

Digging for my Dutch ancestral roots

My personal search for traces of an indigenous spirituality in the ancestral past of the Netherlands

Wim Bonis

The need to understand our ancestry

To understand why these days the survival of Western civilization is at stake due to several crises confronting it, it is essential for all of us to get know socially and individually who we actually are and how did we get to where we are today. Gradually we discover that the inner and outer cannot be divided any longer. That is the reason why I have turned this wisdom into the motto of my website: *as without so within: where we are, is who we are.*

In this respect, I have been trying to increase my understanding of the ancestral past of the western, coastal region of the Netherlands, the place where I was born and I am still living. An important step in this direction I have taken in 2005 when I wrote – and published – an article (in Dutch) about the settlement *Lugdunum Batavorum* and its connection to Celtic culture. In the same year wrote an expanded version of this article, to include more information.¹ In the current article I will repeat a few facts that I have written down at the time, but this is necessary to be able to present the results of my search as complete as possible.

One of the most important discoveries since I wrote my article in 2005 is the fact that our lives are always fully embedded in the landscape, and that our prehistoric ancestors were much more aware of that than we modern human beings. When we think about the country we are living in, we often think automatically about a nation, about the abstract political entity that provides us a national identity and is symbolized by a flag. Our ancestors didn't think about their region in this sense yet: their habitat was primarily a territory – a landscape they felt very much part of and experienced as sacred. Understanding the difference between them – as it was expressed in Alfred Korzybski's famous words: *the map is not the territory* – and reevaluating the meaning of the territory, of the landscape, has become essential in bridging my life to the life of my prehistoric ancestors.

Lugdunum in the Rhineland

Let me start building this bridge by focusing on the curious settlement Lugdunum Batavorum, which has existed in Roman times – and according to me before that period as well – in the Rhineland, and has not been given the attention it deserved to get. According to three ancient accounts, a settlement called *Lugduno* or *Lugdunum* has existed in Roman times in the ‘Rhineland’ near the mouth of the river the Old Rhine (‘De Oude Rijn’). A medieval copy of an old Roman map – the *Tabula Peuteringeriana* or *Peutinger map* – shows the settlement Lugduno near the mouth of the Rhine. The Alexandrian astronomer and geographer Ptolemy reports in his *Geographia* (in the 2nd century AD) a settlement called genaamd *Lugdunum Batavorum*, that was also supposed to have been located at the mouth of the Rhine. And finally in a Roman travelbook from 333 AD, the *Itinerarium Antonini*, a place called *Lugduno* is localized in the same region.² For more than a hundred years now Dutch archaeologists and historians agree, following the information on the Peutinger map, that it makes no sense anymore to equate this settlement with the town of Leiden, and that it must be located somewhere near Katwijk, a town at the mouth of the Rhine.



Detail of the ‘Peutinger map’, showing the settlement ‘Lugduno’

On the beach near Katwijk there reputedly has existed a Roman military building, called the *Brittenburg*, which has now disappeared in the sea and has only survived in a drawing. Researchers assumed this must have been the ancient Lugdunum, a assumption that has continued until today. In my article I argued that this association makes no sense, because the name

Lugdunum refers to the Celtic God Lug(h), to a pre-Roman, indigenous settlement built in honour of this God, which in a later period was Romanized by the Romans.

I read somewhere the suggestion that the presence of Gallic soldiers in the Roman army might have been responsible for the name. I think this a quite unlikely reason, as all the other Lugdunums in Europe do point to the existence of a Celtic predecessor. Why would it be any different over here? To suggest that visiting Gallic soldiers have built the structure or settlement, is quite unfounded. With this – perhaps unintentionally – also the way to further research into the curious presence of this settlement in the Rhineland might have been cut off. It is unlikely that Roman *soldiers*, whatever their country of origin, would have chosen a name of an indigenous deity for one of their new, *military* settlements. I did (and still do) respect the argument on a linguistic basis that the name Lugdunum could not have survived in the name of Leiden. And, of course, I consider the location on the Peutinger map a strong argument against identification of Leiden with Lugdunum. But when the Brittenburg was not the ancient settlement Lugdunum, it must have existed somewhere else in the Rhineland near the mouth of the old Rhine, at an as yet unidentified location.



One of the other Lugdunums: Lyon, on a 17th century map

We should keep in mind that the God Lug was an important Celtic God that has been worshipped over a large area, covering Europe all the way down to Spain and also in Britain and Ireland. When both Tacitus and Julius Caesar said that Mercury was the most important Celtic God, they were obviously talking about Lug. So with regard to his worship in the Rhineland, it is not likely that it was limited to the one specific settlement that bore his name. We can assume that in the pre-Roman indigenous world Lug was worshipped in the whole region, among the entire population.

