Sucellus and Nantosuelta in Mediaeval Celtic Mythology


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In the following notes we hope to offer satisfactory evidence for the identification of the Celtic god Sucellus and his companion Nantosuelta (1) with certain divinities of pre-Christian Wales and Ireland. Such an identification suffers, at the outset, from the extraordinary difference in material available for the study of the Celtic regions of the Roman Empire, and post-Roman Celtic literature respectively. In Roman times the main sources of information which shed light on native mythology are sculptural representations, a small number of Latin and Celtic inscriptions, a few excavated temples and temple districts, and in addition we have to cope with an ever-present tendency of Romanizing Celtic numina in « interpretatio Romana. » In the Middle Ages, on the other hand, we find few conclusive archaeological remains of Celtic religion, but a flood of frequently contradictory literary traditions, an exception for Roman times. The sagas or pseudo-historical texts in question were written down many hundred years after the passing of pre-Christian

(1) The two authors of this joint article have the agreeable duty to thank their wives for valuable assistance in the revising and typing of the manuscript; and Felix Oswald, D.Sc., F.S.A., of Solva (Pembrokeshire), and G.F. Campion, Esq. of Nottingham, for providing us with photographs of two reliefs.

For Nantosueltia and Sucellus in the Celtic regions of the Roman Empire cp. Pauly-Wissowa, Realencyklopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft, art. Muttergottheiten (col. 962-63), Nantosueltia, Olludius (by F. M. Heichelheim), Sucellus (by Professor Keune); P. Lambrechts, Contributions à l'étude des divinités celtiques (= Rijksuniversiteit te Gent. Werken uitgegeven door de Faculteit van Wijsbegeerte en Letteren. Vol. 93) 1942, p. 100 ff; F. M. Heichelheim, in Man 16 (1916), p. 66 with earlier bibliography.
beliefs. Here even the similarity of divine names may lead us astray. Cases like that of Mabon ap Modron and Apollo Maponus (1) which instantly suggest a relationship, are rare, and there remains only the careful investigation of the functions and mythological peculiarities of the numina under discussion, especially in as far as these can be derived from similar or identical attributes or symbols.

The Celtic divinity known as Sucellus or, because of his frequent hammer-symbol, as « The God with the Hammer » has been for long the centre of discussion. This numen is a pre-Indogermanic deity of Western Europe who was assimilated to Indogermanic Celtic beliefs. The god’s symbol, the hammer, appears as early as on the monuments of the French Neolithicum (2). It seems established that three functions met in Sucellus: first, that of a god of the underworld and death; second that of an ancestor of the Gaulish race; thirdly that of a fertility-deity; three functions which are, in any case, supplementary rather than contradictory as shown by the association of the Greek Hades with Demeter in the Persephone myth, and in that with Erechtheus, the ancestor of the Athenians. Now in so far as Sucellus figures as a god of the underworld and concurrently as the ancestor of the Gaulish nation, he very likely


Mars Nodens, the Celtic Nudd or Nuada, should be mentioned in this connection too. Cp., with bibliography, Heichelheim in Pauly-Wissowa, R.E., art. Nodens; N. Joliffe, Arch. Journ. 98 (1942), 49. Nudd has been shown to be responsible for various features of the Arthurian Legend. Cp. A.C.L. Brown, Origin of the Grail Legend (1943), Passim.

corresponds to the mysterious Dispater of Caesar (1). As god of the underworld and death he has the attire of the Latin Pluto in Roman sculptural representations, some of which have been excavated in cemeteries of this period. In addition, the hammer, his symbol, is an instrument of mining and quarrying, activities which were associated, at least in Gaulish representations, with infernal deities.

On the other hand, however — and this leads to a widening of the first function — Sucellus seems to have good claims to be considered as a god of the sky as well as of the underworld (2). In this connection his hammer may symbolise thunder, power in the sky, as it does in the well known case of Thor, the Germanic god of thunder. Professor Lambrechts here rightly draws our attention to the fact that Sucellus is sometimes represented in the posture of Juppiter, the Roman god of the sky, and is called Juppiter Optimus Maximus in a Latin inscription. In the same inscription his name is even spelled Su-caelus, as if to associate the Celtic name with Latin « caelum ».

