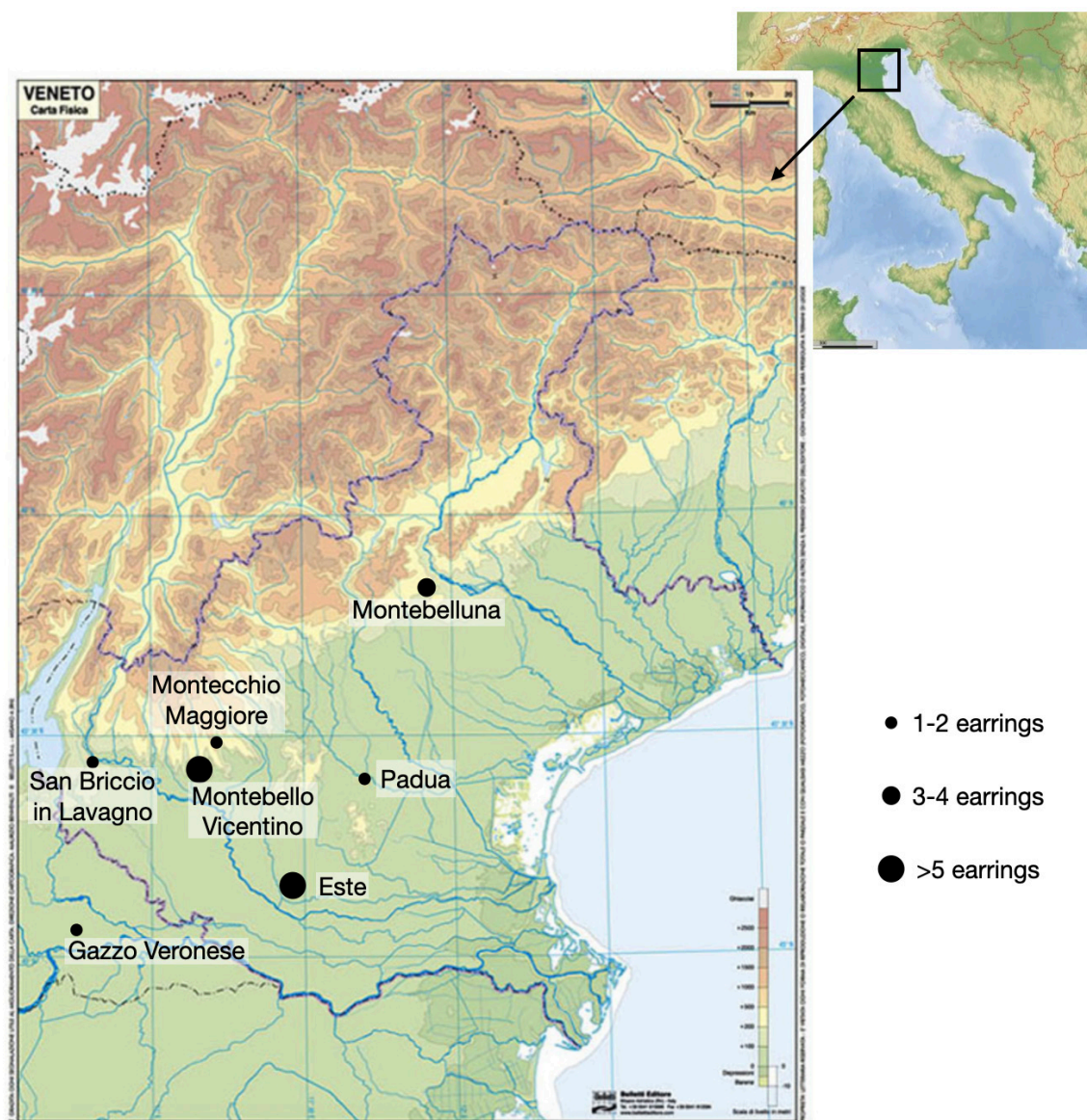


Fig. 3. Map of earring density in the Veneto region: 1) Este, 2) Gazzo Veronese; 3) San Briccio in Lavagno, 4) Montebello Vicentino; 5) Montecchio Maggiore; 6) Padua; 7) Montebelluna.