Sometimes Mercury has been equated with the Germanic God Wotan. But we know that the Germanic worship of Wotan only reached Western Europe in the 2nd and 3rd century AD and the coastal areas in the Netherlands in the 5th century. And now it has also become clear (from linguistic and archaeological research) that up to the time of the Roman invasion there was a Celtic culture in the Dutch coastal region. According to the Celtic scholar Laurant Toorians there are indications that the people living in the coastal area of the Netherlands have spoken 'North Sea Celtic', which also suggests that the culture in this area might have been Celtic as well.³ When has been the case, I think it is quite conceivable that the indigenous people living in that region can have worshipped Lug.⁴

As the God Lug features quite a lot in mythical stories of Celtic origin that have been handed down to us, I find it quite amazing that – as far as I know – this fact has raised little or no interest yet among both archaeologists and historians.⁵ To get a better picture of indigenous life in the Rhineland before the arrival of the Romans, it is good to build as many bridges as we can – not just with our own ancestors but also within the culture of our ancestors. As we will see below, there might be an important link between the worship of God Lug and of the Goddess Nehalennia who was worshipped a bit more southwards: they were both worshipped in the same delta area – in which the rivers the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt flow into the North Sea. In this respect it is remarkable that the nature of the worship of these deities was quite similar: they both had a dual role as protectors of merchants and the harvest. And perhaps they were even worshipped by the same tribe, the Menapians. If we manage to build a bridge between the worship of this God and Goddess, and to place the specific nature of their Celtic religion or spirituality in a Dutch context, it would add a lot to understanding our ancestors.

With the task at hand of uncovering the worldview of the Dutch indigenous people in prehistory, I have to think of what George Young has argued in his book *Goddess on the Cross* with regard to uncovering the nature of our original Goddess myths: ‘The task we are engaged in is one of intuitive reconstruction similar to that of the archaeologist, who tries to piece together the few scattered slivers of an ancient bowl by first imagining its original shape. In myth so complete has been the metamorphosis to the male that unlike the archaeologist we are left as investigators with only the shadows of the once pre-eminent goddess myth to conjure with.’⁶

When we are trying to get a clear picture of indigenous life in Dutch prehistory, likewise we are left with only the shadows, due to our ongoing emphasis on the importance of history. However much ‘hard evidence’ we like to get, we also have to start with an intuitive reconstruction, with imagining what this indigenous past might have been like, on the basis of only a few scattered pieces. And filling up the gaps necessarily involves some speculative thinking. It becomes interesting when some connections between the speculations can be made. This might inspire later researchers and hopefully they will eventually be backed-up by more evidence. Yet I am realistic: we shouldn’t expect to ever end up with a complete picture.

Outdoor spirituality

When we try to imagine what life was like in the Netherlands before the arrival of the Romans (and in many other places in the world before the Western outlook came to dominate in it), we have to realize that at the time the tribal people spent most of the time under the open sky. We might say that they spent a lot of time ‘outdoors’, when we acknowledge the fact that the door as such had not been invented yet. Still I like to use the term, because it can make us aware how different it must have been from our modern way of living that – during working hours at least – is mostly spent indoors. This ‘outdoor’ quality of prehistoric life had a tremendous impact on the human conception of life. It made them feel fully embedded in the landscape, which to them therefore was considered sacred. This sacredness of the entire surrounding landscape, which in certain spots was definitely experienced more intensely than in others, was central to their ‘outdoor spirituality’. The powerful matrix of sacredness in which prehistoric people felt included explains why so many features of the landscape – rivers, trees, plants, mountains, skies, the moon, the sun, and animals from insects like

spiders and bees to larger species like snakes and lions – were considered sacred as well. Archaeologists usually do not like to use terms like ‘sacred’ and ‘spirituality’ very much, but what better terms do we have at our disposal to properly understand the lives of our ancestors? To understand our roots properly we need to acknowledge that for our prehistoric ancestors life undeniably had a spiritual dimension.

Through the years I have become more and more aware of the fact that ‘religiously’ our human development from prehistoric times on has been one from *outdoor spirituality* to *indoor religion*. It all started with directly experiencing the sacred dimension under the open sky, which is boundless, and this gradually developed into institutionalizing these experiences, capturing the Goddesses and Gods, who were increasingly depicted in anthropomorphic form, in stone statues, writing the experiences down and passing them on to people within the four walls of temples or church buildings. It is well known that the Celts usually did not portray their deities in human form or build temples, as they experienced the sacred everywhere around them directly in nature.

For this kind of direct experience of the sacred I think the term *spirituality* is more appropriate than *religion*. So in my view an important difference between them is that spirituality has no visible borders around it, no limitations in this sense, whereas religion has, in the form of the walls and roof of the temple or church building.⁷ One of the central qualities of the spiritual worldview of indigenous people was that they really felt themselves to be living *within* the surrounding world, to be intimately connected to it like living in a larger body. This is what made the landscape into a sacred landscape. And to the extent that this outer world was considered part of the indigenous identity, it really was an inner world.

