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Gert van Klinken

Religion on the Road—Nehalennia Revisited: Voyagers Addressing a North Sea Deity in the Second Century CE

Abstract: Connections between travel and religion are discussed by an analysis of the seafarers' cult of Nehalennia during the early Roman Empire in a region that now belongs to the seaboard of the Dutch province of Zeeland. Veneration of Nehalennia exemplifies an important aspect of transition, not only for those who made the perilous journey between Britain and the European mainland so many years ago, but also for those who study religious history from a modern perspective. The cult of Nehalennia demonstrates the impact of Mediterranean concepts of the divine on local culture in the North, a dissemination that clearly received an impetus from travel between different regions of the vast Roman Empire.

It is noticed that some aspects that are commonly attributed to the era of Christianization during Frankish rule can already be observed in pagan form in the Nehalennia cult during the second century CE. In order to understand the formative process that was to shape the Christian culture of the Middle Ages, this case study suggests that many of its characteristics were brought in during the preceding Roman era, when paganism in the form of fusion between Greco-Roman and native Germanic motives was still the norm. Despite massive demographic and political change, continuity in the religious developments during the first millennium CE deserves academic attention. Both in the Roman and in the early Medieval era ideas used to be exchanged via networks of trading connections, and not only by the agency of religious professionals.

At the Crossroads

In Roman times it was not unusual to find the shrines of the gods on crossroads. Wayfarers and sailors were well-acquainted with the tendency of temple complexes to spring up at the same site as fairs, markets and other examples of economic activity. As Wim van Es remarks in his books on the Romans in the Netherlands, spiritual and material interests were intertwined.¹ It was natural for both commercial and religious spheres of activity to be located at sites that were being

¹ Wim A. van Es, *De Romeinen in Nederland* (Bussum: Fibula-Van Dishoeck, 1973), 152.

frequented by travellers. The sacred and the mundane were not taken as mutually exclusive, in the sense that they were prohibited to interconnect. As Guy de la Bédoyère put it: “There is no doubt that travelling, and the passage from one place to another, represented an important spiritual experience.”²

A well-known example is provided by the temples dedicated to Nehalennia at the Scheldt estuary, in what is now the province of Zeeland at the Dutch seaboard between Walcheren and Schouwen-Duiveland. Both shrines flourished between the second and early third century CE, only to be claimed by the shifting seabed later. Paradoxically it may be argued that the rich trove of texts and statuaries retrieved from these sites in modern times and now cared for in Leiden, would probably have been lost for posterity if they had not been engulfed by the sea. Until their demise, both temples used to stand at the Southern bank of the Scheldt estuary. The remains of the Domburg temple ended up in the North Sea and the better-known examples of Colijnsplaat (*Ganuenta*) in the Eastern Scheldt. The Roman toponym for Domburg is unknown. Naval shrines of this type are especially common at the Western seaboard of the Roman Empire. We even find them in the far West, such as Nornour in the Isles of Scilly.³

It is assumed that both temples at the Scheldt estuary belonged to the so-called Gallo-Roman type, which is also known from France, Belgium, Great-Britain and the Western fringe of Germany. A central tower-like *cella*, which used to contain the image of the deity, was surrounded by a concentric ambulatory with a pitched roof built into the *cella* walls. It is not uncommon for the revered deity to have a native name combined with Roman symbolism and of course an accompanying text in Latin—an obvious example of the *interpretatio Romana*, where autochthonous and Roman conceptions of the divine are fused together.

Native elements, also found at Domburg and Ganuenta, are the presence of a grove of trees (*nemus*, *nemeton*) and the stylistic phenomenon of triplication. A charming detail in these local deities was their dress, designed in a way that is specific for these two locations. Similar examples of local costume (*klederdracht*) can be found in the attire of the Matrones in the Cologne region, especially in their caps modelled after those worn by the female members of the Ubii tribe.

