

## THE CULT OF THE *DEA NUTRIX* IN KENT

By FRANK JENKINS, F.S.A.

A class of pipe-clay figurine, represented by five examples from various excavations at Canterbury, portrays a matron seated in a high-backed basket chair, holding either one or two infants at the breast. Figurines of this type were mass-produced in four-piece moulds and represent an industry which flourished in the Allier district in Gaul during the second century A.D. At present there is no evidence to suggest the existence of a similar industry in Britain at that time, so that the figurines of the matron found in this country must be regarded as either objects of trade, or as the personal possessions of Gaulish immigrants.

Many years ago, at Toulon-sur-Allier, Tudot examined a number of kilns which produced figurines of this type, and subsequently he published the contents.<sup>1</sup> He illustrated two heads which are identical in style to that of a complete figurine found at Canterbury,<sup>2</sup> and two heads from Hassocks, Sussex, and Rawreth, Essex,<sup>3</sup> respectively. A few years ago, another head of the same type was picked up on the beach at Reculver, whence it had evidently fallen from the face of the cliffs.<sup>4</sup> The marked similarity in style displayed by these objects suggests that all are the work of the same modeller. The identification of this artist is strongly suggested by certain figurines found at Bolards, near Nuits-Saint-Georges, a few miles south-west of Dijon.<sup>5</sup> This group includes a number of figurines of the type we are discussing, which bear the name of Pistillus, apparently the same ceramist who worked in the *terra sigillata* workshops at Lezoux in the latter half of the second century A.D.<sup>6</sup> The name is stamped from the mould on the rear of each figurine in bold relief before baking in the kiln. In view of this it is highly probable that the name is that of the modeller rather than that of the potter, if, of course, two individuals were concerned in the production. In any case it amounts to the same thing, for if these

<sup>1</sup> E. Tudot, *Collection de figurines en argile, oeuvres premières de l'art gaulois* (Paris, 1860), p. 26 and Pl. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Appendix to the present paper No. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Appendix to the present paper Nos. 15 and 16.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Appendix No. 14.

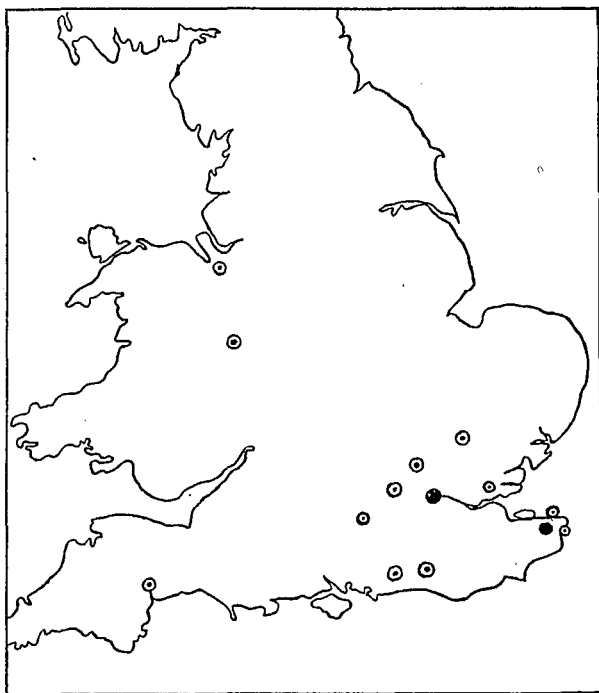
<sup>5</sup> E. Thevenot, *Gallia* (1949), VII, fasc. 1, p. 199ff.; *Revue archéologique de l'Est de la France* (1951), II, pp. 12-14. Also Tudot, *op. cit.*, Pl. 30A.

<sup>6</sup> F. Oswald, *An Index of Potter's Stamps on Terra Sigillata; Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, XIII, 10015, 84.

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products of Pistillus are compared with the unsigned figurines found in Britain, it is seen that in style and treatment all are identical. From this, it is but a short step to reach the conclusion that the British examples are either the original work of Pistillus or are direct copies.

Although figurines of this type have been found in great numbers in Gaul, it is curious that they are comparatively rare in Britain. The geographical distribution in this country is most revealing. Most of



Map of Britain to illustrate distribution of clay figurines of the *dea nutrix* (see Appendix).

○ Single figurines.      ● Several figurines.

the sites where figurines of this type have been recorded, have yielded only single examples. London, on the other hand, has at least six certainly found in the city, and five more have turned up in Canterbury. If the head from Reculver and a fragment of the side of a basket chair found in the excavations at Richborough are included, it is apparent that figurines of this type were fairly popular in the south-east area of Britain, particularly in East Kent. Because of this fact the writer has searched for evidence which might shed light on the significance of these

objects, and the results so far obtained form the subject matter of this essay.