Lugdunum and the heritage of Lug

While keeping the above in mind, we are going to focus here first on the settlement Lugdunum, which pointed to the worship of the God Lug, and then we make a connection to the worship of the Goddess Nehalennia. Of course there is a subjective element in this choice, as we could have included other archaeological finds that are part of the Dutch spiritual heritage, like the many other Goddesses that have been worshipped in the delta area of the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt. If you want to know more about them, you can read my article *The Goddesses of the Low Countries*.⁸

Let me start with Lugdunum. As I have said earlier, the presence of the settlement of Lugdunum in the Rhineland and the fact the Lug was worshipped all over the Celtic world, implies that Lug must have been worshipped by all the people living in the region, not just on the exact spot where the settlement once must have been. This means that worship of Lug quite probably has also existed in the area where much later Leiden came into being, even when the town has been proven to not have been the ancient settlement Lugdunum.



Settlements amongst the Roman limes, with the corresponding names of the modern towns.

As I have said at the start, I take the location on the Peutinger map serious and I respect the argument by linguistic experts who claim that the name of Leiden could not have been derived from Lugdunum: as *Leithon* was apparently its earliest name, I read that it was linguistically impossible for a *d* to have changed into a *t* and then to have changed back later to a *d*. Not being a linguist myself, I have to follow the experts in this.

Yet, I keep on hitting on information that raises some doubt again in my mind. I read, for instance, that the name of *Leithon* probably already existed in Roman times.⁹ What should we think about that? How could this name survive for a thousand years when records tell us also that during this period the region was often depopulated due to floods, etc.? Another interesting fact is that probably there has been another settlement in the direct vicinity called *Legihan* or *Legthan*.¹⁰ I can't help taking notice of the fact that the presence of the *g* in this name brings it closer again to Lugdunum... But I agree: this is not the same as providing evidence.

Some years ago my first doubt about this matter was already raised, strangely enough during a visit to the Scottish capital Edinburgh. In this city I happened to come across some names that brought the discussion about the origin of the name of Leiden back to my mind. In Edinburgh there is a river called *the Water of Leith*, which made me think about the fact that the predecessor of Leiden, the settlement *Leithon*, was called after a river with an almost similar name, *Leitha*.¹¹ When I investigated a little further into this matter, I discovered something very interesting for our story: Edinburgh

was divided in three districts: *West, Mid* and *East Lothian*, and the name *Lothian* referred to the reign of a certain king called *King Loth*. And it turned out that the early forms of the name Lothian were, for instance, *Leudonia* and *Lleudinyawm*, echoing the name of the Welsh Sungod *Llew Llaw Gyffes*. This starts to get more meaning when we know that historically there is a record of a tribe, called *the Goddodin*, that had lived in the Lothians area at one point before they moved from Scotland to Wales. This tribe happens to have been described as ‘the people of Llew’s tribe, the people of Llew’s mountain fortress’! Interesting for our story is also that the Welsh name for the Lothians, *Lleudinyawn*, (it has been pointed out by John Carth Wilkinson) could be derived from the Celtic *Lugdunion*!¹²

Perhaps it is obvious, but just in case it isn’t: the Welsh God Llew is the same as the Celtic God Lug, whose name at some point was translated into the Welsh tongue. And by now we need hardly point out, I think, that we can hear in the name of *King Loth* echoes of the name of the God Lug. Doesn’t this comparison reveal some curious parallels between Edinburgh and Leiden? Although the name of the Water of Leith in Edinburgh is – as far as I could trace – not related to Lug, it is still curious that a similar river name exists or has existed in both cities.

When I dug a bit deeper into the names of rivers, I found out that there happen to be other names of rivers in England and Ireland which are not that different from Leith, but whose origin *do* go back to Lug. In Ireland in County Cork there is *the Lee* whose name is possibly related to Lug.¹³ There is more certainty in this regard in England with *the Lea*, and here it turns out that Lug’s name has also survived in the name of a town at this river, *Luton*.¹⁴ Luton is not only a town about the same size as Leiden today, but Leiden’s earlier name *Leithon* also resembles de name *Luton* a lot. And when we add to this that the name of the three rivers called *Leitha* – which as said earlier have resulted in the name *Leithon* – are derived from *leede*, the Dutch river name comes much nearer to the English ones. In Ireland, by the way, Lug has also survived in the name of the town of *Louth*, which in its turn has given its name to an entire county: *County Louth*.¹⁵ This county in the east of Ireland not only borders on the Irish Sea but the famous river the Boyne also flows through this county to the sea. Is this telling us that the presence of water has been important in all the places where this name occurs?