Though mostly presented as an individual, it is not uncommon to find Nehalennia triplicated, while maintaining her name in the plural form: *Neihalenninis*. As a single person, Nehalennia can be referred to in terms of an intimate relationship between the deity and the dedicant. When triplicated, there is a sense of numen

² Guy de la Bédoyère, *Gods with Thunderbolts: Religion in Roman Britain* (Tempus: Stroud, 2007), 105.

³ Jeanette Ratcliffe and Charles Johns, *Scilly's Archaeological Heritage* (Truro: Twelveheads Press, 2003), 13, 31.

rather than individuality: presence of the divine power that is often associated with a specific spot on the map (as *genius loci*) but not as a personal presence.

Travelers came to visit the Nehalennia shrines as part of their commercial travels via the seaways between Germania Inferior and Britannia. Most of the individuals we know by name were merchants and sea captains from the Rhine and Moselle valleys, exporting goods that had been manufactured in Cologne and Treves to the British market. During the outward-bound leg of their journey, they would make a promise (*votum*) to set up an altar to the deity, on the condition that they and their loads would return safely. If this came to pass (and as far as we can see: only then!), they would set up their votive altar, delicately carved and with words of thanks to Nehalennia. In his analysis of Roman culture in the Rhineland, Michael Zelle remarks that this was common practice in their region of origin.⁴ Similar votive altars were raised in honor of Jupiter Conservator in Colonia Ulpia Traiana at the left bank of the river Rhine. Such stones, known as *Weihesteine* in the Rhineland, also show female goddesses such as the Matres or Matrones. Another similarity to Nehalennia are the fruits (pears and apples) that were deposited on top of some of the votive altars and that were also rendered in stone. We also find fruit in the hands of the male Batavian god Hercules Magusanus (Empel; Xanten). Zelle believes that the Matrones were essentially benign, unlike the warlike Hercules Magusanus.⁵ Nevertheless, their goodwill did not come cheap: even for a well-established trading firm, a votive stone of the quality that is in evidence in Domburg and Ganuenta would require substantial investments. Limestone, and more rarely sandstone, blocks had been brought in from the South via the rivers Meuse and Rhine, most likely already chiseled into the required general form. Individual touches, especially the votive texts, would be added on site, in accordance with the wishes of each dedicant. A veneration of this type depended on an economy that was producing a decent surplus.

The Matres are often perceived as native in their origin (compared to the Frisian Hludana). However, as is typical for the *interpretatio Romana*, Nehalennia is simultaneously styled in the guise of the goddess Fortuna, as known from Italy. She represents Fortuna Redux, the guarantee of a safe return of the traveler on land and sea. Iconographical markers for Fortuna Redux are the cornucopia and the ship rudder, which draw attention to Fortuna's positive influence at land and sea. This is not to say that they are addressed in a way that is fully anthropological. Roland Geschlößl rightly remarks that the ambiguity between a personalized god and *numina loci* is an element of what he calls *Götterverschmelzung*.⁶

4 Michael Zelle, *Götter und Kulte: Colonia Ulpia Traiana* (Cologne: Rheinland, 2000), 93.

5 Zelle, *Götter und Kulte*, 95.

6 Roland Geschlößl, *Im Schmelztiegel der Religionen: Göttertausch bei Kelten, Römern und Germanen* (Mainz: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006).

Addressing a North Sea Deity

The making of an offering to a god must be considered as an unusual event, outside the normal routine of daily life. It can be noted that the rich correspondence from Vindolanda (more than eight hundred partially preserved letters from Northumbria, early second century BCE) refers to a shrine in just one instance, where a load of wheat was to be delivered to a certain Amabilis, *ad fanum*. The mention of the shrine is preceded by a delivery to “the oxherds at the wood (*bubulcaris in siluam*),” which is suggestive of a rustic setting of this special shrine.⁷ References to transport and travel, on the other hand, are quite common in Vindolanda. Travelers were quite aware of the problems they might encounter on the road. However, apart from a few oblique references, they preferred to address difficulties connected to travel as a matter of fact, rather than connect them to any religious invocation. The letter of Octavius to Candidus offers an example of this approach:

Mitte coria que scribis esse Cataractonio scribe denture mi et karrum de quo scribis et quit sit cum eo karro mi scribe iam illec petissem nissi iumenta non curavi uexsare dum viae male sunt.