In Gaul, figurines of the matron suckling infants are frequently found at the sites of temples and shrines, many of which were erected near sacred springs, where no doubt they were deposited as votive offerings to the presiding deity. This strongly implies that the matron thus portrayed was actually a goddess, and although her name is not recorded, it is by reason of her suckling infants that henceforth for the purpose of this essay she will be referred to as the *dea nutrix*.

What, then, is the symbolism expressed by her clay images? In order to define this we must seek our evidence in Gaul, for the British figurines are, at best, badly recorded as to their precise associations. Turning to the Gaulish evidence for guidance, we find that under the influence of the *interpretatio romana*, many native deities were equated with imported Roman deities believed to have similar functions. It is therefore possible that the matron is really a native goddess equated with a Roman female deity of the same type. Perhaps the latter was Juno Lucina, whose prime function in Classical religion was to preside over childbirth, especially that of making the new-born child see the light of day.<sup>1</sup> It is equally possible that under the influence of religious syncretism, Lucina was invested with other functions in the less restricted field of Gaulish religion. As her prime functions were so closely linked with motherhood it may well be that in time she was closely identified with the great mother-goddess of the Gaulish people, the *terre mere*, source of all life. If this is true, then we can assume that besides presiding over births and the fertility of human beings, she concerned herself, like her Gaulish counterpart, with the inexhaustible fertility of the fields. Furthermore, the frequent occurrence of her clay figurines at the sacred springs must surely indicate her close association with hydrotherapeutic cults in Gaul, as well as the prolific life-giving qualities which these waters undoubtedly symbolized. That the cult was one popular with the Gaulish women is suggested by the strong maternal characteristics displayed by the clay images, which leads one to think that they were offerings made to the deity to invoke her aid in childbirth and to ward off the various disorders and diseases peculiar to the female sex.

Thus a multiplicity of activities is suggested, a not unusual feature of Romano-Gaulish religion. Professor Lambrechts has convincingly demonstrated this aspect.<sup>2</sup> In his opinion many of the deities which the Gauls borrowed from the Roman pantheon, did in fact acquire

<sup>1</sup> Virgil, *The Eclogues*, IV, "Smile on the baby's birth, immaculate Lucina . . ."

<sup>2</sup> P. Lambrechts, *Contributions à l'étude des divinités celtiques* (Bruges, 1942), p. 171.

diverse functions under the influence of the *interpretatio romana*. Minerva, to quote but one example of a Roman female deity involved in this religious syncretism, appears to have been invested with the qualities of a mother-goddess, although she still retained her guise of a goddess of war in the iconography of the period. Hence, we may not be far from the truth, if we recognize in the matron portrayed by the figurines of the *dea nutrix* type, a native Gaulish mother-goddess in Classical guise. In other words, she may well have been a native fertility goddess whose art-type was inspired by a Roman conception of a similar deity, and ultimately stemmed from an earlier Greek prototype which represented the *dea Kourotrophos*.

We may have confirmation of the origin of the art-type in the striking resemblance which exists between the Romano-Gaulish figurines of the *dea nutrix* and a limestone statuette of precisely the same subject, recently discovered in a tomb of the sixth century B.C., at Megara Hyblaea in Sicily.<sup>1</sup> This, according to Dr. Gentili, is the earliest representation of the goddess and twin infants yet brought to light in the Central Mediterranean region, akin to the Gaulish figurines. The strong resemblance between the two art-types is so striking, that one can only think that, although separated by many centuries in date, both portray the same deity.

It is perhaps significant that the Sicilian statuette was found in a tomb, for in Roman times the Gauls deposited clay figurines of the *dea nutrix* with their dead. In France the custom appears to have been widespread,<sup>2</sup> while a seemingly isolated instance, well away from the main area of distribution, came from a burial in Bavaria.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore of great interest that one of these figurines was found in a similar context at Canterbury, and clearly shows that this curious custom was not entirely unknown in this country.<sup>4</sup> This figurine was in a broken condition when found, and it is noteworthy that the damage was neither recent nor accidental. In fact, it seems that the figurine had been deliberately smashed before it was placed in the pottery urn with the cremated remains of the dead person.

Ritual breakage was not an unusual custom in Romano-Gaulish

<sup>1</sup> G. V. Gentili, *The Illustrated London News* (19th December, 1953), p. 1033, Fig. 5, is a convenient reference for British students. The present writer is much indebted to Dr. Gentili for information concerning the discovery of this statuette and its dating.

