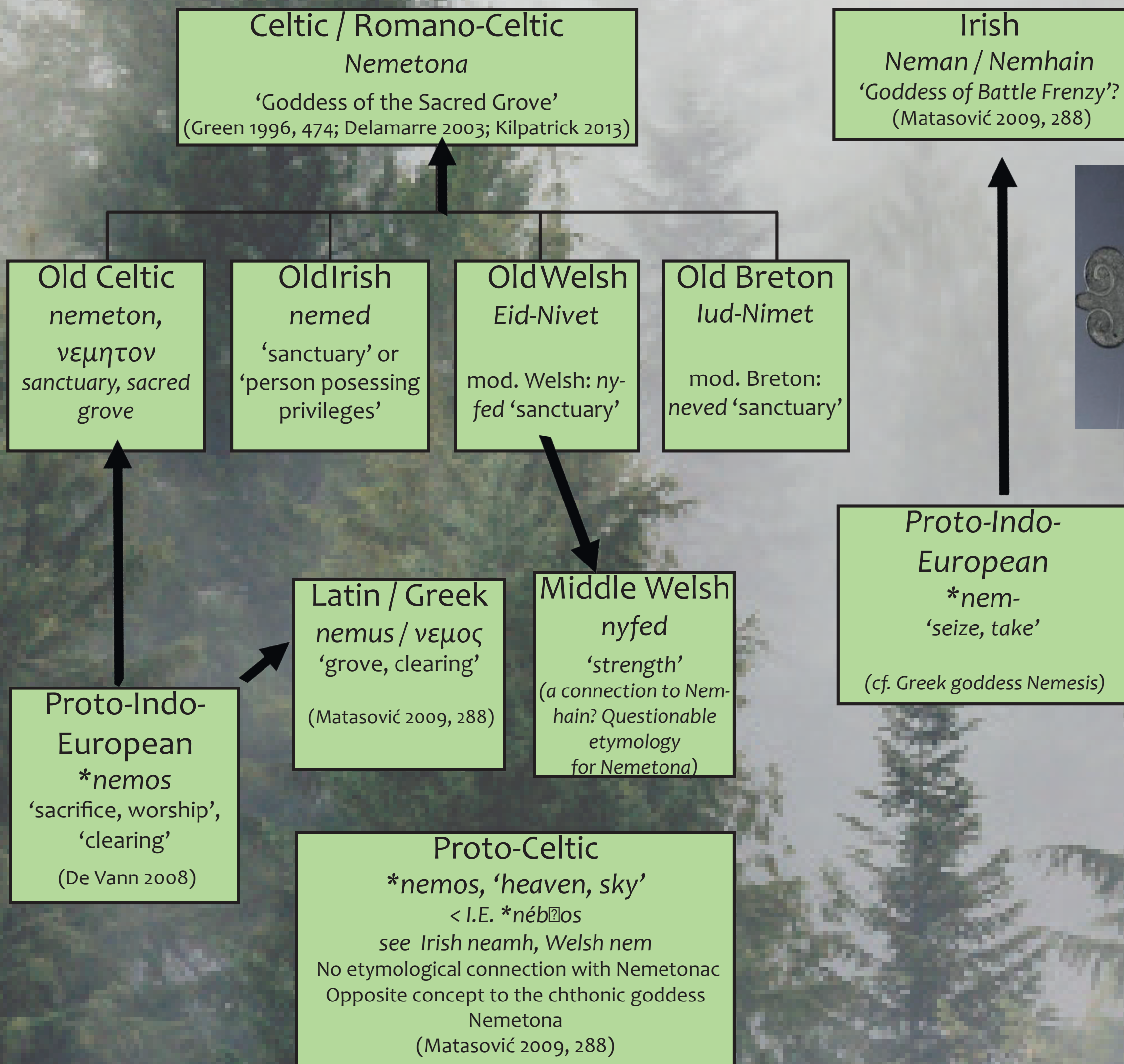


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A Multi-Disciplinary Research Methodology

Nemetona is generally interpreted by modern scholars as a Celtic goddess of sacred sites and a goddess of war (Green 1992, 160). This research aims for a better understanding of Nemetona by confronting the available evidence from Antiquity (primarily Latin epigraphy and Celtic linguistics) with the medieval sources, esp. Irish mythology. Conventionally one assumes that Nemhain - the 'goddess of battle frenzy' - is the Irish equivalent of Nemetona (Green 1992, 160). But such parallels between ancient and medieval Celtic traditions are highly problematic (Beck 2009, 251). We will see that the goddess' function has changed through location and time: the ancient goddess Nemetona was above all a goddess of the sacred grove and a protective deity. The commonly assumed association with war and battle is misguided.

