

# **Nehalennia worship in Engeland?**

*A search for the possible worship of the Dutch Goddess Nehalennia  
in Kent in the Roman times*

**Wim-Bonis**

## *The temples in Zeeland*

As is well known, in the Dutch province Zeeland the Goddess Nehalennia has been worshipped in Roman times. The evidence for this is provided by two major finds. In 1647 after a storm the remains of a Gallo-Roman temple and some statues who were devoted to her were found on the beach near Domburg; and in 1970/1971 many similar statues of her were fished from the bottom of the Oosterschelde near Colijnsplaat, where once there must have stood a temple as well. All these statues date from the first centuries AD and unfortunately both the temples and the statues have been swallowed up by the sea in the third or fourth century, probably after a heavy storm and flooding. So these temples have not been there for a very long time, at most a few hundred years. But this does not tell a lot about the worship of Nehalennia in this coastal area. The statues were a typical product of Roman culture, but they represented the worship of an indigenous Goddess, which must have existed already for a good while among the local people when the Romans came across it. How long exactly is difficult to say, because there are no archaeological finds that can tell us something about that.

## *The safe journey across the sea*

It is important to mention here that the statues were erected by merchants who passed through Domburg or Colijnsplaat on their journey to and from England, and thanked the Goddess for their safe journey across. Surely in that particular time a journey across the sea was a risky business. That's why it is quite logical to assume that after their journey to England, so on the other side of the North Sea, these merchants must have thanked a local Goddess in a similar way for their safe journey across. Yet as far as I know there has been little research into this kind of worship practice in the English coastal areas.

Although it is of course unlikely that all merchants crossed over to the same area in England, my attention was drawn quickly to one particular area: to the county of Kent. As of yet no remains of temples similar to those of Domburg and Colijnsplaat have been found there which would demonstrate the link with Zeeland.<sup>1</sup> But, as will try to make clear below, we do come across some remarkable facts which indicate that merchants from Zeeland must have come ashore here. I start my search with the discovery of a cave.

### *The Shell Grotto in Margate*

In 1835 an extraordinary cave was discovered in the English coastal town Margate, when a group of schoolboys were digging in the land near their school (in Dane Hill) and a shovel of one of the boys suddenly fell through a hole in the ground. The schoolmaster, James Newlove, lowered his son through it, and it proved to be a cave, which just at two meters deep stretched under the houses in the direct vicinity. It turned out to be a very special cave, with a serpentine corridor and all the walls beautifully decorated with shells. All kinds of symbolic figures were depicted by these shells that in no way referred to Christianity: constellations, Gods and Goddesses, the moon, the sun, phalluses, snakes, flowers, abstract signs and an anatomically correct depiction of the female womb.<sup>2</sup> The cave was named *the Shell Grotto* or *the Shell Temple*.<sup>3</sup>

### *Unmentioned in the sources*

It is quite understandable that after this find people have searched for historical sources that had mentioned the cave. Usually some unknown source turns up in cases like this one – in particular when one realizes that the cave was (and still is) located only two meters under the houses of a residential area – but until today not a single one has been found. Is it conceivable that the people belonging to a secret society had created the cave, decorated it and managed to keep its existence secret? We must

---

<sup>1</sup> Just like in Zeeland in Roman times the coastline was extending much further out in the sea. Since the first century AD in Kent 600 metres of the cliffs has disappeared due to erosion. D.R.J Perkins, 'The Roman archaeology of the Isle of Thanet', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, Vol. 121 – 2001, p. 43-60.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Howard, *Earth Mysteries*, Robert Hale, London 1990, p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> On the website of the Shell Grotto you can find many nice pictures of the interior of the grotto: <https://www.shellgrotto.co.uk>

realize that even in the days before the Internet and social media it was almost impossible to work completely in secret.

Rod LeGear indicates in his article about the Shell Grotto that researchers have searched for the origin of this cave in many different directions. It has been considered prehistoric, Roman, Phoenician, 18<sup>th</sup> century, or a 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘folly’.<sup>4</sup> Because nothing has been recorded, one can assume that the cave has not been known among the people in the centuries before the discovery. This makes a recent origin in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century quite unlikely. In England the creation of ‘follies’ in caves – decorating caves in a fantastical way – is a well-known tradition. But the people involved in this usually have a lot of money and time on their hands, and a privately owned place where it can be created. Follies are usually created on privately owned estates and not under residential areas. The place where the Shell Grotto is located has never belonged to such an estate, which makes it quite unlikely as well that we are dealing here with a folly. Everything suggests that it is a creation that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century must have been hundreds of years old and perhaps even much older.

