

# Epona

Hidden Goddess of the Celts



P.D. MacKenzie Cook

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*Published by Avalonia*  
[www.avaloniabooks.co.uk](http://www.avaloniabooks.co.uk)

Published by Avalonia

BM Avalonia, London, WC1N 3XX, England, UK

[www.avaloniabooks.co.uk](http://www.avaloniabooks.co.uk)

EPONA: HIDDEN GODDESS OF THE CELTS

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First Published by Avalonia, May 2016

This Kindle Edition August 2016

Typeset and design by Satori

Cover image: Ava Crabbe

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data. A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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# Table of Contents

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[PREFACE](#)

**PROLOGUE:** [THE HIDDEN GODDESS](#)

## **PART I AT THE THRESHOLD**

[THE ANCIENT WORLD](#)  
[ELOQUENT SYMBOLISM](#)

## **PART II THE MUCH-LOVED GODDESS**

[LADY OF THE HORSE](#)  
[MOTHER, MAIDEN, HEALER & WARRIOR](#)  
[SOVEREIGN IN EARTH & SKY](#)  
[LIAISONS OF LOVE & POWER](#)

## **PART III HER DEEPER SECRETS**

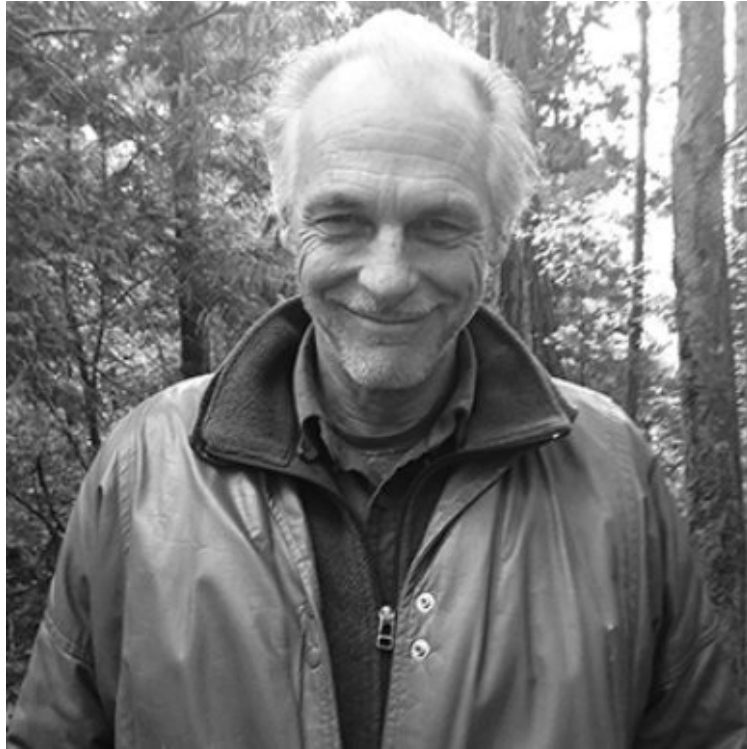
[ORIGINS, MYTHIC & REAL](#)  
[HEART OF THE MYSTERIES](#)  
[AN ALCHEMY OF WHOLENESS](#)

## **PART IV SEEDS OF RENEWAL**

[THE MIDDLE AGES](#)  
[THE “NEW WORLD”](#)  
[ADVENT OF THE GODDESS](#)

[BIBLIOGRAPHY](#)

# About the Author



P.D. MacKenzie Cook was born into a deeply pagan and matriarchal Celtic family, very much in tune with Nature and the Sacred Feminine. It was his grandmother who first began to nurture his love of the Goddess, teaching him to feel the divine in the caress of water, sun and wind, in the soft quiet of the night. He was also fascinated by the beauty and power of the women in his life, and often stayed up late into the night to watch and listen as they talked together in the firelight.

While still very young, his mother (an initiate of several traditions) introduced him to the realm of faerie, and later, after his grandmother had introduced him to divination and the uses of healing herbs, his mother gave him his first crucial lessons in the polarity dynamics of the Tree of Life. These powerful childhood experiences were strongly reinforced and deepened by Peter's father - a war-hero with healing hands who had saved lives by dismantling bombs and mines - who set a constant example of chivalrous and deferential reverence for women, and later passed on spiritual teachings he had himself received from his own mother.

At seventeen, Peter answered an inner call to Britain where he trained with a druid shaman, and studied astrology, tarot, mythology, sacred geometry, Kabbalah and Hermetic philosophy. He later focused on healing, and began a nine-year apprenticeship in natural medicine. Pursuing graduate studies in history and philosophy of medicine, he discovered the healing

alchemy of the ancient Goddess-centred Mysteries. Realizing this was a living, though well-hidden, tradition, he was fortunate enough to meet a young Priestess who led him into a deeper personal relationship with the Goddess, helped deepen his appreciation of the Sacred Feminine, and inspired his quest to know more about Epona.

Now, at sixty-four, Peter is firmly rooted in the ancient healing discipline of the Goddess and continues to learn her “deeper secrets”.

# Preface

This book may shock you in some places, and will probably challenge cherished assumptions in others. I make no apology for this. The layers of history in which Epona's older story is embedded were not laid down by people who held our modern views and concerns, and today's interpretations of history are only the surface layer in the “archaeology” of time itself. By digging widely and carefully, and sifting sensitively through its deeper levels, we can arrive at insights that transcend the biases of a particular era or agenda. I have tried to do this throughout the book, and am satisfied that Epona's story will more than repay your thoughtful reflection.

My special thanks go to Alyssa Spungen without whose inspiration, guidance and encouragement this book would have remained unfinished or extremely dull. I would also like to thank Alison Merkley, whose ruthlessly-honest critique of an early draft left an indelible impression on the final one; and the Gabriola librarians who generously gave their time and expertise in helping me access several hundred books and articles ~ a number of which were obscure and hard to find. My sincere gratitude also goes to Tara Wolfe and Ava Crabbe for their beautiful illustrations, worth far more than “a thousand words”; to Corynn MacKenzie Cook and Ava Crabbe for their pains-taking high-resolution photos of the illustrations; and to the women and men whose stories have added another equally fascinating dimension to the book. Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude and thanks to Sorita d'Este at Avalonia for her patience, experience and skill in turning the efforts of all involved into a book I would like to have read myself.

Peter MacKenzie Cook

June, 2015

# PROLOGUE



# The Hidden Goddess

Many (if not all or most) Celtic deities are “hidden”. The Celts left no writings describing them, and in many cases we don't even know their names. Although Greek and Roman writers sometimes mentioned Celtic gods and goddesses, they knew little about them, and their habit of identifying them with their own deities obscured their native Celtic complexity and nuance. Later, Christian writers in Ireland and Wales had their own ways of altering the pagan details when they recorded the stories at the heart of Celtic mythology and religion.

By contrast, Epona was an extremely popular and well-known goddess - especially during the Roman period when she became the darling of the Legions. Although the Celts left no writings about her either, she was extensively depicted in richly-varied artwork; named and described by epithets in inscriptions; and mentioned by several Greek, Roman and Christian writers in various contexts. Relatively speaking, this means there is an enormous amount of information available about her. Paradoxically, however, even at the height of her greatest popularity during the Roman period, Epona was more deeply hidden than any other Celtic deity. Although evidently known universally among the Celts (a most unusual thing in itself), her origins were lost in the mists of time. Her “birth” in human form was also mysterious: the little myth describing it contained several (apparently deliberate) riddles. Literary and artistic clues also tell us that Epona was involved in the ancient Mysteries. Not only were the details of these Mysteries themselves secret (the penalty for revealing them was death), but the nature and extent of Epona's involvement was also hidden.

For these reasons alone, it would be accurate enough to call her “*the* hidden Celtic goddess.” But there are a number of other ways in which that title is also appropriate. Although there is no way to prove it, for instance, Epona may have been known as “Macha” among the Ulaid in Northern Ireland and as “Rhiannon” in Wales. Without her original name, or proof of the transition, her presence shimmers in the details while her true identity remains hidden. In a similar way, her influence on the medieval ideals of chivalry and courtly love hovers hidden in the shadows of history. Her depiction - or seeming depiction - in a petroglyph located in a set of caves in Oklahoma is also shrouded in mystery and controversy.

Even today, Epona remains largely hidden. Being a “Horse Goddess” in an age of trains, planes and automobiles does not help, even though archaeologists have been finding and recording evidence for her since the early 1800's. As new evidence has come to light, perceptions of the Horse

Goddess have changed markedly - even since the 1950's. Now, by gathering all the evidence together, we can get a fairly reliable picture of Epona herself and begin to see the outlines of her larger story. But this is not as easy as it might sound. For one thing, the evidence is scattered in books and obscure journal articles published in several different languages: a fact that has tended to keep Epona hidden, at least from the ordinary (non-academic) reader.

Even when all the archaeological evidence is laid out in front of us, the separate details only give us a fragmented or partial picture: like looking at a series of unconnected photos. To see Epona's wholeness in all its complexity and nuance, we need a broader perspective - one that views the available evidence in a historical and cross-cultural context. The fact that there has never been any concerted attempt to do this before is certainly one of the main reasons why Epona has stayed hidden, even from the academics, and is the *raison d'être* for this book.

