Nehalennia and the Marsaci

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Abstract

The goddess Nehalennia is known principally from two sanctuaries in Zeeland that have been dated to the late second and early third centuries. Variously explained as a Celtic or Germanic theonym, Nehalennia may best be understood in terms of the evidence of other names associated with Roman Zeeland. The Nehalennia sanctuaries are both situated in an area that seems likely to have fallen within the Roman civitas named for the Belgic Menapi, but the cult of Nehalennia appears likely to have been an originally Germanic development before it became more widely adopted by all manner of merchants who traded through the ports in the area. The theonym appears to record similar phonological developments to names recorded of Marsacian soldiers stationed in Roman Britain and Nehalennia accordingly appears to have been a goddess of the Marsaci.

Keywords

Nehalennia – Marsaci – West Germanic – historical dialectology

1 Introduction

In the last days of 1646, violent storms struck Domburg, on the island of Walcheren, Zeeland. In their wake the ruins of an ancient temple complex were revealed on the beach that had been obscured in the sand for centuries. On April 14, 1970, the first of what turned out to be an even larger trove of ancient altars dedicated to the same goddess was discovered by a fisherman, Klaas Bout, in the Eastern Scheldt estuary near Colijnsplaat, on North Beveland, about 25 kilometres east of Domburg. Some 331 fragments of ancient altar stones have since been uncovered from Domburg and Colijnsplaat, most
of those that preserve dedications being addressed to the ancient goddess Nehalennia (Hondius-Crone 1955, Stuart and Bogaers 2001, Stuart 2013). The votive stones from Domburg and Colijnsplaat are the most important epigraphic finds from ancient Zeeland, revealing much about Roman seafaring and trade in the second and third centuries. But the ethnic identity of the cult of the goddess has remained a matter of dispute since the nineteenth century.

Linguists first became interested in the Domburg finds the year they were discovered, variously attempting to analyse the goddess’s name as Celtic or Germanic. Two altars dedicated to Nehalennia were also found in 1776 in Deutz, the site of the fortress Divitia that guarded the Roman bridge over the Rhine at Cologne (CIL XIII 8498–99), but the Scheldt flowed through the ancient lands of the Menapi, a Belgic tribe, and the earliest investigators of the cult of Nehalennia varied between those who thought that the goddess had a Germanic name and those who considered her to represent an originally Celtic figure (Van Boxhorn 1647: 23–25, Keysler 1717: 29–37, Pougens 1810: 14). Simrock (1869: 357–58) compared the gemination of the nasal in Nehalennia with Gaulish forms such as Arduenna and Cebenna, and concluded that the theonym must be Celtic. But Kern (1871) pointed to the spelling of Nehalennia occasionally as Nehalenia and the similarity of the theonym to Old High German neihhen ‘to sacrifice’, translating Nehalen(n)ia as ‘the giver’. Celtic etymologies have continued to be proposed for the theonym, but Kern’s understanding that the -h- in Nehalennia makes it most likely to be a linguistically Germanic form has been upheld in most of the subsequent scholarship.

The river Scheldt is generally accepted to have a Germanic name – the Latin form Scaldis (Caesar, B.G. 6, 33) appears to be cognate with Old English sceald ‘shallow’ (Ekwall 1909: 210). Yet Kern’s connection of Nehalennia with Old High German neihhen ‘to sacrifice’ did not consider the Old English cognate hnǣcan ‘to kill’ which suggests that the two verbs continue an earlier *hnaikijanq and his connection of the -h- with a Germanic etymology did not stop continued attempts to prove that the theonym is Celtic. Detter (1887) suggested that the first syllable of Nehalennia should be connected with an otherwise unattested Germanic reflection of Ancient Greek νεκρός ‘dead’ (i.e. with Neh- < *nek- ‘to perish, to disappear’), but the most insightful of the nineteenth-century etymological studies was that proposed by Much (1891) who contended that Nehalennia is a compound comprised of elements related to Old English nēah, Old Saxon nāh and Old High German nah ‘near’ (< *nēhwa-) and Old Norse linna and Old English linnan ‘to cease, to stop’ (< *lenn-). Accordingly, Much proposed that the theonym should be interpreted as ‘the one who approaches near’ (in the sense ‘comes to help’). Much compared his etymology to the manner in which the Old Norse sea god Ægir is described in Gylfaginning (23):
Hann reðr fyrir göngu vinds og stillir sjá og eld. Á hann skal heita til sæfara ok til veiða. Hann er svá audigr ok fésæll at hann má gefa þeim auð landa eða lausafjár er á hann heita til þess

He rules the course of the wind and stills sea and fire. Men call on him for voyages at sea and for hunting. He is so prosperous and wealthy that he may give them riches in land or chattels if they call on him for such things.

Von Grienberger (1896: 1007) argued, however, that Nehalennia reflects a Celtic form on the same grounds as had Simrock, and the new century saw ever-more varied and improbable attempts to explain the theonym as Celtic or Germanic. A wide range of analyses have been adduced for the name of the Domburg goddess, most of which were surveyed and rejected by Neumann (2002) as phonologically irregular. Few of the linguistic analyses of Nehalennia to have been produced to date have offered much of an advance on Much’s, the most phonologically regular of the nineteenth-century etymologies.

2 Ganuenta and the Dedicants

Much’s analysis of Nehalennia appeared before the discovery of the Colijnsplaat finds, but after many of the Domburg altars had been lost. The 27 altars rescued in the seventeenth century had at first been kept in the church at Domburg and in 1845 Janssen published an edition of lithographic reproductions of the dedications. In 1848, however, lightning struck the church tower causing it to collapse and destroy many of the dedications. What remains of the seventeenth-century finds are mostly now held in the Zeeuws Museum in Middelburg, except for two conserved in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, and another that had been given in 1781 to the Académie de Bruxelles (Hondius-Crone 1955, Stuart 2013). The discoveries from Germany were found on the grounds of Deutz Abbey where many other altar stones have been found, evidently as repurposed materials used when Divitia was rebuilt in the early fourth century, but they have since both been lost. The majority of dedications to Nehalennia are preserved on the 220 altars discovered near Colijnsplaat in the 1970s and 80s that are conserved today in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, the Zeeuws Museum, the Koninklijk Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen and the Zeeuws Archeologisch Depot (Stuart & Bogaers 2001).

