

THE «OLD» CELTIC GODDESS *SENA*: A NEW TESTIMONY FROM AQUITANIA

Abstract: The inscription *Sena[e]* on a small votive altar from Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges is interpreted as a further instance of the Old Celtic theonym *SENA* «The Old One» which we find worshipped under various forms in Britain, Gaul, Noricum and Spain and to which, according to Pomponius Mela, an important sanctuary was dedicated on the Ile de Sein in front of Point du Raz (Dép. Finistère).

Key-words: Aquitania, Bibracte, Britain, Celtic theonyms, dea Sena, dea Senuna, deae Senae, deus Senaicos, deus Veter, dii/deae Veteres, Hispania, Ile de Sein, Noricum, Pomponius Mela, *RIG-L-82i*, Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges.

The Celtic goddess *SENA* «The Old» is named, probably in the dative singular *Senae*¹, as the first word on a small votive altar (cm. 16,4 x 10 x 8,2) found in 1938 in Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, where it had been reused in the medieval wall of the north terrace of the cathedral.

The inscription *SENA[E]* in comparatively big and regular characters (2,3 cm. high) seems to occupy if not the whole at least the larger part of the first and only line preserved of the dedication, the inscribed field extending to a width of 6,5 cm.

The arula has been published —with a good photograph— as no. 53 in the 1988 collection by Sablayrolles and Schenck of all the votive altars in the Musée Archéologique Départemental de Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges. Unfortunately, though, the editors did not recognize the Celtic deity as such, therefore tentatively suggesting that «La seule ligne conservée de l'inscription, qui paraît être la première du champ épigraphique, contient peut-être le nom du dédicant» (1988, p. 62). Even less satisfactory is their proposal «on peut songer à un surnom du type de *Sena[tor]*» (Sablayrolles & Schenck 1988, 62).

To begin with, our altar is not in any respect different from the almost totality of those found in Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, where —with just one possible exception— the deity is named first. Moreover, it stems from the high sector of the town, where inscribed altars beginning with dedications *I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo), deo Marti* and *Aberrri deo* were found². In addition, it was probably matched by altar no. 72 which, also stemming from the «high-town», begins with an S [---] and shows an isolated L (for *l(ibens)*) towards the end of what seems to be the fourth (and possibly last or penultimate) line of the inscribed field³.

Secondly, the deity *SENA* represents the same theonym that was discovered 2002 in Noricum, on a votive altar dedicated by C. A. Firmin(i)us and Cl. Secundus or Severus and later inserted in the church of the town of Tiffen⁴. Here it is attested in the dative *Senabos* from a nominative plural

¹ But cf. *infra* on the possibility of a dative plural *Senabos*.

² Cf. the nos. 5, 17, 18, 19 and 33 of the collection and also the table in Sablayrolles & Schenck 1988, p. 62. For the composition of what might have been the pan-

theon of a similar multicultural akropolis cf. De Bernardo & García 2008.

³ Cf. the photograph in Sablayrolles & Schenck 1988, p. 72.

⁴ Dolenz & De Bernardo 2004.

SENAE: actually documented as *SENA[BOS]* «to the venerable old women/ goddesses»⁵, it represents a possibility that we cannot entirely discard also for the altar of Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, even if the inscribed field of the latter seems to have been decidedly narrower.

In any case, being what I call «number variation» a very frequent phenomenon in Celtic religion⁶, there is no need for assuming that the deity was worshipped in the same number both in Aquitania and Noricum.

Another instance of *SENA*, this time in the singular and on a silver leaf from Britain, has been recently published by Tomlin⁷ together with many dedications to a new and probably related goddess *SENUMA*. The fact that the dedication *Senae* appears in the same hoard with the latter could imply that it represents a shortened form **Sen(un)ae*, were it not for the dedicant's theophoric name *Lucilia Sena*. Moreover, the ending *-una* is also attested in theophoric derivative names such as *Sacr-una* or *Vib-únna*.

Also in Britain, we find many dedications to the Celtic deity under its «translatio Latina»⁸: together with the plural manifestation contained in *deabus Vitiribus*, also a specific masculine form is worshipped, both as a singular and as a plural deity, as we see in the dedications *deo Veteri* and *dibus Veteribus*⁹.

