



ON THE ORIGIN OF THE TOPONYM AMEGLIA

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Abstract: *This paper was written based on an historical research about the evolution of the settlement of Ameglia (province of La Spezia, Liguria, Italy). The time-frame considered was between the Ancient Era and the Middle Ages. The analysis of sources and bibliography demonstrated the necessity of a focus on this toponym, which could be interpreted as an integral part of a place identity and history. After disproving the most widespread hypothesis, which locates its origin in the Latin Age, I determined the affinity with the proto-Celtic-Ligurian linguistic basin, by comparing the toponym with others from the same area. Lastly, I focused on the exact meaning of the toponym's primary root.*

Key words: *Liguria, Lunigiana, proto-Celtic toponyms, pre-Roman toponyms*

1. INTRODUCTION - METHODOLOGY

Researching about a toponym means analysing one of the aspects of a place's history. Therefore, seeing it only from the linguistic perspective means overlooking elements which can totally change the interpretation of the consulted sources. In this paper, considering the placement of Ameglia in relation to the surrounding area has been determining; it was a crucial element which other hypothesis didn't consider.

The area of the ancient settlement of Ameglia -corresponding to the nucleus of the current municipality in province of La Spezia, Liguria- it's on the northern-eastern slope of the promontory which separates the Gulf of La Spezia from the Magra river basin, dominated from Mount Marcello -once called Mount Caprione. At first glance, this position results strategic, both militarily -it allowed to defend from maritime attacks- and commercially -it gave its owner control over trades in the last section of the Magra river. It was a forced pass-through area between the historical region of Lunigiana and Tuscany, and consequently between Lombardy and thyrranian Italy. When the area was inhabited by the Ligurians and, later, during the Roman age, many commercial routes already crossed here, and from the 10th Century the region was



traversed by the *Via Francigena*. This area's "overcrowded" situation complicates the reconstruction of a toponym's origin, because the Roman domination and the Middle Ages left written, archaeological and linguistical source, but for the previous phases we have none or very few remains: some of these are, often, toponyms themselves. They consequently are one of the "leftovers" historians can work on to reconstruct pre-Roman history.

This research has been carried on through toponymy dictionaries and papers, as well as history-focused works. My thanks to professor Enrica Salvatori and Sergio Mussi, whose incentive and help allowed this research to start and advance. For expressions and dialectal forms of the toponym Ameglia thanks to Mr. Lagomarsini Giovanni, Mr. Longhi Emilio, Mr. Muccini Ugo, Mr. Ricco Umberto, Mrs. Marina Chella and Mrs. Fabiano Grazia.

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

[Dialectal: *mégia*]; "*A vagu a amégia*" (Ameglia, SP.); "*Andàn a amégia*" (Arcola, SP). The archaeological surveys carried out close to the village of Ameglia (SP), particularly in the necropolis of Cafaggio, showed that the area was already inhabited during the Ligurian Age. The graves dug up here, dated back to the second Celtic Era (IV-III Century B. C.), are placed regularly along the slope which goes from the village to the plain of the Magra river, and built with stone mined in the adjacent promontory of Mount Caprione¹. The features of the necropolis and the artefacts found there evoke a quite important settlement -not only with defensive purpose, but also commercial- and relatively socially varied. The Roman domination went with a decay in the use of the necropolis, maybe related to a decline or a radical change of the settlement -Ameglia- which utilized it. Villages in upland areas as Ameglia probably lost importance in relation to the city/colony of Luni, established in 177 B. C. in the lower plain: romanity brought a new economical phase, new inhabitants and a districtualization which pushed people to abandon little villages sited halfway up the hills or uphill -as we might think was the Ligurian Ameglia- preferring the close town, towards which converged commercial routes -in the case of Luni both maritime and terrestrial- that enriched an élite of landowners².

Table 1. Ameglia's medieval history phases

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 963 | First attestation of the <i>castrum de Amelia</i> (dominion of the bishop of Luni) |
| 1252-1276 | Property of the Fieschi family |
| 1276 | Sold to Genoa |
| 1283 | Given back to the bishop of Luni |
| 1295-1297 | Occupied by Sarzana |
| 1306 | Property of the Malaspina family |
| 1321-1327 | Dominion of Castruccio Castracani (Lucca) |
| 1328-1476 | Succession of ruling families, such as the Visconti of Milano |
| 1476 | Sold from the Duchy of Milan to the genoese <i>Banco di San Giorgio</i> |

¹ Entry "Necropoli di Cafaggio" from the MiBAC (Ministry for cultural heritage and activities) website. About the dating of the graves: cfr. Bartelletti, 2002, pp. 11, 13-14

² Bandini, 1999, p. 11

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, during the Early Middle Ages, a comeback to the uplands occurred, followed by a strong encastellation phenomenon, carried on by the bishops of Luni and by local landowners. The first reference to the settlement of Ameglia, in the form *Amelia*, is in an emperor Otto I's *diploma* addressed to the bishop of Luni Adelberto, dated 19th May 963³. In it, a list of belongings was confirmed to Adelberto, including the *castrum de Amelia*. The following documents and events demonstrate the dynamism of the settlement and its strategical and commercial importance (see Table 1).