As respected scholars have repeatedly pointed out, attempting an explanation of Celtic religion is - at best - speculative, and this is no less true of Epona.<sup>[1]</sup> The evidence supplied by archaeology is necessarily incomplete. Where the Celts are concerned, we are entirely dependent on what has survived the ravages of time, circumstance, and religious agendas. The surviving evidence is also inherently ambiguous - often deliberately so. As a result, it can be interpreted in widely different ways. This is one of the reasons why a cross-cultural perspective is so important where Epona is concerned. So much of the symbolism used in her artwork draws on well-established precedents in classical art - precedents we know a lot about from contemporary Greek and Roman authors, and which often had more ancient antecedents in the religions and mythology of even older civilizations. In Part I, the book opens with a look at these older civilizations - at the historical and cross-cultural context in which Epona emerged - and then at the symbolism used in her artwork: our most revealing source of information about her.

This provides a more reliable and comprehensive framework for interpretation when we come to look at her popular and well-known aspects in Part II. But even with this broader perspective, the picture of Epona and the outlines of her larger story presented in the following pages must be viewed as “a construction rather than a reconstruction”.<sup>[2]</sup> In this sense, she must remain hidden to some extent. But rather than being entirely due to incomplete and ambiguous evidence, there is a strong sense in which being hidden is (or was) a fundamental part of Epona's nature.

We begin to see this almost immediately in her intimate identification with the horse and its ancient underworld symbolism. But, as an intrinsic quality, her hiddenness becomes most visible when we look at her origins and the nature of her involvement in the Mysteries in Part III. Paradoxically, just

when we might wish to know more and to be more certain about what we know, Epona's story becomes most obscure. It was deliberately concealed in relation to the Mysteries, certainly, but this was also closely tied to where and when she was “born” in human form: the Greeks apparently had reason to identify her with Demeter's daughter Despoina/Persephone, the most hidden goddess in the ancient world.

Like all good detective stories, this one does not move in a straight line: its clues lead to conclusions that turn out to be starting points for new investigations and explorations. The story “constructed” in the following pages is both original and speculative - the first (and, so far, the only) attempt ever made to integrate and explain all the evidence in its broader context. For the scientifically-minded, key elements of this construction (such as Epona's “birth” place) have the advantage of being easily disprovable by new discoveries in archaeology or by new historical evidence.

Epona herself, however, will always remain hidden to some degree. This is probably true of her identity in Ireland and Wales, and of the family traditions that preserved her memory during the Middle Ages in France and Spain - and thus her influence on chivalry and courtly love, and perhaps her presence in the Oklahoma caves. These are the questions taken up in Part IV. But no book, and no amount of reading can replace an epiphany - the “striking appearance” or inner apprehension (understanding) of the Goddess. Like Persephone, she will always be the *arrhetos Koura* - the “unspeakable maiden” revealed through deepening personal experience alone. For this, only the stories of those intimately involved with Epona today can shed any direct light on the Horse Goddess: probably the same Lady the Irish saw as Macha, daughter of *sáin rith im baith*: the “long-running sound of the wild wind”.

Some of these personal stories come from men, and it may seem remarkable today that a man would feel warm devotion to a goddess. Indeed, it may only be through her embodiment in women that modern men can truly embrace the Divine Feminine. But these men belong to an ancient tradition: Celtic kings, warriors and heroes were also devoted to Epona. Nor was this at all unusual in the ancient world. King Solomon and the Greek philosophers Parmenides and Empedocles, for example, were each devoted to goddesses. Even Socrates was instructed by a priestess in the nature of the most famous of all ancient Mysteries: those of the Mother and Maiden, Demeter and Persephone. It was neither accidental nor merely incidental that each of these men were also noted for their wisdom.

The simple truth is that men who respect feminine wisdom - and who take the time to listen to it - are led to deeper insight, knowledge and understanding than those who do not. But Epona brought a special message for men. Her wisdom required a heroic journey of surrender - a death and

rebirth into deeper, more genuine masculinity in devotion to the Sacred Feminine: the Goddess implicitly embodied in women, and immanent in Nature and the human soul. For women, her message was (and is) subtly different - a call to surrender to their own deepest selves, and thus to bring their implicit and instinctive embodiment of this very special Goddess into conscious awareness.

This may sound like advocacy for a particular spiritual perspective, and it could certainly be argued that taking Epona's message to heart can have profound personal - and social - healing benefits. Certainly, the men and women who shared their stories in Part IV have found this to be true in their own lives. But her message, and the stories of people who have taken it to heart today, are intrinsic aspects of Epona's own larger story - one that would be woefully incomplete if these aspects were not included. The fact is, she has emerged from the academic realms of purely historical and archaeological research, and into the personal lives of real people today.

Surveying the archaeological evidence, and seeing Epona from a broad historical and cross-cultural perspective, provides a firm foundation on which to understand her message. Exploring how people are responding to that message now helps us to see its implications: how she remains spiritually relevant in today's world. Her relevance, however, cannot be appreciated from a purely academic perspective. Epona's spirituality was (and is) earthy and sensual, and in both its ancient and its modern dimensions her story could rightly be called "historical with juicy bits". But whether this book is seen as a scholarly survey, an intriguing detective story or a spiritual message to be taken to heart, is an entirely personal matter. For some, it will be none of these. For others, it may be all three, and this book could not have been written by someone whose own Celtic "bones" did not resonate with Epona in each of these ways: the scholar, storyteller, and poet-seer are each present to some degree in the "construction" presented in the following pages. Enjoy.

P. D. MacKenzie Cook

Summer Solstice, 2015.

# PART I

# At The Threshold

# CHAPTER ONE

# The Ancient World

Here at the very beginning of the story, we stand at the threshold of a world vastly different from the one we know today. This was the ancient world where Epona first emerged, where her story began.

To get know her we need to cross this threshold and see the sights, smell the scents, and hear sounds of antiquity.<sup>[3]</sup> Without this, her story would lose its depth and meaning in the telling. This was the living context in which we can begin to see her for who she was, understand where she came from and why she mattered, and appreciate the value of her legacy today.

One of the first features to engage our senses, for instance, would have been the horses. Whether it was the wild herds seen in the distance, the sounds of the mares pulling ploughs and wagons in the fields and streets around us, or the rich earthy scent rising from the stallion between our thighs, horses were an ever-present part of daily life. They are the spirit and essence of Epona's story and were part of that story from its earliest beginnings to the present. But it wasn't just the simpler technology of a horse-based way of life that made the ancient world so different from ours. Nor was it that there were more trees, cleaner air, and purer water; that settlements nestled into the natural wildness around them; or that the lights and sounds of human life were still small in the underlying quiet of the earth. All of this was certainly true. But more than anything else, it was our ancestor's perceptions - the way they saw and felt about their lives - that made the ancient world so very different.

Then as now, of course, perception was not always and everywhere the same. It was in flux and changed in subtle ways over time and from place to place. But unlike the rapid changes in today's world, the basic elements of ancient perception remained constant over thousands of years. Because of this, although Epona didn't emerge in Europe until the Iron Age, much of the detail and significance of her story goes back to the bedrock of the distant Stone Age and to the civilizations that emerged, flourished and disappeared in the Bronze Age.

From an admittedly "Western" perspective, the ancient world stretched from Persia (Iran) and Mesopotamia in the east to Britain and Ireland in the west. It included Asia Minor and Greece, the Balkans and central Europe, France, Italy and Spain. Even Syria, Egypt and North Africa had a part to play. This was the physical matrix in which western civilization was born and developed, and it was the changing perceptions of the civilizations that came and went over time within this matrix that transformed its geography into places with meaning and relevance. We could say that these ancient places



and perceptions formed a richly-woven tapestry of vibrant thoughts and feelings, beliefs, and interactions.

Most significantly, the “warp and woof” of this tapestry (the fundamental threads giving structure to the richness of its details) were formed by perceptions of gender, divinity, and power. Gender was central to religion in the ancient world, and therefore also to social structure and politics.<sup>[4]</sup> The tension between ancient perceptions of divine feminine authority and later beliefs that supported the power and increasing dominance of the male gods was brought into sharp focus in Epona. But the earliest of these threads - perceptions of the divine feminine - were first spun on the “wheels” of our Stone Age ancestors, and it is there that the deepest roots of Epona's story can be found.

## THE WOMB OF LIFE

Stepping across the threshold into the “cradle of western civilization”, we find ourselves in the fertile crescent of Egypt, Mesopotamia and south-eastern Asia Minor, where our Neolithic ancestors evidently believed that the universe and all life - stars and gods, humans, plants, and animals - were conceived in the womb of a Great Mother:<sup>[5]</sup> what we might call the Divine Feminine today.<sup>[6]</sup> This was “the goddess” in her most transcendent dimension, both above and beyond the universe she had conceived and given birth to, yet also immanent - immediately present - in the earth: the centre of it all. The sun, moon and stars revolved around her; everything came from her, and all life returned to her in death to be reborn and live again. As Earth Mother, she was the “womb and tomb” in which life and death were seamlessly united. She was also inherent in womanhood. Women were the living embodiment of the goddess in warm human flesh and blood. Like the Mother, they too conceived within a hidden womb and birthed and nurtured life upon their breast. A woman's vulva was the sacred gate of life, and the waters of her womb were humanity's first and most intimate home.<sup>[7]</sup>

The link between womb and “home” may not have been a conscious one at first, but it was primal and instinctive. Our earliest ancestors were nomadic peoples living in small family groups - hunters and gatherers of vegetables, fruit, and nuts, who followed the seasonal migrations of the herds they hunted year after year.<sup>[8]</sup> Their territory was vast, yet intimately familiar. As children, they played amid its shapes and colours and sounds, observing and comparing every detail of its landscape and wildlife. At night they listened to the stories of their elders and absorbed the wisdom gained through generations of interaction with this land - the home of their larger lives, traditions and culture. Like the womb, the land gave form and meaning to their lives and was intimately connected with how they defined themselves as

a people.

