

To be done with Vicus Helena

By Eric Capron

We present the hypothesis that the historical Vicus Helena has taken the modern name “Les Helembis” Les Helembis is a lieu-dit from the village of Sancourt, near Cambrai. Hubert LeBourdellès thought three criteria were necessary to the identification of historical *Vicus Helena*

- 1) onomastic continuity with its original name,
- 2) situation near a city limits,
- 3) including a waterway and a bridge.

1) First condition: onomastic continuity

The evolution of the place name can be retraced backwards:

Helembis \Leftarrow *Helemna-Vis* \Leftarrow *Helemna-Vicus*¹

Breaking down the term Helembis into word roots, we find: *Hel-*, *Hem-* and *Vis-*, where:

Hel \Leftrightarrow English, hill

Hem \Leftrightarrow German, heim: village

Vis \Leftrightarrow Latin, *vicus*: village

We will explain this “village-village” redundancy below.

The two roots *hel-* and *hem-* reappear in many toponyms, as in:

- Hellemme-les-Lille
- Hellesme-en-Ostrevent
- Elesme (village near Maubeuge)
- Les Helembis (lieu-dit of the village of Sancourt)

Here, studying topography is key to understanding toponymy: all these places are located on hills; at the source of streams which themselves end in rivers located in marshes (e.g. the Marque, the Scarpe, the Sensée).

Therefore, the combination of the *hel-* and *hem-* roots indicates an upriver or upstream village.

In some instances, this upstream place is paired up with a downstream one. Two examples:

- Hellemmes-les-Lille (upriver) and Langlet, on the Marque (downriver)²
- Les Helembis (upriver) and Hem-Langlet, upon the Sensée (downriver)³

1 The reader may wonder about why « Les Helembis » instead of “Les Helemvis”; this is due to a fortition, a consonantal change ($[w] \rightarrow [\beta] \rightarrow [v]$) which has stopped before its ending

2 Cassini maps of France

3 IGN maps of France

Looking up the etymology of Langlet, we find the Germanic root *lang-*, which is found in the English language: this root points to a downstream village with slow moving waters.

2) Second condition: near a city limits

The Sensée was a natural border limiting the territory of the Atrebates and that of the Nervii.⁴

3) Third condition: a waterway and a bridge

We identify the bridge as Pont-Rade, between Paillencourt and Wasnes-au-Bac. Following Henri Platelle's interpretation, Pont-Rade comes from the Latin *Pons Rapidus*, that is a toll bridge.

In the commune of Abancourt, we locate the Voie Haute and Voie Basse. In the commune of Paillencourt we find La Rive and La Rive Massac ("*Fors ripae colle propinquo...*").

The three criteria are thus respected.

Why was the *Vis* added to *Helena*? After the battle of *Vicus Helena*, the Empire took back the upper hand – and imposed the roman word *Vicus*. Let's recall that the place is close to the strategic main road from Arras to Cambrai. According to Sidonius Apollinaris⁵, it was a symbolic victory. Gregory of Tours only recalls the takedown of Cambrai⁶, understandably, after the sending of emissaries who had been in *Vicus Helena* for fifty or a hundred years.

In a previous article from *Linguistique Picarde*⁷, I proposed the etymology *Helena* ⇔ *Inula Helenium* (the plant elecampane). The etymological study was right, but my conclusion was erroneous. I was so preoccupied by older research looking to locate the toponym in a marsh area.

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4 B. and R. Delmaire, *Les limites de la cités des Atrébates (nouvelle approche d'un vieux problème)*, in *Revue du Nord*, 1990, p.697-735 ; and Dérolez, in *Revue du Nord*

5 Sidonius Apollinaris, *Panegyric to Majorian*

6 Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*

7 E. Capron, *Remarques étymologiques sur Vicus Helena*, in *Linguistique Picarde*, 34^e année, 1^{er} trimestre 1994, fascicule n° 129