Moreover, given the existence of instances where the «translatio Latina» of an indigenous deity accompanies its Celtic name in one and the same dedication, it is even possible to think that in variants such as *Hvitiribus* and *deo Hveteri*, *dibus Hvetiribus* the initial *H-* represented a shortening of the original Celtic name¹⁰ with an aspirated initial **S*¹¹, i.e. *H(enis) Vitiribus*, *deo H(eno) Veteri*, *dibus H(enis) Veteribus*¹².

In Bibracte (Mont Beuvray), a graffito *Seno* in the dative singular on the bottom of the vase *RIG-L-82i* may represent a votive offering to the same god *SENO*s implied by some of the British dedications.

Related to *SENA* at least semantically, i.e. if it is not a further case of «variatio generis» of the deity¹³, is the Hispanic god *SENAICOS*: attested in a dedication *Senaico*, made by a devotee from Cantabria, it goes back to an older form *SENACIOS* meaning «The Old» or perhaps «The Older One»¹⁴ and attested in the personal (theophoric?) onomastics of the Iberian Peninsula (nomen *Senacia* and cognomen *Senacianus/-a*¹⁵)¹⁶.

⁵ «den ehrwürdigen Alten (Göttinnen)»: Dolenz & De Bernardo 2004, p. 741.

⁶ De Bernardo Stempel 2004/07.

⁷ I am deeply indebted to Manfred Hainzmann, editor of the proceedings of the Colloquium «Instrumenta inscripta Latina» (Klagenfurt, 5th-9th May 2005) in which the contribution «Dea Senuna: a new goddess from Britain» by R.S.O. Tomlin is going to appear, for providing me with a copy of the paper.

⁸ As to this specific type of «Interpretatio» cf. De Bernardo Stempel 2005/i.p., and also eadem 2003/07, 2006/i.p. and De Bernardo & Hainzmann 2006.

⁹ Note that, in addition to «number variation», also «gender variation» is a very frequent phenomenon in Celtic religion (De Bernardo Stempel 2004/06).

¹⁰ Resp. *SENAE* (fem.pl.), *SENO*s (masc.sg.), *SENI* (masc.pl.).

¹¹ Note that beside *s* > *h*-, which is the normal development in Brittonic, there is also some evidence of **s* > 0 in a few specific Continental Celtic areas.

¹² On the contrary, the Germanicized *MATRONAE VETERANAEHAE* repeatedly known from Germany were probably not related to the *SENAE* but to the Roman veterans.

¹³ Cf. supra note 9.

¹⁴ I.e. with an expression of the comparative grade similar to the one found in Welsh (De Bernardo Stempel 1989).

¹⁵ *OPEL* s.vv. and Abascal Palazón 1994, p. 503.

¹⁶ On the theonym, cf. already De Bernardo Stempel 2003, p. 52; Dolenz & De Bernardo 2004, p. 739 with discussion of earlier bibliography in note 21. — The phonetic law VCyV > ViCV, which operates in Celtiberia and some other territories of the Iberian Peninsula (where it even survives as a substratal feature in the modern Romance and Basque dialects), was identified in De Bernardo Stempel 1999/2001 and 2002.

Also in the Iberian Peninsula, the translated *VETERES* are attested as *MATRES* from Porcuna (Jaén)¹⁷.

Finally, if further proof were needed, the existence of a Celtic goddess *SENA* is confirmed around 43/44 AD¹⁸ by Pomponius Mela, who in the 3rd book of his *De Chorographia Libri Tres* speaks of those Celtic islands *quas quia plumbo abundant uno omnes nomine Cassiteridas appellant*¹⁹, setting then forth in chapter 48:

*Sena in Britannico mare Ossismicis adversa litoribus, Gallici numinis oraculo insignis est [...]*²⁰.

Furthermore, the hitherto neglected passage in Pomponius Mela not only accounts for the popularity of the goddess in Britain, the island being situated *in Britannico mare*²¹, but also for her plural manifestations, since her female priests *perpetua verginitate sanctae numero novem esse traduntur; Gallizenas vocant*, which is evidently the faithful transcription of the original **Galli Senas vocant* with the regular Celtic lenition of the intervocalic sibilant at the beginning of the both Celtic and Latin accusative of the plural *Senae*²², whom the same Gauls considered endowed with magic powers: *putantque ingeniis singularibus praeditas maria ac ventos concitare carminibus, seque in quae velint animalia vertere, sanare quae apud alios insanabilia sunt, scire ventura et praedicare[...]*²³.