The Nehalennia altars are preserved in a range of states and have been dated from AD 180 to 230. Some of the altars are only known as fragments, but others represent particularly fine pieces of ancient masonry. The usual form
of a Roman altar is represented among both the Domburg and Colijnsplaat finds, with examples of basic plain dressed stone, on a base surmounted by a capital featuring a pediment, a focus and bolsters (*pulvini*) being well known from both of the sites. More elaborate altars from Domburg and Colijnsplaat include a niche featuring depictions of Nehalennia (usually) sitting in her temple, wearing a short cloak or cape of what seems to be a local type, holding fruit on her lap, accompanied by a dog and a fruit basket. Rarely the goddess is depicted standing rather than seated, but her short cape is always fastened by a brooch, presumably reflecting a form of regional dress. The goddess is also sometimes represented with her foot on the prow of a ship or with horns of plenty engraved on the sides of the altars.

The altars from Domburg are (or were) particularly fine with the majority of them featuring niches and depictions of the goddess. The representations of Nehalennia have led to much speculation regarding aspects of her cult, including suggestions that she may have been understood as a form of Isis (Kauffmann 1892), Hel (Güntert 1919: 55–59) or Iduna (Czarnowski 1927), or a protectress of the dead on their voyage to the afterlife (Wagenvoort 1971). Depictions of worshippers evidently bringing gifts and of a ceremony are represented on some of the altars. One of the Domburg finds and one of those from Colijnsplaat even feature trios of seated divinities, a form of depiction better known from representations of mother goddesses from the Rhineland (Hondius-Crone 1955: no. 16; Stuart & Bogaers 2001: no. A71; Biller 2010). Yet most recent assessments of the cult of Nehalennia have stressed aspects revealed by the dedicatory inscriptions preserved on the altars rather than those (possibly) reflected in the representations of the goddess that feature on so many of the altars.

Epigraphically, Nehalennia dedications are the commonest type of Germano-Roman inscription known to have survived from antiquity, with 147 dedications to the goddess recorded in legible states (Scheungraber 2020: 392–411). The inscriptions addressed to Nehalennia show some variation in the spelling of the theonym, with the attested alternations such as -h- ~ -ch- and -nn- ~ -n- being similar to those found among other Germano-Roman finds. The variations also include -ei- for -e- in the first element (albeit only once, in the fragmentary form Neih[--] from Domburg; *CIL* XIII 8798) and -ae- for -e- in the second (six times, in the Domburg and Colijnsplaat spellings *Nehalennia*; *CIL* XIII 8785 and *AE* 1973, 371; 1975, 642, 644 & 646, and 1997, 1164) which suggests that the first -e- may have been relatively high and the second was relatively low. Ignoring partial forms, Nehalennia’s name appears to have been spelled correctly 74 times (78%), with 21 irregular spellings, most of them featuring -n- for -nn- or -ae- for -e-. But it is not clear if spelling variations of this type have any phonological consequence. Similar variations are attested in
Latin inscriptions from elsewhere in Gaul and they may well just reflect idiosyncrasies introduced by the craftsmen (ordinatores) who set out the inscriptions on the altars (Pirson 1902: 18–21 & 88–89).

One of the key developments with the discovery of the finds from Colijnsplaat came with the reading of the dedication on one of the altars first published by Bogaers and Gysseling (1971). Revising his initial reading of the text that he had published in an exhibition catalogue of the finds earlier that year (Stuart & Bogaers 1971: no. 28), Bogaers (in Bogaers & Gysseling 1971: 86–89) interpreted one of the Nehalennia dedications as featuring a place-name that has since come to be used to refer to the Roman port near Colijnsplaat. The inscription is largely preserved intact, with the only lacuna appearing in the first line:

Deae Neha[le]niae
Gimio Ga-nuent(ae) cons(istens)
ν(otum) s(olvit) l(ibens) m(erito)

To the goddess
Nehalennia,
Gimio,
established (or residing)
at Ganuenta,
fulfilled (his) vow, willingly, deservedly.

Bogaers took the apparent toponym Ganuent(a) to refer to another site, perhaps the capital of the Frisiavones (Bogaers & Gysseling 1971b: 89). But Gysseling (in Bogaers & Gysseling 1971b: 89–92) explained Gimio as a Gaulish name and took Ganuenta to be a Belgic toponym, arguing that it was a development of the Indo-European noun *ǵénus ‘chin, jaw’ (cf. Sanskrit hānu- ‘jaw’, Latin gena ‘cheek’, Armenian cnawt ‘jaw, chin’, Tocharian āšanwem ‘jaws’, Welsh gen ‘cheek’ and Gothic kinnus ‘cheek, jawbone’). He linked Ganuenta to place-names such as Gendt in Gelderland (first recorded in the eighth century as Gannite) and Jambes in Namur (first recorded in the twelfth century as Jamneda), and noted that *ǵénus is reflected in Old Irish as gin ‘mouth’. Gysseling was a supporter of Kuhn’s (in Hachmann et al. 1962: 105–28) Northwest Block, and contending that the language of the ancient Belgae was distinct from Celtic and Germanic, Gysseling suggested that Ganuenta displayed Belgic (or Northwest Block) root vocalism and accordingly was the name of an onomastically Old Belgic settlement on a river mouth. His analysis of Belgian place-names as
Belgic (rather than Celtic or Germanic) is not supported by evidence external to his toponymic studies, however, and his analysis of Ganuent(a) is accordingly difficult to confirm, let alone assess.

Yet no obviously better linguistic interpretation of Ganuenta has since emerged. Toorians (2000:114) takes Ganuent(a) to be a Germanicised Celtic formation Gan(u)-yenta ‘mouth-place’ and Raepsaet-Charlier (2011: 207, n. 39) has argued that the altar’s text should be interpreted as an abbreviated patronymic Gan- followed by a reference to Venta Silurum in South East Wales. The name of the Italian port of Genoa (Latin Genua) has often been linked to Old Irish gin ‘mouth’ (Matasovic 2009:158), but there is no firm evidence that the Belgae were anything other than northern Gaulish tribes. Gysseling took place-names featuring -nt- to be very old formations, linked to Krahe’s (1965) Old European hydronymy, as if Ganuent(a) received its name before Celtic and Germanic settlers moved into the area. The morphologically closest comparable toponyms appear to be the names of the Roman forts Bannaventa (near Whilton Lodge, Northamptonshire), and Glannoventa (near Ravenglass, Cumbria) mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary (2, 8 and 10), and a similar hydronym Soluente is attested as the early medieval name for the Solent (Bede, H.E. 4, 16).