It was also pretty obvious to the researchers that the Shell Grotto was not a cave in which people had been living. Everything suggested it must have been a kind of initiation place. But whose initiation and for what reason? Because of the rich symbolism, the decoration and also the design of the spaces, in this respect one has for instance thought about the Knights Templar or the Freemasons. There is one important fact that argues against the Knights Templar: as mentioned, no Christian symbolism – like for instance a Christian Cross – has been found in the cave. All symbolism appears to be non-Christian and one would expect Christian symbols in a shrine of the Knights Templar.

#### *And ancient origin?*

As a recent origin of the Shell Grotto was unlikely, the idea that it might have been much older – perhaps thousands of years old – became a more conceivable option. There are good reasons to take an ancient origin seriously and to research it a bit further. For instance, the region appears to have been inhabited for a long time. There are plenty of remains which have

---

<sup>4</sup> R.F. LeGear, *The Margate Shell Grotto*, MAAIS, AIFA, nr. 23. (downloadable from [www.kentarcheology.ac.uk](http://www.kentarcheology.ac.uk).)

been found from the Iron Age and from Roman times. In Thanet alone (in 2001) 83 locations have been registered where remains from Roman times have been found. From these 3 are classified as ‘Possible Shrine or Temple Sites’, of which 1 is located in Margate.<sup>5</sup>

Interesting in this regard is a recent research report by Colin Baker about archaeological finds in a cave and mine shafts at Spratling Court Farm, Manston (which is also located in Thanet). He places the origin of this cave in Roman times and with concern to its function he suspects that it has served ritual purposes, and so has served as a temple. When he comes to the deity that might have been worshipped here for a moment he thinks about the God Mithras, but nevertheless considers this is unlikely because the worship of Mithras only reached the region in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. The mine shafts that have been found in the vicinity are, like the other ones in the region, remains of old mines in which at least until Roman times chalk had been mined.

For our theme it is interesting that Baker finds an interesting connection between the mining of chalk and the worship of Nehalennia in a book by Charles Road Smith from 1868: ‘There is an interesting inscription which should not be forgotten in connection with British chalk and marl. It is a dedication by a successful dealer in British chalk who, in consequence of having prosperously imported in the low country now known as Zealand (where the inscription was found) his freights of chalk, discharged his vows to the goddess Nehalennia.’<sup>6</sup> This statue appears to have belonged to the temple in Domburg, which was exposed there on the beach in 1647 after a storm. The name of the ‘dealer in British chalk’ is also known: he is called Marcus Secundinius Silvanus. Baker points out that the Greek geographer Strabo does not yet mention the trade in chalk from England to the European continent, and therefore he concludes that this trade – as evidenced by the Nehalennia statue – must only have started after Strabo’s time.

When I read this the following question arose immediately in me: could the worshipped deity in the cave at Spratling Court not have been a Goddess

---

<sup>5</sup> D.R.J Perkins, ‘The Roman archaeology of the Isle of Thanet’, *Archaeologia Cantiana*, Vol. 121 – 2001, p. 43-60. All the articles of *Archeologia Cantiana* can all found full-text on their website.

<sup>6</sup> Colin A.Baker, *Investigation of an Iron Age pit and Roman cave at Spratling Court Farm, Manston, Kent*. (This report can be downloaded at [www.kentarcheology.ac](http://www.kentarcheology.ac).)

instead of a God? Apparently Baker does not think this is very obvious, even after mentioning the connection between the chalk trade and Nehalennia. But we should not forget that since the Paleolithic caves have symbolized the womb of Mother Earth and have been associated with Goddess worship.

Now it is probably getting clearer why I have written quite extensively about the Shell Grotto. We may wonder indeed whether this specific cave could also have been associated with the worship of a Goddess. In this respect I think of course particularly about Nehalennia. I'm not the first one to think in this direction. Michael Howard had connected the Shell Grotto with Goddess worship.<sup>7</sup> Annemieke Witteveen, who has devoted a two-part article on the Shell Grotto on the website of *Ancient Origins*, reports that when she visited the place she strongly felt that a female power was worshipped there...<sup>8</sup> It is also worth mentioning that in the cave some symbolism has been found which is connected to the Goddess. On the map of the Shell Grotto one specific figure is identified as the 'Corn Goddess' (see the picture to the right). In addition, a lot of the other symbolism in the cave refers to nature and fertility. But a direct reference to a worship of Nehalennia or a similar Gallo-Roman Goddess has not been found.



