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Senuna, goddess of the river Rhee or Henney

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In 2002 the remains of a hoard were recovered comprising: gold jewellery, a silver figurine with an inscribed base, two silver model arms, and twenty votive plaques, seven of which were gold and thirteen silver (Figs 1 and 2, Plates 2 and 3). The find, first reported in *Britannia* in 2005 (Tomlin and Hassall 2005, 489), was described as being found near Baldock. The name of the goddess represented was given as *Senuna*, and the site was described as a location where springs rose. Because of this the name was associated with the south-British river *Senua*, as mentioned in the *Ravenna Cosmography* (Rivet & Smith 1979, 455). The site was discussed further in a recent article (Jackson & Burleigh 2007, 37–54). Here, more of the plaques were described and in more detail, including the appearance of the goddess's name on a number of different artefacts. The exact location of the religious complex is, at present, being kept secret but is now known to be some 80m from the bank of the River Rhee, which originates at Ashwell, and more than 1.3km from the large spring there. There is no direct association between *Senuna* and the river—her attributes are those of *Minerva*—but if any river could be considered to have a connection then it would have to be the Rhee. The goddess's association with the attributes of *Minerva* does not preclude her association with a river, as *Minerva* was associated with the goddess *Sulis* at the hot spring site at Bath (RIB(I) 1995, nos. 141, 143–4, 146–150).

The village of Ashwell, which takes its name from a spring, lies at the head of the River Rhee, which flows north into Cambridgeshire and is alternatively known by the names *Cam*, and *Granta* (see Fig. 3). These names were discussed in the place-name volume on Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely (Reaney 1943, 2–3). A medieval record gives the name of the river as *ripariam de Heneya*, in 1260. The name has been associated with the Henney, in Cambridge, but the name Henney appears twice along the length of this river, the other example being further up the course. Henney Lane was recorded as a lost Cambridge name, which used to be applied to the road running from the centre of Cambridge to the river. The name was re-



Figure 1. Gold plaque (no. 14) embossed with the image of Minerva, with dedication to Dea Senuna by Memorianus inscribed on the basal tab. Photo Trevor Springett, copyright British Museum. See also Plate 2.