The Celtic roots Banna- ‘prominence’ (< *bandā) and Glanno- ‘shore’ (cf. Middle Welsh glan ‘river-bank, shore’) are etymologically transparent, but neither Sol- nor -uent- are. Delamarre (2010–12: 126–29) takes the British toponymic element -venta to reflect a derivative of *gʰehen- ‘to strike, to kill’ and anthroponyms such as Venticius and Ventidius (CIL VIII 11139 and XII 5686) also suggest that there was an onomastic root ūent- in Celtic. But a translation as ‘place of slaughter, place of sacrifice’ makes no sense for the hydronym Soluente, a form whose initial root seems most regularly associated with Celtic *sol- ‘take, acquire’ (cf. Lambert 2008). Following Kitson (1996: 77–81), Koch (2016) derives the Brittonic element instead from the Indo-European suffix *-uents ~ *-unts ‘ful, like, having the quality of’, a possessive adjectival suffix reflected in both Greek and Sanskrit (Sihler 1995: 354–55). Ganuent(a) lacks the connecting vowel attested in Bannaventa and Glannoventa, and although the spelling could reflect Ganu(u)ent(a), nothing directly comparable to Toorians’s Ganu- is clearly attested in Celtic. Ganuent(a) might be explained more regularly as a derivative of the Proto-Germanic verb *ganāną ‘to yawn, to gape’. Greek χασκω ‘to yawn, to gape’ has a nominal derivative χανος ‘mouth’ and rather than a Celtic place-name Ganuent(a) may similarly have preserved a nominal development of *ganāṇq ‘to yawn, to gape’ enlarged by the possessive adjectival suffix *-wenp- (< *-uents-).

Instead of preserving an admixture of ‘Old Belgic’, Celtic and Germanic (or even irregularly derived) roots, many of the names recorded as commissioners
of the altars dedicated to Nehalennia are also either regular Celtic or Germanic formations. The names of dedicants that are transparently Celtic include *Ambacthius, Exgingius, Exomnius, Exomnianus* and *Nertomarius* (*CIL* XIII 8784, 8788 & 8792; *AE* 1973, 362 and 1975, 642) each of which has a well-established Celtic etymology. *Ambacthius* is derived from Gaulish *ambaxtos* ‘servant’ and the gentilicium *Exgingius* continues the common Gaulish onomastic compound *exs-cing* ‘warrior’ (Schmidt 1957: 110 & 221). *Exomnius* reflects a similar, widely attested Celtic compound *exs-obno* ‘fearless’ and the gentilicium *Nertomarius* derives from a commonly attested Gaulish name that literally means ‘having great strength’ (Schmidt 1957: 213 & 249). Other instances of the name *Gimio* (*AE* 1973, 380) include patronymics of two men from Italy and Germany with what appear to be Celtic given names (*CIL* V 7306 & XIII 7819) and despite a similar onomastic root clearly being evident in Germanic, Weisgerber (1935: 319–20) linked *Gimio* with a Celtic root *gimo- that Thurneysen (1931: 8) had argued may be reflected in the Old Irish variant spelling *gem* ‘winter’ (< *ghéjóm ~ *ghimés*).

The clearly analysable Germanic names recorded on the altars from Zeeland are *Ammacius Hucdionis, Andanhianiu(s) Severus, Ascattinius Rasuco, Dacinus Liffionis, Flettius Gennalonis, Freio Palusonis, Neuto Lucani, Sumaronius Primanus, Sumaronius Vitalis, Vacrenus and Varausius Ahuconis* (*CIL* XIII 8779–80, 8783, 8786 & 8795; *AE* 1975, 644; 1991, 1253; 1997, 1161 & 1164; 2001, 1499 & 1504). *Ammacius* appears to reflect *amma* ‘grandmother’ or *ammônq ‘to irritate, to incite’ (Fürstemann 1900: 87) and his patronymic *Hucdio*, which is similar to the name *Huctia* found in 1962 on a tombstone from Derventio (Papcastle), Cumbria (*RIB* 3221), may continue the preterite stem *hukt- ‘squatted’ (Kroonen 2013: 252). Comparable names are not attested in the medieval languages, but as Raepsaet-Charlier (2011: 211) observes, forms derived from *amn-* are widely paralleled in Germano-Roman onomastics and include both simplex constructions such as *Amma* and *Ammus*, but also derivations including *Ammius, Ammianus, Amno, Ammil(l)0, Ammutius, Amminius, Ammiatius, Ammaca, Ammava, Ammalenus* and *Ammicia*. A Vandal named *Ammata*, a Frank called *Ammigus* and a Goth called *Ammius* are known from sixth-century sources, but the onomastic use of the root *amn-* seems to have fallen out of fashion in later times (Schönfeld 1911: 17–18).

The gentilicium *Andanhianiu(s)* is paralleled by the similar form *Andangianus*, the name of the raiser of a tombstone from Yonne (*CIL* XIII 2945), and it appears to continue an onomastic compound of *and- ‘end, tip, prominent’ and the root of *angô ‘barb’, both of which are employed as themes in medieval onomastics (Fürstemann 1900: 102–7). The spelling - *nh- in *Andanhianus* is reminiscent of that attested in the patronymic *Adenhus* from first-century
London (Tomlin 2016: no. 76, Mees 2023: 10–12) and it presumably reflects a Verners’ law variant *anhu- comparable to that reflected in *anhulaz ‘shoot, tip’ and *anhulō ‘strap’. Old High German ango suggests that the Proto-Germanic root was an n-stem and the alternation may reflect amphidynamic accent: *h₂ěnkō ~ *h₂ɨkněs. The parallel with Adenhus suggests that both forms may be taken from a Germanic dialect that retained accentual variants that had widely been lost from the medieval Germanic languages.

The pseudo-gentilicium (or non-Roman family name) Ascattinius appears to be derived from *aska- ‘ash tree’ (Gutenbrunner 1936: 78) and his cognomen Rasuco may reflect *rasaną ‘to rush’ enlarged by the suffix *-uk- also found in the name Hahucus on the Zwaanmerdam shield boss (Haalebos 1977: 200). Dacinus seems most likely to be etymologically Celtic (Delamarre 2007: 80), but his patronymic Liffio was taken by Gutenbrunner (1936: 79) to reflect the Germanic root *lībą ‘life’, a cognate of Lifana, the subject of a memorial from Carvoran, Northumberland (RIB 1830). Flettius probably represents a geminated form of *flēdi- ‘beautiful’ (Gutenbrunner 1936: 79) and his patronymic Gennalo may reflect *ginn- ‘holy, great’ (Gutenbrunner 1936: 79). Freio is paralleled as a Tungrian name (CIL XIII 3614) and more clearly reflects the Germanic adjective *frīja- ‘free’ while Neuto is reflected by another Tungrian form Neuto from Housesteads (Tomlin 2009: no. 14) and Neutto from Celles (CIL XIII 3826) which appear to be derivatives of *neutaną ‘to acquire use of’. Sumaronius presumably reflects *sumara- ‘summer’ (Gutenbrunner 1936: 79) and the two dedicants with this gentilicium from Colijnsplaat are paralleled by a Sumaronia Tasgilla from Metz (AE 1976, 475). Vacrenus appears to represent a derivation of *wakra- ‘alert, awake’ (Förstemann 1900: 1489–90), while Varausius seems to be a dithematic name, a compound of *war- ‘aware’ and *aus- ~ *auz- ‘dawn, light’ (Förstemann 1900: 210). Varausius’s patronymic Ahucco is also attested as the name of the recipient of a Roman military diploma discovered at Xanten (Roxan & Holder 1978–2006: no. 52) and appears to be a derivative of *ahjanq ‘to think’ enlarged by the suffix *-uk-.

