

A Note on the Farley Heath Sceptre-Binding

The meaning of the representations on the sceptre-binding from Farley Heath has been discussed by Goodchild in two papers (Goodchild 1938; 1947). This note is not a new interpretation. Rather it offers additional comment on certain of the individual elements of the design. These have been given numbers for ease of reference and are shown on fig 1.

3 and 4 are the smith god's hammer and tongs and 5 shows a nude male figure. Two objects are shown at 6. One is the mallet of Suceellos, above the left shoulder of the figure (5). The second is above the figure's head, but despite this relationship there are good reasons for thinking that we are intended to regard both the objects as held by the figure, one in each hand. In France's Museum of National Antiquities at St Germain-en-Laye there is a case full of bronze statuettes of Suceellos. He is shown with his mallet in his left hand and resting over his left shoulder. In his extended right hand he holds a cup. The same two objects are associated with the god (shown seated) on a sculptured relief from Nolarg (Côte d'Or) in the same museum. The object above the Farley Heath figure's head is therefore best interpreted as Suceellos' cup, and the figure himself must represent Suceellos. However, the continental representations of the god show him wearing a tunic and sometimes also a cloak and it is not clear why he should be shown here nude. Dr M Henig has pointed out to me that the emphasised nipples, navel, and genitalia of the Farley Heath figure are matched in two sculptured reliefs from the Chedworth villa, one inscribed to Lenus Mars (Goodburn 1976, 27 and pl 10.1 and 3). It is possible that both at Farley Heath and Chedworth a local British deity has been assimilated to a Gallo-Roman god and endowed with his attributes while retaining distinctive characteristics of his own.

The mallet certainly symbolises the god's power and is analogous to the thunderbolt of Jupiter, Neptune's trident, or the caduceus of Mercury, but perhaps rather more creative than coercive. The cup may represent his gift to mankind, in the same way that Mercury is represented with a purse of coins as well as the caduceus. Some support for this idea comes in a relief from a villa at Kinheim an der Mosel which is in the Landesmuseum at Trier. The god is shown with his mallet over his right shoulder and his left arm supports a large bunch of grapes in a fold in his cloak. In this Suceellos retains the mallet as his badge of power, but his gift to men has become the special product of this vine-growing area. It would be logical to suppose that the more usual cup represented a drink also, perhaps the *zytbos* (barley beer) mentioned by Diodorus siculus (5. 26, 2)

7 seems to show the tongs holding some object on an anvil, and presumably we are to suppose that the god was in the act of using his tools. This is of importance because it seems to indicate that the sceptre-binding portrays a narrative or myth. We are apt to forget that a Celtic mythology, perhaps even a theology, existed, albeit in oral form (Caesar *de bello Gallico* 6, 18.1). No 9 shows the thunder-wheel of the god Taranis and the helmeted head (10) is either Taranis himself or an offering to him.

The other elements are much more difficult to interpret. 1, 3, 4, 7, 8 and 11 are flanked by enigmatic signs. Although their meaning is not known their occurrence or non-occurrence beside particular elements must have some significance. Further signs occur at the very top of the sceptre, above 13, and may also separate 1 and 2. The main rectangular element of no 1 is similar to the trunk of Suceellos. Some of the lines around it may represent limbs. The detached head (10) will be remembered, and a crude relief from Wall in Staffordshire seems to portray two living and two dead figures (Ross 1979, 3–11 and specifically 5 & 8 (fig 2) stone no 3) and provides a possible parallel. No 2 is clearly a bird. In view of the certain appearance of Suceellos, it has been taken to be a raven, representing his consort Nantosuelta. She is shown here in her aspect of war goddess (Ross 1974, 313). No 8 has not been satisfactorily explained by previous commentators. On one of the panels of the Gundestrup cauldron (Ross 1974, 103 fig 31) a god is shown plunging