### *The shell symbolism*

Perhaps an important clue for the connection of the Shell Grotto with Nehalennia might be found in the symbolism of the shell. This symbolism was also important in the representation of Nehalennia. On the statues she is often depicted sitting in a small temple with a large shell depicted above her head, serving as the roof of the temple. This way of depicting a shell was definitely not unique for Nehalennia, and a big shell as temple roof is not the same of course as millions of real shells which have been put as

---

<sup>7</sup> Michael Howard, *Earth Mysteries*, Robert Hale, London 1990, p. 154 and further.

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.ancient-origins.net/unexplained-phenomena-ancient-places-europe-opinion-guest-authors/mysterious-shell-grotto-margate>. She says so in part 2 of this article.

decoration against the walls of the Shell Grotto. But we should remember that we do not know what the walls of the Nehalennia temples at Domburg and Colijnsplaat have been like. Only sparse remains have been found of those temples, and if there had been shell decorations on their walls, these would definitely have disappeared due to an ongoing attack of at least 1500 years by salty sea water. It is assumed that they have looked like the Gallo-Roman temples as they are known to have existed in other places. But who knows the depiction of the big shell on the statues might have referred to an abundant shell decoration within the temples...



Considering the fact that the worship of Nehalennia was quite unique anyway, it cannot be ruled out that her temples might have deviated from the standard Gallo-Roman temples. And on the coast of Zeeland there would have been plenty of shells on offer. Even today we can see that the presence of shells in coastal areas often inspires people to include them in their works of art. But of course I must admit that this is all rather speculative.

### *Caves and temples*

One reason to reject the worship of a Goddess like Nehalennia in the Shell Grotto could be that in Zeeland she has been worshiped in a temple built by humans, and not in a cave. But then we must remember that in the swampy delta region of the Dutch coast natural caves that could have been used for this purpose have never existed. And if they had been there, of course we still don't know whether Nehalennia would have been worshiped in them. But we do know that the spiritual experiences in caves and in temples are not very far removed from each other. Historically and culturally there is continuation between the worship in caves and the worship in temples.<sup>9</sup> Particularly in regions like the Dutch coastal region, where no natural caves

---

<sup>9</sup> The connection between caves and the structure of later religious buildings, like temples and cathedrals, has already been made in the 1950/1960s by E.O. James: E.O. James, *From Cave to Cathedral*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1965.

were available, it is not hard to imagine that humans must have been driven to imitate the womblike cave experience.

How strongly caves are associated with the power of the Divine Feminine and can even inspire people to artificially build them for this purpose, can still clearly be seen in the creation of the Lourdes grottos. As is well known, by creating them people have tried to bring themselves closer to the original experience of the apparition of the Virgin Mary in the famous cave in Lourdes in France. These grottos are spread all over the Catholic world, and can also be found in the Netherlands.

### *Initiaton sites*

Another important indication for a possible worship of Nehalennia in the Shell Grotto can be found in the fact that – as Annine van der Meer has argued recently – it is likely that both the temples of Gallo-Roman Matrons in Germany and those of Nehalennia have also served as oracle places.<sup>10</sup> The Norwegian researcher Maria Khilvaug endorses this view: ‘The enthroned goddess has much in common with real-life women who performed an oracle, seated on a chair, high-seat or elevated platform.’<sup>11</sup> As we have noted above, researchers have concluded from the symbolism and the design of the Shell Grotto that this place has probably served as a place for initiation rituals. And at oracle places naturally initiation rituals must have been performed...

### *Other ritual caves in Thanet*

But it is good not to keep on focusing solely on the Shell Grotto and widen the area of our research a bit. First it is worth mentioning that at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century another Shell Grotto had been discovered in Margate, with a completely different lay-out and put in a Christian context by researchers. This place, however, is not open to the public. In a town not far from

---

<sup>10</sup> Annine van der Meer, *De Drie Dames uit Duitsland. De Matronen en Nehalennia, Moedergodinnen uit de Vaderlandse geschiedenis*, PanSophia press, Den Haag 2015, p. 108-112. See also: Annine van der Meer, *Nieuw licht op Nehalennia. Over een Zeeuwse Moedergodin uit de Vaderlandse geschiedenis*, PanSophia Press, Den Haag 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Khilvaug has added a few comments to the study ‘The Temple of Nehalennia at Domburg’ by Ada Hondius-Crone from the 1950s on her website:

[http://freya.theladyofthelabyrinth.com/?page\\_id=377](http://freya.theladyofthelabyrinth.com/?page_id=377). Her master thesis about ‘the Goddess of Initiation’ can be downloaded from the Internet:  
<https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/23958?locale-attribute=en>

Margate, in St. Nicholas at Wade, another ritual cave, a so-called ‘underground chapel’, has been discovered.<sup>12</sup> Other ritual caves have been found in Thanet, which sometimes even have an ancient origin, like the one in Spratling Court that we have already mentioned. And importantly we should bring the article from 2001 back to mind (referred to above), in which was argued that in Thanet alone 83 location of Roman origin have been found of which 3 are classified as ‘Possible Shrine or Temple Sites’.<sup>13</sup> And who knows what other ritual caves or places are to be discovered yet in north-east Kent? Therefore I think we should avoid creating too narrow boundaries for our research and do well to widen it a bit and compare both areas – Zeeland and the north-east coast of Kent – with each other.

### *The mouths of rivers*

When we compare the two areas, then it is immediately obvious that both offered access to major rivers. The Nehalennia temples were located at the mouth of the Scheldt and indirectly (through connections to other ports on the Dutch coast) also at the mouths of the Rhine and Maas/Waal. And the north-east coast of Kent, including the ‘the Isle of Thanet’ – now part of the mainland but in Roman times an island –, was located relatively near to the mouth of the Thames.

Just like the towns of Domburg and Colijnsplaat (which was probably called *Ganuenta* in Roman times) the area of north-east Kent was located directly at the sea, with a good connection across the water to the hinterland. Therefore it is conceivable that also certain places on this coast have served as major points of departure and arrival. After crossing over from Zeeland it was quite logical for merchants to arrive on this coast, perhaps also to transship the cargo, so that it could be transported further over the Thames to the English countryside. And conversely, for merchants in Kent and the hinterland of Roman London (which was called *Londinium*) it was logical to cross over from north-east Kent to Domburg or Colijnsplaat. In these towns their cargos could be transshipped to other boats that could transport them further over the Scheldt, the Rhine or the Maas/Waal to the European hinterland. And when this heavy traffic has

---

<sup>12</sup> Rod leGear, *Underground Thanet. Quarries, Shelters, Tunnels and Caves*, Trust for Thanet Archaeology, Birchington, 2012

<sup>13</sup> D.R.J Perkins, ‘The Roman archaeology of the Isle of Thanet’, *Archaeologia Cantiana*, Vol. 121 – 2001, p. 43-60.



existed between those two areas, it is plausible of course that the worship of Nehalennia must have been known in Kent.

### *Trade in chalk and Marcus Secundinius Silvanus*

Perhaps the most important links between Zeeland and north-east Kent can be found in the trade in chalk, about which we have already spoken briefly above. Kent, famous for its 'white cliffs', is an area with lots of chalk available for trade, as is also evidenced by the presence of the chalk mines.

We have already mentioned Marcus Secundinius Silvanus (hereafter to be referred to as MSS), the merchant who has erected a Nehalennia statue at Domburg. When we have a closer look at his role, the fact that he might have been a merchant in chalk raises interesting questions with regard to the possible worship of Nehalennia on British territory. First of all, this merchant appears to have been a very important figure in the trade at that time. It turns out that he has not only erected a statue for Nehalennia in Domburg. Among the finds in the 1970s at Colijnsplaat there happened to be a second statue carrying his name. MSS is the only merchant who has erected two statues for Nehalennia, which suggests he must have had an important status.<sup>14</sup>

In this context it is important to mention that the English and Dutch interpretations of the inscriptions on the statues, regarding to the origin and the kind of merchandise, differ profoundly. In some old English books (which today often can be consulted through the Internet) a direct link is made between the mining of chalk in Kent and the worship of Nehalennia, on the basis of the Nehalennia statue of MSS found at Domburg. Above we have already given an example of this. Another example is a book by R.B. Watts from 1820. He brings Nehalennia in direct relationship with the people who work in the chalk mines: 'These mines are remarkable for their antiquity, the Heathens having a Deity named NEHEELENNIA, the goddess of chalk workers. The walks among these vast subterraneous caverns are much visited, being very romantic, and the landscape from the hill delightful.'<sup>15</sup> Amazingly, in these English books she is sometimes referred to as the 'goddess of chalk workers' or 'goddess of chalk

---

<sup>14</sup> P. Stuart, *Nehalennia. Documenten in Steen*, De Koperen Tuin, Goes 2003, p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> R.B. Watts - *The Margate Steam Yachts' Guide, or a Topographical Description of the Principal Buildings, Towns, Villages, Seats, &C.,&C., Between London and Margate; With a Brief Sketch of the Isle of Thanet*, 1820, p. 57. (Downloadable from the Internet)

merchants'.<sup>16</sup> We know now that Nehalennia was much more than a Goddess of chalk workers or of chalk merchants. When this understanding is based only on this one statue of Nehalennia found at Domburg (which, incidentally, we do not know for sure), then we can simply disregard this as a misinterpretation.