The festival of Lughnasa

From Irish accounts we know that in Celtic culture the worship of the God Lug was central in a yearly festival called Lughnasa, which traditionally was celebrated on the first of August. This was essentially a harvest festival, belonging to a cycle of four major Celtic festivals, to mark the changing seasons, starting on the 1st of November: Samhain, Imbolc, Beltaine and Lughnasa. These festivals marked the changes in the agricultural and pastoral season, and in the case of Lughnasa this was the beginning of the harvest period. Maire MacNeill, who has written a wonderful and very informative book about this festival, first published in 1962, regularly refers to the European continent. According to her, Lughnasa almost certainly must have been celebrated in the continental places that are called after Lug, and evidence of this fact can, for instance, be found in the names of several European towns that formerly have been known by the Romanized name of Lugdunum. She includes Leiden among those (while Dutch researchers do not dare to make the connection anymore since the start of the 20th century).¹⁶ Another important link in her book is offered by the fact that in Ireland Lughnasa was not only celebrated on high places but also at lakes, rivers and wells – in other words, near water. As there are no hills or mountains in the Delta area of the Low Countries, the water connection might have been particularly significant here.

Other Celtic festivals

Although there is no direct record of the celebration of Lughnasa in the Netherlands, there is however an indication that another Celtic festival was celebrated, Halloween, which in Celtic world was known as Samhain. There is a medieval song called *The Song of Sir Halewyn* ('het Lied van Heer Halewyn'), which has been written down in the 19th century, after having been handed down orally for centuries. The Dutch historian Frits van Oostrom has pointed out that the name *Halewyn* is etymologically related to the word *Halloween* – the Celtic festival which marked the start of the winter period on the 1st of November – and also the specific characteristics of the figure of Halewyn point to a Celtic origin.¹⁷ This all indicates that this Celtic festival must once have been known and also celebrated in the Netherlands. And when this festival was celebrated, the other ones like Lughnasa must have been celebrated as well. There is even a direct link between Halloween and Lug. The French Celtic scholar Jean Markale has

argued that also at Halloween the worship of the God Lug has been central.¹⁸

Nehalennia

Some might wonder why the Goddess Nehalennia must be included in our current story.¹⁹ I will try to show that there is a very some good reason to make a connection between Lug and Nehalennia. Both are associated with trade (admittedly with a slightly different emphasis: Lug/Mercury protecting the merchants and their trade, and Nehalennia protecting these merchants crossing the sea). But even more importantly, both are also associated with the harvest: Lug is central in the harvest festival of Lughnasa. Although the inscriptions on the Nehalennia altar stones (of which more than 300 have been found, about half of them mere fragments) refer to the role of this Goddess as the protectors of merchants crossing the North Sea, the imagery on the stones shows her as a harvest Goddess, with some fruit on her lap and also in a basket beside her. And Lug, like his Roman equivalent Mercury, had a various roles to fulfill, and protector of merchants and of the harvest was part of it: a similar dual role to Nehalennia. Could it not be that they somehow belonged to one another, that they represented manifestations of the same kind of indigenous spirituality?

At the Nehalennia temples in Zeeland several male Gods were worshipped as well, in particular Neptune and Hercules, but the God Mercury appears not to have been that important. He is only rarely depicted on the side of the Nehalennia altar stones. There is more evidence of Mercury worship from other locations in the Low Countries, which of course could be considered relatively near to Domburg or Colijnsplaat. Yet, we may also wonder whether Mercury could still not be present, in a somewhat hidden manner, namely expressed by the Goddess herself, in feminine form.



*Stone altar of the Goddess Nehalennia,
200 AD*

After all, it is quite curious that the male merchants passing through Zeeland on their way to Britain chose this local indigenous Goddess as their protector and not Mercury, who seems to have been the logical choice for merchants with a (Gallo-)Roman background. Interesting in this respect is the observation that Nehalennia's boots and shoulder mantle do connect her directly to Mercury: as a God of trade and conductor of souls to the Otherworld he was also depicted with this 'travelling wear'. Other Roman(ized) deities usually wore sandals.²⁰ It has also been noticed that on an altar stone of Mercury found in Cologne he is depicted seated and accompanied by a dog, which is very similar to the depiction of Nehalennia. Below we will return to the curious dual connection of Nehalennia to both the harvest and to trade, and try to find out more about it by putting it in the context of Celtic 'outdoor spirituality'.

Batavians or Menapians

Another reason to link Lug with Nehalennia can be found in the fact that the same tribe, the Menapians, might have worshipped them. On most maps of the period this tribe is located in the coastal area of Flanders. Yet Caesar has made it clear that this tribe was living at the mouth of the Rhine (that is the Old Rhine we have talked about earlier), which still flows through Leiden and Katwijk to the North Sea. At the time the (Old) Rhine was considered *the Limes* – the northern border of the Roman Empire.²¹ In a later period, in the reign of Claudius, the Menapians were living in Flanders, and so apparently had move their habitat southwards. If the homeland of the Menapians really was in the coastal area of the Netherlands all the way to the Rhine, who knows how long they might have lived in this area? It is worth mentioning in this respect that already in prehistoric times they had seafaring tradition, and sailed the seas and oceans. There is, for instance, a lot of evidence that the Menapians have settled in the eastern coastal areas of Ireland and spread their culture over there, as witnessed by the many place names in which reflect their name.²²) This raises the interesting question whether it is not more obvious to connect the long seafaring tradition of the Dutch to the Menapian heritage instead of the Batavian one (as is still the case at the moment). When they have lived for a long time on the Dutch coast, then it also becomes quite conceivable that the Menapian homeland once included the regions where evidence is found of both the

worship of Lug and of Nehalennia. Seen from this angle, is it a coincidence that both these deities had an important connection to trade and water?

