

## Why Snakefeeder? Why Dragonfly? Some Random Observations on Etymological Entomology

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### Abstract

This paper lists 95 English and 23 Celtic names for the Odonata. Almost all of these are associative and/or descriptive. Although the names may be grouped into 13 categories from their connections or associations (some of which are fanciful or false) with familiar objects or ideas, the most numerous group are "associated" with snakes (or dragons); another large group includes names connected with the devil. The origin of such names is attributed to the reputation of the insect and the folklore that anything bad is of the devil combined with the identity of the devil and a snake in the Judeo-Christian myth from the Garden of Eden. The origin of the idea that dragonflies are harmful is questioned as "almost any textbook of Entomology will furnish the information that they are entirely harmless to man and cannot bite or sting". However, this is not literally true, and examples of biting and "stinging" by individuals of some of the larger dragonfly species are given.

I have been compiling lists of names of the Odonata for a number of years. A few papers on both technical (7) and common (5, 6) names have been published. Names are being compiled from all languages. As far as possible the meaning and significance of each name are traced. Particular attention has been given to those names with malevolent implications, as *Augenschiessen*, *bas drucha*, mule stingers, and *pakharaille*, and those with reptilian overtones, as *aspis dimonis*, *cap de ser*, *Drachnenfliegen* and snake doctor. Attempts have been made to identify, or hunt out, facts, beliefs, legends, myths and traditions which may have inspired the names.

In this paper the 95 English and 23 Celtic names for dragonflies which have been found to date are listed and some speculations concerning their origins are offered. A few names of similar meaning or import in other languages are cited for each set (type) of English names.

These lists have been compiled from all possible sources—textbooks, dictionaries (8, 13), linguistical atlases (4), articles on folklore (1, 3), novels and other literature (12), special treatises on dragonfly or insect names (2, 6, 9, 10, 11), personal correspondence and replies to a questionnaire distributed with an issue of *Selysia, A Newsletter of Odonatology*, in 1965 (5, 6). When he received this questionnaire the late Colonel Niall MacNeill of Dublin arranged for the Irish Folklore Commission to conduct a survey to obtain Celtic names. This survey yielded almost as many Celtic names as I obtained from other sources. Some English names in use in Ireland, a few of which have not been reported elsewhere, were also furnished. The lists of Celtic (with English equivalents and the areas from which reported) and the English names are given in Tables 2 and 1, respectively.

In a paper entitled "Some observations on the nature of insect names" awaiting publication I have shown that insect names are of six types, which are not at all mutually exclusive—primitive, borrowed,

TABLE 1. *Common names for Odonata (English).*

1	adderbolt	26	penny adder	49	mule stinger	72	Jacky breezer
2	adder-cap	27	snake doctor	50	eye stinger	73	kiteflee
3	adderfly	28	snake feeder	51	ear cutter	74	Tom breeze
4	adderspear	29	snake waiter	52	horse long	75	Tom breezer
5	atherbell	30	snake('s) stang		cripple	76	bee butcher
6	atherbill	31	stangin(g) ether	53	mule killer	77	mosquito hawk
7	athercap	32	stangin(g) hazzert	54	cow killer	78	balance fly
8	bull adder	33	tanging edder	55	blue needle	79	water dipper
9	bull ether	34	tanging ether	56	darning needle	80	locust
10	dragonfly	35	tanging nadder	57	sneider	81	blue beetle <sup>2,3</sup>
11	edderbout	36	tanging nether	58	needle case	82	salmon fly <sup>2,3</sup>
12	edther	37	bad man's needle	59	green darning	83	water butterfly
13	edther bowt	38	devil's needle <sup>2</sup>	60	granny's needle	84	woodwig
14	ether's mon <sup>1</sup>	39	devil's darning	61	horse needle <sup>2,3</sup>	85	hobby horse
15	ether's mild <sup>1</sup>		needle <sup>2</sup>	62	silverpin	86	coach horse
16	fleeing aither	40	devil's riding	63	spindle	87	peacock
17	fleeing ask		horse	64	spindler	88	king fisher
18	fleeing snake	41	Dickerson's horse	65	spinner	89	leather wing
19	flying adder	42	Dickerson's mare	66	spineroo	90	water nymph
20	flying ask	43	bullstang	67	spinning Jenny	91	damselfly
21	flying asp	44	bull-tang	68	fire flee	92	demoiselle
22	flying dragon	45	bull-ting	69	heather-bill	93	lady fly
23	flying esk	46	horse-tang	70	heather-flee	94	merry may
24	horse adder	47	horse-sting	71	Jacky breeze	95	(=May-maid)
25	horse snake	48	hoss-stinger				

<sup>1</sup> Reported as colloquial names in English speaking area (Shropshire), but probably of Celtic origin.