<sup>2</sup> A. Blanchet, *Étude sur les figurines en terre-cuite de la Gaul-romaine*, in *Mémoires de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France*, 6e series, I (1891); *ibid.*, *Supplement*, X (1901), in which he gives lists where figurines of this type have been found.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lindenschmidt in Schumacher, *Altertümer unserer heidnischen Vorzeit*, V, p. 373, No. 1202, Pl. 65. The figurines of this type also reached Austria, for one is recorded from Salzburg, but no further details are known; cf. R. Noll, *Kunst der römischen Zeit in Oesterreich* (Wien, 1949), Pl. 20.

<sup>4</sup> No. 1 in the Appendix to this paper.

territory for the devitalizing of cult objects and personal belongings of the dead formed an essential part of the burial rites. Here again the Sicilian parallel seems singularly appropriate, for it was headless.<sup>1</sup> This curious custom may have sprung from the belief current in many ancient religions, that the gods were supposed to die in order to rise again. Hence it is possible that the ritual breakage of the image of the *dea nutrix* was connected with a similar belief in Gaulish religion, but we cannot be too sure, for there are many cases where figurines in burials were intact when found. In any case the close association which existed between the figurines of the *dea nutrix* and the burial rites is clearly established, and that being so we can advance a stage further in our inquiry.

The occurrence of the clay images of the goddess in graves seems to indicate that she was also regarded as an underworld deity, a not inappropriate role in view of the fact that she was a member of a circle of deities allied to the great earth-mother. In this grim sphere she would have acted as guide and protectress of the souls of the dead on their last journey into the realm of death. In following this line of thought some students have suggested that the infants borne by the matron are symbols of the souls of the dead under her protection. This attractive theory needs proof, however, but is worth bearing in mind. If the goddess was regarded as the provider and sustainer of earthly life, it is possible that her worshippers believed that she fulfilled similar functions beyond the grave. On the other hand, there may be a more prosaic explanation for the custom of placing an image of the goddess in the grave and ritually breaking it. The Gauls were a highly superstitious race, and it is possible that being aware of the close spiritual links which existed between the dead person and the cult object, they devitalized the latter in order to ensure that the dead would not haunt the living. Whichever is the correct interpretation, of one thing we can be certain, and that is, in the presence of these figurines of the *dea nutrix* in Kent, we have further evidence of the significant cultural links which existed between this area and Gaul in Roman times.

We have seen that the *dea nutrix* represented by the clay figurines was evidently a member of the circle of female deities displaying all the manifestations of the universal mother-goddess. This great divinity from whence life springs and to which it at death returns to be born again, played an important role in the religion of the Romano-Gaulish peoples. We have already detected elements of her cult in Kent in the presence of *Nehalennia*, or a goddess closely akin to her, at Canterbury.<sup>2</sup> That the great mother-goddess was worshipped under many titles and various forms is well attested. She also had a promin-

<sup>1</sup> G. V. Gentili, *loc. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> F. Jenkins, *Arch. Cant.*, LXX (1956), 192ff.

ent place in Roman religion where she was revered as Magna Mater, Cybele and Ceres to name but a few variants. Therefore, we must not overlook the fact that after all, these clay figurines, which we have labelled as representations of the *dea nutrix*, really represent an imported Roman deity and nothing more.

For a moment, then, let us ponder on this possibility. If in fact the goddess originated from Gaulish religion it is quite reasonable to suppose that the cult gained increasing popularity and fresh impetus from the official cult of Fecunditas at Rome. This seems to have reached its peak in the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps of some significance that during the same period, the clay figurines of the *dea nutrix* were placed on the Gaulish market in considerable numbers. Fecunditas personified the fecundity of the Empresses who were represented on their coinage as nursing mothers under the title Fecunditas Augusta.<sup>2</sup> But as the clay figurines belong to a low order of provincial art it would be unwise to attempt to recognize in the figure of the nursing mother, an Empress deified.

While on the subject of imported religions it is fitting that mention be made of Cybele. Her cult was non-Celtic in origin and was brought from Phrygia to Rome as early as 204 B.C. By the second century A.D., it was recognized as an official cult of the state, and the art-type for Cybele's images had become firmly established. This shows her wearing a mural crown, and bearing her main attributes, namely the cymbals and tympanum, with lions flanking the throne or cart in which she is seated.<sup>3</sup> It would seem, therefore, that if images of the goddess were needed they would show her in her usual guise rather than that of a nursing mother. For this reason the present writer is of the opinion that the clay figurines of the *dea nutrix* were never intended to be representations of the Phrygian goddess, although they have been described as such on a number of occasions. For the same reasons any identification with Isis is rejected.

