

Sirona: a lost Celtic divinity?

Summary

We describe two old painted panels, presented in the French art commerce, allegedly once being part of a ceiling. We try to situate these paintings. The possibility of an Italian (travelling) painter as author was confirmed by style comparison. He may have signed his work on one panel with the Latin/Italian name: 'GUIDO'. The work would date from early 13th c. AD. and be one of the earliest paintings in France. The other panel represents a woman, dressed as a widow, in front view, holding a snake in her hands. This picture could depict the ancient Celtic deity 'Sirona', the snake being her attribute as healing, renewal and fertility deity, worshipped in part of the Celtic world. Despite complete annihilation of its cult, some remnants have remained, almost always in the form of excavated stone sculptures, with which comparison was possible. This painting would then be the first known two-dimensional representation of this deity, as far as we know. This possibility exists, as transition in the ancient Western world from so called 'paganism' to Christianity was not always abrupt, as old 'pagan' beliefs and customs lingered on.

Keywords : Sirona, Celtic deities, 13th c. AD panel painting, Romanesque ceilings decoration.

Historical introduction.

The contribution of the old Roman Empire to the evolution of European culture may not yet be fully estimated. In one aspect, the tolerance toward religious expression was remarkable. It certainly contributed to the stability of the Empire during a long time.

At that time there was freedom of worshipping everywhere in the Roman Empire and freedom of choice among the multiple deities. Local divinities coexisted with the 'imported' ones, for instance from Egypt, or from the middle East. The imported ones arrived with the Roman legionnaires, who were recruited from everywhere in the continent, and marched thousands of miles from their homeland, clinging on to their own idols, such as Mithra or Isis. The local Western deities had their roots in very ancient customs by the local populations, who lived a sedentary life in small communities, sometimes faraway from army crossroads.

This freedom of worshipping changed drastically in 313 AD with the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine I to the Christian religion, until that time the sole forbidden and persecuted sect. From then on, the emperor exhorted the converted followers to destroy and wipe out all other forms of religious belief. Hence, Christian fundamentalists and missionaries destroyed thousands of worship places of local deities, sometimes replacing them by small oratories or wooden churches for Christian cult. However, at some remote localities resistance was fierce, for instance in the outward areas of the empire or in isolated forests. This resistance lasted on occasion even till the early Middle-Ages.

Once the new Christian cult was imposed, conservative worshippers avoided these new cult places with their 'strange rites'. To persuade them to overcome their reluctance, some concessions were made by the missionaries. For instance, some new Christian saints emulated old deities, or the old deity was still tolerated amongst the Christian saints. One example is a small church in Ireland, where the in stone sculptured old Celtic pagan deity 'Gilig-a mesh' was incorporated above the entrance of the now Christian oratory. Or the ceiling of the small church of Sankt-Martin in Zillis, Switzerland, where, amongst the painted panels with Christian motifs, pagan pictures were included.

The panels: provenance.

In 2003, two square old wooden painted panels, allegedly originating from a ceiling, were offered for public sale in Paris, France. Afterwards, two similar ones were seen by the author in French art commerce (at Tefaf, Maastricht). And in 2011, a series of seven similar panels was sold at public sale in Paris to an art collector (La Gazette Drouot, 17-06-2011, 24, p.66). More panels of the same ceiling may still be in private hands.

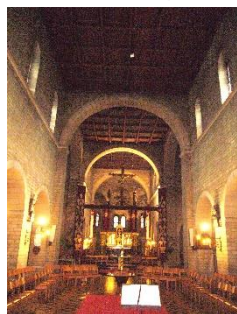


Fig.1. Sint-Truiden, Saint Martin's Romanesque church (photo N.B.)