Other likely Germanic dedicants include Bosiconius Quartus (AE 2001, 1489), M(arcus) Ottinius Frequens (AE 1997, 1162), Huni[-]o (AE 2001, 1493), [---]obiu(s) Libilus (AE 2001, 1506), Tagamas Tagadiani (AE 2001, 1452) and T(itus) Tagadunius Adiutor (AE 1975, 645). Raepsaet-Charlier (2003: 297–98) links Bosiconius with medieval names like Boso (Förstemann 1900: 329–30) that reflect an earlier *bausa- ‘evil, swollen up, proud’ (Kroonen 2013: 56), and a similar monophthongisation of *au > ō would explain Ottinius as a reflection of *aud- ‘rich’, much as is the medieval German king’s name Otto (Förstemann 1900: 185–206). Raepsaet-Charlier (2003: 298) restores Huni[-]o as Huni[c]o or Huni[o] given Hunicius from Cologne (CIL XIII 7858), Hunatto from Namur.
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(AE 2004, 939) and the name of the late-third-century Gothic princess Hunila (Schönfeld 1911: 142). Libilus may be another reflection of *lībą ‘life’ comparable to the Batavian name Libela (CIL XIII 10017, 516) and given the composition vowel -a-, Tagamas, Tagadianus and Tagadunius all seem likely to be Germanic and to preserve an initial element *pag- ‘silent’ (Kroonen 2013: 531). The element -mas is analytically difficult – it may reflect a cognate of a root such as *mati- ‘food’ – but a similar name Tagomas is attested in three inscriptions from Vindolanda (Birley 2011: 266), -ad- may reflect the root also found in Adenhus and -dun- (perhaps reflecting *dusna- ‘brown’) is another element attested in medieval Germanic names (Forstemann 1900: 432–33).

Names of dedicants such as Bosiconius Quartus and Ammacius Hucdionis demonstrate that two different types of Germano-Roman binomina had developed by the early third century. The dedicants from Domburg and Colijnspaat that have Germanic names typically have a pseudo-gentilicum ending in -ius, a suffix which was employed in the Roman provinces to form family names from patronymics, and either a cognomen such as Latin Quartus ‘Fourth (son)’ or a patronymic like Hucdionis. The preponderance of family names in -ius in the Nehalennia dedications contrasts with the onomastic style employed in first-century inscriptions for figures such as the Batavians Imerix son of Servofredus (AE 1971, 299) and Flavus son of Vihirmas (CIL XIII 8771), and indicates that most of the dedicants were Roman citizens (rather than peregrini or free provincial subjects of the Empire). Even when Germano-Roman dedicants to Nehalennia feature patronymics, their first name usually features the suffix -ius typical of the family names of Roman citizens. Other Germano-Roman pseudo-gentilicia recorded on the altars include Andanhianiu(s), Ascattinius, Flettius, Ottinius, Sumaronius and Varausius, and they even include forms such as Flett- and Ott- that feature geminates, a development only found otherwise in Germanic names that are formed from single onomastic themes (cf. Neuto and the Tungrian name Neutto). Nedoma (2022: 200–1) has recently claimed that the form holtijaz on the Gallehus horn (Krause & Jankuhn 1966: no. 43) cannot represent a patronymic, citing the retention of the nasal in Old Norse hveðnir ‘a type of fish’ (< *hwaþanijaz), but Flettius appears to demonstrate that n-stems could lose their nasal marking when forming similar constructions in early Germanic.

Unlike those from Domburg, the dedicants from Colijnspaat are also often described in terms of their occupation and appear to have included those of traders in commodities such as salt, fish sauce, pottery, wool, wine, oak, limestone, sandstone and perhaps Menapian ham. Some of the merchants are also recorded as stemming from Britain, Gaul and Roman Germany rather than being local inhabitants of Ganuenta. The dedicants from both sites are

Similarly, Bosiconius Quartus is described as a ship’s captain (*actor navis* of Florus Severus (*AE 2001, 1489*), and one of the salt merchants, M(arcus) Exgingius Agricola, is recorded as being a Treveran citizen from Cologne, while another dedicant, C(aius) Iul(ius) Florentinus, is indicated, similarly as an Agrippinian or Ubian. The altar raised by M(arcus) Ottinius Frequens even indicates that he was a [*sevir* Aug(ustalis*) at Cologne, a member of a college of priests of the imperial cult in the colony. A fish oil merchant, C(aius) Catullinius Secco, is also recorded as being a Treveran citizen, and several dedicants from Colijnsplaat are recorded as being merchants who traded out of British ports, including Placidus son of Viducus, a Veliocassinian citizen, presumably from Rotomagus (Rouen), who in AD 221 erected another altar that was found in 1976 in York (*RIB 3195*). Other merchants are recorded as having come from Sequania (*cives Secuanus*) and the canton of Basel (*civitatis Rauricorum*), both of which were Celtic-speaking regions in Germania Superior at the time.

The dedications to Nehalennia that feature Germanic names are often less loquacious than those that are more clearly Roman. The altar raised by C(aius) Catullinius Secco is plain, only featuring adornment (bolsters and a pediment) on its capital, but it features 11 lines of well-formed characters, whereas the similarly plain altar of Freio Palusonis also from Colijnsplaat features only six lines of text and they are less well executed. The altar commissioned by Dacinus son of Liffio found at Domburg features a niche with a depiction of the goddess and it is richly decorated, but M(arcus) Exgingius Agricola’s commission from Colijnsplaat is similarly decorated and features twice as many lines of text as does Dacinus’s commission. The dedicants with Celtic and Latin names typically have trinomina, while those that include Germanic formations are mostly binomina as if they reflect a less fully Romanised onomastic tradition. A social hierarchy seems to be reflected not only by the quality of the
altars and the lengths of text their dedications record, but also in terms of the linguistic origin of many of the dedicants’ names.

