

The Names of the Dagda

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“Aed Abaid Essa Ruaid misi .i. dagdia druidechta Tuath De Danann 7 in Ruad Rofhessa 7 Eochaid Ollathair mo tri hanmanna”

“I am Aed Abaid of Ess Rúaid, that is, the Good God of wizardry of the Túatha Dé Danann, and the Rúad Rofhessa, and Eochaid Ollathair are my three names.” (Bergin 1927)

This opening line from “How the Dagda Got His Magic Staff” neatly summarizes the names by which the Dagda is known in the surviving Irish manuscripts. Translations for these names begin to shed some light on the character of this deity: the “Good God,” the “Red/Mighty One of Great Knowledge,” and “Horseman Allfather.” What other information can be gleaned about the Dagda from the way in which he is named? This essay will examine the descriptions and appellations attached to the Dagda in various texts in an attempt to provide some further answers to this question. It should be emphasized at the outset that the conclusions below are intended to enrich our religious, rather than scholarly, understanding of the Dagda, and that some latitude should be afforded the interpretations on this basis.

Cóir Anmann (The Fitness of Names) contains adjacent entries for the Dagda under each of his three names (Stokes 1897: 354-357):

150. Dagda .i. dagh dé .i. día soinemhail ag na geintíbh é, ar do adhradháis Tuatha Dé Danann dó, ar bá día talmhan dóibh é ar mhét a chumachta.

151. Eochaid Ollathair .i. uilliu é inna a athair. N[ó] Ollathair .i. athair oll do Thuathaibh Dé Danann é.

152. Ruadh Rofesa .i. is aigi robhoí óighi ind fessa g[e]inntlidhe, 7 is aigi bádar na tréidhe ildealbhaidhe.

150. *Dagda*, that is, *dag dé* ‘fire of god’. He was a beautiful god of the heathens, for the Tuatha Dé Danann worshipped him: for he was an earth-god to them because of the greatness of his (magical) power.

151. Eochaid *Oll-athair*, that is, greater (*uilliu*) was he than his father (*athair*). Or *Oll-athair*, a great (*oll*) father (*athair*) to the Tuatha Dé Danann was he.

152. Ruad *Ro-fessa* ‘of the great science’, that is, ‘tis he that had the perfection of the heathen science, and ‘tis he that had the multiform triads.

Two of the derivations given here are the expected ones, but *Dagda* is derived from “fire of god” rather than the “good god” found in *Cath Maige Tuired*. While the folk etymologies given in *CA* and other texts cannot be considered philologically accurate, they may shed some light on the ways in which the author perceived the object of the derivation, and thus constitute culturally if not always linguistically important data (Mac Cana 19??). The suggestion that the Dagda has an association with fire has an echo in *CMT*, where the Dagda’s claim that “[t]he power which you boast, I will wield it all myself” directly follows the assertion of the druid Figol that “[t]hree showers of fire will be rained upon the face of the Fomorian host” (Gray 1982: 44). A fire association with the Dagda would also provide a symbolic link with his naming as Ruad Rofhessa, since fire imagery is often used to describe wisdom and poetic inspiration in the Irish tradition.

Stokes’ translation of *día talmhan* as “earth-god” also merits some explication. Like English *earth*, Irish *talam* has a wide semantic range: it can refer to the geographic Earth (that is, the planet), the earth as distinct from the air or water, or earth as soil or clay (*DIL* s.v. ‘talam’). *Día talmhan* could therefore signify “god of the soil,” “god of the earth-realm,” or “god of the world, planet-god.” These interpretations resonate in interesting ways with other portrayals of the Dagda. Both *De Gabail in t-Sída* and *Tochmarc Étaíne* associate the Dagda with control of grain or crops (Koch and Carey 2000: 145-146). (Interestingly, *dag* can signify “wheat” as well as “good” and “fire”.) “God of the world” recalls the epithet *Athgen mBethai* “Regeneration of the World,” a name given for the Dagda in *CMT* (see below).

References to the Dagda appear in twelve poems in the *Metrical Dindshenchas*: three poems on Ailech, two each on Brug na Bóinde, Boand and Druim Súamaig, and in the *dindshenchas* of Codal, Odras, and Mag Muirthemne. Generally, these poems provide few additional facts about the Dagda. He is portrayed as king of Ireland (IV: 92, 104, 108, 268) and a giant (IV: 106, 268); the former is also attested in *Lebor Gábala Érenn* (Macalister 1941: 120, 125, 180, 184), *De Gabail in t-Sída*, *Aislinge Óenguso*, and *Tochmarc Étaíne*, while the latter is implicit in the account of his mating with the Morrígan in *CMT* (Gray 44), and perhaps in his clearing of plains and creation of streams in *Tochmarc Étaíne* (but see also below). The great number of references to the Dagda, on the other hand, allows ample opportunity to analyze the terms used to portray him.

Usage of the form “*Dagda* _____,” “the _____ Dagda” is common in *MD*; almost invariably, the adjectives chosen are monosyllabic and begin with the letter *d*, which suggests that they were perhaps chosen more for conformity to the metrical and alliterative rules of Irish poetry than for their particular aptness to the Dagda. Several cases, however, bear closer examination.

