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The Names and Epithets of the Dagda

Scott A. Martin, April 2012

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 Great-father.” 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.

The glossary *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.

Fittingly, the first entry treats this figure’s most familiar designation: the Dagda. *Cath Maige Tuired* supplies the most-often-cited explanation of this name: during Lug’s inventory of the skills of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Dagda 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). *Tochmarc Étaíne* offers an alternate justification: “Another name of his was ‘the Dagda’, for it was he who used to work miracles for them [the Tuatha Dé], and to apportion storms and fruits: so folk used to say, and therefore he was called ‘Dagda’.” (Koch and Carey 2009: 146) *Cóir Anmann*’s variant reading *dag dé* ‘fire of god’” relies on a reading of *dag* for OIr *daig* “fire,” which seems likely to be a pseudo-etymological invention.

Scholarly interpretation of this name, based on the episode in *CMT*, generally reads “the Good God” to mean “the god who is performatively good” (good *at doing*), rather than “the god who is morally good.” The semantic range for *dag* given in *DIL* embraces moral goodness or auspiciousness as well as skillfulness, however, in a similar fashion to English “good.” The derivation in *Tochmarc Étaíne* seems to imply that the Dagda was “good *for*” or “good *to*” the Tuatha Dé, suggesting a reading of *dag* as “benevolent.” Eric Hamp recently argued for a reinterpretation of the name *Dagda* as “the god of the good/noble ones” based on an examination of Italo-Celtic terms occupying the semantic range “good,” as well as other attestations of the element *dag-* in compounds where its sense is clearly “noble.” Hamp’s revision turns on the interpretation of *Dagda* as a *tatpurusha* (XY = Y of X) rather than a *karmadhāraya* (XY = Y that is X) compound (Hamp 2002: 166); it seems possible to reject this inversion while accepting that “noble” is a more precise interpretation of the element *dag-* in this instance. Such an interpretation of *Dagda* as “the noble god” is in line with descriptions of the Dagda as “noble” in the *Metrical Dindshechas*, discussed below.

An intriguing alternate (or perhaps additional) explanation, in line with the varied semantic field of *dag*, is that the name *Dagda* may represent an apotropaic euphemism: a nickname intended to evoke the good qualities of a fearsome deity and thereby avert his wrath. Such names are not unknown to Irish tradition; the tendency to refer to “the gentry” or “the good neighbors” when speaking of the fairy-folk is a well-known example. Intriguingly, apotropaic euphemisms are often used in other Indo-European cultures to refer to gods who are roughly equivalent to the Dagda. The classic example is Sanskrit *siva* “auspicious, the auspicious one,” which in the *Vedas* is used to refer not only to the proto-Shiva, Rudra, but to other gods, notably (for our purposes) the *vajra*-wielding storm-king Indra. An Athenian aspect of Zeus similarly bears the epithet *Meilichios* “easy-to-be-entreated.” A particularly apropos comparison is the Gallo-Roman deity Sucellos, whose name “the Good Striker” is suggestive on its own merits, but is even more so when one considers possible relationships to OIr *sochell* “kindness”

and *soichell* “generosity.” One could even include Thorr’s epithet *vinr verlidha* “friend of men,” though one must weigh this against the literary evidence for genuine affection between Thorr and his worshipers.

The phrase *día talmhan*, translated by Stokes as “earth-god,” also merits some examination. 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. *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 2009: 145-146). (Interestingly, *DIL* gives “wheat” as an additional secondary meaning for *dag*.) “God of the world” recalls the epithet *Athgen mBethai* “Regeneration of the World,” a name given for the Dagda in *CMT* (see below). We must, however, balance this speculation against the occurrence of related language elsewhere in the literature. A similar phrase is used of the Ulster king Conchobar in *Fled Bricrenn*: *ar is é dia talmaide ro boi oc Ultaib ind inbuid sin Conchobar*, “For he, Conchobar, was an earthly God among the Ulster people at that time” (Borsje 2009: 79). We find a Latin equivalent in the *Collectanea* of Tírechán, in an episode where two sisters, startled by the appearance of Saint Patrick and his retinue, wonder whether they might be *deorum terrenorum* “of the terrestrial Gods” (Borsje 2009: 56-57). Taken together, “terrestrial god” seems roughly to refer to a category of native supernatural figure to be explicitly distinguished, in the context of our Christian texts, from the heavenly God, or possibly simply to mortals who hold a godlike authority over their followers.

Cóir Anmann’s other two entries provide less material for interpretation. The Dagda’s role as father is well-attested in the literature, with several sons and at least two daughters mentioned by name, as well as a trio of grandsons who jointly hold the kingship of Ireland when the Milesians invade. These offspring have roles of their own (of variable importance) in narratives, suggesting that their appearance is not simply a by-product of the Irish passion for genealogy, but may reflect genuine tradition that the Dagda’s lineage comprises a substantial portion of the divine society, much as Zeus’ offspring do. (Note further that the Dagda’s brother Ogma is also an important figure of divine narrative, akin to Zeus’ brothers Poseidon and Hades.) The designation of Ruad Rofessa as having “the perfection of the multiform triads” is especially fitting given that the Dagda himself bears three names.