Earrings belong to the most recent category in my corpus, dating from La Tène B. The shape of the appendix makes it possible to recognize two different series: an older one and a more recent one. The older series (La Tène B1) includes specimens with more complex, well-defined appendixes, such as the earrings from Montebello Vicentino, from tomb Este-Casa Ricovero 222 and tomb via Tiepolo 32. The recent examples (La Tène B 2) have more stylized ends.

These earrings are very different from the local tradition, although their general distribution is almost exclusive to Veneto. The shape of the appendix is close to the Celtic “plastic style” – although more recent – found north of the Alps, especially in the eastern and Bohemian area, such as the ankle rings from Klettham (Bavaria)



and Plaňany (Bohemia), but these are only partial comparisons. The absence of direct comparisons with the north-Alpine area, and the limited distribution, characterize those earrings as a product of Veneto craftsmanship, but with a differentiation from the local tradition for the plastic aspect of the terminations and the use of noble metals. Another comparison seems possible for this type of object: still in the category of ornamental items, glass paste beads with *oculi* could be a good parallel.



Fig. 4. Earrings: 1-4) Este and Montebello Vicentino. Beads: 5-6) Ceneda, necropolis Ai Frati (Arnosti 1996, fig. 15); 7) Forcello, Mantua (De Marinis and Rapi 2007, fig. 136) ; 8) Bucy-le-Long (Desenne 2009, fig. 136). Ankle rings: 9) Klettham; 10) Plaňany (Moscati 1991, 268, 270)

From the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, these beads were already present in previous centuries, spreading throughout Europe, especially in central Europe, and reaching several territories over a long distance. They appeared in Gaul, Italy, Ticino, Slovenia and Bohemia.

Getting back to the spread of earrings in Adriatic Veneti tombs, there is a frequent association with La Tène artefacts belonging to contexts with prestige goods (tomb Este-Casa Ricovero 226, here with La Tène fibulae and Attic pottery; tomb Este-Casa Ricovero 126/1993, with La Tène fibulae; tomb Este-Casa Ricovero 20, with an openwork belt-hook and belt rings (Papi 2021a, 84-85). For contexts with the richest and almost aristocratic items, see tomb Montebelluna 264, tombs Este-Casa Ricovero 23 and 36. (Fig. 5). The main finds are concentrated in the Este area: this prevalence

has been interpreted as the result of local production in specialized ateliers, intended to produce “exotic” ornaments to satisfy the demands of a selected local clientele.



Fig. 5. Este-Casa Ricovero 23, called tomb of Nerka Trostiaia. 1. General disposition of the grave goods; 2. Anthropomorphized funerary urn with gold complex-ended earrings and gold La Tène fibulae; 3. Attic bell-krater attributed to the Filottrano Painter (Gambacurta and Ruta Serafini 2019, 46-47).

The center of Montebello Vicentino also shows a considerable concentration of those earrings: the data are not sufficient to suggest the presence of on-site ateliers, but they do allow us to reconstruct a distribution area that extends over the nearby territories, with an opening towards the north-east. On a larger geographical scale, the distribution of earrings suggests an extension to other north-eastern territories: a fragment has been found in the Castelraimondo settlement in Forgària (UD), in a building from the beginning of the 4th century BC, and a whole, but partially comparable, example has been found in a storage site in Castelselva in Levico (TN).

On the other side of the Adriatic, in the Northern Balkans, other parallels come from Nezakcij (Istria), where silver earrings with curled extremities are found in tomb I/3744. Although these items are not numerous, they point to a wider distribution along the Tagliamento axis, a route already used for commercial trade between the Alps and the High Adriatic.