Dagda donn: Appears in the first poem on Brug na Bóinde (II: 10). The full line is “*in ben mór, in Dagda donn*” which Gwynn translates as “the great lady [and] the swart Dagda;” Murphy (1954: 193) renders the same line as “the big woman and the swart

Dagda.” *Donn* is a color term generally translated as “brown” or “dark”, as in the *Donn Cuailgne*. Other references to the Dagda employing similar colors refer specifically to his clothing: in *Mesca Ulad*, where the Dagda’s cloak is described as *lachtna* (*DIL*: “of the colour of milk: grey, dun”), and again in *CMT*, where his tunic is *aodhar* (“dun”; Gray 1982: 46). An alternate, or perhaps complementary, reading of this line interprets *donn* as “princely, noble.” Such a reading would render the line as “the great lady and the noble Dagda.” This interpretation is supported by Gwynn’s glossary entry for *donn* (V: 247), which lists “noble” as the reading and provides several examples of similar construction.

Dagda déin: Appears three times (II: 10, 18; IV: 92); the first two are translated “swift” while the last is translated as “mighty.” Gwynn’s glossary gives the reading as “holy” (V: 241) and references an appearance in the *dindshenchas* of Coire Breccáin, where “*huir deirg déin*” is translated as “red potent clay” (IV: 84). *DIL* gives *déine* “swiftness, speed, impetuosity; vehemence”, as well as *de(i)n*, which has as possible readings “pure, clean, neat” and “firm, strong, powerful.” I suggest that the implication here is “mighty” in the sense that the Ásatrú community uses it: full of might or magical force. This dovetails neatly with Bergin’s reference to the Dagda as god of *druidechta*, as well as CA’s “greatness of his (magical) power.”

Dagda (n)dúr/Dagdai duir: The former appears twice in the first *dindshenchas* for Brug na Bóinde (II: 18, 20), translated successively as “harsh” and “stern”; the latter occurs in the first *dindshenchas* for Ailech (IV: 96) and is translated as “stern.” The *DIL* entry for *dúr* suggests “of persons and moral qualities, in good sense *hardy, firm, resolute.*” Interestingly, an adjacent entry for *duir* refers the reader to *dair* “oak”. Many Indo-European languages derive words for qualities such as “hard,” “firm,” “strong,” and “tough” from the root **dorw-* “tree/oak” (Friedrich 1970: 141-142). This may suggest significance in additional *MD* usages such as *Dagda duilig* (IV: 100) “hard Dagda”, and *Dagda druine* (IV: 104), which Gwynn translates as “skilful Dagda,” although *DIL* suggests “firmness, solidity, strength” with specific reference to this usage in *MD*. The oak was a sacred tree across Indo-European cultures, often associated with thunder or lightning gods. In this context, it is worth noting the appearance in the *dindshenchas* of Mag Muirthemne (IV: 294) of the Dagda’s *lorg anfaidh*, translated as “mace of wrath”; both Gwynn’s glossary (V: 220) and *DIL* suggest “storm” as a reading for *anfad/anfud*. The opening paragraph of *Tochmarc Étaíne* also attributes power over the storm to the Dagda (Koch and Carey 2000: 146). (I should mention that an association with the oak might lend additional weight to the reading of *donn* as “brown” in reference to the color of the oak or its various parts.)

Dagdai deirg: Appears in the second poem on Brug na Bóinde (II: 18), where it is translated as “the red Dagda.” This usage is suggestive when combined with Bergin’s quote *supra* identifying the Dagda as “Aed Abaid of Ess Rúaid.” *Tochmarc Emire* contains a tale on the naming of Emain Macha in which three kings hold the kingship of Ireland. One of these kings, Aed Rúad mac Badurn, drowns at Ess Rúaid and is succeeded by his daughter, Macha Mongruad, who battles the remaining two kings and seizes the sole rule of Ireland (Coe 1995: 64-65). This juxtaposition of references gives

us a figure described as “red” and as a king of Ireland, associated with Ess Rúaid, and named as the father of one of the three Machas. This last is interesting given the scholarly acceptance of Macha as a goddess with close ties to horses (Macha wife of Cruinnuc defeats the chariot-horses of the Ulster king in a race) and the additional naming of the Dagda as “Eochaid Ollathair” or “Horseman All-father.”

The use of the “watchman device” in *Mesca Ulad* provides a good opportunity to explore an additional description of the Dagda: “a large-eyed, large-thighed, noble-great, immensely-tall man, with a splendid gray garment about him” (Cross and Slover 1936). This description lends additional weight to the perception of the Dagda as a giant or at least greater-than-normal sized; the term translated “noble-great”, *slinnénach*, is given in *DIL* as “having (great) shoulders,” and therefore does not give any additional support to the reading of *donn* as “noble” in its *MD* appearances. The Dagda’s staff or club is again referred to as a *lorg*, and is here given the additional description of *adúathmar* (terrible) and *íarnaidi* (iron).