But it becomes even more interesting when we compare it with the Dutch interpretation. According to Dutch researchers MSS does not come from England at all, and he also did not trade in chalk. They consider him a merchant with a *Cologne background*, transporting *pottery* from the European continent to England.<sup>17</sup> The name Secundinius would refer to a well-known family from Cologne, and the entry *negotiator cretarius Britannicianus* would mean something like 'pottery merchant to Britain'.<sup>18</sup> So in the old English texts he is a merchant *from* Britain and in the Dutch researches he is a merchant going *to* Britain. And as I have said, according to the old English texts he traded in chalk, and according to the current Dutch researches he traded in pottery. A big difference. Who is right here?

### *Trade seen from two sides*

It seems obvious that we should give the Dutch researchers the benefit of the doubt. After all, they rely on knowledge that was not yet known when the old English books were written (in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century). But I wonder if there has not been another source which has triggered the English idea about the worship of Nehalennia on British soil. When this unknown source has been there, then I have not found it yet. The difference in interpretation of that small piece of text raises at least the question once again whether Nehalennia could have been worshipped in England.

In this respect we may wonder whether we have assumed perhaps too easily that the merchants who erected the statues at Domburg and Colijnsplaat must have come from the European continent. The inscriptions on the statues of course give a good reason for this, as the town or region of the merchant's origin is often mentioned on them. But must there not also have been trade activities in the opposite direction, perhaps by British merchants? In any case, it seems at least plausible that chalk from the British chalk mines has been transported to the European continent (as

---

<sup>16</sup>Michael Howard, *Earth Mysteries*, Robert Hale, London 1990, p. 156-157.

<sup>17</sup>P. Stuart, *Nehalennia. Documenten in Steen*, De Koperen Tuin, Goes 2003, p. 78-79.

<sup>18</sup>P. Stuart, *Nehalennia. Documenten in Steen*, De Koperen Tuin, Goes 2003, p. 78, 82.

noted in the old English books). The merchants surely did not return with empty boats from Kent to Domburg or Colijnsplaat? And therefore, can we not also assume that in north-east Kent there must have been a harbour town with a temple (or even several harbour towns with a temple), where the merchants could thank a Goddess for their risky voyage?

### *The Celtic connection*

In the search for the cultural roots of the worship of Nehalennia we also see this one-sided view to the European continent. Until recently most researchers have searched for her roots in the east and the south, in short across the European continent. This way, I think, they have largely and also wrongly ignored the potential cultural influence from the west, across the sea. First of all, it is known that in prehistory cultural and trade contacts took place much more over water than over land.<sup>19</sup> And secondly, the search for the roots of Nehalennia in an eastern or southern direction was motivated by the assumption that the worship of Nehalennia either had a Germanic or a Roman origin. In recent decades it has become increasingly clear that Celtic culture has been much more prevalent on the Dutch coast than previously thought. Researchers have discovered that in the Dutch coastal areas so-called 'North Sea Celtic' has been spoken by the people.<sup>20</sup> In addition, it also has become clearer that the main cultural influence on Nehalennia must not be searched in the Germanic or the Roman world, but in the Celtic world. In this respect the English researcher Miranda Green has put Nehalennia already for years in a Celtic context. Recently the Dutch linguist Peter Alexander Kerkhoff has argued that the name of Nehalennia was most probably of Celtic origin.<sup>21</sup> According to him she was 'a Celtic goddess who was worshipped on the Celtic-speaking coast of the Netherlands and Belgium in Roman times.'<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Barry Cunliffe, *Facing the Ocean. The Atlantic and its People*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> See L. Toorians, 'Kelten aan de Nederlandse kust. Noordzeegermaans begon met Noordzeekeltisch', *Spiegel Historiae* 36 (2001) nr. 3, who has devoted an entire article to this subject.