In the Balkan peninsula, the spread of Hallstatt elements mainly affects Istria, and seems to be related more to the eastern than the western Hallstatt group. Studies on the western Hallstatt group are very limited, but still make some considerations possible.

The arrival of the Celts in Italy on the one hand, and the foundation of Greek colonies in the central Adriatic – with the diffusion of Hellenism – on the other hand, marked the beginning of the final 6<sup>th</sup> phase of *Histra* culture during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (Gabrovec and Mihovilić 1987, 314-317). This corresponds to the fifth phase of the Istrian chronology proposed by J. Sasel in 1984.

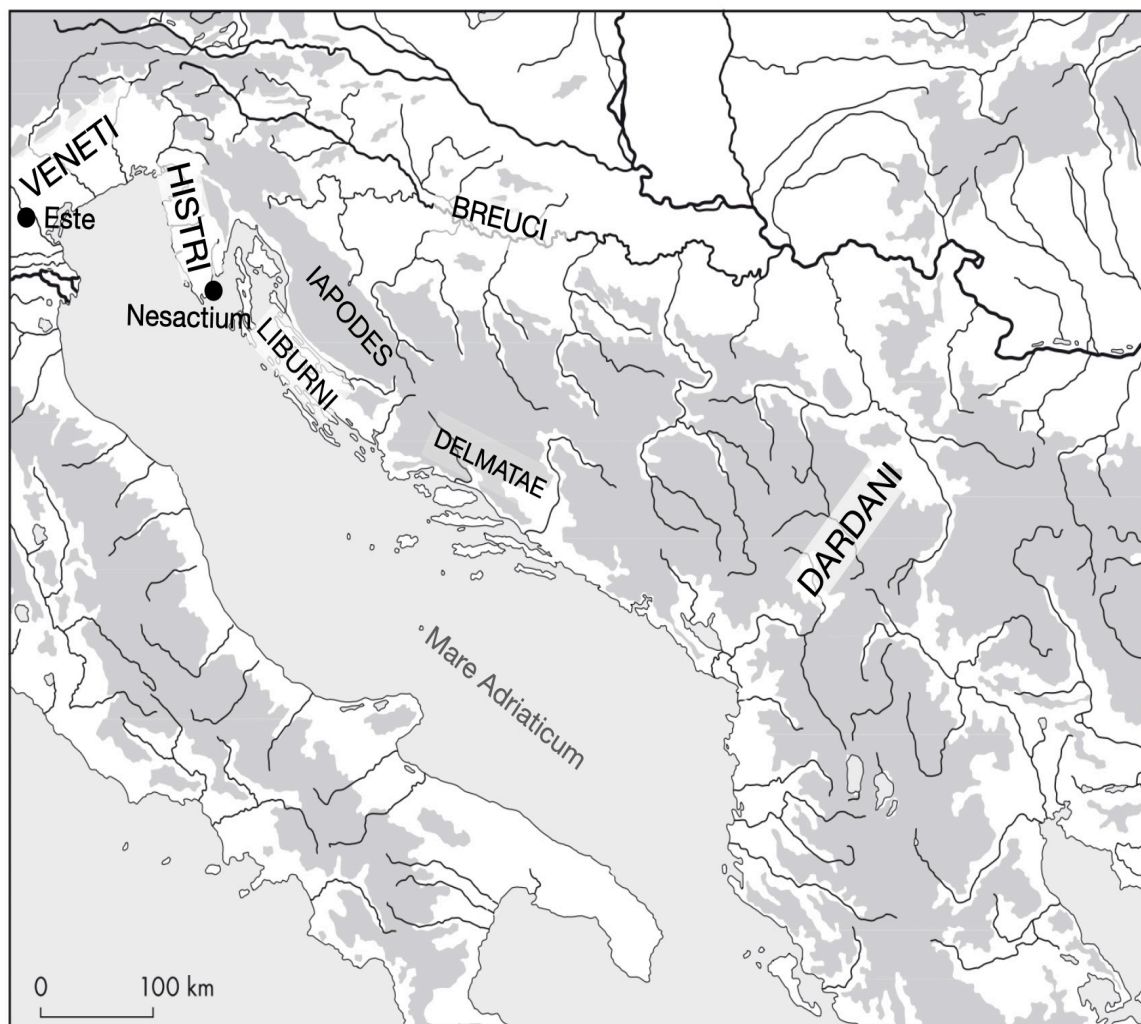


Fig. 6. Localisation of Nesactium and the main Protohistoric cultures in the Balkans.