3 Nehalennia and Germanic *ē₁

Rather than controlled by the Menapi, in antiquity the region about the Scheldt estuary has usually been assumed to have been under the local authority of a Germanic tribe, Bogaers (1972: 311) suggesting the Marsaci and Raepsaet-Charlier (2002: 36) the Sturi. Pliny (N.H. 4, 17) describes the Texuandri, Menapi, Morini and Marsaci as living near the Scheldt, but nothing is known about the Sturi except that Pliny places them somewhere between Helinium and Flevum along with the Marsaci, and that members of the tribe later served as scouts (exploratores) at the border fort at Waldiirn in Baden-Württemberg (AE 1983, 729). In contrast, the Marsaci are recorded in inscriptions from the Rhine Delta (Zandstra 2019: 159 & 170–71), the Rhineland (CIL XIII 8303, 8317, 8630 & 8632), Britain (RIB 919 & 926) and Rome as soldiers serving in their own ethnic detachment as well as members of the Emperor’s bodyguard, the equites singulares (CIL VI 3263 & 32869a and AE 1954, 78, 1973, 63 and 1989, 30). The ethnonym Marsaci is clearly Germanic (as inherited *-rs- > -rr- in all the Celtic languages) and it appears to derive from a root *mars- that was associated by Müllenhof (1900: 126) with Gothic marzjan ‘to impede, to hamper’, Old English mierran ‘to impede, to get lost’, Old Saxon mierran ‘to disturb, to annoy’, Old Dutch merren ‘to wait, to linger’ and Old High German marrrjan ‘to impede, to tie up’ (Neumann 2001), while Sturii seems to have been related to Old Norse styrr ‘a stir, a tumult, a battle’ and Old English gestyr ‘movement, action’. Unlike the Marsaci, however, the Sturi do not seem to have been a particularly significant people in Zeeland at the time that the Nehalennia altars were being produced.

Nehalennia appears likely to have been a Marsacian deity and to preserve an early Germanic name indicating nearness. In his survey of the Germanic theonyms preserved in Roman inscriptions, Gutenbrunner (1936: 77–82) accepted Much’s analysis of Nehalennia, but the discovery of the Colijnsplaat inscriptions inspired a new raft of unlikely etymological proposals. Gysseling (in Bogaers & Gysseling 1971a: 83–85) began by claiming that Nehalennia was best explained as a Belgic name formed from an Indo-European root *nei- ‘to lead’. He rejected Much’s interpretation of Nehalennia as requiring a phonological development of *nēhwa- ‘near’ > Neha- which, following Gutenbrunner’s (1936: 14–18) survey of the phonology of the Germano-Roman inscriptions,
Gysseling claimed was anachronistic. Translating *Nehalennia* as ‘the leader’, Gysseling explained -al-ennia as a double suffix, with the gemination a sign of the Belgic origin of the theonym. Like his explanation of *Ganuent(a)*, however, Gysseling’s analysis of *Nehalenna* as Belgic was linguistically irregular.

Gysseling (1982: 217) later proposed that *Nehalennia* should be connected to the Indo-European root *nei* - ‘to shine’. But Cramer-Peeters (1972) favoured taking the disputed first element of *Nehalennia* as featuring a cognate of Old Norse njól ‘darkness’ as if the expected West Germanic reflex of *b* preserved in Old Frisian neval, Old Saxon nebal and Old High German neböl ‘fog’ (< *nebilaz, *nebulaz) had been elided from the theonym. Relying on a phonological development that is only attested in Old Norse, her analysis was rejected by Neumann (2002) in his entry on Nehalennia in the *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*. Neumann also dismissed Polomé’s (1985: 311–14) resurrection of Dettter’s (1887) connection of *Nehalennia* with Ancient Greek νεκρός ‘dead’ as a reflection of *nek* - ‘to perish, to disappear’ is not clearly attested in Germanic. Instead, Neumann agreed with Much’s analysis of Neha-, but rejected his explanation of -ennia as semantically contrived. Neumann argued that -ennia should be identified with Old Frisian lin ‘pond’ and Old Norse linnr ‘well’ followed by a suffix -nja equivalent to that reflected in Old English gyden and Old High German gutin (< *gudinjō) ‘goddess’. Neumann translated *Nehalennia* as a bahuvrihi ‘having the water near’ in the maritime sense ‘she who lives on the shore’.

In the same year as Neumann’s entry appeared, Rübekeil (2002: 156–64) offered a new attempt to interpret the theonym as Celtic. He claims that the spelling -h- in *Nehalennia* should be explained as reflecting hiatus and that the theonym should consequently be derived from a Celtic adjective *nēalo-, perhaps meaning ‘strong’, that is not otherwise attested. Rejecting Rübekeil’s explanation, De Bernardo Stempel (2004) analyses the goddess’s name as Ne-halen(n)-ia < *ni-salen-ia, translating the theonym as ‘the one in the saltwater, the one in the sea’. Agreeing that *Nehalennia* is a Celtic formation, she compares the theonym to Middle Welsh halen and Old Irish salann ‘salt’ in a manner comparable to Schrijver’s (1995) otherwise unparalleled analysis of *Helinium*. Gysseling had connected the geminate nasal with a series of other forms from northern Gaul and Roman Germany that Weisgerber (1968: 376–84) had contended demonstrated a regional tendency and De Bernardo Stempel explains the geminate in *Nehalennia* in a similar manner. Yet De Bernardo Stempel’s analysis is substantially irregular. The form ni- is attested in Gaulish as a preverb meaning ‘down’ (in the apparent calque nitixsintor ‘defigantur’; Lambert 2003: 169) and it is only expected in Celtic before a verb – the preposition required
in De Bernardo Stempel’s explanation is attested in Gaulish as in (Lambert 2003: 168 & 171). Moreover, the Gaulish cognate of Middle Welsh halen and Old Irish salann ‘salt’ should be expected to appear as *salen- or *salan- (Matasovic 2009: 319) – as Stifter (2012) explains, there is no evidence that Gaulish ever featured lenition of s > h.

Yet Neumann’s connection of the element -lenna with Old Frisian lind ‘pond’ and Old Norse linnr ‘well’ is also irregular. The Germanic cognates are reflected by Middle Welsh llyn ‘drink, lake’, but Old Irish lind ‘water, drink, ale’ and Gaulish linda ‘drinks’ indicate that the Germanic cognates continue *lind-, not *lend-, and are presumably derived from *liHnd- to Indo-European *leiH- ‘to flow’ (Matasovic 2009: 239–40). They must also have reflected a meaning ‘drinking water, fresh water’, an unlikely semantic for the name of a goddess worshipped by salt merchants and mariners. As West Germanic *gudinjō ‘goddess’ shows, constructions with the suffix *-njō also typically preserve an apophonic medial vowel (-i- or -u-), even in forms with heavy stems such as Old High German friuntin ‘female friend’ and Old High German fīantin ‘female enemy’ (Krahe & Meid 1969: 19–20). The apophony and lack of syncopation even shown in heavy-stemmed forms suggest that *-njō was derived from a suffix similar to that used to form theonyms such as *Wōdinaz ~ *Wōdanaz (Zimmer 2015: 382–83). Neumann’s modification of Much’s etymology does not represent an improvement given the phonological, morphological and semantic issues it raises.