At the start we have pointed out that Ptolemy already mentioned a settlement called Lugdunum Batavorum – a terminology that in the 16th century was copied by Janus Dousa when he identified this settlement with the town of Leiden. This term suggests of course that the settlement Lugdunum was connected to the tribe of the Bataves. But probably Ptolemy added the last part just to distinguish this Lugdunum from the other settlements with the same name.²³ By the way, the region where Lugdunum must have once existed at the time belonged to another tribe, the Cananefates. And long before both the Bataves and Cananefates had settled on Dutch territory, the Dutch coastal region had probably already been populated with the Celtic Menapians.

A godly pair in the Rhineland?

Another important reason to associate the Goddess Nehalennia with the God Lug can be found in the fact that in the Celtic world of Western Europe several godly pairs have existed, indicating that dual worship of a God and Goddess could also have been possible in the Rhineland.²⁴ One of these godly pairs was Mercury and Rosmerta. And as said earlier, it is likely that the Celtic God Lug is hidden behind the Roman God Mercury. On a good few altar stones, found in different locations in Western Europe, they have been depicted together and this represented a specific Celtic cult that was not known in Roman religion.²⁵ Other godly pairs were, for instance, Apollo Grannus and Sirona, Mars and Nemetona, and Sucellus and Nantosuelta.²⁶ We can see here that often the masculine God had a Roman name (sometimes with an indigenous name added to it), but that the Goddess usually was just known by her indigenous name, and apparently had no Roman equivalent. This could point to the fact that the Roman God had once been ‘imported’ by the Romans, whereas the Goddess was truly of indigenous origin, inextricably connected to the local landscape.²⁷ This idea fits in well with the fact, as argued by Irish archaeologist Barry Cunliffe, that all Goddesses in the Irish tradition of Celtic mythology have been reflections of the Mother Earth Goddess, connected to the land, and all the masculine Gods have been reflections of the Tribal God, the God that had been primarily connected to the tribe.²⁸ The God could easily be moved from one place to another, whenever a tribe moved to another place to settle, but the Goddess was much less mobile in this sense. Her

power was intimately connected to the local environment. The Irish Celtic scholar Proinsias Mac Cana has added something important to this insight. He has pointed out that the Sacred Sovereignty, represented by the Goddess as the personification of Ireland, has been a permanent and fundamental element of the Irish tradition. And importantly, according to him there are indications that similar religious conceptions have existed on the European continent.²⁹ So why could this tradition not have existed in the Rhineland as well?

Indeed, in the region where Lug had been worshipped, terracotta figurines or fragments of figurines of Goddesses (all from around 200 AD) have been found. These kinds of figurines have been found all over Western Europe, and also in the Rhineland area near the *limes*, the northern border of the Roman Empire. In the city the Hague, for instance, in the 1980s several fragments of these kinds of figurines, nearly all of Goddesses, have been found.³⁰ A very interesting find comes from Valkenburg, a little town in



Mother Goddess figurine with little figure, 200 AD, found at Valkenburg

between Leiden and Katwijk, where there once was the Roman settlement Praetorius Agrippinae. The figurine – found in Valkenburg but made in Cologne – shows a seated Mother Goddess and a little figure standing beside her. They are both nameless, and one could wonder who exactly had been depicted here. They deviate from the other godly pairs, who were always depicted equal in size. Depictions like this, with a much larger Goddess are rare, and our special attention is drawn to the little figure, which is almost certainly male. He is clearly leaning on a stick or staff. What if we see here a depiction of Mercury, and so, indirectly of Lug?

Perhaps the larger size of a Goddess next to Lug can start to make sense when we have a closer look at Irish history of the festival of Lughnasa. In Ireland the festival originally consisted of funeral games held in honor of Lug(h)'s dead foster mother Tailtiu: Tailtiu was said to have cleared a great forest to make space for the Irish to plant the first fields. This activity had

exhausted her so much that actually she died as a result. In reminiscence of his dead mother Lug therefore organized the funeral games which were performed at the festival. This might point back to previous age when Tailtiu was still considered a Celtic Earth Goddess dealing with sovereignty (a well-known mythological figure from Celtic mythology that was handed down under various names). In this context Lug was the dying and reborn sun God who was associated with the growth of the grains in the fields.³¹ This kind of relationship between Tailtiu and Lug could explain perhaps the fact that in the figurine found in Valkenburg the permanent feminine presence of the Goddess was depicted larger than more temporary and constantly changing presence of the masculine God.

