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Ressort: Special interest

Alkimoennis ? The Power Center at the Danube Narrows

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Alkimoennis is a name that appears in ancient literature: the geographer Ptolemy mentions it in the 2nd century CE as a place north of the upper Danube. The most likely identification points to the Michelsberg near Kelheim in Lower Bavaria, where one of the largest Celtic oppida in Europe once stood

The archaeological structures fit, the topographic logic fits, and yet a degree of uncertainty remains. It is precisely this gap that makes Alkimoennis a historical puzzle to this day.

The site itself was not an urban center in the classical sense, but a strategic locus of power. Across roughly 600 hectares stretch ramparts, terraces, and working areas that point to metalworking, trade, and control. Whoever stood up here dominated the narrow passage between the Danube and the Altmühl. The Celts left no writing, no self-designation, no explanation. Only walls, paths, and a name that reaches us from the distance of ancient geography.

The site ranks among the largest oppida in Europe. It consists of a multi-phase fortification system whose dimensions point less to urban life than to political control and economic infrastructure. Metalworking, trade supervision, and symbolic displays of power shaped the place.

Economically, the power of Alkimoennis rested on a single raw material: iron. The soils around the Michelsberg contain exceptionally high concentrations of iron ore, and the dense forests supplied the fuel required for smelting. The landscape is still dotted with small craters and depressions — the remains of shallow extraction pits and shafts where the ore was mined.

Some archaeologists therefore argue that Alkimoennis should not be understood as a city, but rather as a fortified industrial complex — an early, highly specialized “empire of iron.”

The surrounding valleys offered fertile land for agriculture and livestock, especially pig husbandry. The Danube and the Altmühl likely played an important role as well: fishing was probably indispensable for supplying the population.

The mystery lies not in myths, but in the gap between text and soil: Ptolemy names a place, archaeology reveals a large-scale complex, but the connection remains a hypothesis. The etymology is likewise unresolved: river name, fortification, limestone and everything is possible, nothing is certain.

The etymology remains disputed: a reference to the Alcmuna (Altmühl), to moenia (“walls”), or to Indo-European roots meaning “bright, chalky.” None of these interpretations is conclusively proven, yet

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another part of the puzzle.

And what about the people living there today? Genetic studies of recent years, including large-scale research on the population history of Central Europe, show that the rural regions of Old Bavaria exhibit remarkable continuity since the Iron Age. This does not mean that today's people are "Celts." It means that the population was never completely replaced. Migrations occurred, but they overlaid a stable base population that has lived in the same landscape for thousands of years.

This fits the archaeological situation around Alkimoennis. The Kelheim region was never a place of radical depopulation. Neither Roman expansion nor the early Middle Ages caused a break.

The landscape remained inhabited, the routes remained the same, the settlement logic remained the same. People changed languages, religions, political affiliations — but they stayed within the same topography that had already shaped the oppidum.

The real "mystery" is therefore not whether today's inhabitants of Kelheim are "Celts." The mystery is that a place mentioned only once in antiquity lies in a landscape whose population has never truly disappeared since the Iron Age.

The connection is not romantic, but geographically and historically real: anyone living in Kelheim today moves through the same valleys, across the same heights, along the same rivers as the people of Alkimoennis. Their connection to Alkimoennis is a matter of landscape continuity. The paths, the crossings, the sightlines and much follows the same lines as 2,000 years ago. Anyone living in Kelheim moves daily through a topography that already shaped the builders of the oppidum. Alkimoennis is therefore less a thing of the past than a layer of the present that continues to live on in the terrain.

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