The *Metrical Dindshenchas* contains twelve poems bearing references to the Dagda: 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 narrative 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 Gábalá Érenn* (Macalister 1941: 120, 125, 180, 184), *De Gabail in t-Sída*, *Aislinge Óenguso*, and *Tochmarc Étaíne*, as well as the invasion narratives of the *Annals of*

Inisfallen and *Lebor Bretnach*, while the latter is implicit in various aspects of his portrayal in *CMT*, 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 specific language used to describe 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, may 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, translation 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. Eric Hamp (2002) argues for such a reading, connecting the word to Celtic **duon-no-o*-related to Latin *bonus*.

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.” Hamp proposes that *de(i)n* should be read as “a cognate of unknown morphology to Latin *duenos*, and to 2 *donn*,” and dismisses any connection to *dian* “rapid” (Hamp 2002: 168). 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 *anfud/anfad*. The opening paragraph of *Tochmarc Étaíne* also attributes power over the storm to the Dagda (Koch and Carey 2009: 146).

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 Great-father.”

The use of the “watchman device” in *Mesca Ulad* provides a colorful description of the Dagda: “a great-eyed, great-thighed, great-shouldered man, excessively great and tall, with a fine brown cloak about him” (Koch and Carey 2009: 118). This description lends additional weight to the perception of the Dagda as a giant or at least greater-than-normal sized. The Dagda’s staff or club is again referred to as a *lorg*, and is here given the additional description of *adúathmar* (“dreadful”) and *íarnaidi* (“iron”). This is, in fact, the only occurrence of the “iron” description I have yet found in the literature, despite the apparently widespread perception among even scholars (Enright 2006: 333, for example) that the Dagda’s club is always described as an iron weapon; the fact that Conchobar’s doorkeepers are similarly said to be armed with iron clubs in a later passage of the tale (Koch and Carey 2009: 121) further lessens its normative status.

The portrayal of the Dagda in *Cath Maige Tuired* serves as the basis for the common conception of this figure. This depiction is complex, and contains some interesting contradictions. Although he is not portrayed as a king in this text, he is clearly a senior member of the Tuatha Dé Danann, as he is included in Lug’s councils of war and even sent by him to spy on and delay the Fomoiré (Gray 1982: 46-47); the episode with the Fomorian host and the daughter of Indech (Gray 46-50), however, treats him as a rustic figure of comedy: ill-dressed, impotent (at least temporarily), and bested by a woman of the Fomoiré. I plan to address the *CMT* depiction of the Dagda more thoroughly in a

later essay; for the moment, I wish to focus on a small portion of the narrative that involves some alternative epithets for the Dagda.

During his verbal sparring 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 *fír* "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 one possible (albeit unattested) 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* occurs elsewhere in the medieval Irish corpus. It is the byname of the Ulster warrior Furbaidhe, and is glossed in the Rennes *Dindshenchas* entry for Carn Furbaidi as "having two horns on his head" (Stokes 1895: 38-39). The name is also adopted by the *geilt* Suibhne (*Buile Shuibhne*, lines 1202-1203):

*nocha n-é mh'ainm dlighteachán,
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; certainly he is not elsewhere described as "horned" in the way that Furbaidhe is. The preceding stanzas of *BS* 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”).

A metonymic reading of this epithet provides a possible solution to the puzzle. If we read *benn* as meaning “horned beasts” rather than “horns,” then both Suibhne and the Dagda could be appropriately referred to as “Man of Horned Beasts.” In Suibhne’s case, these would be the stags with whom he shares his wilderness abode. In the case of the Dagda, the beasts in question are more likely to be cattle, providing a symbolic linkage to the episode later in the text wherein the Dagda calls the tribute-cattle back from the Fomori. This epithet could also suggest “man of wealth,” as the cow was the standard unit of value for transactions in agricultural Ireland (Patterson 73-74), or perhaps simply “farmer.” (Borsje 1996: 26 provides an example of such a reading for *benn* from the poetic portion of *Echtra Fergusa maic Leiti*.)

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 2009: 149). From the human perspective, this radical transformation could certainly be considered a rebirth of the land, restructuring it from its “natural” to its “cultural” state.

To the best of my knowledge, the phrase *athgen mbethai* occurs in one other text: *Félire Óengusso Céili Dé* (the Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee), whose poetic epilogue contains the following stanza (Stokes 1905: 275, lines 237-240):

*Drong rerach im Nóë
tar sálmuire sretha,
céli ind Ríg flaithgil,
ba hed aithgin mbetha.*

The troop of ancestors around Noah over ranges of mainseas: the servants of the bright-realmed King, it was the rebirth of the world.

The association with Noah suggests that the rebirth here refers to the Flood. The description of the radical reshaping of the landscape perpetrated by the Dagda above, as well as the previous proposal that the name *Dagda* might itself be apotropaic, suggests a native paradigm for this phrase that encompasses violent or destructive action as a prelude or means to regeneration. Such a paradigm would negate an apparent paradox caused by the juxtaposition of *athgen mbethai* with *cerrce* in this passage.

The picture of the Dagda that arises from the evidence considered is complex: he is great of stature if not actually a giant; physically robust and potentially destructive, but simultaneously benevolent and generative of life, both among the gods and in the realms of humanity; rich in magical power and the knowledge required to use it wisely; a noble king of the Gods of Ireland.

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