The complex feelings that melded perceptions of home with the sacredness of womb and land must have given birth to the ancient idea of sovereignty: the supreme authority of the Mother Goddess was rooted in territory - the “earth-place” set apart (and thus, by definition, made sacred) by the rivers, mountains, forests and plains that formed its natural boundaries.[\[9\]](#) Within this domain, the sovereignty of the goddess was vested in the people through the women,[\[10\]](#) and their territorial authority made the independence of the group inviolable and absolute. Goddess, woman and womb were the essence of land, home and sovereignty. Together, these were the aspects of a wholeness that today we might call the “Sacred Feminine” - the goddess immanent in the land and soul, and directly embodied in womanhood.[\[11\]](#) In this matrix, time and its changes were cyclical in every sense: the dance of the seasons no more so than the birth and growth of one generation merging into the ageing and death of the last. The goddess was reflected as much in the sun's journey through the day and year, as in the cyclic changes of the moon during the month or the fertility cycles of the women.

This way of life continued until about 13,000 years ago, when women first learned how to tame and breed sheep, goats and pigs. In our mind's eye we can see a young girl quietly picking berries with her friends while the boys were off on one “adventure” or another. Although there were almost certainly girl-adventurers too, the hunter-gatherer division of labour may have given girls an advantage in “making friends” with wild animals. Certainly we can picture a girl noticing a wild ewe or nanny goat grazing nearby, and gradually earning the animal's trust: enticing it to eat from her hand, and finally taming it. This one small act - or something very much like it - brought about a major change in the lives of our Stone Age ancestors. The news must have spread like wildfire from group to group, especially after women learned how to breed the animals they tamed. Soon able to add cheese and butter to their diet, and no longer dependent on wild game for meat and clothing, domesticating animals became a commonplace of their daily lives. Living and working closely with their animals, it would not have been long before women also learned how to breed them selectively to strengthen desirable qualities and improve their herds.[\[12\]](#) But even this was only the beginning.

About a thousand years later, women's intimate knowledge of plants finally yielded an even more life-altering discovery: how to cultivate cereal grains (wheat, barley and rye) and, later, fruit-trees. It was this discovery that led our Stone Age ancestors from the hand-to-mouth existence of nomadic hunter-gatherers to the abundance and hard work of a settled community farming-life. While the men continued to hunt, women marked out plots of land to graze their animals and grow their crops.[\[13\]](#) They learned to protect

the grain by roasting it; made pottery in which to store grain and liquids; improved the potter's wheel and ceramic glazes; learned to ferment wild honey and grain; developed rules for community-living (the basis of law and order); originated new values, customs and traditions, and created words and art forms to express their growing new culture.[14]

Beneath the surface, these were the secrets of the womb and tomb - the living alchemy of life and death: of separation and purification, of dissolution and fermentation, of fertilization and germination, and of the exaltation of regeneration in the seasonal renewal of life. Beyond the physical and hormonal changes brought on by puberty and pregnancy, these secrets became the pith and marrow of “women's magic”. They were the mysteries of the Great Mother in which civilization was first conceived,[15] brought to birth and nurtured for millennia - a fact that played a very significant role in Epona's story (see Chapter Eight). Taking their cue from Nature, where conception and germination happen unseen in the womb of the earth, women probably kept the details of these powerful discoveries to themselves - including the male role in insemination. It must have seemed that these secrets of Nature were inherently “feminine”, and thus belonged to women naturally. But they would certainly have been revealed and passed on through generations of girls and young women during their passage into each new phase in the growing fullness, complexity and power of their womanhood.

There were probably exceptions: the occasional young boy who found his way into the “red tent” of the women's mysteries and stayed to hear their stories. If he listened quietly, the women probably smiled indulgently and let him stay.[16] He was the type who might one day become a shaman-priest in the “temple of the Moon”. These exceptions were probably rare. Most boys would have been too busy with their adventures, and the men would have kept their distance from these “womb-centred” secrets in the instinctive awe and reverence that sprang from their inability to grasp the depth and nuance, the complexities and apparent contradictions, and the subtle shifts and changes that women embraced so fluidly. The results of women's knowledge must have impressed them too, and no doubt added to the perception that women embodied the magical and creative power of the goddess. Certainly, it would have taken a brave (or foolish) man to question women's wisdom or challenge their authority. Modern arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, this seems to have been the *status quo* - the way things stood - for the next eight thousand years or so.

## THE BIRTH OF PATRIARCHY

Sometime around 4000 BC another earth-shaking change occurred in the ancient world. Somewhere on the Eurasian steppes between the Black and

Caspian Seas, men began to tame and breed horses.[17] The power and speed of the horse must have been very attractive to men, and following women's example in breeding other animals, they would have become aware of one of the basic “facts of life” - perhaps for the first time in history. Seeing the role of sperm in horse-fertilization, it would only have been a small step to the dawning realization of men's role in human fatherhood - a realization that must have burst in their minds with the force of a tsunami, and might well have fostered the birth of patriarchy (“father-rule”).[18]

We can only guess at what happened next. If men then realized that women had already known the secrets of conception, they may well have felt that women were choosing them for their desirable qualities like breeding studs. This would have been deeply wounding to their pride - especially since, like a goat or stallion, they were unable to withhold what every fibre of their being yearned to release when deliberately inflamed. Anyone who has ever watched a male animal being stimulated by hand will recognize the complete loss of conscious control as this primal drive to release takes over. Although this powerlessness had always been present, men's new knowledge of breeding would have brought its significance into new and painfully sharp focus. This might explain the vehemence and cruelty behind the sweeping denigration of women's minds, bodies and sexual power that later began to emerge in the ancient world.

Certainly it was more than just the new awareness of their role in fatherhood that prompted the spread of male dominance in the ancient world. Fatherhood was not the same thing as *patriarchy* - the “rule” of the fathers. But again, the change was slow in coming. It was not until the Bronze Age began in Mesopotamia just over a thousand years later that male rulership began to show up in religion, politics and social structure. Certainly, the earlier discoveries made by women became the foundation for the development of writing, mathematics and astronomy; philosophy, religion and law; art and literature; and metallurgy and architecture in ancient Sumer. But this was also the beginning of empires, of slavery and of organized warfare. The face of patriarchy can be seen clearly in Sumerian myth. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, for example, the goddess Inanna was described as a “woman who walked in fear” of the sky and air gods.[19]

Men were clearly establishing their independence from women. But despite this, we can still see revealing glimpses of the older power of the Divine Feminine. Other stories of Inanna, for instance, described her struggles and ultimate victory in becoming “Queen of Heaven and Earth”, [20] and in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* the sky and air gods finally bowed to her will.[21] The Epic also made the correlation between men and animals abundantly clear, explicitly referring to men as “material” to be transformed

and providing a graphic statement of the methods used to do so.[22] Similarly, an Akkadian cylinder seal from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC illustrates the dominance of the goddess very clearly: in her naked thigh; in the foot she is placing on the back of the “lion-lover” she has tamed; and in the braided halter-thong she uses to control this king of beasts.[23]

Nevertheless, patriarchy had made deep inroads into the ancient authority of the Sacred Feminine, and a profound struggle for male supremacy was the keynote over the next thousand years or so. By about 1500 BC, virtually the entire ancient world had become more or less adamantly patriarchal. This was chillingly illustrated in the Babylonian re-writing of the ancient Sumerian creation myth. Whereas the Sumerian goddess Nama had “curled in upon herself” to conceive Heaven and Earth,[24] in the later account she became the “monster” Tiamat who was “heroically” defeated by the storm-god Marduk.[25] He became the new “creator” by slicing her body in half in order to (re-)make Heaven and Earth.[26]

For much of this time, most of the ancient world was war-torn and blood-soaked.[27] Sumerian culture was completely overrun by the war-like Akkadians,[28] and Mesopotamia was then dominated in turn by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Kassites and the Hittites. Egypt was invaded by the Hyksos, the Kushites, the Hittites, the Lybians and the mysterious “Sea Peoples”. Syria and Anatolia (Asia Minor) were similarly embroiled in turbulence: the influential Hurrian civilization was invaded by Amorites, and later completely absorbed by the Hittites who went on to dominate the small well-organized city-states and kingdoms of the “land of the Hatti” in Anatolia. The Iron Age was no different. Mesopotamia was conquered by the Medes and Persians, by the Greeks, and finally by the Romans. Egypt was dominated by the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans, and Anatolia was invaded by the Persians and colonized by the Greeks before it too was finally dominated by the Romans. Greece itself only narrowly escaped being overrun by the Persians, and later the Celts. But well before the end of the Iron Age, all of Europe and Britain had been dominated by the Romans.