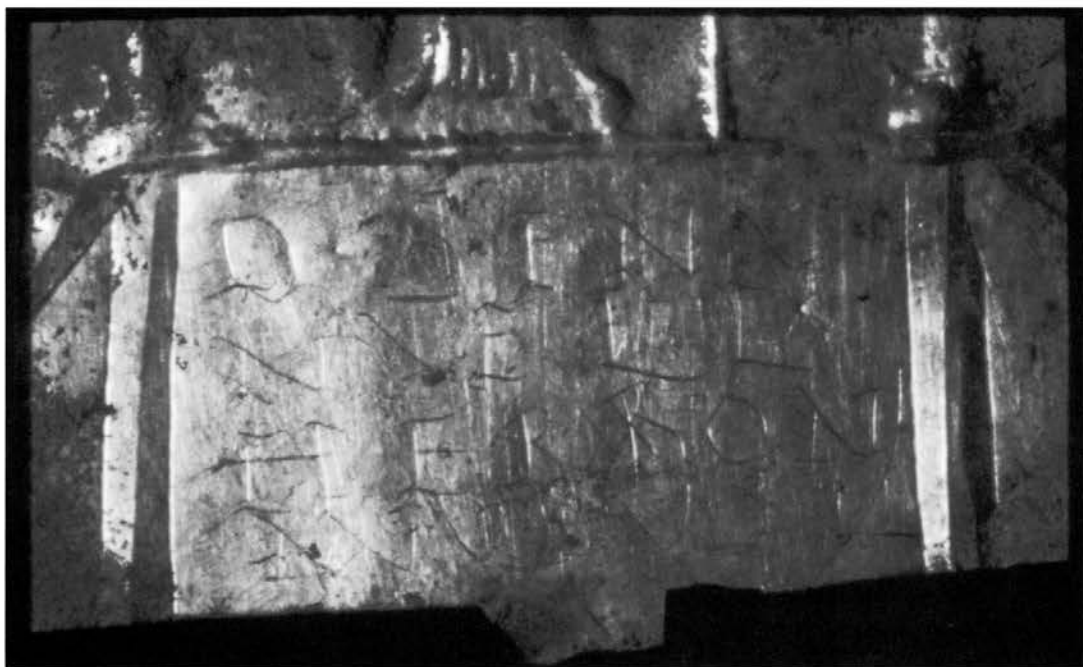


Figure 2. Detail of silver plaque (no. 17) showing elegantly-incised dedication to Dea Senuna by Herbonianus. Photo Trevor Springett, copyright British Museum. See also Plate 3.

corded as *Henneyestrete*, in 1329, and *Henneye*, in 1362. This lane took its name from an area of Cambridge called *Heneye*, in c. 1227; *Henhaye*, in 1272; and *Heneneye*, in 1340. The land was also called *Henabbay*, in 1448, and *Henabbey*, in 1455. The interpretation of this name is given as *henn-ēg*; an island or low-lying land frequented by wildfowl. This, on the surface, is a reasonable interpretation; however, there is further evidence which complicates the issue.

The second name, which appeared at Henny Hill and Henny Farm, has a slightly different spelling and is found in the parish of Soham. The name was first recorded as *Haneia* or *Henney*, in 1086; as *Hen(n)ey(e)* or *Henneie*, in 1190 to 1490; and as *Henneye Hyll*, in 1557. In 1279 it was recorded as *Enneye*. The interpretation of the name has also been given *henn-ēg*, island. The island referred to is the most prominent raised land in the vicinity of the confluence of the rivers Rhee and Cam along the old course of the Great Ouse. The location is important and parallels can be drawn with the location of similar names ending in *ēg* or *ēa*, meaning island or stream. A notable number of examples can be advanced. These include the Gloucestershire names South Cerney on the confluence of the River Churn, Down Ampney, near the confluence of the Ampney Brook, and the Oxfordshire name Charney, which lies near the confluence of the Charn. Henny sits in a similar type of location. In all these other cases there is some evidence for the confusion of the two English words *ēg* and *ēa*, a confusion known to have occurred in Middle English.

The name of the goddess given on the plaques has survived in a number of forms. On the base of the statuette the name is recorded as *SENVNE* (Jackson

& Burleigh 2007, 37–54). On the gold plaques the name inscribed is *SENVN* and *SENVNE*. On the silver plaques the names in the inscriptions are *SENVNAE*, and the abbreviated form *SE*. There is also the form *SIINAIL*, where the name is abbreviated without the central <u>. There is no specific way of dating the artefacts, or determining which of the inscriptions came first. One of the plaques was dedicated by *Lucilia Sena*, and it has been suggested that the name of the dedicator resulted in the name of the goddess being ‘infected’ with that of the dedicator. An alternative suggestion, by Tomlin (2008, 305–315), is that there may have been two spellings of the goddess’s name: *Senuna* and *Sena*. This philological change cannot be explained properly as yet but could, perhaps, be seen as a truncation of the early Roman name. It is known that certain names were truncated quite radically; for example *Manduessedum* > *Manecestre* (Gover et al. 1936, 85–86). The Ravenna records the name twice: *Sena*, as a conflated name, and *Senua*, which is considered to be a copying error of *Senna* (Rivet & Smith 1979, 455). It is feasible, therefore, but not proven categorically, that by the end of the fourth century and into the fifth century, the name could have become *Sena* or *Senna*, predominantly. It could also be the case, as Tomlin suggested, that this was an alternative name for the goddess.