The Goddess Alauna

Above we have mentioned that the names of the Irish town Louth and of County Louth are connected to Lug. In Lincolnshire in England there is also a town called *Louth* – a town with a long history, in a region with finds going back to the Paleolithic Age. The Latin name of this town was *Lude* or *Luda*, the river flowing through it is called *Lud*, and the inhabitants *Ludensians*, but no reference to Lug is made anywhere.³² In this town there is, however, something else that demands our attention: a well called *St. Helen Spring*. This name is supposedly derived from the name of the mother of Constantine, the first Roman emperor who had converted himself to Christianity and had even made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. But another tradition tells us that St. Helen's Spring is a Christianized Romano-British site where the pre-Christian Celtic water Goddess *Alauna* was worshipped.³³ Interestingly, her name (or the male equivalent *Alaunus*) survives in place names in both in France and England, and in Brittany her name still echoes in the river *Aulne*. A fort near the town of Maryport in Cumbria in England was called *Alauna* in Roman times, and the nearby river is called *River Ellen*.

Of course, in the light of the theme of this article I wonder whether the name of the Goddess Alauna could have been related to the name of Nehalennia. Unfortunately I haven't found any mention of this association. But could it be possible? I did find an association between the name *Elen* or *Helen* and Nehalennia, but then, to what extent can the Internet sources that provide some of the information be trusted?³⁴ In a Mannheim inscription from the Roman era I found an association between Alaunus, the masculine

form of Alauna, with the God Mercury: in it Alaunus is an epithet of Mercury. Might this indicate a connection between Alaunus/Alauna and Lug?³⁵ We can even go one step further and wonder whether this could help to make Nehalennia and Lug as a godly pair more probable. I know that this is all speculative, but by putting all these speculations together new fields of enquiry might be opened. Who know, perhaps we need just one more surprising find to throw new light on this matter.

Celtic outdoor spirituality in Dutch prehistory

Here we return to the dual role of both Lug and Nehalennia with regard to the harvest and to trade. When we know that there has been a Celtic culture in the coastal regions of the Netherlands, we can assume that the people living here also practiced the Celtic religion – which should actually be considered more a form of spirituality. And as we have said earlier, central in the Celtic spiritual experience, which was similar to the spiritual experience in many other indigenous cultures, was experiencing the sacred directly in nature, primarily in ‘outdoor’ life in all its continuously changing manifestations. That is why the Celts had an aversion to writing down their ideas in this field, didn’t create (anthropomorphic) statues of their deities and didn’t build stone temples in which their deities were worshipped. All the attention was on experiencing the sacred directly in the world around them.

Creating statues with inscriptions on them and building stone ‘indoor’ temples were features that the Romans had brought to the Rhineland. We must realize that a Goddess like Nehalennia, originally an indigenous Goddess, was worshipped by the Romans – who were non-natives coming from elsewhere and were just passing through – through statues, writing and stone temples. These were the three very things that had been added to the original form of worship – a worship without statues, writing and temples (unless of course perishable material had been used). It is not too farfetched, I think, to suppose that the imposed cultural ideas from Rome probably also changed something in the worship of the Goddess itself. Might it not have been the case that the Roman merchants enhanced the role of Nehalennia as a protector of the merchants crossing the sea to England, while her other role, as an harvest deity, which was not really important to passing merchant but of course had been prominent to the local people, was pushed to the background? This explains for me why her harvest role was only

expressed by the imagery on the altar stones and her role as protector of passing merchants primarily by writing.

Although the Celts were not used to creating human representations of their deities themselves, images were still closer to them than texts. In this respect Leonard Shlain has argued convincingly (in his book *The Alphabet versus the Goddess*) that images have always been central in the Goddess heritage and that writing only become central in the later patriarchal religions.³⁶ In the Nehalennia altar stones both traditions are represented.

As I have mentioned earlier, it is conceivable that the travelling Roman merchants already worshipped Mercury before they arrived in the coastal region of the Netherlands. Although according to Caesar and Tacitus he was considered the most important God by the Celtic people as well, in Zeeland the emphasis of the worship practices appear to be already on an even older deity (who might have been of pre-Celtic origin): Nehalennia. I imagine that for the local indigenous people she was the prime protector of both natural forces and human activities: of the seasons, of growing fruits and vegetables, and of the fishermen risking their lives at sea. The Romans were well aware of the fact that they should never ignore the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, and their appreciation for Nehalennia must be understood from within that context. To gain credit and cooperation from the indigenous population – after all, they could provide them with food and inform them about the weather conditions – the passing merchants were wise to pay homage to her, and to thank her by erecting a statue depicting her image when they had returned safely from their trip across the sea.

One of the things that we have said about Lug earlier, applies here as well: we can assume that Nehalennia was just not worshipped in the two places where the temples and statues have been found. She must have been worshipped in a much wider area, in places the Roman merchants hadn't bothered to visit as they weren't located on their trading route. And we can also assume that among the indigenous people it is quite likely that women had been involved with her worship as well, and perhaps had even played a central role. In short, the stone altar statues that were exclusively erected by male merchants, might give us the wrong impression altogether of the original form of worship.