<sup>2</sup> Reported as used in Ireland from a survey conducted by the Irish Folklore Commission.

<sup>3</sup> Not reported from any other English speaking area.

extended, associative, descriptive and synthetic. All of the English names, except one or two which are probably borrowed (from the French), are associative and/or descriptive and, as far as I can determine, the Celtic names are of the same types. Although most of the names indicate association or connection with familiar objects or ideas, many of the linkages are highly imaginative, some are non-existent and a few of the implications are false. The names may be grouped into 13 categories, although some fall into two or more groups. The "connections" and the names (indicated by number from Table 1 and letter from Table 2) of each group may be identified as follows: 1) snakes (including dragon and lizard)—1-36, A-K; 2) the devil—37-42, O; 3) sting—30-36, 43-50; 4) horse—24-25, 40-42, 46-49, 52-53, 61; 5) bovine (cow, ox, bull)—43-45, 54, C, K; 6) instrument or agent of damage or harm—50-54, S-T; 7) needle, pin—15, 37-39, 55-62, E-F, L-P; 8) spear, bolt—1, 4, 11, 13, Q-R; 9) spindle or shuttle—63-67; 10) rapid flight—68-75; 11) other animals—80-89; U; 12) habits—76-79; 13) personification—90-95.

Names for dragonflies in other languages are as varied as those in English, and include some types not found in our language.

The widespread tendency to personification of animals is typified by the last six names in Table 1. However, such names appear to be

TABLE 2. *Celtic common names for Odonata.*

Name	English equivalent	Reported from
A. adone er	_____	Brittany (?)
B. bod-easculachar <sup>1</sup>	clown's lizard	Clear Island, Co. Cork
C. damhan nathrach	ox viper	Scotland
D. ether's mon	adder's man	Shropshire
E. ether's mild	adder's needle	Shropshire
F. gwaell y neidr	adder's knitting needle	Wales
G. gwas y neidr	adder's servant	Wales
H. nadermargh	_____	Cornwall
I. nadoz-aer	_____	Brittany (?)
J. nadoz-ear	_____	Brittany (?)
K. tarbh-nathrach	bull viper	Scotland
L. snathad chogaidh <sup>1</sup>	battle needle	southwest Co. Donegal
M. snathad mor <sup>1</sup>	big needle	Co. Mayo
N. snathad mor na sciathain <sup>1</sup>	big needle of the wings	Annadown, Co. Galway
O. snathadan an diabhail <sup>1</sup>	devil's needle	southwestern Co. Donegal
P. snathadan cogaidh <sup>1</sup>	battle needle	northwestern Ireland
Q. spioğan mor <sup>1</sup>	big spike	Co. Mayo
R. spioğoid mor <sup>1</sup>	big spike	Co. Mayo
S. bas drucha <sup>1</sup>	dusky death	Clear Island, Co. Cork
T. spearadoir <sup>1</sup>	mower	Killorglin, Co. Kerry
U. cleardhar caoch <sup>1</sup>	blind wasp	western Co. Galway
V. chwildarw		

<sup>1</sup> Reported as used in Ireland from a survey conducted by the Irish Folklore Commission.

somewhat more numerous in other languages than in English: in French—*dame de Paris*, *marîée* (young married woman), *reine* (the queen), and *demoiselle*, which has been "borrowed" directly by English, and may also be the origin of damselfly. There are exact equivalents of the latter name in Portuguese and Spanish—*donzelinha* and *dimuzela*. *Damo de gandola* (lady of the gondola) and *moungeto* (little nun) occur in Provençal, and *la munga* and *munego* (nun) in Italian. In German are found *Edeljungfer* (genteel maiden), *Wasserrjungfer* (water maiden or nymph) an older form of which was *Waterjumfer*, closely related to the Dutch *waterjuffer*, Swedish *vattenjungfer* and Danish *Vanderymfer*. Some languages have corresponding male names, usually applied to the larger species while the feminine names may be restricted to the smaller ones, as *monsieur*, *danzello*, *sinoriko* and *moine* (*vs. demoisella*, *donzelinha*, *dimuzela*, and *moungeto*, respectively); also *pretre* (priest), *cure* (curate), *capelan* (chaplain) in French, *al privostu* and *e pret* (priest) in Italian. The latter names may be derived from the color, or color pattern, of certain species which suggests the habit of a religious order.