Furthermore it is worthy of note that Sucellus shares a very important symbol, the olla, with Sylvanus, the god of fields and fertility of Old Italy from whom he seems, at times, indistinguishable (3). As Sucellus appears, on a considerable number of monuments, in the company of Sylvanus; and Diana, the usual companion of Sylvanus in Roman representations, is not infrequently seen as the companion of Sucellus, the conclusion seems inevitable that Sucellus shares with Sylvanus the function of a peasant and hunter god of fertility, and that this function is expressed by their common symbol, the olla, which might well be thought of as either a dish for the carrying of food, or as a vessel to contain reaped fruits of orchard or field. Furthermore it seems more than likely that even the hammer of Sucellus may have been confused, at times, with the somewhat similarly-shaped reaping hook of Sylvanus. In any case olla, hammer, and reaping hook alike are found with both gods.

To sum up: it seems best to see in Sucellus, as Professor Lambrechts

(3) For the well known « Interpretatio Romana » of Sucellus as Sylvanus cp.-J. Toutain, Les cultes patiens dans l'empire romain, III (1920), 238; Lambrechts op. cit., 111 ff., with detailed discussion of the monuments and bibliography.
does « a protecting divinity of the fruits, a god of riches and of fertility, a god of the sky », a ruler of the underworld, and, last but not least, the father of the Gaulish race (1).

Now there exist traditions of an Irish god who shows, even at this stage of the enquiry, surprising similarities to Sucellus. Primitive Irish mythology seems to have imagined a Pantheon of benignant deities, known as the Tuatha Dé Danann, and chiefly associated with the underworld and fertility functions. In this Pantheon an important, if not the most important, position was held by a deity known as the Dagda. The significance of this name is disputed (2) and does not really concern us here. He is, however, also known by two other names: he is called Ruad Rofessa, « the Red one of Great Knowledge » (3), a suitable name for an underworld deity (the association of wisdom with underworld deities is a mythological common place), and Eochaidh Ollathair, « Eochaidh All-Father ». The second part of this last name, which does not occur in the names of other Irish gods, clearly suggests that, like Sucellus Dispater, the Dagda was considered the ancestor of the human race.

Our knowledge of the Dagda is gleaned largely from a fairly late and not altogether reliable text, known as the (Second) Battle of Moytura (Cath Mag Tured) (4). In this text we are told of the great battle waged by the friendly Tuatha Dé Danann against the race of supernatural invaders of Ireland, the Fomorians. The Dagda plays an outstanding role in this battle as one of the leaders of the Tuatha. Now in this account we find two symbolic objects associated with him, significant for the proposed identification with Sucellus: a cauldron and a gigantic forked branch.

The cauldron of the Dagda, which together with other similar objects of Irish and Welsh mythology has been claimed by such a scholar as Professor R. S. Loomis as one of the prototypes of the

(1) Lambrchts, op. cit., 114. For further analogies between Sucellus and Dagda cp. note 15.
(2) Cp. J. A. Mac Culloch, Religion of the Ancient Celts, 1911, 77, for explanations of this name.
(3) Cp. R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance, 1927, 238 f., who suggests, independently from us, that the Dagda was probably a sun god, an underworld deity, and an agricultural deity in one. All these three functions would, of course, correspond to those of Sucellus.
Holy Grail (*), is, beyond doubt, a symbol of fertility. It is said to provide soup for whoever comes to it, and it is inexhaustible (2). The texts, indeed, do their best to make the connection of the Dagda with an unending supply of food, and especially of soup, perfectly clear. Before the start of the battle the Dagda is sent into the camp of the Fomorian enemy to spy. The Fomorians straightway prepare soup for him « and because he loved soup very much, they filled for him the king's cauldron which had the depth of five men's fists. » They pour the soup into a hole into the ground and force him to empty it (3).

The second symbolic object of the Dagda, the gigantic forked branch, is even more suggestive of a connection with Sucellus, as it partakes clearly of the double nature of the hammer of Sucellus: thunder-weapon and fertility object. This forked branch, which may be a prehistoric predecessor of Sucellus' hammer, is described as too heavy for eight men to carry (4), and as primarily a weapon. Asked by the god Lugh before the battle of Moytura how he will aid the common cause, the Dagda replies: « I shall exchange blows with the Fomorians and annihilate them by magic. Such will be the number of Fomorian bones broken by the blows of my branch-club as is the number of hail stones under the hoofs of horses during a tempest (5) ». Nothing could be clearer than this suggestion of the symbolism of the Dagda's emblem, to convince us that it is seen here as a weapon of a god of the stormy sky. And yet the same Dagda resides in an underground fairy dwelling, the famous Brughna-Boyne, partaking thus like Sucellus of sky and underworld at one and the same time (6).