3. THE TOPONYM

As for many other places, a research on the toponym of Ameglia produces variegated results. The main branch of hypothesis can be dated back to the *Dizionario geografico fisico storico della Toscana (Geographical physical historical dictionary of Tuscany)*, written by Emanuele Repetti in 1833. Repetti wrote that «its name seems of Roman origin, maybe a modification of *Emilia*, from the ancient consular road that Emilio Scauro extended along the Tuscan coastline passing from Luni»⁴. Another hypothesis links the settlement to the homonym Amelia, in province of Terni (Umbria, Italy); this one, according to the UTET *Dictionary of Toponomastics*, got its first name *Ameria* for its mythic founder Ameroe, son of Atlas⁵.

Both hypothesis lack of support and, above all, overlook an important element: the territories of Liguria, Lunigiana, northern Tuscany and western Emilia present a massive presence of toponyms bearing the suffix *-eglia* (probably a specification suffix, utilized to indicate a feature of that particular place). This observation led me to find and gather these toponyms, even in quite different forms. Consequently, Repetti's hypothesis of a Roman anthroponym was excluded: Ameglia's similarity with them couldn't be a coincidence. Therefore, the research focused on the Ligurian age, the last phase of local history in which ethnic and, especially, linguistic identity of this area was intact before the Roman conquest⁶. The toponyms with the suffix *-eglia* or similar found in Liguria, beside Ameglia (SP), are Campegli (GE), Comeglio (GE), Coreglia Ligure (GE), Graveglia (GE), Laigueglia (SV), Lemeglio (GE), Moneglia (GE), Oneglia (IM), Pegli (GE); in surrounding areas -but still in the ancient Ligurian linguistic basin- there are Bareglia (PT), Boveglio (LU), Caglieglia (MS), Candeglia (PT), Mount Po of Casteglia (Casola in Lunigiana, MS), Coreglia Antelminelli (LU), Ebureglia (Bettola, PC), Giaveglia (Bagni di Lucca LU), Loppeggia (LU), Mareglia (Bagni di Lucca, LU), Miseglia (MS), Nociveglia (PR), Noveglia (PR), Peille (Alpes Maritimes, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, France), Piteglio (PT), Teglia (MS), Punta della Teglia (LI), Vetteglia (LU), Visperegglia (LU), (see Figure 1).

In front of such a wide list of toponyms -which could surely be expanded with further and more intense researches- it is difficult to keep supporting Repetti's theory of Ameglia's name originated by Emilio; much more plausible is a Ligurian origin, then inherited by the Roman world: it is known and attested how easily Latin toponyms,

³ Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Otto I, 254

⁴ Entry "Ameglia" from Repetti, 1833, p. 69

⁵ Entry "Amèlia" by Marcato C., 1990, UTET, p. 26

⁶ About the suffix *-eglia*: Armanini, 2015, p. 149

wider linguistic basin, extended to almost all the pre-Roman Western Europe- a big vocabulary, cured by the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, has been published on the University of Wales website¹²: “hill” is here indicated between the meanings of the root *mello*. According to this we can find the origin of the toponym Amegl-ia in the Ligurian-protoceltic linguistic basin -and not Roman- particularly in the root *mel*, meaning hill, upland, elevation. For the Ligurian inhabitants of Ameglia and the close plain of the Magra river, that settlement was so relevant to be defined the “upland settlement” par excellence.

A further speculation is possible about the A- which precedes the root. Here it can maybe be found the latin language “overlapping” to the Ligurian roots: the movement-to-a-place preposition *ad* could have been put before *Mel/Mello/Mella* (to-the hill, to-the upland), becoming by the use from *ad-Mel/ad-Mello/ad-Mella* to *Amel/Amello/Amella* and lastly to *Amelia*, or even directly to the *castrum Amelie* (fortification placed on-the hill) indicated on the 963 imperial *diploma*. The local pronounce tends to transform the sound *li* or *gli* in *gi* (*amelia* < *ameglia* < *amégia*), sometimes even without the initial A- (*Megia*); there are already traces of this in modern age cartography (Figure 2).