<sup>21</sup> Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses. Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*, British Museum Press, London 1995; Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, Bramley Books, Godalming 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Alexander Kerkhof, 'Nehalennia. Taalkundige oplossing voor een Zeeuws raadsel.', in: *Neerlandistiek*, 25 oktober 2016:

<http://www.neerlandistiek.nl/2016/10/nehalennia-taalkundige-raadsels-van-een-zeeuwse-godin/>

This knowledge makes it less far-fetched to search for the roots of her worship in the west. Who knows a few merchants or travel-loving adventurers from the British isles have lived for a while on the Dutch coast among the Menapii, who lived in Zeeland at the time, and have given an important impulse to the worship of Nehalennia. Who can tell? Of course, the Celtic background may also indicate that we need not look in any direction for plausible influences. As the Celts have a long history on the European continent as well, it might indicate that we are dealing here with a worship that has a genuine, indigenous Zeeland origin, and has been connected with this coastal area for a very long time – perhaps even going back to pre-Celtic times.

### *The Cantiaci*

There is still something more to say about the Celtic connection. Kent owes its name to the Celtic tribe of the Cantiaci. This tribe appears to be of Belgic descent and is related to the Belgae tribes on the European continent, of which some partly have moved to and settled in England. The Menapii, who have lived in the southern coastal area of the Netherlands – which includes Zeeland – and in the coastal area of Belgium, are also counted among the Belgae tribes. We should not forget that Julius Caesar had already noticed that the customs of the Cantiaci were very similar to those of the tribes on the continent. Norman Mongan has written an interesting book about the Menapii, in particular about their cultural influence in Ireland, where their name still resounds in many names of place and regions. But he also mentions a few things that are important for our theme. About the connection between Zeeland and the Menapii he says the following: ‘Watts Peyster quotes Eyndius, a Zeelandic historian (1575-1614) who stated that the Zeelandic islands – as shown from the writings of Strabo and Caesar – were under the jurisdiction of the Menapii’.<sup>23</sup>

According to Mongan this tribe had a long seafaring tradition, which included a route from Domburg to England: ‘The tribes of the Venetii, Santones, Menapii and Morini were the leading mariners on the coast of Gaul. As far back as the Hallstatt period, and possibly even earlier, there had been an important trade with the British Isles and the seafaring Gaulish

---

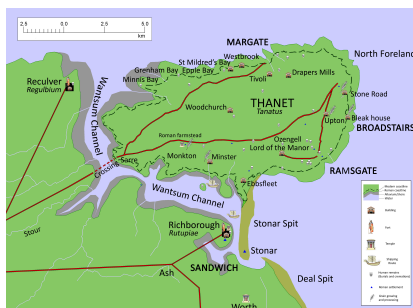
<sup>23</sup> Norman Mongan, *The Menapia Quest. Thousand years of the Menapii: seafaring Gauls in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man, 2016 BC – 1900 AD*. The Herodotus Press, Dublin 1995, p. 8.

tribes acted as intermediaries in this traffic with the Mediterranean world. The most important cross-Channel routes went from Rouen to Clausentum (near modern Southampton) and from Boulogne to Dover. Another busy route led from Nijmegen, Fectio and Domburg near the mouth of the Rhine, to the east coast of Britain and on to London. The original export product of the north Gaul coast was amber, which was then transported to the Mediterranean by the Phoenicians.<sup>24</sup>

The latter is noteworthy because – as will be made clear in the next paragraph – the contact with the Phoenicians has left some traces in Kent. Although as far as I know the name of the Menapii has not (yet) been found in Kent, we can almost assume that due to the existing cultural affinity regular contact must have continued between the Cantiaci and the Belgae tribes on the European continent.

### *The Isle of Thanet*

It makes sense to research the name of ‘The Isle of Thanet’, one of the places where merchants may ever have left from and returned to, a little further. Interestingly, there are strong suspicions that the name *Thanet* refers to a Goddess, namely *Tanit*, the moon Goddess of the



Phoenicians, who once traded in this region. In the 1950s Conan and Nellie Shaw have already argued in their book *The Shell Temple in Margate*, that the symbolism in the Shell Grotto would go back to the teachings of Pythagoras (which were taken once to England by the Phoenicians); that the cave was connected to the worship of Baal and Astarte, and was the symbolic representation of the Sacred Marriage between the sun and the moon, personified by a God and a Goddess.<sup>25</sup> If this link exists, then it is also conceivable that the Isle of Thanet was named after a Phoenician Goddess.