The portrayal of the Dagda in *Cath Maige Tuired* contains some interesting contradictions. He is clearly powerful, although he is not portrayed as a king in this text: during Lug’s inventory of the skills of the Tuatha Dé Danann, he vows to wield by himself the combined powers of the host, at which all exclaim “*Is tuasai an Dagdae!*” (“You are the Good God!”); thus does the Dagda get his name (Gray 1982: 44). On the other hand, the episode with the Fomori host and the daughter of Indech (Gray 46-50) is clearly intended to be comic in nature, and its description of the Dagda with a tunic that barely reaches his rump and his penis uncovered is hardly flattering. It is tempting to view this as a isolated and aberrant invention on the part of *CMT*’s author. John Carey’s analysis of mythography in *CMT*, in particular its depiction of Bres compared to other early sources, provides a potential example of such innovation (Carey 1989-90: 56-58).

Assuming for the moment, however, that this passage represents an authentic tradition, what information about the Dagda’s character can we derive from it? The Dagda’s promise to leave the imprint of his heel in stones and the mark of his axe on trees (Gray 48-50) is certainly consistent with an association with storms; the physical results of a lightning strike might easily be explained as the weapon-stroke of a deity. Moreover, during his conversation with Indech’s daughter, an extremely odd sequence of names is attached to the Dagda: “*Fer Benn Bruach Brogaill Broumide Cerbad Caic Rolaig Builc Labair Cerrce Di Brig Oldathair Boith Athgen mBethai Brightere Tri Carboid Roth Rimaire Riog Scotbe Obthe Olaithbe.*” Gray (100) says of this passage:

His names illustrate the Dagda’s complexity, reflecting both his immediate condition and enduring aspects of his character. *Oldathair* (MS. *oldath-*, =*Ollathair*) is found elsewhere, but the other names seem to describe his distended person, his soiled state, and his on-going association with creation and regeneration.

She goes on to suggest some possible interpretations; Sayers, in his article dedicated to an interpretation of the epithet *cerrce*, summarizes these and gives some additional free-

ranging interpretations of his own (Sayers 1988: 344-345). I will examine a few of these which seem relevant to the concepts already developed.

Fer Benn: Gray (100) translates this as *fer* “man” and *benn* “horn, peak, point”; Sayers makes an additional reference to *fir* “white” and “the possibility of snow-capped peaks” (Sayers 344). *Benn* is given numerous meanings in *DIL*, including “mountain, crag, peak, point”; “pinnacle, spire”, “horn of animal” (which also seems to apply to the points of a stag), and “prong, point (of various forked and pointed objects)”. It is easy to see how several of these meanings might apply to the Dagda. “Mountain” or “pinnacle” could refer to the Dagda’s giant size, while “prong, point” might refer to the lightning-stroke. This latter reading suggests a possible interpretation of the unique description here of the Dagda’s club as a “wheeled fork” (*gaból gicca rothach*; Gray 46): the fork is the lightning, and the wheel the sound of the thunder.

Interestingly, *Fer Benn* is also a name adopted by the *geilt* Suibhne (*Suibhne Geilt*, lines 1202-1203):

nocha n-é mh'ainm dligtheachán,
mó is ainm damh Fer Benn.

that is not my lawful name,
rather is it *Fer Benn*.

It is difficult to know in what sense this term is appropriate to Suibhne. The preceding stanzas glorify stags, and in particular exclaim that “pleasant is the place for seats on the top/of thy antler-points (*benn*)” (lines 1198-1199); on the other hand, Suibhne also lives on mountain-tops (lines 1210-1211: “I myself keep my watch/on the top of the mountains”).

Cerrce: Gray has no suggestions for this term; Sayers makes a compelling case for its derivation from IE **perk^w*- (Sayers 345-346) and notes its connection to both oaks and thunder/storm gods in various Indo-European cultures (see also Friedrich 133-140). He offers a tentative translation “Striker” and connects the Dagda to other Celtic and Indo-European figures who bear hammers or other striking implements (Sayers 341-342). Although his subsequent argument, linking the Dagda to Cernunnos and Conall Cernach through a complex of horn-bearing and physical-deficiency motifs, does not convince, I believe that the initial proposition has merit.

Labair: Gray (100) translates this as “talkative, arrogant, boastful,” but Sayers (344) notes the additional meaning of “noisy,” which would certainly apply to a deity whose powers include control of storms.

Athgen mBethai: The translation of this epithet as “Regeneration/Rebirth of the World” is not contested; it is useful, however, to note a supporting episode from another textual reference to the Dagda. In *Tochmarc Étaíne*, Ailill’s demands for plains to be cleared and streams produced, which the Dagda undertakes on behalf of his son Oengus, are

made for the purposes of human culture rather than simply out of spite: the plains “may forever afford grazing to cattle and dwellings to men” and the streams “bring produce from the sea to tribes and kindreds, to dry the land and the earth” (Koch and Carey 2000: 149). From the human perspective, this radical transformation is certainly a rebirth of the land.

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