Despite all the clash, clamour and bloodshed however, basic values remained much the same everywhere at least in their essentials. While the attitudes and beliefs - the perceptions - that molded and motivated most of these civilizations had become distinctly patriarchal, they were also inherently polytheistic and thus preserved the goddesses of the older religions.[29] In fact, even specific religious beliefs and formative mythic themes were transferred from one ancient culture to another with only minor (though sometimes very significant) changes.[30]

What shifted was their ways of dealing with the feminine (both divine and human), which varied from broad-minded social tolerance or patronizing

indulgence to the kind of vehement fear and anger-filled repression expressed in the Babylonian myth of Marduk (above). For the most part, goddesses took a secondary position as mothers, daughters or consorts to the more powerful male gods. But patriarchy had still not conquered the hearts and minds of the entire ancient world. There were individuals and groups who still cherished the goddess, and whole civilizations or cultures that continued to embrace and honour her in different ways. The oldest and most enduring of these was located on the Island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea.

## MINOAN CRETE

The remarkable civilization that developed on Crete could not have been more different from the chaotic profusion of patriarchal peoples and events elsewhere in the ancient world during the Bronze Age. After its beginnings around 3600 BC, what archaeologists call the Minoan civilization grew and blossomed for a little over two thousand years.[\[31\]](#) Minoan art reflected their deep love of nature, and expressed a joy and vitality in form and colour not found in the artwork of any other Bronze Age civilization.[\[32\]](#) In striking contrast to their neighbours they were a happy, peace-loving and productive people: there were no wars, either internally or with other civilizations, and they traded extensively with Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, the Scythian shores of the Black Sea and the mainland and islands of Greece.[\[33\]](#)

The reason for their peace, prosperity and happiness may have been that the goddess was central to Minoan culture. Although their women were spiritually, politically and socially prominent, there has been strong resistance to the idea that the Minoans were a matriarchal culture.[\[34\]](#) At least one writer has referred to what she called the “equal partnership” between Minoan men and women, and used a well-known mosaic to illustrate her point.[\[35\]](#) In it, two adolescent girls and a boy are doing lengthways flips over the back of a charging bull. But although the mosaic certainly shows that girls or young women were equally capable of courage, daring, precision timing and athletic skill, this very dangerous Minoan game was not about “equality” in the modern sense. On the contrary, these public demonstrations of their abilities must have evoked intense admiration in their young male peers, and were probably a key factor in building the foundation of respect needed for what was a harmonious but almost certainly *female led* partnership between sexually mature women and men.

This becomes especially clear when the bull-leaping mosaic is seen in the context of other Minoan artwork. Not only are there strong indications of female leadership based on a clearly perceived continuum between womanhood and the goddess but also, like the early Sumerians, women apparently cultivated the finest masculine qualities by raising men from an



animal-like state to a more genuine manhood. This is particularly visible, for example, in the comparison between the Thera fresco of a Minoan Queen receiving tribute from a monkey-like figure and a ring seal from the palace at Knossos in which a beautiful young man stands in awe of the Mountain Goddess (Chapter Nine).[\[36\]](#) We also get a glimpse of these finer male qualities in the Minoan “Kouretes” (from the Greek word *kouros* meaning “youth”). These were the helmeted, shield and spear-carrying but otherwise naked young men who worshipped the Cretan goddess Rhea and protected her divine son in the myth of the Dictaeon cave. Although the myth came to us through the Greeks, its roots lay in the initiation of young Minoan males into manhood after being trained as warriors or guardians devoted to the goddess.  
[\[37\]](#)

The hardship and pain these young men endured during their training (much like that of young soldiers today) was almost certainly summed up in the cane held by the Mountain goddess in the ring seal mentioned above. This archaic symbol of feminine authority (originally a “goad” used to herd animals), and the man's erection in response to the goddess wielding it, are highly reminiscent of the description given in the Epic of Gilgamesh of Inanna's relationship to her lovers (both animals and men).[\[38\]](#) It is extremely likely that the erotic ecstasies of the naked Kouretes dancing round the infant god were the end result of a training similar in many respects to the “civilizing art” used by the Sumerian priestess of Inanna. These cross-cultural perceptions and practices were almost certainly why the Greeks saw the Kouretes as virtually indistinguishable from several other young male ecstatic fraternities - including the Phrygian Korybantes in Anatolia, who also danced in ecstasy as they protected the infant child of the Great Mother, Kybele.[\[39\]](#) In fact, it was exactly this concentration of ancient influences from Mesopotamia and Crete in Phrygia (Asia Minor) that later had a profound bearing on Epona's story.

## PHRYGIA

The kingdom of Phrygia emerged out of the collapse of the Hittite empire in the Bronze Age. At the height of its power in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, it included most of central and western Asia Minor, or “Anatolia”. Colonized by the Greeks from the beginning, its last independent king - the historical (not the mythic) king Midas - was overthrown when the Cimmerians invaded the Phrygian capital at Gordium. Very shortly after that, the Lydians conquered and ruled Phrygia until it was dominated in turn by the Persians, by Alexander the Great (who cut the “Gordian knot”), and by the Romans.

Throughout all its long history, and despite strong patriarchal influences,

the goddess reigned as Great Mother in Phrygia. Apparently, she had done so since the Neolithic Age when the large settlement at Çatalhöyük was built in southwestern Anatolia around 7500 BC. The now-famous figurine of the goddess seated between two lionesses was found in one of the grain-storage bins there, and she was almost certainly the same “Great Mother” later called Kybele who was also typically depicted enthroned between two lions.[\[40\]](#) The lionesses flanking the Neolithic Mother, and the lions beside the throne of the classical Kybele were both typical of the ancient “Mistress of Animals” - a theme shared with the Minoan goddess Rhea and common to a number of other goddesses throughout the ancient world, including: Inanna in Sumer; the Assyrian Ishtar and Syrian Astarte; the Syrian-Egyptian Q'desh, Artemis (and Aphrodite) among the Greeks - and significantly Epona, though in her case the lions were replaced with horses.

Like Rhea, Kybele was known as “Mountain Mother” and both were associated with a Mount Ida: one on Crete and one in Phrygia. It is not surprising that the Greeks saw them as a single Goddess, and the close similarity between the Kouretes and Korybantes strongly suggests that the cults associated with the two goddesses were more or less identical. Fortunately, the Phrygian cult survived intact until the end of the Iron Age, and thus provides details that are only implied in the Minoan artwork mentioned above.

Perhaps the most famous of these details was the fact that the cult was associated with the feminization of men. This was grounded in the myth of Kybele-Agdistis and the grain god Attis.[\[41\]](#) Like the Sumerian Creatrix Nama, who was implicitly bi-gendered, Kybele-Agdistis originally had both male and female genitals. Her androgyny offended the Greek Olympian gods so much that they had her castrated, and an almond tree grew from her severed male genitals. Nana, the daughter of the river god Sangarius, conceived Attis when she placed an almond from the tree against her “bosom”. He grew up a long-haired beauty, and Kybele-Agdistis fell in love with him. Not knowing this, he was about to marry the daughter of the king when the goddess arrived at his wedding. Seeing her, Attis castrated himself in the erotic madness of the love he suddenly felt for her.[\[42\]](#) Drawing on the myth, it became a common practice for the priests of Kybele to be castrated (literally or figuratively) in imitation of Attis' passion and sacrifice.[\[43\]](#)

The presence of the Korybantes at the centre of the cult however, shows that feminization was not the only or the final goal of the rituals. While ancient perception certainly accepted and found a role for at least some castrated priests, the Korybantes apparently represented the highest form of masculinity: undeniably virile, yet utterly devoted to the Goddess and the protection of her divine child. Both were present in the details of a 4<sup>th</sup> century



silver patera now in the Milan Museum of Archaeology,[\[44\]](#) which shows Attis in women's clothes sitting beside Kybele in her lion-drawn chariot with his thighs spread in imitation of the goddess, while the sword and shield bearing Korybantes dance ecstatically around them.

Like Minoan Crete in the Bronze Age, the ancient power and authority of the goddess survived in Anatolia during the Iron Age - though in a far more embattled way. The Cimmerians and Persians who conquered Anatolia were both emphatically patriarchal. Even if the Lydians provided a brief goddess-oriented respite in between these conquests, the survival of the Great Mother's cult was remarkable. Paradoxically, the Greek colonists who settled on the coasts of Anatolia in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC may have played a significant role in that survival.

## THE GREEKS

The fact that the Greeks took the Minoan-Phrygian goddess so much to heart is surprising. Like most other civilizations around the Mediterranean, they were a patriarchal people. This was clearly reflected in their male-dominated Olympic pantheon during the Iron Age. Despite this patriarchal influence, their late-Bronze Age ancestors (the Mycenaeans) had been influenced by Minoan culture since about the 18<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century BC. Evidently, they were impressed enough with Minoan culture to adapt its religion rather than destroying it. This was about two hundred years before the cataclysmic collapse of Bronze Age civilization in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC - not only on Crete and in Greece, but right across Anatolia to Gaza in the Middle East. In the wake of this collapse populations dwindled and palaces, towns and villages were abandoned. Although farming, weaving, pottery and metallurgy continued on a small scale locally, there was no new building, sculpture or painting, and writing disappeared completely.[\[45\]](#)

Recovery and growth began quickly. By the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century BC, villages began reappearing; bronze was replaced by the spread of iron-smelting; pottery technology improved (better glazes, a faster potter's wheel, new vase shapes, and the use of the compass in decorative design); and the beginnings of a new trade network began in the Aegean. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC, new building was also taking place though not yet on the grand scale of former ages. In addition to these physical aspects of renewed civilization, Mycenaean-Greek oral tradition preserved the beliefs and practices of Minoan and Anatolian religion. As a result, at the dawn of the Iron Age the Greeks inherited a more goddess-embracing culture than they might have done otherwise. Even so, they had very mixed feelings about the female gender.