(1) Cp. Loomis, op. cit., 240, and in Speculum VIII (1933), 428 f. Professor Brown, op. cit., 71 draws attention to a passage in the Dé Gabail int Sida which demonstrates that the Dagda, in one of his aspects, is clearly a god of fertility and abundance: « Wonderful truly is that land (i.e. of the Dagda) trees with fruit are there always, and a pig eternally alive, and a roasted swine and a tankard with marvellous liquor, and never do they all decrease. » The tankard is clearly another form of the Dagda's inexhaustible cauldron.

(2) D'Arbois, op. cit., V, 403.
(3) D'Arbois, op. cit., V, 426, 427.
(4) D'Arbois, op. cit., V, 427.
(5) D'Arbois, op. cit., V, 431. If this mythological tradition of the club weapon of a divine glutton should be pre-Roman, it would explain why Sucellus was identified with Hercules by the Interpretatio Romana. Cp. Keune, in Pauly-Wissowa, R.E. art. Sucellus; Lambrechts, op. cit., 113.
(6) Cp. D'Arbois, op. cit., II, 270, according to which texts the Dagda is
But the forked branch-club occurs in the «Battle of Moytura» in a very different connection: after his gigantic feat of soup-eating mentioned above the Dagda departs from the Fomorian camp, dragging his branched club after him and drawing with it an enormously deep furrow (1), a clear enough reference to his agricultural powers. Indeed, in still another passage of the same text we are told of a second furrow-drawing exploit of the Dagda, for which he receives in payment a cow with the power to attract other cattle by its lowing (2). Both in function and attributes there seems then a surprising correspondence between the Dagda and Sucellus. Not only are the Dagda's cauldron and forked branch similar to the olla and hammer of Sucellus, but as god of sky and underworld, as deity presiding over the produce of field and herd, he exactly fulfills those functions postulated for Sucellus. Yet a further point of resemblance which seems to clinch the argument will become clear later on (3).

But before mentioning that point it will be well to show that the usual female companion of Sucellus, who is called Nantosueltta in an inscription from Sarrebourg (4), finds an equally surprising parallel in Irish mythology. The name of Nantosueltta has given rise to various explanations of which two seem significant. The name has been connected, in the first place, with the Celtic word for war. On the other hand, «nant» meaning valley has also been adduced in explanation. Nantosueltta, who usually, but not always, occurs together with Sucellus (5), is on several sculptures accompanied by a crow, something almost unique for a Celtic numen in interpretatio Romana, and is represented as winged at least on one. She is also, said to distribute subterranean fairy dwellings to all the Tuatha, his own chief dwelling being the fairy mound at the river Boyne.

(1) D'Arbois, op. cit., V, 427.
(2) Indeed we are expressly told that the Dagda holds sway over corn and milk, and that only his friendship enables the invaders of Ireland to reap corn and to drink milk. Cp. D'Arbois, op. cit., II, 269. It was actually D'Arbois, op. cit., V, 448, who tentatively suggested the equation between Sucellus and Dagda for the first time fifty years ago.
(3) Cp. below, for the marriage of Dagda and Morrigan.
(4) Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, XLI, Nr. 4542.
in various reliefs, represented with a round hut on which her crow is sitting (1). Now it is almost uncanny to observe how both the explanations of her name and the two symbols find confirmation in what we know of the Irish goddess, Morrigan, the goddess of war and death. Her name has been explained, we think satisfactorily, as composed of « rigan » « queen », and the Indo-European root « mor » to be found in Latin « mors », modern English « nightmare », etc. (2). We shall see, however, that this goddess is also frequently connected with water so that the double explanation of the name of Nantosueltta may be due to a fusion of death-war and water ideas. The Morrigan is generally associated with the Tuatha Dé Danann, of whom the Dagda is one: she gives them outstanding help in the « Battle of Moytura », and in spite of her nature as goddess of war and death she is clearly a member of the Tuatha group.