It is of interest that a clay figurine of the *dea nutrix* exactly like those discussed in this essay, was found with one of Cybele in a Romano-Celtic temple at Hofstade in Belgium.<sup>4</sup> But it would be wrong to assume that because of this association, the *dea nutrix* is Cybele, for clay figurines of Venus and an unidentified mother-goddess together with a bronze figure of Minerva came from the same site. In view of

<sup>1</sup> M. Rostovtzeff, *Archaeologia*, LXIX, 208-9.

<sup>2</sup> For the reverse types of Fecunditas on the coinage, cf. Mattingly and Sydenham, *Roman Imperial Coinage*, III and IV, under Faustina I, Faustina II, Crispina, Lucilla and Julia Domna.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. F. Hettner, *Drei Tempelbezirke im Trevererlande* (Trier, 1901), Pl. X, 20.

<sup>4</sup> S. J. De Laet, *Ben Gallo-romeins Heiligdom op de Steenberg te Hofstade bij Aalst (Oostvlaanderen)* in *Cultureel Jaarboek van de Provincie Oostvlaanderen* (1949-50), pp. 269-314, Pl. IV C and D.

this it would be safer to conclude that the type of figurine offered to the local deity depended upon the individual fancies of the worshippers.

We are now in a position to summarize the evidence set forth in this paper. Firstly we have established that the matron represented in the series of figurines found in Canterbury was either a native goddess in Roman guise or was purely Roman in origin. Secondly she was a member of a circle of female deities which owed their origin to the belief in the universal mother-goddess. This strongly suggests that the goddess was concerned with fertility, by analogy that of human beings. That being so, it would be natural for her worshippers to proffer her clay images as thank-offerings for bestowing this quality or to invoke her aid in acquiring it. As a representative of the great earth-mother from whence life springs and returns at death, she seems to have assumed the role of an underworld goddess. We seem to have evidence of this in the burial custom of depositing her image with the dead. Finally, the strong maternal characteristics displayed by the figurines of the *dea nutrix* suggest that her cult was much favoured by the women. That the cult had secured a place in the religious life of Roman Canterbury is certain, but as the total number of the clay images is small compared with Gaul, one is tempted to think that they belonged to the wives of Gaulish immigrants who had settled in the city. In any case these interesting figurines, in company with those of Nehalennia<sup>1</sup> and the Genius Cucullatus,<sup>2</sup> shed much light on the religious life of the area in Roman times.

#### THE GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE CLAY FIGURINES OF THE *dea nutrix* IN BRITAIN<sup>3</sup>

(1) Canterbury, Kent. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London* (2nd series), I, 330; *Archæologia Cantiana*, XVII, 34-7. The Royal Museum, Canterbury, Inv. No. 933. St. Dunstan's Roman cemetery. (Pl. Ia.)

(2) Canterbury, Kent. *Archæologia Cantiana*, XVII, 34-7, text fig. The Royal Museum, Canterbury, Inv. No. 931. Site of Hammond's, now Lloyd's Bank. (Pl. Ib.)

(3) Canterbury, Kent. John Brent, *Canterbury in the Olden Time*, pp. 40-1, Pl. 6, No. 5; *The Archæological Journal*, I, 281; *op. cit.*, I, 282-3. For the inscription on this figurine cf. Haverfield, *Ephemeris Epigraphica*, VII, No. 1355, in which he reads it as SILI. The figurine is now lost. The goddess holds one infant. Sun Street.

(4) Canterbury, Kent. Canterbury Excavation Committee excava-

<sup>1</sup> F. Jenkins, *Arch. Cant.*, LXX (1956), 192ff.

<sup>2</sup> F. Jenkins, *Arch. Cant.*, LXVI (1953), 86ff.

<sup>3</sup> The goddess holds twin infants except where otherwise stated.

PLATE I



(a)

(b)

[Photo: *Enticistile, Canterbury*  
(a) St. Dunstan's Roman Cemetery, Canterbury.  
Height 6.3 in.  
(b) St. Margaret's Street, Canterbury. Height 6.0 in.

PLATE II



[Photo: *S. S. Freere*

Burgate Street, Canterbury. Height 4.4 in.