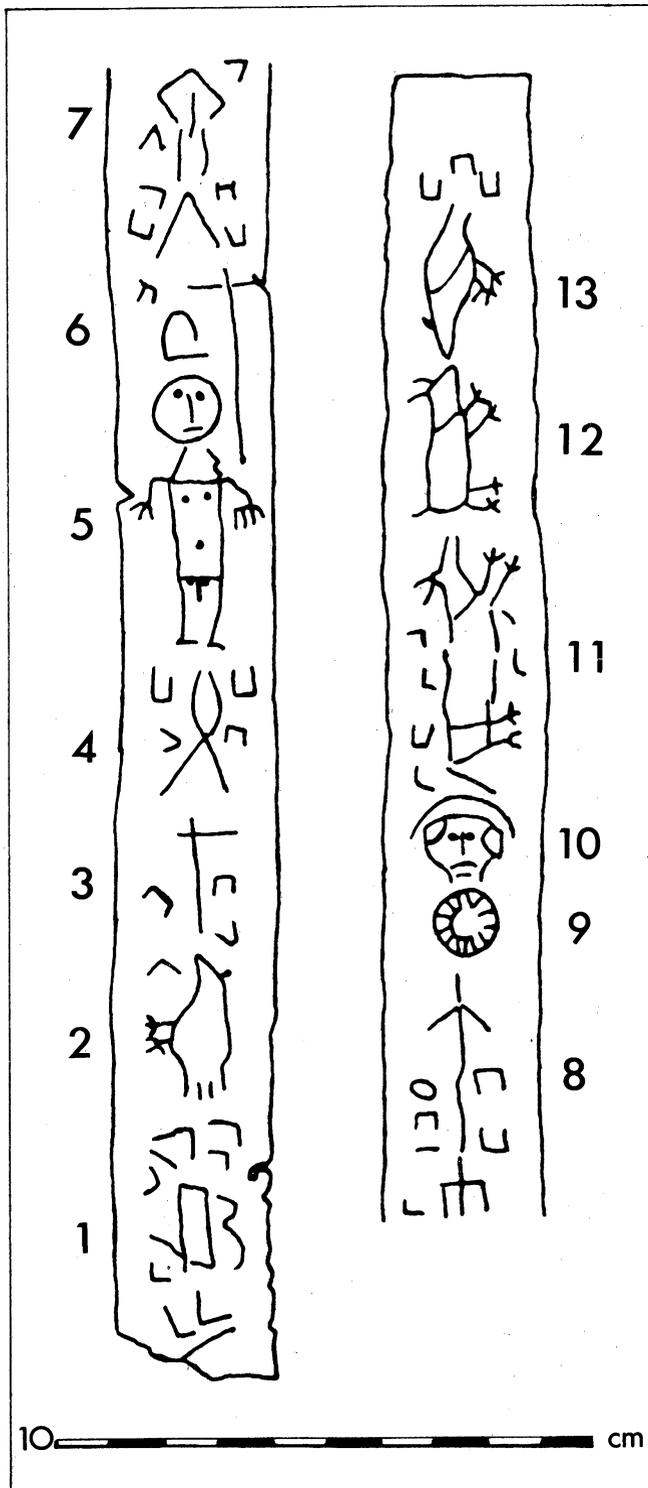


Fig 1. The Farley Heath sceptre-binding drawn out

a human victim into a pit. There is a dog present and a procession of soldiers bearing a complete tree towards the sacrifice. The tree is represented as quite straight, with short branches sprouting from either side of the trunk (it is not conceived three-dimensionally), and there are three roots portrayed at one end. This seems to be the closest artistic parallel for 8 on the Farley Heath sceptre-binding, and I take this to represent a tree trunk with branches and roots. A Romano-British parallel comes from Castleford in Yorkshire on a stone dedicated to the nymphs (Hassall & Tomlin 1983, 337 and 342 fig 40). The stone-carver seems to have selected elements from a classical relief-type showing nymphs combing their hair and to have given them a Celtic emphasis. The trees which would simply have acted as a frame indicating a rural landscape in such a model have here been transformed by the addition of triple roots, and must themselves carry some meaning. Trees occur on Dobunnic coins and one is held by a goddess carved in stone from Caerwent (Boon 1983, 43-4 pl 8). Boon states that the tree is an emblem of eternity, and this could certainly apply to the tree in the semi-circular panel below Christ on the Hinton St Mary mosaic, but we cannot be sure that this was its only symbolic significance.

Nos 11-13 are two quadrupeds and a bird. The bird may once again be the raven goddess Nantosuelta, though the difference in the treatment of the tail here and in 2 should be noted. The two quadrupeds have been regarded as different species by most commentators, but I would draw attention to the treatment of their feet. Both are clearly shown with claws and recall the wolves flanking the wheel god Taranis and the wolf to the left of Cernunnos on the Gundestrup cauldron (Ross 1974, 181, fig 95 and pl 65). Both animals should be canine, though 11 could be taken as a wolf and 12 as a dog. The presence of the signs beside 11 and their absence from beside 12 suggest that the two should not be taken together. 12 and 13 are confronted and may represent Sucellos and Nantosuelta together. The helmeted head and the raven indicate the war aspect of Taranis and Nantosuelta, and cache of silver plaques from Barkway in Hertfordshire associated Mars Alator and Mars Toutates with Vulcan as the smith god (Green 1976, 209). A similar association perhaps existed as Farley Heath.

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