PATRIZIA DE BERNARDO STEMPEL
P.O. Box 823 / apartado postal 823
E-01080 Vitoria-Gasteiz
patrizia.debernardo@ehu.es

REFERENCES

- ABASCAL PALAZÓN, J.M., 1994, *Los nombres personales en las inscripciones latinas de Hispania*, Murcia (Anejos de antigüedad y cristianismo 2).
- BARRINGTON = *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*, ed. by R.J.A. Talbert, Princeton / N.J., 2000.
- BIRKHAN H., 1997, *Kelten: Versuch einer Gesamtdarstellung ihrer Kultur*, Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- COUSIN, G., 1906=2006, *Additions to Alfred Holder's Celtic Thesaurus together with [...]*, ed. by P. Sims-Williams, Aberystwyth: CMCS, 2006.
- BRODERSEN, K., 1994, *Pomponius Mela: Kreuzfahrt durch die Alte Welt (De chorographia: zweisprachige Ausgabe)*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- DE BERNARDO STEMPEL, P., 1989, «Britannischer Komparativ und Konsonantenverdoppelung», *Indogermanische Forschungen* 94, pp. 207-233.

¹⁷ Olivares Pedreño 2002, p. 122 with references.

— On the «translatio Latina» cf. supra in note 8.

¹⁸ According to Brodersen 1994, p. 2.

¹⁹ Chapter 47; on *cassi-* and the Old Celtic metal names cf. De Bernardo Stempel 1998, chapter 2.

²⁰ Brodersen 1994, p. 160 (with German translation p. 161), bold characters by the present author.

²¹ Identified with the Ile de Sein in front of Point du Raz, Dép. Finistère, cf. Birkhan 1997, 919; Barrington,

map 7: B3; Cousin 1906=2006, p. 465; Sims-Williams 2006, pp. 109 and 144.

²² Birkhan 1997, 919f.; too many now unnecessary conjectures in Maier 1997.

²³ *sed nonnisi dedita navigantibus, et in id tantum, ut se consulerent profectis* (Brodersen 1994, pp. 160-163).