If we now recall that Nantosueltta has the crow as her symbol and is even represented as winged it will seem of considerable importance that the Morrigan is constantly connected with the crow and that, on various occasions, she changes into that bird, an appropriate enough transformation for a goddess of the battlefield. There are at least three separate pieces of evidence for this power of transformation (3):

(1) In the « Cattle Raid of Cooley » (Tain Bó Cuálnge), an Irish text originally of the 8th century, Morrigan appears to the famous Irish hero Cúchulainn at a river ford as a young woman offering him her love. When he rejects her she disappears, but hampers him when in single combat at another river ford, is wounded by him, and flies away in the shape of a crow (4). To this must be added that in Cúchulainn’s last battle, after having unyoked his horses to prevent his setting out, the Morrigan hovers above him

(1) Cp. the list of monuments in Heichelheim’s art. Nantosueltta (Pauly-Wissowa, R.E.). The only mythological raven or crow from the Celtic regions of the Roman Empire which has been found with another god is depicted on a relief from Bonn. The native Mercury in question has probably been influenced by the Germanic Wodan. Cp. Heichelheim, in Pauly-Wissowa. R.E., art. Mercurius (col. 994 Nr. 190 b, 1013), Tierdaemonen (col. 925).
(3) For the following cp. especially R. S. Loomis, in Speculum 20 (1945) 92 f.; T. P. Cross, in Modern Philology, 12 (1915), 585-664; L. A. Paton, Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance, (1903), 136-166.
(4) Loomis, loc. cit., 193; Hull, Cuchullinn Saga, (898), 164.
in distress as a crow, and when he has received his death-stroke she perches on a stone near him (1).

(2) In the mysterious « Cattle Raid of Regamna », (Táin Bó Regamna) Cúchulainn meets the Morrigan as a red-eyed-browed woman in a crimson mantle on a chariot near a ford. When he drives her away she disappears, but as a black bird on a tree close by threatens to hurt him in every conceivable way (2).

(3) While the crow-nature of the Morrigan is amply demonstrated by these two examples, the argument is made pretty well unassailable by the fact that the Morrigan is equated, in Irish mythological lore, with two other war and death goddesses, Macha and Bodb, where the name Bodb actually signifies crow. For the equation with Macha we quote a gloss in a 14th century MS which runs « Machae, a scald-crow, or she is the third Morrigan » (3). For the equation with Bodb who herself is known as « Bodb of the battles », and seems to have been known to the Continental Celts under the name of Bodua (cf. such names as Boduogenos) (4), attention has been drawn to an entry in the Irish « Book of Invasions » (Lebor Gabhala) which runs

Bodb and Macha, rich the store,
Morrigan who dispenses confusion ...
(5).

and to the fact that in the account of the « Battle of Moytura » both the Bodb and the Morrigan fight on the side of the Tuatha. After the battle they announce the victory to mountains, rivers and river-mouths (6).

It is also worthwhile noting that in the « Brislech móir Maige Muirthemne » Cúchulainn encounters, at a ford, a maiden washing « crimson bloody spoils ». She is the Morrigan and is called « Bodb’s daughter » (7). Indeed, in Irish sagas disaster is often portended by

(3) Cross, loc. cit., 605.
(4) Cp. Mac Gulloch, op. cit., 71, where the equation of Bodb, Macha and Morrigan is amply discussed, and where it is shown that Bodb is also the consort of the war-god Néit, one of the Tuatha. The latter may have been the Mars Neton of Macrob., Sat., 119, 5. Cp. Heichelheim, in Pauly-Wissowa, R.E., art. Mars (col. 1953).
Bodb or Morrigan washing bloody garments, heads or arms at a ford (1). It would lead too far to collect here all the evidence that establishes that Morrigan, Bodb and Macha, in this late period of Celtic mythology, are more or less identical as goddesses of war and death, and that in this function they are imagined as crows hovering over or near the battlefield.

While the crow-symbol goes a long way to support the proposed identification of Nantosueltta and the Morrigan, much light is shed on another symbol of Nantosueltta by a further study of another aspect of the Morrigan. We have seen that Nantosueltta is frequently represented with a round house, which has been explained tentatively and not very convincingly as a bee-hive (2). Now the Morrigan shares with the Dagda and many of the Tuatha Dé Danann a preference for the type of habitation known as sids or faery mounds. These faery mounds, while bearing witness to the underworld character of the Tuatha Dé Danann, affect the picture of the Morrigan very considerably. After her appearance to Cúchulainn in the « Táin Bó Regamna » the Morrigan is expressly stated to return to her habitation, the faery mound of Cruachan (3), and in the « Táin Bó Cuálnge » she is called « Morrigan daughter of Ernmas from the elf-mounds » (4). It seems, indeed, that the Morrigan was commonly thought of as emerging from these mounds which were imagined as partly subterranean and circular in shape. In sculptural representations these circular faery dwellings, which may have originated in the well known subterranean cave temples of the Maltese and « Western » Neolithicum, had to be somewhat due to the exigencies of the material worked upon. So we find Morrigan’s sid transformed into the round house of Nantosueltta.