This ambivalence was reflected on one hand by their high regard for goddesses - as enshrined, for example, in the epic poetry of Hesiod and

Homer in the 8<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Occasionally, this admiration also extended to certain women. The epigram ascribed to Plato in praise of the poetess Sappho, for instance, equates her with the Divine Feminine: “Some say the Muses are nine: how careless! Look, there's Sappho too, from [the island of] Lesbos, the tenth.”[\[46\]](#) Another remarkable example was the fact that Socrates valued his instruction by the priestess Diotima on the role of eros (love as desire) in the joining of the human with the divine.[\[47\]](#)

On the other hand, Greek women generally did not fare this well and even the goddesses and nymphs of the Greek pantheon often suffered in later versions of older myths. In the Athenian myth of Artemis asking her father Zeus for perpetual virginity, for example, not only is she demoted to secondary status as his daughter, but her idealized maidenhead (the hymen) was a clear patriarchal substitution for the powerful maidenhood (sexual freedom) of Artemis *Tauropolos* from the Crimean Peninsula. Perhaps even more significantly, the popular myth of Persephone's rape (abduction) eliminated the ancient primacy of the goddess in the “womb and tomb” of the underworld by making her subject to Hades: its new patriarchal lord and master. Both cases illustrated the underlying suppression of female sexual power - expressed on a social level by the fact that Greek men preferred each other's company over that of women.

Men also dominated Greek social and political life. But this was not so clear-cut when it came to religion, where women held offices equal and comparable to those of men[\[48\]](#) and assumed primary and dominant roles in the Mysteries - the spiritual heart of Greek religion. The most famous examples included the Eleusinian Mysteries of the “Two Goddesses”, and the closely-related Arcadian Mysteries of Despoina. Priestesses also took the central role in the Mysteries of Dionysos which drew deeply from the ancient well of goddess-centred belief, and in the Phrygian Mysteries of Kybele that found a welcoming home in Athens.

Even outside the Mysteries however, there were subtle hints of the Divine and Sacred Feminine in classical Greek thought. Plato, for example, tells us that “first matter” was the womb and “nurse of all becoming and change”,[\[49\]](#) and that *nous* (divine mind) “is rightly called beauty because *she* does the works which we recognize and speak of as the beautiful”.[\[50\]](#) Similarly, the Greek words for wisdom (σοφία, “sophia”), providence (πρόνοια, “pronoia”) and fate (μοίρα, “moira”) were all invariably put in the feminine gender and directly attributed to the goddesses Metis, Athena and the Moirai. Much the same was true of the four ancient cardinal virtues: temperance; justice; fortitude (force, influence or persuasion); and prudence. In attributing these “moral excellences” to Sophrosyne, Dike, Peitho, and Metis or Athena, the Greeks were implicitly endorsing the moral primacy of the Divine Feminine.

The essence of these ancient ideas was preserved and held sacred at the heart of both the ancient Mysteries and in the morality of Greek culture generally. Although the Greeks were undeniably patriarchal, they were nuanced in their regard for the Divine and Sacred Feminine. This can be seen especially in contrast to their mortal enemies the Persians, who were the first to introduce the concept of ultimate, male-dominated “good and evil” into the ancient world.[51] Even so, Greek perception of the feminine was decidedly more patriarchal (at least in public) than their near neighbours the Celts. To an extent unrivalled by any other major culture in the Iron Age, the Celts preserved and cherished “the goddess” - and perhaps Epona most of all.

## THE CELTS

We cannot follow the path of the sun westward during the Iron Age without meeting the Celts. Originating in the Urnfield farming culture that flourished in central Europe while Bronze Age civilizations were collapsing around the Mediterranean,[52] the Celts began to develop their own distinct language and culture near the source of the Danube in Austria from about 800 BC onwards. This was about the same time that Homer and Hesiod were writing the core of Greek mythology.[53] Over the next two or three hundred years, their language and culture spread widely through trade, migration and conquest into France, northern Italy and Spain; westward to Britain and Ireland; and eastward as far as Romania and the shores of the Black Sea. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Celts were regarded as one of the “four great peripheral nations of the known world”. [54] By the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, they had even crossed the Bosphorus into Anatolia and settled in Phrygia - at the heart of the Great Mother's ancient place of worship.[55]

First mentioned before 500 BC by the Greeks (with whom they had extensive contact), the Celts were a vibrant people - a multitude of tribes with different ethnic traditions and customs, but with enough in common to be easily identifiable to their neighbours.[56] Their language eventually divided into two or three main branches (depending on how they are classified): *Celt-Iberian*, spoken in Spain; *Common Brittonic*, [57] the basis of Gaulish and Breton in continental Europe and of Cornish, Welsh and maybe Pictish in Britain; and *Goidelic* - the basis of Irish, Manx (on the Isle of Man) and Scottish Gaelic.[58] The differences between these languages probably reflected variations in the regional traditions and customs of these main groups, and undoubtedly had an impact on Epona's story as we shall see.

Nevertheless, the similarities between the various branches of the Celtic “family” ran deep. Like their Neolithic and Bronze Age ancestors, for instance, their lives were based on agriculture and they were profoundly attuned to Nature and the land.[59] Despite their migrations, the Celtic tribes

were territorially defined. Territory - the “earth-place” with which a tribe identified - was also the foundation for their perceptions of sovereignty as essentially feminine and divine.[60] Strictly hierarchical, Celtic society was based on kingship and a heroically-oriented warrior-aristocracy.[61] Yet their model of kingship required “marriage to the land” - a ritual union between the king and the territorial sovereignty goddess embodied in her priestess.[62] This sacred marriage established and validated the king's social position and authority, and was seen as the magical or spiritual basis for the fertility and abundance of the earth.

Significantly, the goddess was viewed as dominant in this relationship. She would only “marry” a worthy would-be king and, even after the marriage, could reject and depose him if he became “blemished” or weak, or the land became barren under his rule.[63] This can be seen most clearly in Irish mythology,[64] but there are strong indications that goddesses were also seen as dominant elsewhere in the Celtic world.[65] Unlike the Minoans however, whose goddess-centred beliefs were reflected socially in what was almost certainly a female-led culture, Celtic culture was apparently based on a different kind of balance between feminine and masculine. Socially, at least from the outside, it was evidently the men who were in control. Like the Kouretes however, they were devoted to the goddess and almost certainly guided and influenced to a large extent by their women.

Certainly, women once held an exceptionally powerful place in Celtic society - though their high status deteriorated under later Roman and Christian influence.[66] Iron Age burials such as the one at Reinheim in Germany, and the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC burial at Vix in Burgundy, were of women - not of men - who belonged to the highest level of Celtic society.[67] Although Celtic women apparently only functioned as queens in certain cases, the semi-mythical Connachta queen Maeve (*Medb*) in Ireland and the historical British queens Cartmandua and Boudica (1<sup>st</sup> century AD) were clearly bred in “a tradition of autonomous and influential women”. [68] Classical writers commented on the indomitable strength and valour of Celtic women, and noted that they were as formidable in battle as their husbands. [69] Macellinus, for example, remarked that “[a] whole troop of foreigners would not be able to withstand a single Gaul if he called his wife to his assistance...” [70] It was much the same in Britain, where Boudica and Cartmandua “created more fear and havoc among the Roman conquerors than any male British opponent”. [71]

Celtic women however, were more than just formidable warriors. As Plutarch reported, it was women who acted as ambassadors in preventing war among the tribes in the Po valley (northern Italy) in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and it was also women from the Volcae tribe that negotiated with Hannibal. [72]

Since the Celts considered the role of ambassador to be a sacred trust,[\[73\]](#) these women were probably priestesses or female druids - what the Celts in Ireland called *bandrúi* (“charmners”) or *banfilid* (female poet-seers).[\[74\]](#) In the Irish vernacular texts, such women were sources of prophesy and were often powerful and dangerous enchantresses.[\[75\]](#) The same was probably true of druidesses on the continent. The Roman emperor Aurelian evidently consulted a Gallic druidess, for example, about whether his offspring would continue to rule the empire after him.[\[76\]](#) Priestesses however, were a different matter - though they too would have been formidable charmners and seers. Their primary role was to embody the goddess and thus bring into focus both the numinous power of the otherworld and the diffused presence of the Divine Feminine in the world of Nature.

An example from Irish mythology was the princess *Medb Lethderg* of Cualu, who was so closely identified with the goddess that ancient Irish law actually referred to her as “the Goddess Medb” and stipulated that to become king, a man had to drink her “ale” and “marry” her.[\[77\]](#) In her capacity as a priestess at Tara (the Hill at the spiritual centre of Ireland), Medb was said to have married nine successive sacred kings. As the 'Book of Leinster' put it: “Great indeed was the strength and power of Medb over the men of Ireland, for she it was who would not allow a king in Tara without his having herself as wife.”[\[78\]](#) Another very revealing glimpse into the power of the Celtic priestess comes from the semi-mythical Ulaid high priestess Étaíne.[\[79\]](#) After her marriage to Eochaid Airem had legitimized his reign as “high” or sacral king of Tara, her triple liaison on the sacred Hill with Eochaid's brother Ailill was the key to his transformation into a god-like *Aes Sidhe* - the magical inhabitants of the “faerie mounds” where the natural world intersected with the enchanted otherworld.