The revival of the cyclical worldview

I think the fact that both Lug and Nehalennia are connected to the harvest has something important to tell us, about which we have not spoken yet. By marking the beginning of the harvest with the celebration of a festival, as part of a pattern of other – annually returning – festivals, the ancestors of the Dutch expressed their cyclical worldview. Before the linear approach to life was introduced, which still dominates our modern worldview (in fields like history, politics and economics), there existed a completely different cyclical worldview. The difference manifested itself in particular in the way the people placed their own lives within the landscape, in the way they related to the very land they inhabited.

People with a cyclical worldview experienced themselves to be part of the landscape, which meant inclusion in a larger, all-encompassing and ever-changing life that was considered sacred in all of its aspects. This might be particularly hard to understand for modern Dutch people.³⁷ They identify with a long and powerful history in which the land that they inhabited always seems to have been so much in their own hands, and has been continually reshaped to suit their own, human needs. All the way from prehistory they are invited to reach beyond this power of history. This invitation fits in with the current process of the rediscovery of the landscape that is manifesting itself all over the Western world, and about which I have written in another article.³⁸

Gift and trade

Perhaps there is something else worth mentioning here that might be expressed by the dual role of protector of both the harvest and trade, in particular in the way they are included in many of the altar statues of Nehalennia. Through imagery she is shown as a protector of the harvest and as a protector of the merchants by writing. Might it not be that two different kinds of societies are reflected here? The harvested fruit that Nehalennia has on her lap and in the basket beside her are on offer: they are gifts of the Goddess. The protection of the merchants through the inscriptions might reflect the changeover to a market economy.

The image of Nehalennia herself sitting on her throne while offering her fruits might then represent the earlier indigenous world in which food was basically considered a gift. In this society exchanging gifts still played a prominent role. The Roman merchants then would stand at the basis of a

new form of society, with which they confronted the indigenous world, like the people in Zeeland – and which appeared to have such a great impact that later on it would grow and expand into the worldwide market economy that is still with us today.

To return to the start of this article: this matter touches directly on the way we deal with the various crises that we are facing today. We first need to feel locally rooted to open our minds to the wider world, to become part of a planetary, sustainable culture.

I am aware that in this article I have speculated quite a lot. I have done that on purpose – without having any scientific pretensions – but in the hope that it may help people to have a new, fresh look at the Dutch prehistoric past. For me this search has triggered a deeper love for the place where I spent most of my time. And I hope of course that it can inspire you – reader of this article – to search for the indigenous roots in your own vicinity, wherever you might be living.

Leiden, January 2019

Notes

¹ ‘Lugdunum Batavorum en het Keltische erfgoed’, *Leids Jaarboekje*, Leiden 2005. This (Dutch) article and an expanded version can be downloaded from my website (<http://wimbonis.nl/artikelen>). In the Roman era the bedding of the Rhine was more northerly, therefore this river is now called ‘the Old Rhine’.

² P.J. Blok, ‘Lugdunum Batavorum’, *Leidsch Jaarboekje* 1 (1904), p. 1-31; J. Hendriks, *Archeologie in de Lage Landen* (Utrecht 1994), p. 159 and further.; H. Dijkstra en F.C.J. Ketelaar, *Brittenburg. Raadsels rond een verdrongen ruïne* (Bussum 1965) 86. In Ptolemaeus’ *Geografie*, boek II, hoofdstuk 8, the settlement Lugdunum Batavorum is located in Belgica Gallia near the mouth of the Rhine. See also: T. Buijtdorp, *Lugdunum en Batavodurum – twee proto-urbane nederzettingen, Westerheem, Tijdschrift voor de Nederlandse archeologie* 52 (2003), p. 198-199.

³ Laurant Toorians devoted a whole article to this subject: L. Toorians, ‘Kelten aan de Nederlandse kust. Noordzeegermaans begon met Noordzeekeltisch’, *Spiegel Historiae* 36 (2001) nr. 3..

⁴ J. Schuyf, *Heidens Nederland. Zichtbare overblijfselen van een niet-christelijke verleden* (Utrecht 1995), p. 32-33.

⁵ In this article I won’t pay any further attention to what these Celtic myths can reveal about the life in pre-Roman times in the Low Countries, but it is certainly worth investigating.

⁶ George M. Young, *Goddess on the Cross*, Capall Bann Publishing, Freshfields, Chievely 1999, p. 20.

⁷ Perhaps it is good to add that the outdoor dimension did not disappear immediately when temples and churches were built: their geographic location and position was often chosen carefully, often even continued on the exact locations of their 'pagan' predecessors; the windows kept on reflecting the world outside; and the architecture inside kept on referring to the natural world outside. But apart from processions going through the streets and fields, and apparitions drawing people to natural spots in the landscape, the religious rituals moved indoors, by which the numinous outdoor dimension was excluded more and more from the religious experience.

⁸ This article is available on my website: <http://eng.wimbonis.nl/articles>.