In the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Negau helmet of Slovenian type appeared in Nesactium, east of Pula, which persists in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, as well as the Alpine type of the “Sanzeno” group, attested through the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (Mihovilić 1996, 52-55).

Along with the new type of helmet, we still find the iron spearheads with long blade, and a new type of axe with an “ear,” a late Hallstatt weapon characteristic for the whole south-eastern Alpine area. Other evidence points to contacts with the Celtic Hallstatt world, present, although not as extensive as in Northern Italy, as figurative situlae with deer, ibex and flying birds, and late Certosa fibulae of type X, XII and VII. There is a

belt-hook from tomb Nesactium 1/3, with a close parallel to the Este-Capodaglio 31 tomb, with La Tène elements from the Veneto region. But even more interesting is the presence of silver earrings with curled ends, elements of Celtic style but typical, as we have seen, of the culture of the Adriatic Veneti (Mihovilić 2001, 263). The same model is also found in Notranjska (Slovenia) with a local adaptation, as the earring is worn as a bracelet (Gustin 1973, 479). Among the known artefacts found so far in Istria, Celtic objects are extremely rare, which is why this evidence for contacts with the Celtic influence of the Venetian culture seem to me to be particularly remarkable.<sup>13</sup>

In the Veneto region, the main centers on the plains, as well as the settlements on the edges of the territory, show the presence of north-Alpine elements (fibulae, and earrings later on), which appeared at an early stage at the turn of the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Calzavara Capuis and Ruta Serafini 1987, 281; Papi 2021a, 84-87). Their presence is extremely important in that area, as we will see in the next paragraph. From this initial phase on, a circulation network becomes clear in the Adige and Piave valleys. In fact, evidence of early contacts emerges from the upper Piave and Cadore valleys and suggests an overture to the first foothills of the Alps, since these areas also delivered similar artefacts: a number of fibulae with duck heads and double-drum feet can be found in the Belluno (Caverzano) and Trento (Sanzeno, Mechel) areas. (Frey 1971, 380-381; Marzatico 2014, 406; Kruta and Moucha 2018, 71). These examples of Late Hallstatt typology are associated with a whole series of fibulae with zoomorphic feet closely related to the östalpiner Tierkopffibeln, the distribution of which is mostly concentrated in the eastern Alpine zone, also reaching Slovenian lands beyond the Isonzo river (Migliavacca 2012, 69-71).

Interestingly, in the Italian archaeological tradition, the Veneto area has always been considered as very closed to external cultural influences, due to the small number of imported goods found there. This perspective was only overturned after the work of Irene Favaretto (1976), who compiled for the first time a catalogue of Attic ceramics found in the main sites in Veneto. Since then, many specialists have studied the “exotic” artifacts in Veneto grave goods. In the last 50 years, the presence of imported material inside the Veneto culture no longer causes any debate. The current situation shows a culture that is quite selective and rooted in traditions, but does not reject imported elements, which are usually restricted to the richest funerary contexts. The re-examination of the data has led to the identification of several tombs combining objects from different cultures. We thus find the cremation urn of the local type, associated with personal items of the local type (bronze belts, Certosa-type fibulae), with items of the local type but already in Celtic style (complex-ended earrings), and of the Late Hallstatt or La Tène type (Marzabotto-type fibulae, La Tène back-foot fibulae, openwork belt-hooks). The ceramic set shows a similar variety, with vessels of local Veneto tradition (grey clay cups) and imported products (Etruscan-Padan type cups and red-figure Attic vases).