To sum up: « Nantosueltta’s name suggests a connection with war and a possible connection with water. Both these interpretations find ample confirmation in the case of the Morrigan. She is a goddess of war and death and appears for preference at river-

(1) Cp. preceding note.
(2) Cp. note 1, p. 311.
Nantosuelt's round house finds its most satisfactory explanation in the round faery habitation of her Irish counterpart.

While all these parallels seem significant enough in themselves, they are extraordinarily emphasized by the fact that Nantosuelt has a second name in a Sarrebourg inscription (1) which begins with \( M \), is intentionally abbreviated to one letter, and has to be explained as the Latin dative of a divine name. It seems very likely to us that this abbreviation has to be restored to \( M\text{argi} \) or something similar, and can then be connected etymologically with Morrigan, the Death Queen, as an earlier Celtic form of the same name. The probability of this suggestion is strengthened by the fact that a stone representing Sucellus and his female companion has been found in a Roman cemetery not far from the site of the Roman station of Margidunum near Nottingham(2), which thus would...

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(1) Cp. Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, XIII, Nr. 4543.

This relief is preserved in the Museum of University College, Nottingham. It was found and excavated, in the xviiith century, in a Roman cemetery of Ad Pontem, a Roman settlement near Thorpe in Nottinghamshire, which is not far from Margidunum. The sculpture is made from local oolithe stone. Both numina stand upright, in two niches of an aedicula. Sucellus stands in the right niche; he wears a sagum with belt, and boots, and holds the hammer in his left. In the left niche, the goddess holds a basket, probably containing apples, in both hands. She is naked, except that she has a torques around her neck and trousers which are pieced together, with five (leather?) pieces for each leg.

That the centre of this cult was at Margidunum, as the name of this Roman station suggests, is made very likely by another relief. It now belongs to G. F. Campion, Esq., of Nottingham who kindly allowed us to publish it on plate II. The remarkable piece was found, as written records show, by E. W. Campion, Esq., the father of the present owner, on the South-Eastern moat.
SUCELLES AND NANTOSUELTA SCULPTURE FROM ROMAN CEMETERY NEAR NOTTINGHAM (p. 314 note 2).
Relief of the hammer of Sucellus (p. 314 note 2).
be « the town of Margis-Morrigan ». An unpublished votive relief to Sucellus comes even from Margidunum itself. The reason for abbreviating this divine name to M. in the Sarrebourg inscription can now be easily understood as a quite normal superstitious practice to avoid the mention of death or its representatives.

The evidence for the equation between Sucellus and Dagda, and between Nantosuelta and Morrigan, finds one last piece of confirmation. While we have seen that Sucellus and Nantosuelta frequently occur as companions, we have treated their Irish equivalents up to now as if there existed no connection between them. We are however informed, in the « Battle of Moytura », that Morrigan became, on one occasion, the wife of the Dagda. The Dagda saw her bathing in the river Onius, near one of his faery dwellings, and there made her his wife (1). This final point of a connection between the Dagda and the Morrigan seems to add extraordinary weight to our other proofs.

The Dagda and the Morrigan seem to have continued an existence as figures of romance right down through the Middle Ages. The Dagda has handed on many of his functions to Pwyll and Bran of Welsh romance and through them to Pelles and Bron. the mysterious grail kings of Medieval romance (2). The Morrigan survives as that puzzling and uncanny figure Morgain la Fée (3), the sister of king of the Margidunum site which was not yet excavated at that time. The measures of this relief of clay are 15 cm 6 mm in width and 20 cm 8 mm in height. It shows an axe or hammer, has the well known appearance of votive reliefs of clay, and is probably the votive gift of a local quarrier or miner, deposited in a temple of Sucellus and Margis) in or near Margidunum. That the two numina were generally venerated in the Nottingham region is not surprising, if we consider the many natural and prehistoric man made caves of which the counties Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire abound.

Arthur. It is important to trace back these figures, surrounded in later story by an aura of romance and imaginative beauty, to what we consider their ancestors on the monuments of the ancient Celts of the Roman period, to Sucellus and Nantosuelta, and even, more dimly, to prehistoric Celtic and Neolithic « Western » religiosity.