⁹ Ed van der Vlist, *De Burcht van Leiden*, Primavera Press, Leiden 2003, p. 16

¹⁰ M.F.P. Dijkstra, 'Het raadsel van de drie Leithons', *Leids Jaarboekje 2018*, Historische Vereniging Oud Leiden, p. 37-60.

¹¹ Recently it had been argued that once there have been three little rivers called *Leitha* near Leiden, and three corresponding settlements called *Leithon* as well: M.F.P. Dijkstra, 'Het raadsel van de drie Leithons', *Leids Jaarboekje 2018*, Historische Vereniging Oud Leiden, p. 37-60.

¹² Philip Coppens, *Land of the Gods. How a Scottish landscape was sanctified to become Arthur's "Camelot"*, Frontier Publishing, Amsterdam 2007, p. 23-24 and 32.

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River_Lee

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River_Lea

¹⁵ L. S. Gogan, 'The Name of Louth', *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological Society* Vol. 13, No. 1 (1953), p. 5-7.

¹⁶ M. Macneill, *The Festival of Lughnasa*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1962, (Irish reprint in 2008), p. 1.

¹⁷ Frits van Oostrom, *Stemmen op Schrift. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300* (Bert Bakker Amsterdam 2006), p. 89.

¹⁸ Jean Markale, *The Pagan Mysteries of Halloween. Celebrating the dark half of the year* (Inner Traditions Rochester 2001), p. 29.

¹⁹ A few years ago Annine van der Meer has written two interesting little books about Nehalennia that truly put her worship, as one of the titles puts it, in a new light: Annine E.G. van der Meer, *Nieuw Licht op Nehalennia. Over een Zeeuwse moedergodin uit de vaderlandse geschiedenis*, Pansophia Press 2015; Annine E.G. van der Meer, *De Drie Dames uit Duitsland. De Matronen en Nehalennia. Moedergodinnen uit de vaderlandse geschiedenis*, Pansophia Press 2015.

²⁰ I found this information on 'The Atlantic Religion' website:

<https://atlanticreligion.com/2014/08/21/nehalennia-the-cailleach-of-zeeland/>

²¹ S.J. de Laet, *The Low Countries* (London 1958), p. 149; J. Lendering, *Aan de randen van de aarde. De Romeinen tussen Schelde en Eems* (Amsterdam 2000), p. 60. Caesar mentioned in his *De Bello Gallico* (IV 1) that the Menapii lived on land north of the Rhine, close to the mouth of the river. Van Es, however, thinks that they have not lived in the region of Leiden, because Caesar probably meant the *Waal* when he mentioned the Rhine. See W.A. van Es, *De Romeinen in Nederland* (Bussum 1976), p. 27. So not all scholars agree on this.

²² Norman Mongan has written an interesting book on the spread of Menapien culture in Ireland: N. Mongan, *The Menapia Quest. Two thousand years of the Menapii: seafaring Gauls in Ireland, Scotland, Wales en the Isle of Man. 216 BC 1990 AD.*, The Herodotus Press, Dublin 1995.

²³ Dutch Wikipedia: 'Lugdunum Batavorum', consulted on 16-01-2019.

²⁴ M. Green, *Symbol & Image in Celtic Religious Art* (London 1992), p. 54-61; M. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (London 1997) 180; M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Godalming 1986), p. 97-98.

²⁵ M. Green, *Symbol and image in Celtic religious art* (London 1992), p. 54-61. M. Green, *The Gods of the Celts* (Godalming 1986), p. 37. As far as I know, no altar stones of Mercury and Rosmerta have yet been found in the Netherlands.

²⁶ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *God and Heroes of the Celts*, Turtle Island Foundation, Berkeley 1994, p. 30.

²⁷ Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins, Mothers*, The British Museum Press, London 1995, p. 124-135.

²⁸ Barry Cunliffe, *The Celtic World*, BCA London, 1992, p. 72.

²⁹ Proinsias Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, Chancellor Press, London, 1997, p. 19, 25 and 92-93.

³⁰ G.M.E.C. van Boekel, Terracotta beeldjes van de Scheveningseweg, VOM-reeks 1989 nummer 3, Gemeente 's-Gravenhage.

³¹ About the role of Tailtiu as foster mother of Lug and Celtic Earth Goddess, see, for instance, this website: <https://feminismandreligion.com>

³² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louth,_Lincolnshire

³³ http://www.louthmuseum.org.uk/early-louth/prehistoric_louth_part_2.html

³⁴ <http://www.angelfire.com/zine2/DionysianUnderground/Elen.htm>

³⁵ <http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Alaunus>

³⁶ Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess. Male Words and Female Images*, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, London 1998.

³⁷ It is absolutely not my intention to distinguish 'real' Dutch people from migrants who have settled in the Netherlands. They also have to root here, just like in the past the Europeans should have done in 'the New World' (but unfortunately often have not done).

³⁸ Wim Bonis, *The Rediscovery of the Landscape*. You can download this article from my website: <http://eng.wimbonis.nl/articles>.