The ability to embody the goddess, to confer sovereignty, and to transform men into god-like beings, was rooted in ancient perception - not simply that a women's power stems from her fertility, but that her sexual love is fundamentally magical and spiritually transformative. Significantly, Medb's name not only meant “ruler”, but its association with mead (fermented honey) also suggested “she who intoxicates”. The idea that she herself was the “ale” imbibed in the kingship rituals was made poetically explicit in referring to her as “the ale of Cualu”.[\[80\]](#) Much the same seems to have been implied in Étaíne's name, which meant “passion”.

In raising the power of female sexuality to a high art, Celtic priestesses were appropriately enshrined in Irish myth and lore - their “charms” were the earthy marrow of otherworldly enchantment. But the art of the priestess was just one special expression of the sexual power and freedom enjoyed by Celtic women generally. Although still in the realm of Irish myth, the



Connachta Queen Maeve's use of her sexuality (and her daughter's) to gain political and military advantage was clearly part of the tradition of Celtic women's autonomy and influence mentioned above.[\[81\]](#) That their sexual freedom was not simply “mythical” however, was made explicit in a conversation between Julia Augusta (wife of the emperor Severus Maximus) and the wife of the Scottish (Caledonian) chief Argentocoxus, recorded by the Roman historian Cassius Dio:

*“When the empress was jesting with her, after the treaty, about the free intercourse of her sex with men in Britain, she replied: We fulfill the demands of nature in a much better way than do you Roman women; for we consort openly with the best men, whereas you let yourselves be debauched in secret by the vilest.”*[\[82\]](#)

Both the otherworldly and the human dimensions of Celtic feminine power were summed-up in an insightful passage from a 19th century Celtic folklorist - insight that will almost certainly resonate with many Celtic men and women today and, most significantly, is also deeply relevant to Epona:

*“It is otherwise with the fairy mistress...they abide in their own place, and they allure or compel the mortal lover to resort to them...the immortal mistress retains her superiority; when the mortal tires and returns to earth she remains, ever wise and fair, ready to welcome and enchant a hero of a new generation. She chooses whom she will and is no man's slave; herself she offers freely, but she abandons neither her liberty nor her divine nature. Even where the love-story passes wholly among mortals...[t]he Celtic woman takes her fate in her own hand, and chooses herself the husband or makes him accept her conditions.”*[\[83\]](#)

The appearance that Celtic culture was male-dominated, typified by “...swaggering heroes continually fighting and proving their ferocity and valour”, is understandable.[\[84\]](#) This view however, may have been partially due to the patriarchal perspective of the Greek and Roman writers who described them. But the Celts' reverence for the feminine ran very deep. To a large extent, it still does. It may even be fair to say that Celtic culture was female-centred, and that what outside observers saw was the result of Celtic women choosing to embrace and honour their men's virile and outwardly-directed expressions of masculinity. Nevertheless, the fact that women acted as ambassadors in Celtic tribal disputes shows the power they could wield when necessary.

This was the spiritual and cultural milieu in which Epona emerged. The ancient themes of sovereignty and kingship, of fertility and abundance, of female power and sexuality, and of masculinity raised to the heroic and

divine, were all present in her. Ironically, although the birth of patriarchy was probably sparked by domesticating and breeding horses, it was the Celtic Horse Goddess who reawakened and revitalized the ancient power of the Divine Feminine - and who was adopted and taken to heart by the Romans.

## THE ROMANS

In marked contrast to the Celts, the Romans were thoroughly patriarchal. Unlike the exclusive male monotheism they later fostered in Christianity though, they did at least recognize the necessity of the Feminine. Nevertheless, their goddesses and women were subject to the hierarchical dominance of male gods and men. A “younger” people than the Celts, the Romans began as a small city-state. They borrowed and adapted their early pantheon, mythology and type of government from the Greek-influenced Etruscans who conquered Rome in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.[\[85\]](#) It was not until nearly four hundred years later, after winning the Punic Wars against Carthage (despite the fifty-thousand Gauls from northern Italy who sided with Hannibal),[\[86\]](#) that the Romans finally became a dominant force outside Italy and went on to dominate most of the ancient world.

At the centre of Roman life, the family was patriarchal in the true sense of the word - ruled by the father, whose authority resembled that of a king. He had the power of life and death over his children, and the right to sell them into slavery; and he could divorce his wife if she was convicted of a serious offence by a court of her male blood-relatives.[\[87\]](#) Similarly, although the Romans abandoned kingship at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, they retained an implicitly patriarchal social structure made up of two main classes: the wealthy aristocratic *patricians* (ruling “fathers”); and the common *plebian* farmers, labourers, artisans and shopkeepers (“the masses”).[\[88\]](#)

The one outstanding thing the Romans had in common with the Celts was that, from their earliest legendary beginnings, the aristocracy of Rome was based on an “equestrian order” - the *ordo equester*, or *equites*.[\[89\]](#) Although perhaps an exclusively patrician order to begin with, the *equites* came to be defined by wealth and property and, in addition to the hereditary aristocracy, the ranks of the *equites* were eventually opened to the first (wealthiest) class of plebians.[\[90\]](#) Together they formed the prestigious and glamorous “knights” of the Roman upper classes who originally provided both the personal bodyguard for the early kings and later the emperors of Rome, and the men who served in the Roman cavalry.

As the army's numbers swelled after the Second Punic War (against Hannibal) at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, there were not enough *equites* to provide both senior officers and fighting cavalry-men. The hereditary *equites* of the aristocracy moved into senior military positions, leaving the first class

of plebians to fill the ranks of the cavalry.[91] As Rome's influence expanded beyond Italy, these senior officers also commanded the auxiliary regiments that included increasingly large numbers of Numidian, Gallic, Spanish and Thracian cavalry.[92] In time, the auxiliary cavalry began to replace the Roman cavalry. When Julius Caesar began his conquest of Celtic Gaul (France) in 58 BC, he had to rely almost entirely on Gallic cavalry from “*Gallia Belgica*” (Belgium and Germany).[93]

The power and influence of the *equites* was not confined to the regiments in the field, however. In addition to serving as the emperor's military chiefs of staff and personal bodyguard, a wide range of civilian administrative posts were created and reserved for hereditary *equites* under Caesar's successor Augustus.[94] The most coveted and prestigious of these government posts was the governorship of Egypt (Rome's main source of grain and, thus, of wealth), but *equites* also served as chief financial officers of the imperial provinces, as deputy financial officers of senatorial provinces, and as secretaries of state in Rome itself.[95]

The *equites* were probably the single most important reason why the Romans took Epona so much to heart. They shared the same ethos of personal heroism and glory, and played the same central role in Roman social structure as the warrior-elite of Celtic aristocracy. But Epona's adoption by the Romans was not just a simple matter of camaraderie between Celtic and Roman “brothers in arms”. The majority of inscriptions dedicated to Epona in Rome, for instance, came from the *equites singulares Augusti* (the emperor's personal bodyguard).[96] These men were seasoned senior officers of the hereditary *equites*, and although some may once have commanded auxiliary Gallic cavalry regiments, it would have taken many years to achieve their trusted position close to the emperor. Together with the fact that half of their inscriptions include the highest deities of the Roman pantheon (several imply the divine cult of the emperor),[97] this suggests a long period of cultural absorption. It may have taken several generations for Epona to become embedded at the heart of Roman religious worship, and military service with the Gauls may not have been the *equites* only source of familiarity with her. In fact, there are several reasons for thinking that at least some *equites* were introduced to her through initiation into the Mysteries (see Chapter Seven).

Epona's fate, however, was not tied to that of the Roman cavalry or the empire. When the military started to disintegrate in 395 AD,[98] she lived on in the hearts and minds of the *equites* and auxiliary cavalry-men who had known and loved her: the Gallic, Numidian, Celt-Iberian, Thracian, Dacian and Roman men who went home to their wives, raised families and passed on their traditions. Eighty years later, when the Western Empire fell at the end of what historians call “antiquity”, the ancient world had changed in



fundamental ways. A new religious regime, far more repressive than the Roman empire had ever been, now began to dominate Europe. Even under Christianity however, Epona survived: in the family traditions of former *equites* and cavalry men; in brief mentions by classical authors; and in the inscriptions and artwork left behind in so many of the lands once welded together by the empire the Romans had built. The seeds of her message, scattered across the ancient world, would germinate quietly during the Middle Ages and finally blossom with the renewed goddess-awareness in the modern world we know today.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Eloquent Symbolism

The most informative key we have to knowing Epona today is the surviving Romano-Celtic artwork that was created to portray her. In addition to frescoes, relief-carvings, figurines and sculptures found from the Black Sea to Britain, she also appears on nearly three hundred stone monuments in France alone.[\[99\]](#) The eloquence of this artwork stems from the symbolic vocabulary its creators drew on to tell her story. They used about thirty different symbols, each a word or phrase in a poetic language artfully used to describe this much-loved goddess. The meanings of each symbol were imprecise: nuanced, elliptical and typically defined by context and combination. Because of this, they could have different meanings and speak on more than one level at the same time.