The names of other insects, and even of other animals are frequently applied to dragonflies. This transfer of names is not always due solely to misidentification. In Walloon-speaking areas a dragonfly is called *mouron* (salamander) or *scorpion*, coupled with the belief that its bite is extremely dangerous. The German *Pfaufliege* (peacock fly), Spanish *el parot* (butterfly) and Italian *farfaya* (butterfly), as the

English water butterfly have probably come from the brilliant colors or the beautiful appearance of some species of Odonata.

Water dipper, derived from the habit of libellulids, gomphids and some corduliids of washing eggs from the body by striking the abdomen against the surface of the water is matched by the Italian *lavaki* (tail washer).

There are many names referring to the horse; some of these, as in English are also liked to the devil: *Fandens Ridehest* (the devil's riding horse—Danish; *cavallo d'o demo* (devil's horse)—Portuguese; *calul dracului* (horse of the devil) and *pitingdul dracului* (little horse of the devil)—Roumanian; *pirum hevoinen* (devil's horse)—Finnish' *caballito del diablo* (the devil's little horse)—Spanish; and *Teufelspferd* (devil's horse)—German. In contrast, we note in some languages names with devout inferences, as *Himmelspferde* (heaven's horse—German; *su gwaddu endiu* (God's horse), *su yaddu e usant antoni* (St. Anthony's horse), *cavaleta de la Madonna*—Italian; *calu al Demnedeu* (horse of the good God)—Macedonian; *kalet de san jaime* (horse of St. James)—Spanish; and *calul Sf. George* (St. George's steed)—Roumanian.

There is a very widespread belief that dragonflies cause harm or damage (perhaps, sent by the devil for this purpose). This belief is reflected by a great variety of names relating to stinging, biting, cutting, sewing up the mouth or ears, sawing wood, breaking glass, etc.: *cisette* (related to knife), *aiguillette* and *aiguille* (needle), *aiguille du diable* (needle of the devil), *covo-ue* (eye sticker), *pakharaille* (eye piercer) and *roumpe veire* (glass breaker)—French; *saetta* (arrow, dart) and *cavelocchio* (eye sticker)—Italian; *tira-olhos* (eye sticker)—Portuguese; *lleva dits* (finger cutter) and *matacaballos* (horse stinger)—Spanish; *martai diable* (devil's hammer)—Walloon; *Teufelsnadel* (devil's needle), *Satansbolzen* (Satan's bolts), *Augenstecher* eye stinger), *Augenschiesser* (eye shooter), *Pferdstecher* (horse stinger), *Bullenbiter* (bull biter), *Kornbeisser* (cornbiter), *Speckbeisser* (bacon-biter) and *Brettschneider* (board cutter)—German; *Orsnell*, *Orsnegl*, *Orsnil* (ear-snails), *Oyestikker* (eye-stinger) and *Helvedes-navas* (Hell's auger)—Norwegian; and *sidle* (awl)—Czech.

Names related to snakes are found in a number of European languages, although not as numerous in any other as in English and Celtic: *el kabal de ser(p)* (the serpent's horse, or serpent-horse), *le tieeyre* (viper), and *serpens* (serpent, or snake)—Spanish; *pougne serp* (snake catcher)—French; *orm-spy* (snake spit)—Norwegian; *Orm stynng* (snake sticking)—Danish; *hadi hlava* (snake head)—Czech; and *kaoji pastir* (snakes' herdsman)—Slovene.

Few epithets for dragonflies involving dragon have been found: *Drachenfliege* (possibly borrowed from English) and *Drachenhura* (dragon's harlot) occur in German and *dragon* has been reported as a local name at Mons, Belgium (Walloon or French).

Odonatologists have not neglected snake derivatives as a source for generic and specific names. Harris named *coluberculus* and

Charpentier named *serpentina* (= *Ophiogomphus cecilia*) both in the genus *Aeshna* and *Racenis* has recently described *draco* in this genus. Selys named genera *Erpetogomphus* and *Ophiogomphus*, then described four "snake" species in them: *boa*, *colubrinus*, *cophias*, and *elaps*, and other authors have added five: *crotalinus* Hagen, *coluber* and *natrix* Williamson and Williamson *constrictor* Ris and *ophibolus* Calvert. Selys also described *ophis* in *Cyclophylla* (= *Phyllocycla*).