Such ancient ceilings, made of horizontally juxta positioned wooden painted panels, are nowadays extremely rare. Indeed, only one complete original example in situ has remained in Europe, namely the ceiling of the Sankt Martin's church in Zillis, Switzerland, an early Romanesque church (9th c. A.D.). These 153 Zillis panels, each depicting a different Christian or pagan scene, are datable around 1109 – 1114 A.D. A slightly different panel ceiling (ca. 1230 A.D.) is in the Sankt Michael's church in Hildesheim, Germany. We found a similar construction in the Saint Martin's – note the

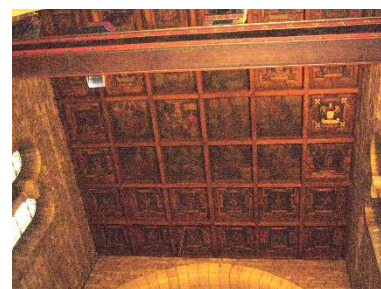


Fig.2. Anterior part of the ceiling, Saint-Martin's church, Sint-Truiden. (photo N.B.)

coincidence - Romanesque church in the city of Sint-Truiden, Belgium, province Limburg (see Fig 1 and 2). But many of those panels are 17th c. heraldic (over?) paintings, which may have replaced older ones.

The reason for the rarity is twofold. First, the degradation of the panel wood and the wooden support due to moisture and vermin along the ages, urging replacement. Secondly, the rapid progression in the 12th and 13th c. of a new building and adornment style of churches and castles of Europe, the Gothic style, replacing smaller obsolete Romanesque constructions.

All eleven French panels sold at auction, were fairly identical in structure. Their definition as ceiling panels could be made by comparison with the Zillis ceiling panels ($\pm 90 \times 90$ cm), although smaller ($\pm 39 \times 40$ cm). The figuration was similar. In addition, an old handwritten label on the backside of two of the French panels revealed their nature and provenance – as far as reliable- namely the ceiling of an oratory in the region of Nogent-sur-Seine (Fr.). The writer of the label seems to have had more historical background knowledge, which, to start off, we accepted as such, until proven otherwise.

We had the opportunity to study two of the known eleven panels, which, according to their appearance, may have belonged to the same ceiling. One probably bearing the signature of the executor, namely a certain "GUIDO", and one representing a woman holding a snake.

The panels: material.

The panels are made of poplar wood, with a prominent vertical concave curve, and measure approxim. 39 x 40 cm. The curvature was carved intentionally with axes and hatchets, of which the traces are clearly visible under the paint surface, an old primitive technique of preparing panels, and was not the result of warping. The panels show signs of nail (or plug) fixation, possibly in a wooden frame. This had resulted in some wood loss, but the holes were filled up with resin. The painted surface of one of the panels, which we call 'the Guido panel' was somewhat worn but showed no major repainting. Neither did the other panel, which we call 'the Sirona' panel' – see below. The 'Guido' panel bears the number CXIII (114) in the back. From the curvature of the panels one can deduce that they were part of a barrel vault. Considering the number 114, and the height and width of the panels, and the degree of curvature, one can calculate approximatively the dimensions of such a vault. We arrived at a vault of about 4 meters of width, and a surface of 16 m². This could indeed correlate with the size of a small oratory. And correlate with the description on the handwritten label on the back side, which reads as follow: "*Panneau de voûture du XII^e siècle sortant d'un oratoire de la région de Nogent-sur-Seine ou Abelard abbé de Pataclet (corrected in Paraclet – what means Holy Spirit) avait séjourné. Celui-ci avait fait peindre l'oratoire par un artiste Italien de passage. Cet oratoire a été partiellement détruit par la guerre de 1939-1945*". Translated: "Vault panel of the XIIth c. (sic) from an oratory in the region of Nogent-sur-Seine (Fr) where Abelard, abbot of Pataclet (corrected in Paraclet - what means Holy Spirit) remained. He ordered the oratory to be painted by a travelling Italian painter. The oratory was partially destroyed during the war of 1939-1945". This label gives the impression of historical accuracy, which we could not verify. The destruction during the war may have resulted in the loss of (most of the) panels.

The panels: style

In composition, the French paintings are similar to the Suisse ones (Fig. 3): a central figure is surrounded on the sides by a decorative border (in this case, the lower border of the adjacent upper panel would serve as the fourth border!- see set-up to the right). This composition

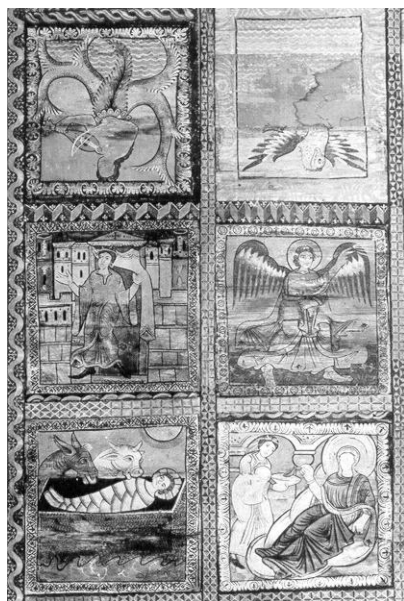


Fig. 3. Some of the 'Zillis' panels.

reminds some Romanesque miniature book illuminations. But while the Zillis figuration apparently is more archaic and with Byzantine influences, the French panels emanate a fresh new style.