This “multivalence” was not unique to Epona's artwork. It was an essential feature of religious symbolism in general.[\[100\]](#) Like all religious art, representations of Epona were “spoken” in the original poetic language of religion and magic, graphically translated into a physical medium. No one piece of art contained all thirty symbols (the horse was the only one that was always present), and each piece was like a magical incantation - a unique message designed to evoke a specific religious experience, and thus convey a particular “knowing”.

Without realizing this we might be tempted to think of Epona's artwork in modern terms, as though it expressed the original ideas or personal vision of an individual artist. But Romano-Celtic artists drew on a tradition of pre-existing Celtic and classical perception to portray her,[\[101\]](#) and much of the symbolic vocabulary had been widely used throughout the ancient world to depict other deities. These artistic references to other deities - and thus to the mythology associated with them - were like quoting a well-known phrase from Homer: they could evoke scenes, stories and emotions that were intimately familiar to all.[\[102\]](#)

In order to see Epona in her entirety therefore, we need to understand the symbolic “words” and “phrases” that were combined in unique ways to express who she was and what she meant to the people who knew and loved her. Working from their most general characteristics to their deepest levels of meaning, the symbols fall into five very basic categories: her *clothing* (or lack thereof); her physical *position* (sitting, reclining, etc.); the *plants* and *animals* she was associated with; and the *inanimate objects* she holds. In themselves, these basic categories hold very little meaning or significance: “inanimate object”, for example, tells us almost nothing about Epona's patera. Nevertheless, approaching the symbols in this way offers a useful framework

in which to understand underlying themes such as: sovereignty and freedom; fertility and abundance; and death and renewal. There is also a small group of symbols that point to a more hidden set of themes related to the ancient Mysteries. Together, these themes form a matrix of deeper meaning in which the individual symbols were interpreted. In fact, the symbols expressing all of these fundamental themes were apparently intended to be interpreted on two very different but intimately related levels: that of everyday life in the ordinary and natural world, and the spiritual and magical dimensions of a hidden “other-” or “underworld”.

The multivalence of the symbols means that there is some inevitable overlap, not only in terms of the levels on which they can be interpreted, but also in terms of the underlying themes they express. In some instances, it can be difficult to know which theme a particular symbol expresses most strongly. Understanding the individual symbols and their combinations in a particular piece of art is thus a complex process: each piece has to be seen in the context of the Romano-Celtic period in which it was created, but also in terms of the older religious influences on the symbols used and what we know about Epona from other sources.[\[103\]](#) The individual symbols are the obvious place to begin however, and for this purpose there are standard reference books on symbolism that provide a baseline for interpretation.[\[104\]](#) Then, it is simply a matter of exploring the symbols in some kind of order: in this case, from the more personal symbols of clothing and body position to simple objects; and from symbols of life to symbols of the inanimate.

## CLOTHING SYMBOLISM

The most personal aspect of Epona, of course, was her body - and thus her clothing or lack of it. In the majority of her artwork she was shown fully clothed in much the same way as the Celtic Mother goddesses: a dress that fell from shoulders to ankles, belted at the waist.[\[105\]](#) It was a style typical of Celtic noblewomen between the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, and was probably influenced by early contact with Greek culture.[\[106\]](#) In any case, Romano-Celtic artists were almost certainly following the classical Greek and Roman view of the clothing appropriate for a morally respectable noblewoman - or goddess: both in life and in art, the objective was to conceal the sexuality of the female body while still unambiguously showing its female form.[\[107\]](#)

Morality however, was not necessarily the main consideration when it came to symbolism in religious art. Concealment had uses that went beyond the dictates of social convention. In its most general application, for instance, portraying a goddess as fully-clothed helped focus attention on the non-sexual aspects of the theme presented. But concealing her body could also have

profound implications in its own right. Her breasts, and especially her vulva, were symbols of the most sacred feminine mysteries: of fertility and abundance; of life, death and rebirth; and ultimately, of immortality. In this context, a goddess' clothing implicitly concealed the precious secrets she “unveiled” only to her chosen initiates. Although cloaked in a veil of secrecy, for instance, Baubo's exposure of her vulva to Demeter - annually reenacted during the procession to Eleusis - was a ribald prelude to the revelation of the sacred Mysteries that would soon take place there.[\[108\]](#)

There were two exceptions to Epona's fully-clothed portrayals during the Romano-Celtic period. In both, she was shown semi-nude: her breasts bared, but vulva discretely covered. The unmistakable emphasis was on her breasts - though unlike the Celtic Mother-goddesses who were sometimes shown with a single breast bared, the purpose in Epona's case was not breastfeeding. These portrayals were of profound significance - and not simply because they were exceptions to the usual concealment of her body. As the classicist Larissa Bonfante put it, the “image of the female breast was too powerful to be represented lightly”.[\[109\]](#)

In Celtic art, the power of an image was intensified by emphasizing the part of the body that best represented the intended message.[\[110\]](#) In Epona's case the form and function of her bared breast symbolized the sun and its life-nurturing qualities,[\[111\]](#) and would have been understood as symbolic of her naked body as a whole.[\[112\]](#) Despite the delicacy of her covered mons veneris, these semi-nude portrayals invoked the primal sexuality underlying her feminine mysteries: in one case, the powerful nymph-like attraction of her earthy sexual fertility (see Chapter Four); and in the other, the archetypal fertilizing rays of the sun fecundating the earth (see Chapter Nine).

## SYMBOLISM OF POSITION

The next most personal aspect of Epona's symbolism was the physical position in which she was portrayed: aside (“side-saddle”), astride, or reclining on a horse; and seated, or occasionally standing, between two or more horses. Each of these positions expressed her sovereignty, freedom and fertility in different yet deeply interconnected ways. Despite the connections between them however, Epona's characteristic positions each emphasized a particular theme. Sitting aside her horse, or seated or standing between two of them, represented different aspects of her sovereignty. Similarly, although riding astride and reclining on the horse could both imply pagan sexual freedom, sitting astride the horse conveyed a sense of intimate command and ecstatic joy whereas reclining emphasized primal nymph-like attraction and sexual fertility.

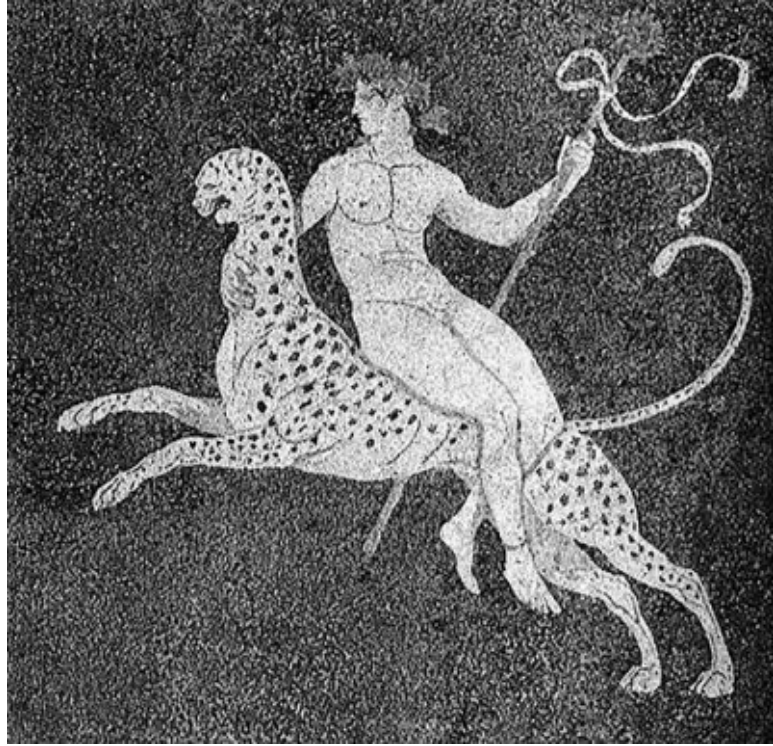
## MOUNTED ASIDE

One of the most common ways Epona was depicted, especially in Gaul, was mounted aside her horse - i.e., “side-saddle”, with both legs on one side of the horse. From a modern perspective it would be easy to assume that this position had something to do with women's clothes (dresses or skirts) and modesty: that taboos surrounding women's sexuality made it “improper” for a woman to sit astride her horse: i.e., with the horse between her thighs. Nothing could be further from the truth, even today - a fact made abundantly clear by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, who *only* rode aside her horse on formal occasions (Trooping the Colours) and still sits astride her mount when riding informally.[\[113\]](#)

As a symbolic statement, riding aside had ancient precedents. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, for example, the Greeks depicted the Minoan goddess Rhea aside a lion - an emblem of her sovereignty since the Bronze Age.[\[114\]](#) Based on an equally long-standing association with lions and sovereignty, the Phrygian goddess Kybele was also portrayed by the Greeks in this characteristic pose.[\[115\]](#) The theme was also taken up by the Romans, as the drawing of Kybele shown below illustrates.[\[116\]](#) Significantly, the Phrygian Great Mother was still being depicted aside her lion on Thracian coins in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.[\[117\]](#) This was contemporary with Epona's Romano-Celtic artwork, and thus provides a very clear example of how earlier religious concepts influenced the artists who chose to portray Epona in this way.