<sup>24</sup> Norman Mongan, *The Menapia Quest. Thousand years of the Menapii: seafaring Gauls in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man, 2016 BC – 1900 AD*. The Herodotus Press, Dublin 1995, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Howard, *Earth Mysteries*, Robert Hale, London 1990, p. 156-157.

In a recent blog Caitlin Green had argued that the link between Thanet and the Goddess Tanit is certainly supported by archaeological research. The presence of the Phoenicians is demonstrated for instance by the finds of Carthaginian coins (Carthage was one of the cities founded by the Phoenicians). In north-east Kent relatively more Carthaginian have been found than in the rest of England, which indicates that the Phoenicians concentrated their trade with England in this area.<sup>26</sup> That Goddess worship has existed in this area is also shown by finds of Goddess figurines: more about this in a subsequent paragraph.

### *Immigration from the Bronze Age on*

In addition to the finds of the Carthaginian coins, a recent discovery of a large cemetery from the Bronze Age at Pegwell Bay, just south of Margate, indicates that already in prehistoric times Kent was an area where people came down to from faraway places. In that cemetery not only skeletons of British people were found, but also of Scandinavians and people from southern Europe. Thus very early Kent appears to have been an immigration area par excellence.<sup>27</sup> The finds of remains of southern Europeans from the Bronze Age can help to make the association between Thanet and Tanit even more likely.

It is known that later in Roman times immigration continued, already from the first moment when the Romans set foot in England. Compared to the rest of north-east Kent in Thanet a relatively high concentration of Roman villas has been found.<sup>28</sup> So apart from the distance by sea, it is conceivable that the Roman merchants, who crossed over to England from Domburg or Colijnsplaat, preferred to go ashore right here, in this highly Romanized region. And we should not forget that in this region some sought after commodities were on offer, including the aforementioned chalk.

---

<sup>26</sup> Caitlin Green - *Thanet, Tanit and the Phoenicians: Place-Names, Archaeology and Pre-Roman Trading Settlements in Eastern Kent?* – 21 april 2015: <http://www.caitlingreen.org/2015/04/thanet-tanit-and-the-phoenicians.html>

<sup>27</sup> Alice Philipson, *Britain was a nation of immigrants in the Bronze Age*, Telegraph, June 2013. This article can be found on the website of the Telegraph.

<sup>28</sup> Colin Andrews, 'Romanisation: A Kentish Perspective', *Archaeologica Cantiana*, Vol. 121 – 2001, p. 25-42.

*From the worship of Dea Nutrix to Nehalennia*

Research has shown that in Kent various Goddesses have been worshipped. For instance, in the 1950s at Springhead a figurine of a Goddess was found which was called ‘the Celtic Venus’.<sup>29</sup> At Oak Tree Farm in Rodmersham, north of Canterbury, in 1960 a ‘fertility symbol’ was found. I have not been able to figure out how old this figurine is and where it is kept, but it could well be a representation of an indigenous Goddess (see picture to the right).<sup>30</sup>



During my visit to Kent I have seen a few Gallo-Roman figurines in the ‘Roman Museum’ in Canterbury that I have seen more often in museums on the European continent: figurines of a Goddess with two babies on her lap, which are known under the denominator of *Dea Nutrix* (see picture to the left). Because I want to know more about this, I search on the Internet and hit on an article from 1957 by Frank Jenkins about the worship of Dea Nutrix in Kent. It turned out that this worship had been concentrated in the east of Kent. Jenkins suspected that behind this Dea Nutrix worship the worship of an indigenous Goddess was hidden and that her presence indicated important cultural links between Kent and the European continent, between Kent and Gaul.<sup>31</sup>

But even more fascinating is that Jenkins referred in the last part of his article to the worship of Nehalennia. A year before, in 1956, he appeared to have written an article in which he associated a nameless pipe clay figurines of a Goddess with a dog on her lap, found in Canterbury, with Nehalennia. Such figurines are well-known from the Trier region.<sup>32</sup> And because in this Trier region also bigger statues have been found of a nameless Goddess

<sup>29</sup> Michael Howard, *Earth Mysteries*, Robert Hale, London 1990, p. 159.

<sup>30</sup> The picture of this figurine I found in a book: Lesley Peaks, *Woodstock. An Archeological Mystery*, Geerings of Ashford Ltd, Ashford 2001, p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> Frank Jenkins, The Cult of the Dea Nutrix in Kent, *Archaeologia Cantiana*, Vol. 71 1957, p. 38-46.