The series of seven panels, sold in Paris in 2011, which we saw only on photographs, represent several figures from antiquity. Some are designated as such on a banderol in the same bold Gothic letters: 'Atalanta', 'Ipodomi', 'Sebilis', while others remain enigmatic. The two panels (flattened by heat possibly for commercial reasons) for sale in a French gallery depicted two saints or prophets. All eleven seem from the same origin. The 'Guido' panel (Fig. 4), we discuss here, shows a young boy, with head band and Italian looking dress, holding a banderol with a Latin message in bold black Gothic characters: 'Guido saluaro', (*I Guido greet you*). Hence, we suppose he was the 'travelling' Italian artist wanting his name to be perpetuated, what almost failed because of the World War. The Latin/Italian name 'Guido' was common in Italy and corresponds to the French 'Guy' or the Dutch 'Gwijde' or the German 'Wido'. The second panel (Fig.5) we discuss here, represents a middle-aged woman in frontal view emerging from a strange plant, dressed as a widow, and holding a curled-up viper or snake in her hands. We call it the 'Sirona' panel.



All the eleven panels in the French commerce, emanate a new style, as compared to the Zillis panels. This new style probably originated from Italy, more specifically, the Roman school. As main reference we propose the Saint-Anthony of Assisi from the Campana collection in the Musée du Louvre



Fig. 4. "GUIDO saluaro" ©

(Paris), allegedly painted by the Master of San Gregorio, a Roman artist from the first half of the 13th C. His picture itself goes back to the fresco in the San Benedetto cloister of Subiaco (It.). The pictorial style of the 'Guido' panel is the same, with heavy linear outlines of the contours and a sober execution. On the other hand, some do suggest Northern Italy, namely the Lombard region, as origin of the artist, and at a later date than mentioned (13th – 14th c. A.D.). The statement of the previous owner of the two panels about a 'travelling Italian artist' may be upheld. The painting style of the 'Sirona' panel is somewhat different



Fig. 5. The woman with the snake ©

however, except for the borders. Maybe the commission may have needed the help of a local painter, maybe himself an adherent of the deity with the snake.

In the Zillis ceiling, the central panels with Christian motifs are surrounded by a string of strange figurations including sea monsters and imaginary beasts. In this way the painter seems to have demonstrated his contemporary cultural knowledge. By analogy we assume a similar concept for the French ceiling: a central part filled with saints and Christian motifs, -most of them missing now or in private hands- surrounded by a series of profane pictures, demonstrating the painter's cultural background (Italy).

Provenance of the panels

We discard the idea that the panels were produced elsewhere but in France. Nogent-sur-Seine (Fr.) is mentioned on the old label. It is a town situated south-east of Paris, at the border of the river Seine, relatively isolated from other towns like Troyes and Fontainebleau. It must have been an old community,



Fig. 6. Oratory near Nogent-sur-Seine (photo N.B.)

laying in the centre of what once was Celtic Europe from the 7th-6th c. BC. and on⁽¹⁾. Like the rest of Gallia, it was subdued by the Roman conqueror Caesar, Romanised, and later probably colonised by Germanic tribes from over the Rhine, invading and/or settling. It was prosperous in the Middle-Ages. It now harbours a nuclear plant. We searched in situ for the small oratory. The locals could only point to a silex stone construction (rebuild?) in the shape of a chapel in the middle of a crossroad, at a small distance from the centre of town. Although in art commerce, any story will do, we gave some



Fig. 7. Oratory, Nogent-sur-Seine, front view (photo N.B.)

credit to the text on the label in the back of the panels, apparently written by a scholar, and visited the alleged area. Under all reserve, because so unusual, we consider this a possibility (fig. 6 and 7). The chapel would fit a barrel vault of ±16 m2. The adornment with a painted ceiling would point to the importance of the location. Speculating further, the oratory could have been an older popular late-Celtic or Gallo-Germanic worship centre in the middle of a -now gone- forest at a crossroad, 'recuperated' by the Christian faith, a common practice at the time.