The Roman material which was recovered from Ashwell is considered to be from the shrine of a river-goddess called *Senuna*, later *Sena*, and possibly *Senna*. The river, which hypothetically would have shared her name, would have risen at Ashwell and flowed past Cambridge to its confluence with the Great Ouse, near Henny; or as it is now recorded on the Ordnance

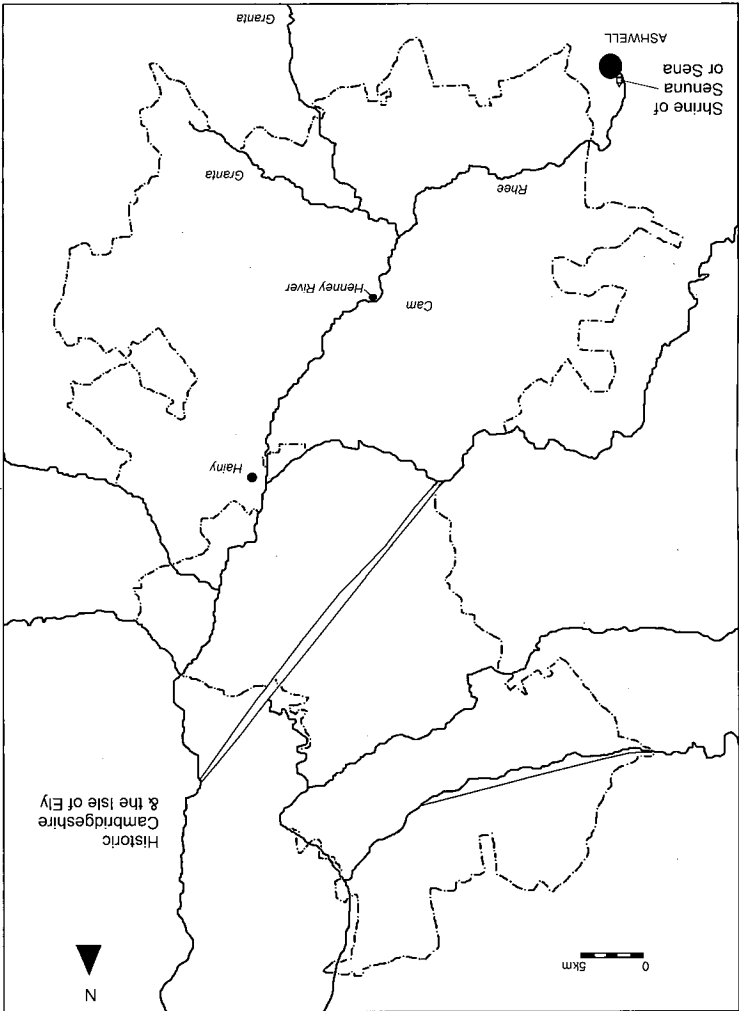


Figure 3. The location of the shrine to Sennua in relation to other places mentioned in the text.

the same process was suggested by Smith (1964, ii.15–16) for the Gloucestershire name Hailes. An important fact about the name *Sabrina* (Severn) is that it has suffered a number of changes depending on which language it was recorded in: Old Welsh, Latin, or Old English.

The paper which discussed the inscriptions to the goddess *Sennua* (Jackson & Burleigh 2007, 37–54) suggested that the name was associated with *seno-*, meaning old. Other Hen- river-names have already been recognised in Britain; these include the *Hennuc*, recorded in AD 972, which was presumably an older name for the Worcestershire Piddle (Mawer & Stenton 1927, 222–223). Ekwall (1928, 148) associated the name with the Welsh *ennic*, initially given as Welsh ‘hen’ (old). It is possible that the -ic here is derived from a river-suffix.