As O.H. Frey (1988, 37) has already noted, “it is clear from this that [...] contacts between the two regions must not have been episodic, but that there were longer-term relationships during the phases of the Late Hallstatt.” However, rather than systematically indicating the physical presence of a “foreigner” on site, these relationships are also consistent with a system of trade and exchange, already envisaged by Capuis (1994,



64) and Adam (Adam 1996, 42). The spread as far as Istria confirms this hypothesis and encourages us to continue our research in this direction. In fact, although the spread of Celtic elements beyond the Alpine arc is generally acknowledged by the scientific community, an exhaustive study covering the entire territory is still lacking. My doctoral research was the first step towards a comparative view of the cultures involved. As already mentioned, I identified three different recurring phenomena concerning the association of north-Alpine/Celtic material with the assemblage. I think it would be interesting to enlarge this perspective and try to understand whether and how the Balkan sector is involved in the same phenomena recognized in Italy in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. For the moment there are no studies available on this matter, so a comprehensive review of the available data, such as that carried out for northern Italy, would be welcome. This article is therefore intended as a starting point for a more comprehensive analysis, aimed at the entire Balkan Peninsula and the Slovenian arc, where elements linked to the (this time, eastern) Hallstatt culture have already been identified.<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The research carried out for this article has (re)defined the nature of relations between the first Celtic groups and Northern Italy in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. This study was based primarily on a re-examination of existing documentation and archaeological sources. The data revision was the fundamental step in the identification of the corpus and the contextualization of each artifact. I identified 49 sites that produced artefacts of the Late Hallstatt or Early La Tène type. A collection of 370 items has thus been compiled. These markers have made it possible to highlight several dynamics in the contacts between the two sides of the Alps and the Adriatic Sea, but they have also raised a few questions.

Firstly, these contacts are not restricted to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Epigraphic sources point to their earliest origins, confirmed by the many inscriptions in Lepontic – Alpine Celtic – writing. At the turn of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Hallstatt antennae-swords appear in the richest tombs of the Golasecca and Felsina (Bologna) communities. Those first examples, like the ones that follow, do not make it possible to draw a distinction between the physical presence of foreign individuals or the expression of the status of a local elite through exotic weapons. The origin of the individual plays a secondary role, since origin and ethnic identity are subjected to an interpretation built around modern discourse, that fluctuates according to the archaeologist's judgement. Archaeological data are essential, but insufficient to resolve this issue.

However, following an archaeological approach, a further clarification is needed: instead of using the expression “insertion of the first Celtic groups”, it would be more appropriate to refer to the modes of association of the first Celtic artefacts. Most of my considerations relate to the circulation of these artefacts, which involve communities whose material culture remains firmly rooted in their traditions. Indeed, these objects seem to have been used as a manifestation of social status rather than being brought

by moving individuals. According to the records collected, there were no movements of organized groups during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. In only a few, very specific cases, is it possible to expect the physical presence of Celts in this early period. Material traces and inscriptions reveal a relatively discreet presence. Onomastics indicate Celtic roots, while inscriptions are always written in the local alphabet. It is reasonable to assume that, if there was a physical presence, acculturation took place through language.

In the case of exogenous objects from a tomb, the hypothesis most often suggested is the movement of the individual. The deceased would have brought with them a number of artefacts characteristic of their native region. Some finds seem to reflect direct contact, whether through the movement of an individual (exogamy?) or a small group of people (mercenaries?).