We have not attempted to confirm the story about the abbot Abelard. But the story of travelling Italian artists, moving to the new art centres of France like Paris, bringing with them a new artistic style is known. In 1194 started the building of the cathedral of Chartres, which initiated the massive spread of the new pictorial style -the Gothic- in France and elsewhere in Europe.

Mystery woman.

One of the panels shows an intriguing picture. The full-frontal representation of a woman cherishing a serpent in her lap is atypical and enigmatic in the presence of other Christian figurations such as saints and prophets. Her dress is unlike the Italian fashion on the other panels, we know off. She wears a simple rosy hem. Over the shoulders hangs a dark brown cloak more in line with the local Germano-Gallic fashion of a body cover made of rather heavy raw material called 'sagum'. The neck is wrapped up to the chin in a white linen collar, which reminds the contemporary dress code of a widow or a virgin saint as depicted in paintings. Her face is serene as she stares right to the onlooker. Such a frontal view is also new in portrait figuration. Over the blond curled hairlocks sits a

bizarre headdress. The green colour excludes it to be a hair peruke. Women caps bulging out on both sides of the head and covered by a typical veil are seen in Italian contemporary fashion and is present in one of the seven in 2011 sold panels (Atalanta). But these caps are then made of embroidered silk and embellished with jewellery. Here, the bulges imitate the cerebral windings of a skull-less brain. If this is so, this representation could stand for extra wisdom possessed by the figure. It reminds the stone mother-divinities with the heavy headdress, - substance unknown-, said to be a Germanic attribute (²). On top of the head lays a strange rosy veil of thick material apparently not fixed by anything. The woman holds in her left hand a curled up brown serpent, and immobilizes its head with her right hand, showing she is in control. The half-length figure sprouts out of a grey flowerlike plant. The dark green background is filled with white ranks. A double border surrounds the figure on three sides. This border is identical to that of the 'Guido' panel.

A lost pagan goddess?

Speculating on the identity of this figure, we followed the following reasoning. The woman we describe differs completely from the other fancy ladies of the series of panels we know. Her main attribute is ostentatious a serpent, which she holds curled up in her lap with one hand, while holding the poisonous head in the other. We do not find a serpent, viper or serpent as an attribute of Christian saints. But in the so called 'pagan' antiquity, the reptile is most often associated with healing, regenerating and fertility properties (Green, 1995, 169-171).. Before 313 A.D., figurations in stone in different forms, were worshipped as divinities in cult centres to implore help, relief or cure of a multitude of illnesses. Beside hunger and sickness, pain was probably the most disturbing affliction in rural areas. A 'healing' deity could be presented with a serpent in different ways. Scarce models have come to us mostly in the form of stone statuettes excavated in the once popular worship centres. In the Celtic, and post-Celtic world the most venerated 'healing' divinities were Sirona and Damona. Sirona was very popular in wide areas around Nogent-sur Seine (Green, 1995).

If we accept the figure in the painting as a pagan deity, how did she enter the cycle of Christian prophets and saints in a Christian oratory?

We propose the possibility that the picture represents Sirona, the original Celtic-Gallo-Germanic divinity at that location. We know from other sources that resistance to the new Christian religion, certainly in more remote areas, was fierce and very persistent even up to the 14th c. The old tradition may still have lived underground and the local artist must have taken the opportunity to give the once venerated Sirona the look-alike of a Christian saint by means of the plain widow outfit but still recognisable with her attribute. In this way the transition of paganism into Christianity was facilitated. People would continue to come to the oratory. Such transitions have been commented elsewhere. In this case, it would represent a unique painted example of the pagan goddess, that slipped almost unnoticed in between Christian figurations.

It would be of interest if all remaining panels could be brought together, and the true nature of the original ceiling be reconstructed. Historical and archival studies may reveal more information

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¹ Green, Miranda -, '*the Celtic World*'. Ed. Rutledge London & New-York. 1996, p. 477, Fig. 25.7.

² Green, Miranda: "*Celtic goddesses Warriors, Virgins and Mothers*", British Museum Press, 1995.