

The Brewing of Etruscan Beer

Jane Whitehead

A collaboration between Dogfish Head Craft Brewery in Delaware and two microbreweries in Italy--Birra del Borgo and Birra Baladin-- has led to the brewing of an early Etruscan "grog," the Italian version of a mixed beverage that was common throughout Europe before the introduction of grape wine.

By combining a variety of clues (archaeological, archaeobotanical, and chemical) from well-preserved tombs, dated ca. 800-700 BC, at Carmignano, Verucchio, and elsewhere, a wheat and barley brew, in accord with the later drink from Pombia (below), is envisioned. Other ingredients might have included honey, pine resin or myrrh, and



locally available fruits, including hazelnuts, apple, and wild grape. Many of these ingredients are especially well-attested in Tomb B at Prato Rosello where the cremated remains of a warrior prince were buried inside a biconical krater (left) together with other bronze Orientalizing vessels from Casale Marittimo/Casa Nocera, (phiales and more exotic types), also containing these same types of contents. Of course, these natural products might simply have served as tomb offerings, but when they are found inside drinking

vessels, one may propose that they were additives to the "grog."

Birra Etrusca, as it has been dubbed by the brewers, tries to do justice to all the varied lines of ancient evidence. It includes two-rowed barley, an heirloom Italian wheat, pomegranate juice, raisins, hazelnut flour, chestnut and wildflower honey, myrrh, and a touch of hops (in keeping with the Pombia evidence). A special "heirloom yeast"—a cross between a native *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* from Vin Santo and *S. bayanus* from Montalcino grapes—was

developed, reflecting what might have been available in ancient Etruria, to achieve a suitably high alcohol content of 8.5% for Etruscan tastes

The three breweries released their individual versions of Birra Etrusca in the past two months. They fermented their brews in vats made of different materials, again partly based on the ancient evidence. Dogfish suspended bronze plates down into the vats to simulate a bronze vessel, Birra del Borgo had a local potter replicate jars in ancient Etruscan design, and Birra Baladin used wooden barrels, which are only attested much later but which would certainly not have been beyond the expertise of Etruscan carpenters in earlier periods. Each fermenter imparts an additional special character to each beverage. (*Terracotta fermentation vat*).



Ancient Italic Beer The archaeological finds at Pombia (NO)

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Recently, a remarkable archaeological discovery has provided new information on beer production in protohistoric Piedmont. In the proto-Celtic environment of the Golasecca culture, in a small necropolis of cremation burials at Pombia, a *pozzo* tomb dating back to around the mid-sixth century BC retained such special microenvironmental conditions that it provided an exceptional discovery. The ashes of the deceased, an adult male, had been removed from the funeral pyre and placed in a small urn. This terracotta cinerary urn and its cover were intact and created an almost watertight seal after burial in a fine clay soil. An impasto beaker full of liquid (about 18 cl), was placed inside the urn over the ashes, and preserved some of the contents.

At the time of the discovery, the contents had become a bright brownish-red crust weighing about one gram.



Impasto Urn with ashes and contents at discovery, Tomba 11.



Humulus lupulus (hops).

Precipitated residue from fermented sugars left no doubt about the nature of its contents. Its color led us to think of wine, but the pollen analysis docu-



Beaker, Tomba 11. Necropoli Golasecchiana, Pombia. Novara.



Pozzetto tomb 11 as found.

mented a percentage of over 90% of tree and cereal pollens as well hops. It was clear that this was the remains of a beverage obtained by fermentation of cere-

al kernels with the addition of vegetal aromas; in short, a high alcohol content dark beer.

The Pombia find not only provides the earliest European evidence for beer of a high alcoholic content but actually predates the use of hops as a flavoring for beer. Even today, hops grow wild in the moors of the Ticino between Pombia and Castelletto and is still used, locally as a flavoring for risotto, according to a recipe described by Pliny the Elder.

In 550 B.C the proto-Celtic populations, long before the invasion of the Gauls, drank a beer at Pombia that was very similar to some of our modern strong beers. It was dark and reddish like the *cervisia* described by classical sources: quite well filtered, made from a variety of cereals and served in a container with a wide mouth that made it easy to pour off the foam. The deceased, who lived in a farming area around the proto-urban settlement of Castelletto Ticino, evidently liked it better than wine, which was quite available in the sixth-century Golasecca culture, but which was probably often mediocre, so that he preferred beer as his last drink and took it with him to the afterlife. (photos MIBAC)