This approach is not wrong in itself, but it cannot be dissociated from a more extensive consideration focusing on the whole assemblage. In the contexts I studied, the majority of the artefacts are part of the local material culture: funerary customs, ceramics and personal items are comparable to those found in other neighboring places. On the other hand, these assemblages are characterized by a strong orientation to foreign models and the accumulation of prestige goods. This social representation includes the clustering of tombs and, in some cases, the monumentalization of the funerary space. The expression “prestige good” is perhaps too strong for the components of our corpus. Only a few artefacts indicate special treatment: surface coating, *ab antiquo* repair and manipulation are only occasional occurrences. However, they are associated with exotic components, involved in building a “social portrait.” We can assume that Hallstatt and La Tène artefacts are part of this phenomenon. The funerary contexts include a variety of assemblages: Etruscan, north-Alpine and Mediterranean. The terrain is thus open to multiple influences.

The most important aspect is the dynamism of the exchanges. The spread of north-Alpine artefacts is mirrored by the local production of items with a strong Celtic character. This phenomenon, already attested in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC by the development of “hybrid” type fibulae, is clearly illustrated by the production of complex-ended earrings, often made of noble metals. This situation suggests that commercial links allowed the circulation of models and products beyond the Adriatic Sea and even as far as the Balkans. It is possible that there was a textile trade, which occurred in parallel with secondary products such as fibulae. Furthermore, although textiles do not often appear in archaeological excavation, the impression of textiles in metal is fixed for eternity and can be studied. Finally, there are a large number of openwork belt-hooks from female contexts, often spatially connected to each other. Their presence in the Golasecca and Adriatic Veneti territory testifies to the attribution of a new symbolic charge: the receiving cultures appropriate the artefact, but not its original meaning. According to the decoration style, some pieces may have been produced locally. This would explain the rise of openwork belt-hooks in the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, when transalpine specimens stopped being used.

Having extended the chronological range to the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and in some cases to the first half of the century, two remarks stand out. The first is the lack of

knowledge of the Cisalpine region at the start of the supposed Celtic settlement. As always, an argument *ex silentio* must be handled with caution. However, the first traces of Celtic movements should have been in place by the first quarter of the fourth century. In sites providing uninterrupted documentation, those traces are neither massive nor ineluctable. Having reconsidered the archaeological sources, one question seems crucial: what do the artefacts of the Celtic invasions of Italy reveal?

If we turn our attention away from written sources and approach this event purely through the prism of archaeological evidence, the situation appears very different from what is traditionally expected. Early La Tène remains should be quite abundant, but above all should be capillary throughout the territory. In contrast, the analysis of material from the early 4<sup>th</sup> century shows only few traces. So, another question comes to the surface, perhaps a little more directly: can we really talk of Celtic invasions? It would be reasonable to expect a considerable diffusion of La Tène artefacts, corresponding to a massive movement of humans. Following a north-south trajectory, those traces should be spread from the Alps to the Po Valley.

I do not deny that migrations could have occurred. However, I do believe that their scale and impact should be put into perspective. Celtic occupation seems, in fact, to have been fairly discontinuous and limited. What's more, it is true that some pre-existing local sites were abandoned, but others were founded at the same time. Urban and rural local settlements survived, and Italic and Celtic cultures coexisted. Ancient sources still have a considerable influence on our understanding of the Celts: the emergence of a composite elite culture must change the conventional view of a devastating wave.

## ENDNOTES

**1** To quote Pliny the Elder “[...] Quapropter haec vel bello quaesisse venia sit”, *Nat. Hist.*, XII, 5.

**2** These included the Battle of the Ellepore (387-386 BC), the Siege of Rhegium in Syracuse (388-387 BC) and the Sack of Rome by Brennus according to the Roman annalistic tradition (390 BC).

**3** We will mention the works of P. Sankot for the Bohemian area (1996), S. Casini and B. Chaume for the Golasecca culture (2014), V. Cicolani for the Golasecca culture (2017), R. Roncador for the Rethic area (2017), G. Gambacurta and A. Ruta Serafini for the Este culture (2019).

**4** The inscription comes from a graffito written in Etruscan characters on a ceramic vessel found in Mantua. This name attests the presence of a person who identifies himself as Helvetian. See Vitali and Kaenel 2000, 118-119.