The Etymology of Nemetona and Nemhain



As we can see, Nemetona and the Irish Nemhain have two different etymologies, suggesting two rather different deities. It is also uncertain whether the Celtic word *nemeton* already existed prior to the Roman conquest, or whether it was only adopted due to increasing interaction with mainland Europe.

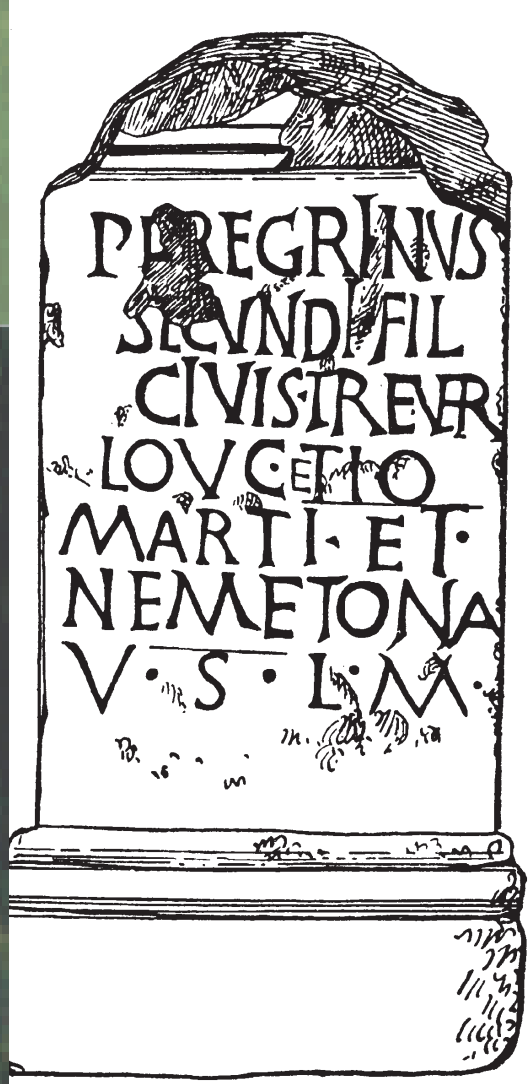
The theonym Nemetona can be linked to Mars Rigonemetis, the 'King of the Sacred Grove' (Green 1996, 144; Delamarre 2003). However, the connection appears to end here as the only surviving evidence of Rigonemetis is a Roman inscription from Nettleham (Lincs.), where he is invoked alone without Nemetona (RIB III 3180).

Nemetona and the Irish War Goddess

Modern scholars have frequently noted Nemetona's links to war and battle (Sjoestedt 1994, 18; Squire 1912, 275). For Sjoestedt (1994, 18), Nemetona is 'definitely a war goddess', not a tutelary goddess. This is based on the common assumption that Nemetona and her consort Mars Loucetius are direct parallels to the Irish gods Nemhain ('Goddess of Frenzy') and Net ('God of War'). Though Nemetona and Nemhain sound similar, their etymologies are clearly distinct (see diagram). The Irish Net, too, is also quite different to Nemetona's consort, Mars Loucetius (Sjoestedt 1994, 32).

The idea of Nemetona as a war goddess is based on weak etymology, lack of archaeological finds, and outdated ideas about Celtic mythology.