Polomé (1985: 312) agreed with Gysseling that the relative chronologies of *ē > ā and *-hw- > -h- rendered Much’s etymology unlikely. Both the medieval North and West Germanic languages preserve clear evidence of *ē > ā and the development has long been dated to a period before the Nehalennia altars were being raised. Yet the delabialisation of *nēhwa- ‘near’ > Neha-assumed by Much is paralleled in the neighbouring ethnonym Texuandri which is recorded as Texand(ri) in a second or third-century altar inscription from Carrowburgh (RIB 1538; Bijsterveld & Toorians 2018: 37). The spelling Texand(ri) (< *tehswa- ‘those on the right (bank)’; cf. Gothic taihswa and Old High German zeso ‘right’) preserves evidence that the West Germanic delabialisation of *-wa- > -a- attested in adjectives descended from *nēhwa- ‘near’ and *tehswan- ‘right’ dates to the first or second century. A dedication from Old Penrith commissioned by what seems to have been a detachment of Marsaci stationed at the Roman fort of Voreda (Mees 2023: 120–23) also records a name Arcavius (RIB 926) that may reflect *arhw- ‘arrow’ (cf. Latin arcus ‘arrow’). Similarly, the name or epithet Fersomeris recorded in the Old Penrith dedication had originally been read as Fersomaris (Haverfield 1911: 470–71) and was
accordingly employed by Gutenbrunner (1936: 17–18) to date *ē > *ā to before the time of the Nehalennia altars. But the lower section of the second -e- is quite clear in Collingwood’s (RIB 926) sketch of the Old Penrith altar and it appears in the element -mēr- ‘famous’ where *ē has developed to *ā in -mariz on the third-century Thorsberg chape (Krause and Jankuhn 1966: no. 20). Like Nehalennia, Fersomeris also attests a retained composition vowel at a time when Batavian, Tungrian, Suebian and Ubian names all show evidence for the loss of composition vowels after prosodically heavy first elements (Mees 2022a: 4, 2022b: 35–36).

Retained *ē seems to be commonly recorded in Germanic names preserved in Roman inscriptions. A name Belada recorded in a graffito from Xanten (Weiss-König 2010:84) appears likely to reflect *bēla- ‘(bon)fire, pyre’ and Retoma, the name of a dedicant on an altar from Xanten (CIL XIII 8614), seems to have a name that reflects *rēti- ‘fierce’. Negalatian(i)us in a dedication from Fronhoven (AE 1984, 693) appears to vary with the partial Batavian form Negae[t] from Vindolanda (Tab. Vindol. 594) and Negalaet[i]us from Bockelmünd (CIL XIII 8513), and all three forms appear to preserve the Vernerised reflex of *nēhwa- ‘near’ attested on the Franks casket as -neg (Bammesberger 2011). This lack of indication of the expected West Germanic lowering and retraction of *ē > *ē or *ā is not just widely recorded epigraphically, however, but also in some of the Malberg glosses. The Malberg term rēdunia ‘lead sow’ (< *wrēþu-) is only written once with an <a> in the glosses and lēt ‘half-free’ (< *lēt-) is typically written with <e> and even <i> (Quak 2016). Germanic *e also usually lowers to i in Germanic when it comes before a nasal, but the retained -e- in -lennia is paralleled by the similar retention in the early Germanic ethnonym Tencteri (Caesar, B.G. 4, 4) and in the Frisian place-name Baduhenna (Tacitus, Ann. 4, 72). All the phonological developments assumed in Much’s etymology of Nehalennia are consistent with forms preserved in sources that are contemporary to or earlier than the Domburg and Colijnsplaat inscriptions.

The semantic plausibility of Much’s analysis may also be assessed with reference to later Germanic reflections of its (proposed) constituent elements. In Old English, compounds with nēah ‘near’ generally fall into two categories: those like nēahgebur ‘neighbour’, nēahmǣg ‘near kinsman’ and nēahpēod ‘neighbouring people’ that refer to people, and those such as nēahēa ‘nearby river’, nēahtūn ‘nearby town’ and nēahwudu ‘neighbouring wood’ that refer to geography. Old English nēahgebur ‘neighbour’ reflects a pan-West Germanic coinage (cf. Old Saxon nāhbūr and Old High German nāhgibūro ‘neighbour’) and similar compounds are also attested in Old Norse such as náfrændi ‘near kinsman’ and nábyli ‘neighbouring farm’. Yet the Old Norse goddess Freyja is called nákvær ‘helpful’ (< *nēhwa-kwēmi-) by Snorri in Gylfaginning (24), a
compound that literally indicates ‘near-coming’ and that supports Much’s etymology of Nehalenna. There is also an adverb represented by Gothic néhō ‘near, close’ that is widely attested as a preverb in Old Norse and the West Germanic dialects (with many later formations evidently modelled on constructions such as Old High German nāhfaran ‘to follow’ where the preverb has been reinterpreted semantically as ‘after’), but the composition vowel in Nehalennia indicates that its first element is an adjective not a preverb.

Under Much’s analysis, the second element of Nehalennia is a deverbal construction formed from a verb *lenn- that has long had a disputed etymology. Previous attempts to explain the geminate in Old Norse linna and Old English līnna ‘to stop’ had ascribed it to an otherwise unparalleled *-nu-present (Snyder 1971: 75) or a laryngeal (Lühr 1976: 79). But Kroonen (2013: 339) reconstructs it as *lennōnq ‘to weaken, to stop’ (< *lennþnōnq), an inchoative denominal to *lennaz, *lennijaz ‘gentle, soft, tender’ (cf. Old Norse līnr ‘gentle, soft’, Old English līþ, līþe ‘gentle, soft’, Old Saxon līthi ‘gentle, soft’ and Old High German lind, lindi ‘gentle, tender’, Latin lentus ‘flexible, sticky, tough, slow’ and Lithuanian leñtas ‘quiet, calm’). Feminine *lennō, *lennijō is a common element in West Germanic women’s names, from the Merovingian runic form aodlind (Nedoma 2004: no. 12) to later names such as Fridulind, Sigilind and Thiodlind. Nedoma (2004: 192–93) stresses that *lennō, *lennijō is a relatively late onomastic theme in Germanic as it is not reflected in East Germanic names. But it is so widely attested in West Germanic onomastics that *lennō, *lennijō seems a particularly suitable element to appear in the name of a goddess who was evidently thought to protect cargos and ships from misadventure. The Old Norse tradition that Njǫrðr ‘stills seas’ (stillir sjá) suggests a similar interpretation of -lennia, although a reference to winds or storms may have been implied by the theonym. Given Nehalennia’s function of ensuring safe passage at sea recorded in the dedications, her name seems to be most regularly taken as a synthetic compound ‘the nearby stopper (of storms)’ or ‘the nearby calmer (of the seas)’.