<sup>32</sup> The museum Valkhof in Nijmegen in the Netherland also has a Dea Nutrix figurine in its collection.

with a fruit basket and a dog at her side – who according to Jenkins must be identified as Nehalennia – he saw a good reason to identify pipe clay figurines which depict a Goddess with a dog on her lap with her as well.<sup>33</sup> It is known that a few merchants who erected a statue for Nehalennia in Zeeland also came from Trier. Considering the ideas of Jenkins, we should realize that he has published his article in 1956, when only the Nehalennia finds from Domburg were known. What would he have said when he had known the large find at Colijnsplaat in the 1970s?

### *Nehalennia worship in Engeland?*

Despite the fact that the merchants who once have erected a statue for Nehalennia in Zeeland almost certainly have gone ashore in Kent, we have to be careful with assuming her worship on English soil. With the whole story above we should not forget – and this is essential – that Nehalennia, like so many other indigenous Goddesses, was closely connected with the region where she was worshipped. That was also the reason why the Romans left her name intact and have not converted her to a Roman equivalent. Of course there were Goddesses whose name could spread over a large area – like, for instance, has happened to Isis, Cybele, and perhaps also to Tanit – but the fact remains that also with those Goddesses the connection with the surrounding area remained very important. Without roots in the local soil a Goddess remains pretty meaningless.

When we go back to the origin, than we must imagine that initially the Goddess was not yet depicted anthropomorphically, and its being was inextricably connected to the (sacred) landscape. For prehistoric people – who in contrast to modern humans were real ‘outdoor’ people – her presence manifested itself through the landscape: she was one with this landscape, which extended in the nightly hours to the entire cosmos with its many cycles, and the people felt completely embedded in her being. From this overwhelming, spiritual experience Goddess worship emerged eventually. Often something of the specific landscape in which she was worshipped still resounded in her name. Therefore taking a Goddess to another region – for instance, when a tribe moved to and settled in a new region – no seldom also meant a change of her name. Researchers have often pointed out that the specific names of the Goddess were in fact mere

---

<sup>33</sup> Frank Jenkins, ‘Nameless or Nehalennia’, *Archaeologia Cantiana*, Vol. 70 1956, p. 192-200.



*titles*, under which the Goddess was known on a local, native level. Peter Alexander Kerkhof has argued that the fact that ‘Dea’ (Goddess) was always placed before the name of ‘Nehalennia’, indicates that ‘Nehalennia’ was an attribute of the Goddess, in other words a mere title that referred to a local manifestation of the Goddess and so did not reflect her ‘real name’.<sup>34</sup> When this is true, then it is conceivable of course that the Goddess on the coast of Kent was worshipped under another name.

In any case, there are enough indications that in Roman times the worship of Nehalennia must have been known in Kent. Due to the busy trade between Zeeland and Kent it is almost certain that the same worshippers must have been in or passed through both regions. Therefore an intensive cultural exchange must have taken place, from the continent to England but also vice versa – an exchange which also must have been expressed in their experience of the Goddess. But despite the many interesting things I have found on my search, I dare not conclude that this Goddess was also worshipped under the name of Nehalennia. Before some spectacular finds are unearthed from the soil (or perhaps are washed ashore) that can tell us more, for the moment we must be satisfied with this.

Leiden, 12-04-2017

---

<sup>34</sup> Peter Alexander Kerkhof, ‘Nehalennia. Taalkundige oplossing voor een Zeeuws raadsel.’, in: *Neerlandistiek*, 25 oktober 2016; zie ook: Simon Brighton & Terry Welbourn, *Echoes of the Goddess. A quest for the Sacred Feminine in the British Landscape*, Ian Allan Publishing, Hersham 2010, p. 126; Apuleius already argued in *The Golden Ass* that in fact there was only one Goddess, Isis, and that all the other Goddesses were mere aspects of this one Goddess.

## Appendix:



This is a painting that I have made at the end of the 1990s (gouache on paper). In it I depicted an imaginative find of a Nehalennia statue on the west coast of Ireland. I thought: when the Menapii once moved from Zeeland and settled in Ireland (which they have done), then surely they could have taken the worship of their Goddess with them? But of course it is not very likely that they could have taken these statues – created in this Roman style – with them, simply because they were not made yet when they migrated. However, for Kent this is all very different. We know that in Roman times the smaller Goddess figurines were taken to England from the European continent. Why could there not have been a merchant who had taken a bigger statue with him on one of his crossings? The world is still full of surprises: who knows one day, after a heavy storm, such a statue might miraculously appear on the coast of Kent...