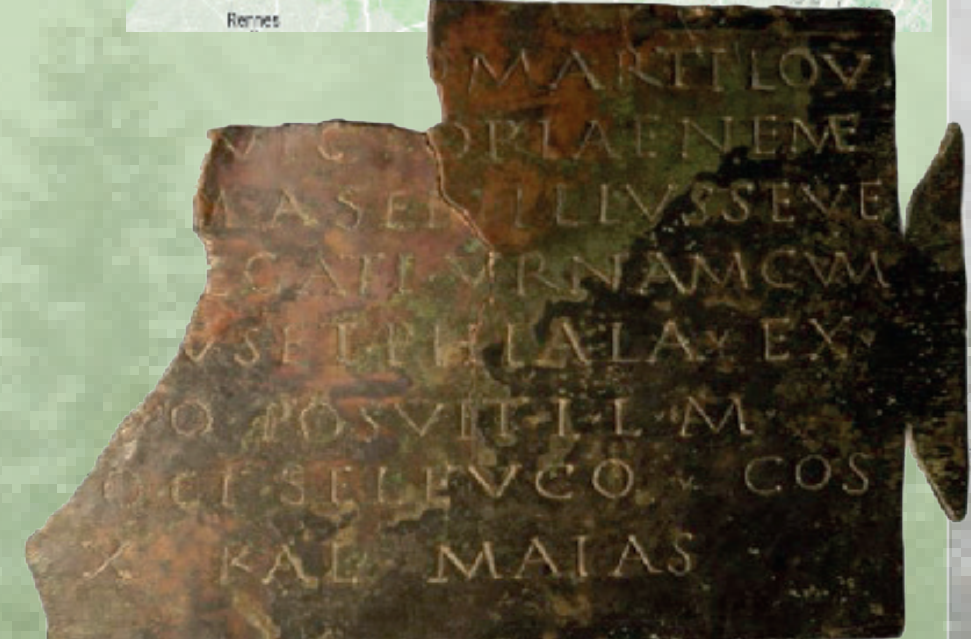
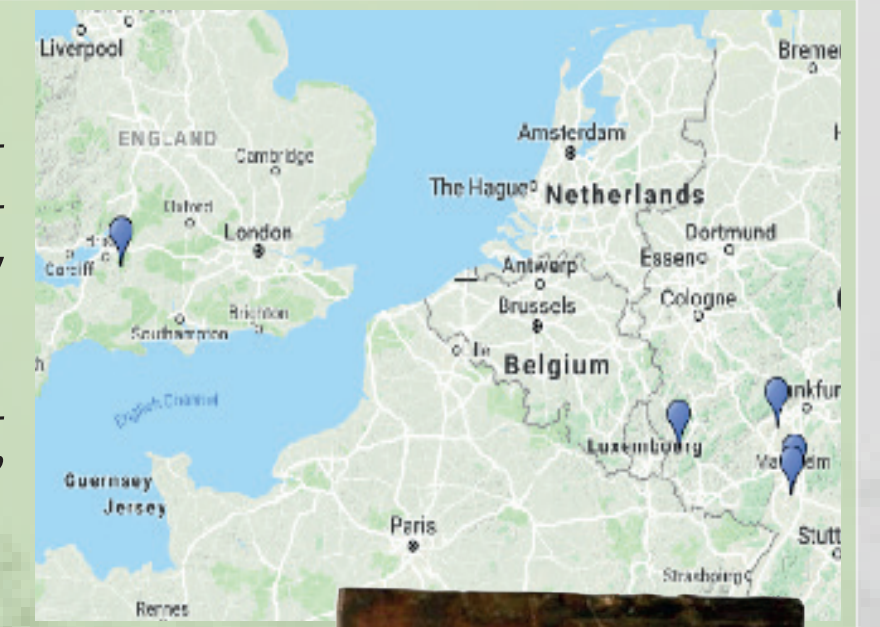
The only Nemetona inscription from the British Isles was actually set up by a Treveran, from the province of Belgica, not by a native Briton. A certain Peregrinus set up this votive altar to Loucetius Mars and Nemetona in Bath (Aquae Sulis) (RIB 140). Since Nemetona was common among the Treveri and Vangiones, it suggests that she was not native to Britain despite her prominent role in medieval mythology.



Nemetona Dedications

Nemetona is known from a number of Latin inscriptions, predominantly from the Roman province Germania Superior, where she is frequently associated with Mars Loucetius.

A votive tablet from Eisenberg (AD 221) is frequently used as evidence for Nemetona as 'war goddess' (AE 2007, 1044). It is a dedication to Mars Loucetius and Victoria Nemetona. Victoria is used here as either an epithet (i.e. the 'victorious Nemetona') or it may show a conflation between Nemetona and the Roman goddess of victory, i.e. an example of creolization where a traditional Celtic goddess becomes intertwined and reinterpreted with a Roman deity, thus transforming Nemetona, creating a new concept of a deity (Webster 2001, 209).