4 Burorina and the Marsaci

The Nehalennia dedications seem to have survived in such large numbers as the submerging of the sanctuaries in sea water, perhaps already before the end of the third century, preserved the altars. Coins dating from the late first to the third century and sherd of imported Roman pottery from the second and third centuries have also been found in the area, as well as amphorae for wine or oil and a variety of plates and dishes. As in much of Gaul, the commissioning
of altars to Nehalennia appears to have stopped during the third-century imperial crisis which began in AD 235 with the assassination of the Emperor Severus Alexander by his troops at Mainz. The local economy underwent a severe contraction as an extended civil war erupted, with a procession of generals declared emperor by their armies only to be assassinated and replaced by rivals. The production of inscriptions in Roman Germany largely ceased by the middle of the century as the first invasions of the provinces by Franks and Alemanni began. In 260, the Batavian general Postumus was declared ruler of a breakaway Gallic Empire by his army and his assassination in 274 was followed by renewed Frankish incursions. The Roman economy began to recover toward the end of the third century during the reign of Diocletian, but by that time much of the Lower Rhine had been given over to Frankish tribes, and the Scheldt had become part of the region settled by the Salian Franks.

Yet Nehalennia was not the only divinity venerated at the small Gallo-Roman temple at Domburg. Unlike at Colijnsplaat, other figures associated with trade and seafaring were recorded among the remains of the Domburg sanctuary, both in terms of inscriptions and figurative sculpture. Representations of other gods – Neptune, Jupiter and Hercules – are occasionally depicted on the sides of the Nehalennia altars, and a small statue of Nehalennia was discovered at Domburg as well as three larger representations of Neptune and Victoria. The seventeenth-century finds from Walcheren also include an altar that preserves a dedication to Hercules Magusanus (CIL XIII 8777) that was discovered further along the coast at Westkapelle, near Domburg, and that is usually thought to have originally stood in the temple of Nehalennia. An altar raised to Iovi O(ptimi) M(aximi) 'Jupiter the Best and the Greatest' was also found in the Walcheren dunes that was commissioned by a dedicant whose name has been read as Texquisius Facii, but is more plausibly taken as a Germanic compound name Texovisius followed by a patronymic Facius (CIL XIII 8778). Texovisius appears to feature the Germanic elements *tehswa- ‘right’ and *wīsaz ‘wise’, with the first root apparently featuring the same delabialisation as is attested in the name of Nehalennia and the ethnonym Tex(u)andri, while the comparable Germanic name Fahena from a dedication found at Haus Gripswald, North Rhine-Westphalia (CIL XIII 8571), suggests that Facius may reflect *fah-‘joy’ rather than *fak- ‘enclosure’. An altar dedicated to Diis deabusque praesidibus provinciae Concordiae ‘all the gods and goddesses of the province and to Concordia’ (CIL XIII 8776) was also discovered at the Domburg site, but the inscription does not name the dedicant. Two altars dedicated to Neptune were also recovered at Domburg, but only one had a legible inscription (CIL XIII 8803). The dedication records that the altar was raised by Octavius Ammius, a dedicant whose gentilicium suggests that one of his ancestors first became a Roman citizen during the rule of the Emperor Augustus and whose cognomen
appears to feature another reflection of the Germanic root *amma- ‘grandmother’ or *ammōṇq ‘to irritate, to incite’.

The most remarkable of the other altars found at Domburg is that dedicated to Burorina, a goddess who is not otherwise attested (CIL XIII 8775). Gutenbrunner (1936: 108) took Burorina to be a Celtic name, comparing it to the epithet Medurinus used of the Celtic god Toutatis in a dedication from Rome (CIL VI 3182), and Toorians (2015) compares it to Gaulish names such as Burrus and Burra (Delamarre 2007: 50). But Proto-Germanic had a preterite stem *bur- ‘born, carried, gave birth to’ that is reflected in *buri- ‘son’ and in medieval onomastics (Förstemann 1900: 351–52). The second element of the goddess’s name might also be understood as cognate with Old Norse Rín, Old English Rīn and Old High German Rīn ‘Rhin(e) (< *Reinos; cf. Old Irish rían ‘sea, ocean, course, route, path’). Burorina can be interpreted as a reverse compound and may literally have been a goddess who was held to have given birth to the Rhine or was considered a daughter of the Rhine, but she may also have been considered a goddess who protected cargo borne on the Rhine by merchants. The altar stone is plain, and the name of the dedicant is not indicated in the only roughly executed seven-line text. Nonetheless Burorina may have been considered a freshwater counterpart of Nehalennia or Burorina may even have been another name for the goddess of Domburg that, like the dedications raised to Nehalennia found at Deutz, indicates that she also had a connection with the Rhine.

Merchants travelling the Scheldt seem to have also made their way up the Rhine carrying goods from one part of Gaul to another as well as venturing across the North Sea to Britain. But the shrines to Nehalennia appear to have been built in the territory of the Marsaci and her name seems likely to have been a Marsacian coinage. A Germanic unit named for the Marsaci stationed at Voreda appears to be mentioned in a military diploma issued in either AD 152 or 153 as a Cohors I Batavor(um) Marsacorum (AE 2016, 2021) and an early-third century dedication from Old Penrith to the Deabus Matribus Tramarinis or ‘Mother Goddesses from Overseas’ and the cult of the emperor (Severus) Alexander and his mother Julia Mamea was commissioned by a vexillum M[a][r]cii Maturae (RIB 919). The Marsaci seem to have been related to the Rhine-Weser Marsi and the Suebian Marsigni, with Marsi being the name of the original tribe. The Marsi were massacred by Germanicus as revenge for their role in the Battle of the Teutoberg Forest – ‘no sex, no age found pity’ (non sexus, non aetas miserationem attulit) according to Tacitus (Ann. 1, 51). But like the Marsigni, whose name seems to preserve a Latinised form of the Germanic patronymic and ablative suffix *-ing-, the Marsaci appear to have originally been a fraction of the Marsi.
Neumann (2001) explains the suffix -ak- in Marsaci as a Gaulish equivalent of -ing-, indicating descent, employed in an otherwise Germanic ethonym. But enlargements of this type are widely attested in West Germanic, for example in Old Saxon fetherak ‘wing’ to fethera ‘feather’ (Krahe & Meid 1969: 211–16), and Russell (1988: 138) could only cite the Levaci and the Mattiaci (who appear to have taken their name from Mattium, the capital of the Chatti) as other examples of ethnonyms that feature the enlargement. Given their presence in the fortresses of the Rhine delta, Old Penrith, Xanten, Cologne, and as members of the Emperor’s bodyguard, the Marsaci appear to have been another Germanic tribe who, like the Batavi, the Cannanefates, the Cugerni and the Ubii, had agreed in Augustan times to supply soldiers to the Roman army. Yet from a linguistic perspective, the most important feature of the Marsaci is their connection with Nehalennia.