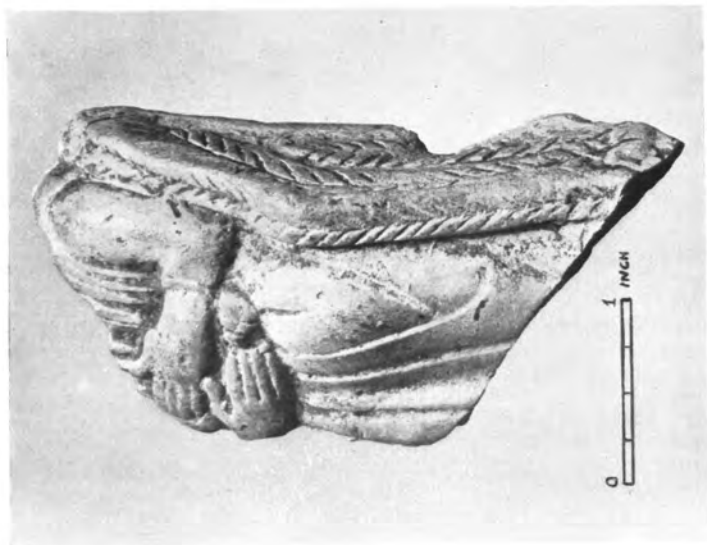


PLATE IV



[Photo: E. C. Wilson, Canterbury  
Reculver, Kent. Height 1.7 in.]

PLATE III



[Photo: E. C. Wilson, Canterbury  
St. John's Lane, Canterbury.]

tions supervised by Mr. Sheppard Frere, F.S.A., on land south side of Burgate Street. Publication pending. (Pl. II.)

(5) Canterbury, Kent. Canterbury Excavation Committee excavations south side of St. John's Lane carried out by Mr. John Boyle and the author of this paper. The goddess holds one infant. (Pl. III.)

(6) London, Liverpool Street. *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, XXVII, 373. *Guildhall Museum Catalogue*, p. 70, No. 30; G.H. Mus., Inv. No. 2088.

(7) London, Austin Friars. *London Museum Catalogue*, No. 3; *London in Roman Times*, p. 48, Pl. XXI, No. 5; London Museum, Inv. No. A 243.

(8) London, Copthall Court. *London Museum Catalogue*, No. 3; *London in Roman Times*, p. 49, Pl. XXI, No. 6; London Museum, Inv. No. A 244. The goddess holds one infant.

(9) Arkesden, Essex. The Hon. R. C. Neville, *Sepulchra Exposita*, p. 41, fig.; C. Roach Smith, *Collectanea Antiqua*, VI, 57; *The Archaeological Journal*, X, 231. Now in the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge.

(10) Silchester, Hants. T. May, *The Roman Pottery found at Silchester*, Pl. XXXIX B, No. 14. Reading Museum.

(11) Chester, Cheshire. *The Chester and North Wales Archaeological Society and Historical Journal* (new series), XXVII, 93-102, fig.

(12) Exeter, Devon. *Journal of Roman Studies*, XV, 237. The Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, Inv. No. 33/1924. 1.

(13) Hambleden, Bucks. *Archæologia*, 71, p. 198. Hambleden Museum.

The following are heads almost certainly belonging to figurines of this type.

(14) Reculver, Kent. Royal Museum, Canterbury. Loaned by the finder, Mr. Anthony W. Swaine. (Pl. IV.)

(15) Hassocks, Sussex. *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, LXVI, xlii; *ibid.*, XCI, 135, fig. (a). Barbican House Museum, Lewes.

(16) Rawreth, Essex. White's *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Essex* (1867-8), p. 567; P. Benton, *History of the Rochford Hundred* (1867-88), p. 686. British Museum, 56/7-1/5108.

(17) London. C. Roach Smith, *Collectanea Antiqua*, VI, 239, fig. British Museum, Inv. No. 56/7-1/326.

(18) London. C. Roach Smith, *loc. cit.* British Museum, Inv. No. 56/7-1/328.

(19) London. British Museum, Inv. No. 56/7-1/328.

(20) Verulamium. *Society of Antiquaries of London, Research Committee Reports*, XI, Pl. LXI, No. 2.

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The following are fragments showing parts of the basket chair in which the goddess is always seated.

(21) Verulamium. *Society of Antiquaries of London, Research Committee Reports*, XI, Pl. LXI, No. 6.

(22) Richborough. Richborough Museum, No. 1752.

(23) Wroxeter. *Society of Antiquaries of London, Research Committee Reports*, I, Pl. XI, No. 2, p. 31.

(24) Highdown Hill, Sussex. *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, LXXX, Fig. XV, 4.

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