**5** These inscriptions have been classified as Celtic on the basis of G. Colonna's interpretation and allude to a consciously assumed Celtic identity. This identification, which in most cases is shared, is still a matter of debate. S. Bourdin (2012) prefers the *Kemtie* variant to the traditional *Keltie* reading, linking it to a gentilic already known

in the Latium region. The Spina-Valle Pega *Treute* inscription, which has long been unpublished, has recently been re-examined by A. Gaucci, who proposes a new reading that enhances the Etruscan dimension. On the other hand, the same author considers a case of Celtic onomastics at Adria, in the inscription *mi uiniaś antes* [...] from a bowl dated between the late 6th and early 5th century BC (Colonna 1993, 140). *Contra* Bourdin 2012, 582, 616 and Gaucci 2019, 417. For Adria, see Andrea Gaucci 2017, 289).

**6** As will be detailed below, it seems clear to me that evidence for La Tène culture found far from the original home cannot be systematically interpreted as markers of adherence to a specific cultural entity.

**7** I prefer the use of “north Alpine” instead of “Celtic” because of the absence of ethnic implications.

**8** The role of the Attic volute-crater in the manifestation of power and wealth has been extensively highlighted by the studies of A. Tsingarida during the Congress “*Le cratère à volutes. Destination d’un vase de prestige entre Grecs et non-Grecs*” (Paris 2014) and S. Verger concerning the Trebenište necropolis in Macedonia (2014).

**9** Among the major sites involved in this phenomenon, I mention Melegnano (Golasecca culture), Este-Casa Ricovero, Este-Villa Benvenuti, Este-Capodaglio, Gazzo Veronese, Lågole (Adriatic Veneti).

**10** See Burmeister 1996, 15-16. To explain the difference between the public and private spheres, the author gives an example from contemporary history. Looking at the first European migrants settled in the United States, he notes how strongly they adapted to the new culture in the public sphere. On the other hand, the traditions of their origins were preserved in the private sphere, i.e. the family context, where they showed a resistance to outside influences: the photographic documents show the use of everyday items traditional of Europe.

**11** In the Livian account, this migration is shared between two destinations: Italy, which is given by the gods to Bellovesus, and the Hercynian forest, located at the northern edge of the Earth according to the Greek view. For an analysis of Livy’s account see Verger 2003, 333-369; Peyre 2007, 363-375; Bourdin 2017, 593-595; Gambacurta 2019, 65-69.

**12** Human mobility research is part of an interdisciplinary approach, and is now scientifically confirmed by physical techniques. The isotopic composition of the human skeleton remains, like bone and teeth, can give information about various aspects of past life. Analysis of strontium isotope ratios ( $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$ ) provides information on individual mobility. The  $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$  isotope ratios of a specific environment are absorbed and fixed in the mineral portion of human and animal bones and teeth. Dental enamel, once formed during childhood, does not remodel, preserving the isotopic signature of strontium that is biologically present in the environment where the subject was born and lived the first years of life (Bentley 2006, 136-139). Thus, by comparing the  $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$  isotope ratio of an individual’s teeth with that of the surrounding environment (vegetation, soil, fauna, water), it is possible to determine if an individual was born and lived through early childhood in the same burial/recovery site (where



he presumably lived during the last years of life). The isotopic values of strontium and oxygen values are considered specific to geographical areas and serve as reliable chemical signatures of migration history of past human populations (local or non-local to the site). In particular, strontium isotope analysis is useful for analyzing migration extents and routes (direction and range) and studying the mobility of ancient human populations (Sehrawat and Kaur 2017, 249-251).

**13** Current research has not detected the presence of such elements in the southern Balkan Peninsula. Studies on the Celtic presence during the 5th century date back to the 1980s, and a review of the documentation should be considered.

**14** I mention the “pioneers” of Celtic archaeology in the Carpathian Basin: Miklós Szabó (1940-2023) and Venceslas Kruta.

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