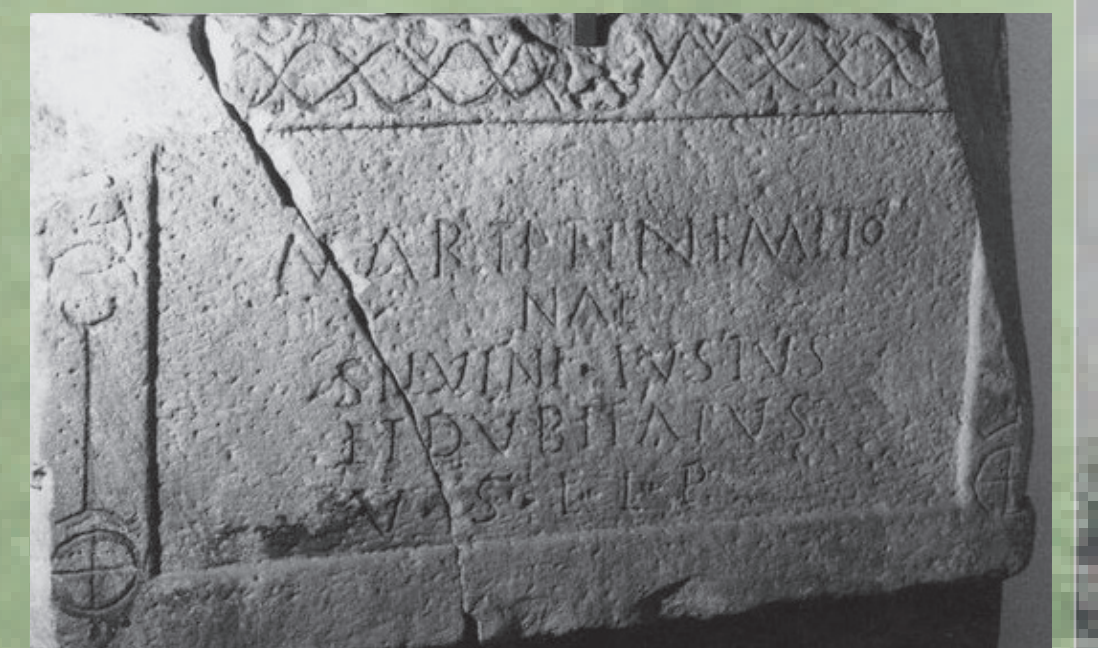
Mars Loucetius and Victoria Nemetona dedication from Eisenberg (AE 2007, 1004)



GDKE, Landesmuseum Mainz, Ursula Rudischer CIL 13, 07253.

Another important inscription comes from the (Mars) Loucetius sanctuary in Kleinwinternheim: Aulus Didius Gallus Fabricius Veiento, the governor of Britain and Moesia during the reigns of Claudius and Nero, made a dedication to Nemetona alone (CIL XIII 7253). We can see Nemetona's supra-regional importance when a high-ranking Roman official honours a native deity (Luckhaupt 2015). The discovery of lances and other weapons as votive offerings could suggest a military role of the cult place and its worshippers. But this does not make Nemetona a war goddess!

In Roman times, we frequently see a male 'Roman' god paired with a female 'Celtic' goddess. For Sjoestedt (1994, 19) there is 'no doubt' that Loucetius is a replacement for the Celtic god of war. This is due to a common misunderstanding in modern scholarship where Mars is associated with war, though the Roman god also had other functions, like prosperity, agriculture and protection. Other scholars, like Green (1992, 160), use this association with Mars to show that Nemetona had 'martial roots'. Once again, this is based on weak links to Irish mythology. A thorough investigation makes clear that Loucetius was no war god: his name means 'The Shining One' or 'Brilliant One' (Delamarre 2003). This may indicate a more omnipotent god, a celestial god, who was paired with Nemetona, a chthonic goddess.



Another monumental dedication to Mars and Nemetona, this time from Altrip (Alta Ripa): CIL XII 6131,

Indeed, deonomastic evidence indicates that *nemeton* and Nemetona might have been known across the Celtic-speaking world, for example in the ethnicon *Nemetes*, the toponyms *Novionemetum* (Nant), *Nemetodurum* (Nantes), *Nemausus* (Nîmes), *Augustonemeton* (Clermont-Ferrand), etc., and also in Galatia: *Drunemeton* (Delamarre 2003; Green 1992, 160). Green suggested that Nemetona was the patron goddess of the *Nemetes*, but there is no evidence to support this hypothesis.

Conclusions: goddess of sacred groves and war?

For many scholars, Nemetona is a Celtic goddess (Green 1992, 160). But the evidence shows that Nemetona, as we know her, had not existed prior to the Roman conquest and might even have been alien to the British Celts. It is more likely that Nemetona was a creolized version of a pre-Roman goddess, incorporating native religious concepts with Roman ideas and given a Celtic name related to her purpose. After all, people across Europe continued to speak a Celtic language after the conquest. The word Nemetona might have been used as a surname or epithet for a more complex divine concept, perhaps related to a goddess whose name was taboo. Together with Loucetius, Nemetona was above all a tutelary goddess protecting not only sacred sites but entire communities. Her association with war only came a thousand years later in Irish myth and is highly flawed.

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