- EADEM, 1998, «Minima Celtica zwischen Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte: 1. Zum Namen der Kelten im Westen; 2. "Zinn" und andere Entlehnungen im Bereich der Metallterminologie; 3. Der Wagentyp *carpentum*; 4. Nochmals zu gall. *cantalon* (R.I.G.-L-9)», in P. Anreiter, L. Bartosiewicz, E. Jerem, W. Meid (eds.), *Man and the Animal World: Studies in Archaeozoology, Archaeology, Anthropology and Palaeolinguistics in memoriam S. Bökönyi*, Budapest: Archaeolingua 9, pp. 601-610.
- EADEM, 1999/2001, «Grafemica e fonologia del celtiberico: 1. Nuovi dati sulle vocali mute; 2. Una nuova legge fonetica che genera dittonghi; 3. Fonti e fasi di sviluppo della sibilante sonora», in F. Villar, M.P. Fernández Álvarez (eds.), *Religión, lengua y cultura prerromanas de Hispania (Actas del 8º Coloquio sobre lenguas y culturas prerromanas de la Península Ibérica, Salamanca 1999)*, Salamanca: Universidad (Acta Salmanticensia, Estudios filológicos 283), pp. 319-334.
- EADEM, 2002, «Centro y áreas laterales: la formación del celtibérico sobre el fondo del celta peninsular hispano», *Palaeohispanica* 2, pp. 89-132.
- EADEM, 2003, «Die sprachliche Analyse keltischer Theonyme», *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 53, pp. 41-69 (reprinted in: J. Gorrochategui, P. de Bernardo Stempel [eds.], 2004, *Die Kelten und ihre Religion im Spiegel der epigraphischen Quellen: Akten des 3. F.E.R.C.AN.-Workshops/ Los Celtas y su religión a través de la epigrafía: Actas del III Workshop F.E.R.C.AN, Vitoria-Gasteiz, septiembre de 2000*, Vitoria-Gasteiz: Anejos de Veleia, Series maior 11, pp. 197-225).
- EADEM, 2003/07, «Einheimische, keltische und keltisierte Gottheiten der Narbonensis im Vergleich», in M. Hainzmann (ed.), *Auf den Spuren keltischer Götterverehrung: Akten des 5. F.E.R.C.AN-Kolloquiums, Graz, Oktober 2003*, Wien: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Philosophisch-historische Klasse: Mitteilungen der Prähistorischen Kommission, Bd. 64), pp. 67-79.
- EADEM, 2004/06, «Theonymic Gender and Number Variation as a Characteristic of Old Celtic Religion», in M.V. García Quintela, F.J. González García, F. Criado Boado (eds.), *Anthropology of the Indo-European World and Material Culture: Proceedings of the 5th International Colloquium of Comparative Mythology and Anthropology (Santiago de Compostela, September 2004)*, Budapest: Archaeolingua (vol. 20), pp. 31-47.
- EADEM, 2005/i.p., «Continuity, *Translatio* and *Identificatio* in Gallo-Roman Religion: The Case of Britain», in T. King, R. Häussler (eds.), *Continuity and Innovation in Religion in the Roman West: Proceedings of the 6th International F.E.R.C.AN. Workshop, London, April 2005*, Supplement vol. 67 (part 2) to *The Journal of Roman Archaeology*.
- EADEM, 2006/i.p., «More Names, Fewer Deities: Complex Theonymic Formulas and the Three Types of *Interpretatio*», in: J. d'Encarnação (ed.), *Proceedings of the VIIth workshop F.E.R.C.AN. (Cascais, 25-27 May 2006)*.
- DE BERNARDO STEMPEL, P., M.V. GARCÍA QUINTELA, 2008, «Población trilingüe y divinidades del castro de Lansbriga (NO de España)», *Madriider Mitteilungen* 49, pp. 255-291.
- DE BERNARDO STEMPEL, P., M. HAINZMANN, 2006, «Das österreichische Projekt *Fontes religionum Celticarum antiquarum (F.E.R.C.AN.)*: erste Gesamtergebnisse», *Keltische Forschungen* 1 (Vienna: Praesens Verlag), pp. 17-28.
- DOLENZ, H., P. DE BERNARDO STEMPEL, 2004, «*Sena[bos]*. Eine norische Gottheit aus Tiffen», in H. Heftner, K. Tomaschitz (eds.), *Ad Fontes! Festschrift für Gerhard Dobesch zum fünfundsechzigsten Geburtstag am 15. September 2004, dargebracht von Kollegen, Schülern und Freunden*, Wien: Wiener Humanistische Gesellschaft & Die Herausgeber, pp. 737-746.
- MAIER, B., 1997, «Gaulish **gena* «girl; unmarried woman»? A note on Pomponius Mela, *De chorographia* III 48», *Studia Celtica* 31, p. 280.
- OLIVARES PEDREÑO, J.C., 2002, *Los dioses de la Hispania Céltica*, Alicante y Madrid: Universitat y Real Academia de la Historia (Bibliotheca Archaeologica Hispana 15).
- OPEL = *Onomasticon Provinciarum Europae Latinarum*, ed. by B. Lőrincz and F. Redő, ex materia ab A. Mócsy, R. Feldmann, E. Marton et M. Szilágyi collecta, Budapest: Archaeolingua 1994 (vol. I) and Wien: Forschungsgesellschaft Wiener Stadtarchäologie 1999-2002 (vol. II-IV).
- SABLAYROLLES, R., J.-L. SCHENCK, 1998, *Collections du Musée Archéologique Départemental de Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges: 1, Les autels votifs*, Toulouse: Conseil Général de la Haute-Garonne.
- SIMS-WILLIAMS, P., 2006, *Ancient Celtic Place-Names in Europe and Asia Minor*, Oxford and Boston: Blackwell (Publications of the Philological Society 39).
- TOMLIN, R.S.O., i.p., «Dea Senuna: a new goddess from Britain», in: M. Hainzmann (ed.), *Proceedings of the Colloquium «Instrumenta inscripta Latina» (Klagenfurt, 5th-9th May 2005)*.