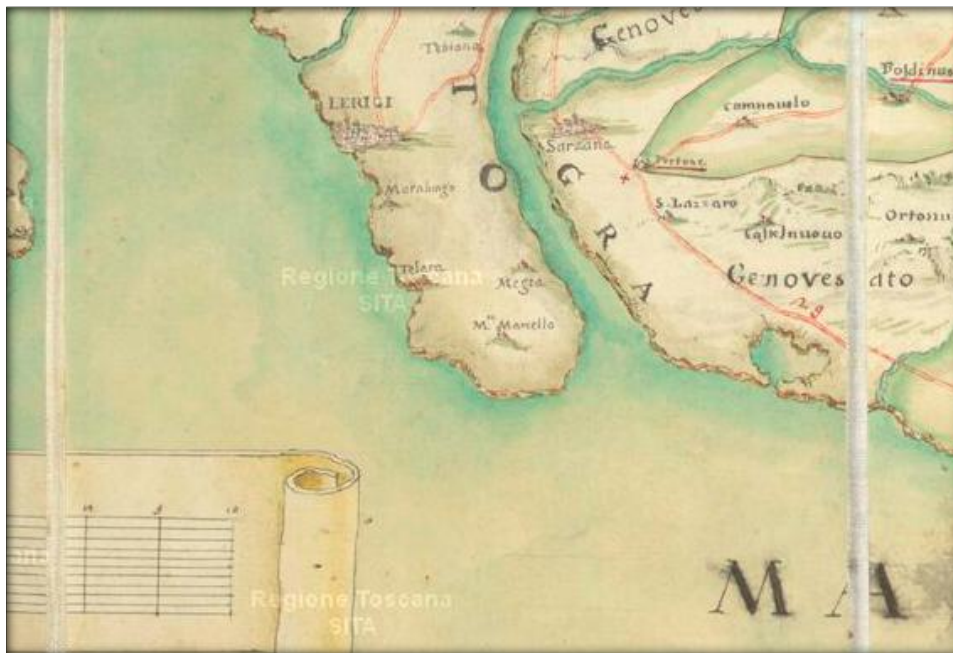


Figure 2. The settlement of Ameglia is indicated in the local form “Megia” still in the second half of the XVIII Century. *Pianta della Provincia della Lunigiana, fra il mare, Genovesato, Parmigiano, Reggiano, Lucchese e Garfagnino*, detail, made in the Granduchy of Tuscany between 1765 and 1790; Národní Archiv Praha, fund Rodinný Archiv Toskánských Habsburku. Consulted on CASTORE, Cartografia Storica Regionale (<https://www502.regione.toscana.it>)

As for the suffix -eglia, the individuation of the root *mel* was followed by a research of similar toponyms. Considered according to an orographic origin, past or

¹² From <https://www.wales.ac.uk>

present, beside the already cited Amelia (TR)¹³ the places which are adapt to a confrontation with Ameglia are Amélie-les-Bains-Palalda (Pyrénées Orientales, Occitanie, France)¹⁴ Lomello (PV)¹⁵, Lomellina reg (probably from *Laevum Mellum*, PV, Lombardy), Maglie, ant. *Melliae* (LE)¹⁶, *La Megia* or *Las Mejias* (Ingenio, Aguatona, Gran Canaria, Spain)¹⁷, Meglia (CO), Mel (Ponte Val Maor, BL), Melazzo (AL), Melia, Ridge of (*dossone della*, Cittanova, RC)¹⁸, Melia, Plain of (Cittanova, RC), Melia, Le Selle of (RC)¹⁹, Mèlia, Monastery of S. Stefano of, and castle of (Castronovo di Sicilia, PA), Melia, Casal (*castrum*) (Castronuovo di Sicilia PA)²⁰, Mellame, Arsié (BL), Melle (CN), Mellea (CN), Melliha Ridge (Malta), Mello (SO), Melogno (SV), Melosa (IM), Melotta (CR), Tromello (PV)²¹. All these places are -or were- sited on a place clearly recognizable as a hill from the surrounding areas.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis of a Latin origin of the toponym Ameglia can be excluded; despite this romanity could still have left traces, particularly in the initial A- derived from the latin preposition. When the Romans arrived at the mouth of the Magra river the toponym was already utilized at least in its Ligurian root, *mel*, maybe already attached to the suffix *-eglia*. But if *-eglia* delines a Ligurian-limited linguistic basin, *mel* allows to spread the point of view to the whole protoceltic area and maybe to the Mediterranean one.

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¹³ Celebrino, 2018, pp. 123-124

¹⁴ Rimbault, 2012, pp. 187-211

¹⁵ Entry “Lomello”, by Segagni Malacart, 1996, from *Enciclopedia dell’arte medievale*; entry “Lomello” by Marcato, 1997, from UTET, p. 160

¹⁶ Panarese, 1982, pp. 5-54, cfr. Collini, 2018, p. 2611

¹⁷ Perez, 2015, from <http://toponimograncanaria.blogspot.com>

¹⁸ Raso, 1987

¹⁹ Rizzi Zannon, 1808

²⁰ Bresc, 2007, p. 323

²¹ Olivieri, 2001, p. 555; entry “Tromello” by Marcato C., 1997 from UTET, p. 671

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