A further and important implication is that the change of the initial letter from <s> to <h> occurred in the late sixth century. This change is known to have occurred in Welsh and, by inference, this means that the people in the Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire area must have still been speaking Welsh, a related language, or a mixed Anglo-Welsh language as late as c. AD 600. This agrees with what is known about the

Survey maps, Hainy. The philological changes which would have occurred to the name *Sennua* can be assessed from what we know from other linguistic alterations. At the end of the fourth century the plaque evidence indicates that there were already two different spellings, the central part of the name being truncated with the loss of a <un> to *Sena* or *Senna* in one form. Besides this the principle process which should be considered is the initial change of the consonant <s> to a <h>; this was a recognised process in the late sixth century (Jackson 1953, 517–521). There is an accepted corpus of Welsh words where this process occurs in place-names and in certain Welsh titles and everyday words, when they are compared to their Latin equivalents. One example was first recorded as *Sabrina* (the Severn) but later became the Welsh *Haften*. The name *Sucat* was used as a title in Ireland for Saint Patrick but the later Welsh recording of the word is *Hygud*. These, along with other names, including river-names, were recorded by Jackson; other examples include **Samosispa* > *Hanespe* (a Hampshire river), and the *Hennuc* in Worcestershire. Some of these names were recognised to have developed this process at an earlier date. Ekwall (1928) used this measure for the Huntingdon river name Hailes and

historical development in the area of the Fens. The area of the Fens and the Chilterns around Ashwell would have lain on, or near, the boundaries of the Iron Age tribes of the *Iceni*, centred on later Norfolk and Suffolk, and the *Catuvellauni*, focused on the north Chilterns and probably extending north into Northamptonshire. These Iron Age tribal territories would have been transformed into Roman *civitates*. The political development of the area into the early medieval period has not been explained satisfactorily, but Morris (1973, 211, 314), in an assessment of the textual material, considered that Welsh was common as a spoken language well into the seventh century. This theory derived from evidence from a number of documented sources. In AD 571, the English are said to have defeated a British army near Bedford. A Welsh poet also mentioned that there was a Welsh kingdom called *Calchvynydd* (the hills of limestone and chalk) at this time. A later Welshman recorded that the kingdom of *Calchvynydd* contained the towns of Northampton and Dunstable, and that the kingdom was considered to have been the continuation of a Roman *civitas*. In 705 Saint Guthlac was troubled by a group of independent British, who retained their speech and hostility, in the Fen area. This would mean that, by the beginning of the seventh century, there is some evidence for the survival of an independent British kingdom in the Fenland area, and that some type of British language was still being spoken at the beginning of the eighth century.

Reaney (1943, xvii–xix) considered that the survival of Celtic river-names was slight in Cambridgeshire, but the interpretation described tends to dispute this; it maybe we are simply unaware of which names are Celtic. Confusion concerning the river-names in this area may have started at an early date; Cambridge was, in c. 730, referred to as *Grantacaestir*, the fort on the Grant. The Grant rose in a different place from the Henney, but below Grantchester at least two different names seem to have been used for the same river. Both names are considered to be of Celtic origin, if the present interpretation of Granta is correct. From this it is evident that river-names were still being confused in the eighth century AD.

The present name for the River Rhee is of Middle English origin and has been recognised for a number of rivers, notably the Warwickshire Rea (Demidowicz 1988, 81–4, Yeates 2006, 77). The name originated in textual sources as the Middle English **at ther ea*, interpreted as ‘at the river’. The name would have been established when ‘the’ was becoming the invariable definite article and the dative *ther* was becoming obsolete. This occurred in the fourteenth century at the latest. In the case of the Warwickshire river, the name replaced the British derived river-name Cole. It is apparent, therefore, that the name Rhee is much later than the names Henney and Cam, which must contain the relics of a possible earlier name.

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Left: Plate 2. Gold plaque (no. 14) embossed with the image of Minerva, with dedication to Dea Senuna by Memorianus inscribed on the basal tab. Photo Trevor Springett, copyright British Museum.

Below: Plate 3. Detail of silver plaque (no. 17) showing elegantly-incised dedication to Dea Senuna by Herbonianus. Photo Trevor Springett, copyright British Museum.