The hides which you write [about] are at Cataractonium—write that they be given to me and the waggon about which you write. Write to me what is with that waggon. I would have already been to collect them except that I did not care to injure the animals while the roads are bad.⁸

This represents the rather matter-of-fact way in which the residents of Vindolanda used to ponder on the realities of travel in their daily correspondence. It was possible to add a reference to unspecified deities: “If the gods (*di*) are propitious.” However, the editors of the Vindolanda correspondence take this as no more than a “standard expression of optimism.”⁹

It seems that religious discourse belonged to a special niche, rather than to the common occurrences of daily life. How was the deity addressed by her travelling devotees? In his reflection on this general theme, Jörg Rüpke defends the proposition that doing for Roman religion is of more importance than believing. He makes his point in a discussion of Cicero’s *De natura deorum*:

7 Alan K. Bowman and J. David Thomas, eds., *The Vindolanda Writing Tablets*, *Tabulae Vindolandenses 2* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1994), 123–24 (180: 10–11).

8 Bowman and Thomas, *Vindolanda*, 321–29 (343: 15–21).

9 Bowman and Thomas, *Vindolanda*, 339 (349: 2).

Religio in the singular in Cicero's argument is a necessary consequence of any belief in a god, and finds its expression, as also its limits, in various feelings of religious obligation: *religiones*.¹⁰

So, there was a contract, in written form:

There is no doubt that in the Imperial Age more people acquired the ability to read written characters, even though advanced textual competence remained an elite phenomenon. Against this background, religion was increasingly regarded not only as something knowable, but also something that had to do with texts.¹¹

But Rüpke is rather more hesitant about the element of piety, at least in the early modern sense of the word:

Whereas both the request . . . and the thanks promised were embedded in a full and enduring communication, in the context of the votum institution they became discrete events in time. Once the obligation incurred by the vow had been made good, the tie binding the two parties in mutual responsibility was loosed.¹²

The dedication texts of the Nehalennia cult in Domburg and Colijnsplaat have been published by Petrus Stuart. Names of dedicants include at least the praenomen and nomen gentile of the dedicant, and often, also the cognomen and father's name. Fairly typical is the dedication of Sumaronius Primanus, who made good on his promise to Nehalennia and did so gladly and willingly: *Deae Nehalenniae Sumaronius Primanus v(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)*.¹³

In other cases, we find an explicit statement that this was being done by putting up a votive altar: *aram posuit*.¹⁴ This is not to say that Nehalennia could claim exclusivity. Even within her own temenos or temple grounds, dedications to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Neptune and the native Burorina—though less common—could also be found. Of all these deities it is said that they are venerated by travelers for their protective aspects, for instance in the phrase (note the plural): *Diis deabusque praesidibus provinciarum* (protectors).¹⁵

The procedure is traced back to the vow, made at the beginning of the journey, *ex voto susceptor*. In many cases the tone is almost business-like, especially when the dedicant refers to his thanks for better results (*ob meliores actus*) or refers to the

¹⁰ Jörg Rüpke, *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 181.

¹¹ Rüpke, *Pantheon*, 336.

¹² Rüpke, *Pantheon*, 336.

¹³ Petrus Stuart, *Nehalennia van Domburg: Geschiedenis van de stenen monumenten*, 2 vols. (Utrecht: Matrijs, 2013), 1:83–85 (24).

¹⁴ Stuart, *Nehalennia van Domburg*, 86 (26).