One of the reasons for this study of dragonfly names was a hope of finding the origins of these names and the reasons why such associative names were applied to these insects. Some of these reasons have been stated or implied in the preceding discussions and require no further comment. The idea that anything bad is the personification of the devil, possessed by him, or sent by him to do mischief is so widespread and well-known in the folklore of all Christian areas that further elaboration would be superfluous.

Whence came this reputation that dragonflies are capable of causing injury by biting and stinging? Almost any textbook of Entomology will furnish the information that they are entirely harmless to man and cannot bite or sting. Such statements are not literally true. I have been bitten many times while collecting Odonata as I removed individuals of larger species, especially *Erythemis simplicicollis*, from the net. As far as I remember every specimen of the comparatively rare *Tachopteryx thoreyi* that I have ever collected has attempted to bite me as it was removed from the net. Such bites have never broken the skin and certainly caused no real injury, but they were of sufficient force to be felt and occasionally were briefly rather painful. Likewise, Thomas Donnelly has noted that they can sting. "Incidentally, I can tell you one reason that dragonflies are reputed to sting; they really do! A female *Coryphaeschma viriditas* that I took in Trinidad last spring struck me with her ovipositor and it really hurt." (In litt., 29 May 1966).

The reason for the use of horse as a component in so many names is not clear to me, but I find the dictionary has one of its longest entries under horse because of the number of compounds. Many, perhaps most, of these are directly connected, but some, as dark horse, horseblock, even the word horse itself, have extended meanings, and the direct connection of others, as horse laugh, horse-leech, horseplay and horse-sense, is remote if discernible at all. An examination of the entries for the word for horse in French, German, Greek (in which the number of compounds is particularly numerous), Latin and Portuguese reveals the same conditions.

I have found no adequate explanation for the extensive occurrence of names for snake in the names of dragonflies. Sarot (11) quoted Cowan as reporting the belief in this country that dragonflies are sometimes eaten by snakes. It was presumed that the insects which light on plant stems and sticks projecting from the surface of water in ponds might mistake the head of a snake held in a similar position for a proper perch and be instantly caught. While this could possibly explain the origin of snake feeder I question from the habits of both snakes and

dragonflies that it occurs frequently enough to give rise to a folk name. Furthermore, the name snake doctor in use in some of the same, or adjacent, areas (the Central and South Central states) with its attendant belief that dragonflies serve snakes, even reviving dead ones, indicates an entirely different meaning for feeder. I believe the plethora of "snake" names in the English glossary of the dragonfly, with an abundance of such names in Celtic and a scattering in languages from Spanish to Czech, has come from the reputation of the insect and the folklore that bad things are of the devil combined with the identity of the devil with a snake in the Judeo-Christian myth from the Garden of Eden. Such names as snake waiter, *gwas y neidr*, *kaopji pastir*, adderbolt, *Teufelsnadel*, *aiguille du diable*, etc., would be a direct result. Other "snake" names arose through variation by folk etymology. Almost every form in the evolution of the Anglo-Saxon *naeddre* to adder has survived in the colloquial names for dragonflies.

Dragonfly appears to be the most widespread and, in fact, the "standard" name in all English speaking areas. It probably arose as did the "snake" and "devil" names from Christian legend. In fact, all of these are identified as one in a verse in Revelations "the great dragon, the ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan." One legend of the battle of the angels with which this quotation is connected has the mounted forces of the Lord led by St. George on a most wonderful horse. Suddenly, this horse started backing, disrupting the ranks that were following. When St. George, warned by the voice of the Lord, realized that the horse was bewitched by the devil he dismounted, saying, "Then, be it the devil's own." It was immediately changed into a flying insect which is called dragonfly in English, the devil's horse in several languages and St. George's steed in Roumanian!

Finally, one name that does not appear in English anywhere deserves discussion. *Libella*, or some variation of it—*libelle*, etc.—is found in most of the Romance languages and, surprisingly, also in German. It might be considered at first thought that this has been adopted from *Libellula*, the Linnean generic name for the Odonata (the name is even written *Libella* in the introductory list of genera in the 10th edition of *Systema Naturae*). However, the exact opposite is true. *Libella* appears to have been the standard Latin name for dragonfly in England (and other countries?) in the 17th century. *Libella* is a derivative of *libra* (not from *liber*, or its diminutive *libellus*, meaning book, although these have frequently been cited as the origin of the name). Both *libra* and *libella* refer to a level, "an instrument to detect any variation from a perfectly level surface" although they may have differed somewhat in structure and function. Perhaps, a *libella*, resembled a soaring dragonfly, and its function would certainly call to mind a "balance fly".

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