Just as the name Arcavius appears as if it may feature delabialisation comparable to that attested in Nehalennia, the Old Penrith dedication also features two forms with retained *ē. The Old Penrith dedication is addressed to Omnibus Dibus Unse|nis Fersomeris and Much (1917: 292) analysed Unsenis as a cognate of the ninth-century Old High German gloss unsāni ‘deformis, incultus’, preserving an inherited *ē that evidently had not lowered to ā. Much explained Unsenis as the name of a dedicator that (literally) indicated ‘unsightly’, and Gutenbrunner (1936: 21) explained Much’s interpretation as reflecting an adjective derived from Gothic saiwhan, Old Norse sjá, Old English sēo, Old Saxon sehan and Old High German sehan ‘to see’ (< *sehwang) – Unsenis appears to be a privative, nasal-enlarged development of *sēhwiz ‘visible’ comparable to Old Norse -sær ‘visible’ (Kroonen 2013: 432, Scheungraber 2020: 554). Both Unsenis and Fersomeris are inflected as if they are dative plural qualifiers of Omnibus Dibus ‘to all the gods’, however, as both should have been Germanic ja-stems and the name of the dedicator Arcavius is represented without syncope of its stem vowel.

Much suggested that the first element of Fersomeris be compared to Old Norse fors ‘waterfall’ and noted that a monothematic patronymic Fersio is preserved on a funerary stone first recorded in 1702 at Housesteads on Hadrian’s Wall (RIB 1620). Old Norse fors (< *fursaz) continues a zero-grade variant of the Indo-European verbal root *pers- ‘to sprinkle’ (Kroonen 2013: 161–62) and Ferso- presumably reflects the expected e-grade variant as if Fersomeris was an epithet that literally meant ‘sprinkle-fame’. The names of the other dedicators of the Old Penrith altar that could still be read clearly are Burcanius, presumably a derivative of the preterite stem *burg- ‘protected’, and Vagdvarcustus which more clearly continues the name of the Germanic goddess Vagdavercustis worshipped mainly by the Cugerni (CIL XIII 8662, 8702–3 & 8805: AE 2012, 978 and
The theonym Vagdavercustis was first assessed etymologically by Much (1917) in the light of an analysis by Kluge (1913: 130) of the second element of her name as reflecting *werakust- ‘virtue’ and Much (1917: 288) linked the Old Penrith spelling of -vercust- as -varcust- with the spelling of the ethnonym Germani as Garmani by early medieval Welsh authors noted by Bede (H.E. 5, 9). The spelling is also found in Welsh loanwords from Latin and is characteristic of British Latin (Adams 2007: 609–10).

Just like the theonym Nehalennia, the inscriptions from Old Penrith appear to indicate that Marsacian retained *ē unlowered but had delabialised *-hw- > -h-. The lowering of *ē > ā appears to have already begun to occur in Suebian by the time that the Nehalennia altars were erected, but as Quak (2016) argues, it evidently occurred much later in the Low Countries. Quak sees the lowering as an early Elbe-Germanic development that did not occur in Frankish until a much later date, much as the Old English dialects preserve inherited *ē as ā or ē. Examples of retained *ē are also clearly reflected in some early Frankish names – Quak cites 28 sixth-century examples with <e> in contrast to 15 with <a>. Quak suggests that these variations indicate that there were dialectal differences within Frankish, but the evidence for retained *ē in the Malberg glosses might also be associated with the influence of languages such as Marsacian in the Low Countries as late as the Merovingian period.

5 Conclusion

The proper etymological analysis of Nehalennia has been disputed since Van Boxhorn first attempted to analyse the theonym shortly after the first dedications to the goddess were discovered in the seventeenth century at Domburg. The most phonologically regular analysis of the theonym was that proposed by Much, but problems with his etymology were raised by critics such as Gutenbrunner, Gysseling and Polomé. Much's acceptance of a retained *ē in a theonym that he proposed also featured a delabialised *hw and his reliance on an unlikely semantic development of *lennōnq ‘to weaken, to stop’ were the main drawbacks to a broader acceptance of his analysis. Yet the similar delabialisation attested in the ethnonym Tex(u)andri and (presumably) in the Marsacian name Arcavius support Much’s analysis as does the more widespread evidence for retention of unlowered *ē. The theonym Nehalennia can be interpreted quite regularly as ‘the nearby stopper (of storms)’ or ‘the nearby calmer (of the seas)’ in a similar manner as the Old Norse goddess Freya is described in Gylfaginning as nákvæmr, a helper of those that came near to her, and her father Njörðr was held to be a ruler of the winds and a stiller of the seas.
The Nehalennia dedications preserve more evidence for Germanic than just the much-discussed theonym and the language they preserve is mostly clear. The local dialect spoken in Roman Zeeland appears to be phonologically older in some respects than is usually reconstructed for West Germanic, but it also features some developments that are not shared by North Germanic. The retention of *ē and *e before n represent linguistic archaisms while the apparent monophthongisation of *au found in some of the names of commissioners of altars to Nehalennia is usually accounted a relatively late development. The retention of the composition vowel in both Nehalennia and Persomaris is not paralleled in dialects such as Batavian, Tungrian and Ubian that evidence loss of composition vowels by the second and third centuries. Yet the inscriptions from Domburg and Colijnsplaat do not all preserve Marsacian names, but evidently include those of merchants stemming from other Germanic-speaking parts of the empire. Only the retention of *ē, *e before n and of composition vowels after prosodically heavy first elements as well as the delabialisation of *hw > h can be considered clearly attested distinguishing features of Marsacian.

References