¹⁵ Stuart, *Nehalennia van Domburg*, 102–103 (38).

safe landing of his cargo (*ob merces bene conservatas*, in the wordings of a negotiator cretarius Britannicus (a merchant who specializes in exporting ceramics from the mainland to Britain).

More personal are the references to a feeling of obligation toward the deity, for instance in the phrase *ex precepto aram posuit pro salute filii sui*—an altar has been set up at her command and for the benefit of a son of the dedicant. The same idea can be expressed as *ex iussu, ex imperio ipseus* (ipsius) or *ex imperio eius*. In some cases, the actual year of the proceedings was noted, by adding a consular date.

Meaning

Finally, we may ask what meaning the making and fulfilling of a vow may have had for the dedicant. The most plausible explanation, still to be found in many books, is of course that of *do ut des*. In this way of thinking, it is commonly assumed that people invest in religion on the assumption of making a net profit in the end. The argument can be extended to presume that this assumption is grounded in a supernatural belief in divine powers that are both able to influence the human fate and open for negotiation. However, we have good reason to question the basic elements of this explanatory model. First, we may ask where the material gain is. Dedicants have no guarantee of a safe return while making his vow. All they know is that they have pledged to honor the deity in the hypothetic case of such a safe return. Apart from that, it should be noted that the Nehalennia corpus dates from the declining years of the classic Roman pantheon. As Neil Bernstein remarks in his discussion of Publius Papinius Statius' epical poem *Thebaid*, it was no longer possible for the cultured upper strata of society to believe in the simpler and supernatural versions of *do ut des*:

The *Thebaid* presents its readers with a series of difficult questions regarding the relationship between ritual, agency, and power. What is the point of engaging in ritual if it cannot certify a positive relationship with the gods? What is the point of moral decision-making in a world where the gods (i) deliberately conceal essential facts from human beings and (ii) remove agency from human beings by manipulating their emotions to the point where they are no longer capable of making rational choices?¹⁶

In fact, it may be that the *do ut des* explanation is not necessary at all to explain the veneration of seafarers for Nehalennia. Rather, we may speculate that for these dedicants, experience of life as such offered the impetus for their *religio*, instead of the

¹⁶ Neil Bernstein, "Ritual Murder and Suicide in the *Thebaid*," in *Ritual and Religion in Flavian Epic*, ed. Antony Augoustaki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 233–48 (247).

hope of gain or even an articulated belief in the supernatural. What we know is that we are people on the road, vulnerable and under the doom that we will die sooner or later. It is worth noting that a basic pattern found in the Nehalennia inscriptions is being repeated in post-Roman times. Memorial stones for the dead in early Christian Scandinavia typically maintain the importance of mentioning the dedicant's name, together with the person for whom the monument is being constructed in the first place. A reference to the Christian God may be added ("God is one"), but not in the form of any specific favors being asked.¹⁷ This is an indication of a form of awareness beyond *do ut des*, in our efforts during our everyday lives and also in our feelings of thanks for generosity offered to us even by a finite existence. Thanks are offered out of our free will, and perhaps also in the faint hope that our words may be read and registered by posterity.

A final question is how different this dedicatory spirituality is when compared to later developments in Christianity. Reflecting on this subject, I was struck by the similarity between the basic layout of the Nehalennia texts and that of Christian funerary inscriptions in the early modern era.¹⁸



CINERIBUS ET MEMORIAE
 GULEILMI CARWITHEN A.B.
 HUIUS ECCLESIAE
 ANN XLIV RECTORIS
 FILII NATU MAXIMI
 IOANNIS CARWITHEN A.B.

We can hardly fail to note the similarities: after having addressed the divine name, the text turns to a mortal man, recorded with some basic detail of family, profession and date. Also, the last words on a Christian headstone are often reserved for an expression of thanks.

¹⁷ Terje Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 96–98.

¹⁸ John Parker, *Reading Latin Epitaphs* (Exeter: Exeter Press, 2008), 5.

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