*Figure 1 Kybele (Rhea) aside Lion*



*Figure 2 Dionysos aside Leopard*

It is worth pointing out that the Greek god Dionysos was also depicted beside his leopard, as in the floor mosaic from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC pictured on the previous page. It was unusual to portray a male god in this way and it was almost certainly related to the fact that he was thought of as a “man-womanish” god,[\[118\]](#) intimately associated with Kybele in both myth and cult ritual.[\[119\]](#) This association was artistically alluded to by the staff (“thyrsos”) they each hold. But it is important to note that Dionysos' sovereignty in the realm of Nature was subordinate to that of the Great Mother “of all gods and all men”, just as the leopard was subordinate to the lion (the “king of beasts”) in the animal kingdom.[\[120\]](#)





*Figure 3 Epona, Le Hérapel relief.*

The so-called “side-saddle” images of Epona, like the one in the photograph above,[\[121\]](#) thus fall into a very distinct and persistent pattern in ancient sacred art - one invariably associated with the idea of sovereignty and its identification with the Divine Feminine. But as a modern sovereign also associated with the royal lion, H.M. The Queen makes it very clear that riding aside is a form of symbolism intended to convey a message of *formal* sovereignty. The rider's control comes from her inherent authority and commanding presence rather than from physical force of any kind. In Epona's case, these images were deliberate statements of her formal status and role as a sovereignty goddess - not informal “personal portraits”. In the Romano-Celtic period, and especially in Gaul where they were most common, images of Epona aside her horse almost certainly emphasized the Celts' spiritual indomitability in the face of Roman military and political dominance (see Chapter Five).

## SEATED OR STANDING

Outside Gaul, and particularly in eastern Europe, the most common images of Epona were those in which she was shown seated (or occasionally standing) between two or more horses or asses. The seated images were dubbed “imperial” by archaeologists (relating to an empire), since they draw on another very common theme in ancient art: that of the *Potnia Theron* or “Mistress of Animals”, whose “empire” is usually assumed today to have been the animal kingdom.[\[122\]](#) As a theme in religious art, it apparently had its beginnings in Stone Age Mesopotamia or eastern Anatolia.



*Figure 4 "Cybele", Neolithic.*

The figurine pictured above for example, dates from about 5000 BC and was found in a grain storage bin at *Çatalhöyük* - a Neolithic settlement in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey).[\[123\]](#) A Mother goddess, both her corpulence and the location of the figurine in the grain-bin suggest that her sovereignty (symbolized by the lionesses that flank her throne) was seen as fundamental to the fertility and agricultural abundance of the land.

During the Bronze Age the Mistress of Animals theme became widespread in Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt and Crete, where the most common artistic motif showed a goddess (often with wings) standing between symmetrically arranged wild animals - typically, but not always, lions.[\[124\]](#) By the time Homer used the phrase "*Potnia Theron*" to describe the Greek goddess Artemis in the early Iron Age, not only had the Mistress of Animals become a "well-established formula", but Artemis was often portrayed artistically in this eastern style.[\[125\]](#) The long history of contact between the Celts and the Greeks[\[126\]](#) makes it extremely likely that these images of Artemis influenced the choice to use this eastern motif in Epona' imagery.



*Figure 5 Kybele enthroned & flanked by lions.*

More characteristically Epona was shown seated on a throne or stool between horses (or asses) - much like the figurine from *Çatalhöyük* on the previous page. After the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, when the Greek sculptor Agoracritos popularized the style, this Anatolian motif became the classical way of portraying the Phrygian goddess.[\[127\]](#) Long known to the Greeks as a Mistress of Animals, Kybele was typically shown seated and flanked by lions. The Romans later adopted the style, as in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD sculpture illustrated above.[\[128\]](#) This Anatolian Mistress motif was - without a doubt - the single most important influence in creating the “imperial” images of Epona.

There were many variations in the way this motif was illustrated in Epona's artwork. Nevertheless, it has been widely acknowledged since the 1950's that these imperial images were intended to convey the Mistress of Animals theme.[\[129\]](#) What has not generally been recognized however, is the significance of their relation to Kybele and the Anatolian motif. The very striking likeness between the classical sculpture of the Phrygian Mistress, and the bronze Wiltshire figurine of Epona shown below, was not accidental (see Chapters Seven and Eight).[\[130\]](#) Although the lions were replaced with horses, and the tympanum (circular drum) in Kybele's left hand became a patera (shallow circular libation dish) in Epona's right hand (not visible in the illustration), the two pieces are otherwise virtually identical.



*Figure 6 Epona enthroned & flanked by her horses.*

## MOUNTED ASIDE

In the late 4<sup>th</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, the Celts began to adopt and adapt Greek coin imagery for use on their own coins.[\[131\]](#) One group of coin images however, seems to have been thoroughly Celtic in origin:[\[132\]](#) naked female figures astride a horse either without weapons or “brandishing a sword or spear in a gesture of ecstasy”.[\[133\]](#) While it is impossible to know whether they were meant to be human warrior-women,[\[134\]](#) there are a number of reasons for thinking these female riders may have been early portrayals of Epona in human form. Celtic coin-imagery possessed profound religious meaning in its own right,[\[135\]](#) and quite apart from the significance of the naked female form, the horse had long associations with the sun - both of which figured prominently in the religious life of the Celts (see Chapter Three).

A Celtic coin minted in Paeonia (modern Macedonia) during the late 3<sup>rd</sup> or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, and illustrated in the photo below, exemplifies these points very well.[\[136\]](#) Although we can't be certain that it represented Epona, it is very likely that it did. In the language of Celtic symbolism, the triskele (the triple-spiral) beneath the horse indicated something of emphatic sacred or magical significance (see further, Chapter Four).[\[137\]](#) The cranes and feathers on the other side of the coin were also sacred, and may have had particular relevance for Epona since the Celts had long associated water with the sun - for which the horse was a special symbol (see Chapter Three).[\[138\]](#)





*Figure 7 The Paeonia coin.*



*Figure 8 – Redones Coin*

The likelihood that the Paeonia coin represented Epona becomes stronger however, in light of the influential link between early Celtic coin-imagery and later Romano-Celtic religious art.[\[139\]](#) The transition from the abstraction of the Paeonia coin to the more defined human form given to Epona during the Roman period can be seen, for example, in the coin minted by the Redones tribe in northwest Gaul (Brittany) during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and illustrated in the photo above.[\[140\]](#) The image eloquently expresses her wild, uninhibited freedom and ecstatic exultation in victory (see Chapter Nine). It also hints at the fully-unleashed power of female sexuality - a very strong and significant theme in Epona's story (see below and Chapter Six).[\[141\]](#)

The link between this earlier coin imagery and the later portrayals of Epona in Romano-Celtic art becomes most clearly distinct in the rare Treveri images in which she was depicted astride her horse. The Treveri relief-carving from the 2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD shown in the photograph on the following page,[\[142\]](#) for example, bears a striking and unmistakable resemblance to the Paeonia coin minted some six hundred years earlier. Much of the freedom, power and implicit sexuality of the earlier images has been lost in the heavier, more defined and realistic style given her under Roman artistic influence.



*Figure 9 - Epona astride Treveri.*

But the image of the divine female “warrior” astride her horse (see Chapter Four), and the indomitability of the Celtic spirit symbolized here by Epona's raised fist (see Chapter Five), remain essentially unchanged. These facts suggest that the Celts had a concept of the Horse Goddess before 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC - even if she was only given human form and became more fully-defined from that point onwards.

Symbolically, images of Epona astride her horse carry a rich array of meaning - from intimacy and exhilaration, exultation or ecstasy to freedom. The earlier coin-imagery hints not only at victory in battle but at a deeper pagan eroticism grounded in the natural power and flowing rhythm of the horse's movement, and in the intimacy of the physical connection between horse and rider - freely and unashamedly expressed in the rider's spontaneous exultation. By contrast, the later Treveri images seem to convey a message more concerned with indomitable political freedom.

## RECLINING

Epona's eroticism was alluded to much more explicitly in at least two examples of her artwork during the Romano-Celtic period. In the relief-carving found at Allerey (Cote d'Or, France) shown in the photograph below, this was done by portraying her reclining semi-nude on the back of her horse. [\[143\]](#) The symbolism of her bared breasts has already been discussed (see 'Clothing Symbolism', above), but the reclining position itself conveyed a languid, slow-burning eroticism that attracts without effort or exertion.



*Figure 10 Epona d'Allerey.*

This was neither the self-contained ecstasy and exultation of the naked female riders in Celtic coin-imagery, nor an active state of sexual arousal. On the contrary, the semi-nude reclining position was an invitation to intimacy - its focus and primary message was the attractive power of Epona's sexual fertility.

That her semi-nudity was “...too powerful to be represented lightly” has already been noted.[\[144\]](#) But her reclining position magnified that power tremendously. This becomes especially clear in the context of classical Greek and Roman portraits of Aphrodite (Venus) - the goddess intimately associated with sexual love and sensual pleasure.[\[145\]](#) Epona's reclining position was virtually identical, for example, with that of Aphrodite in the wall-mural pictured below.[\[146\]](#) Even the arms of the two goddesses were arranged in similar ways. Like Aphrodite, whose sexual allure was so strong that even the all-powerful Zeus was undone and overcome by it,[\[147\]](#) the erotic intensity of Epona's attraction makes her implicit invitation irresistible.

*Figure 11 Aphrodite*





## ANIMAL SYMBOLISM

Among the animal symbols in Epona's artwork, there are several that figure less prominently and require little in the way of description. The goose, for instance, is an aggressive bird that guards and protects; pigs were sacrificed to earth goddesses and associated with Demeter;[\[148\]](#) and birds “demonstrate [Epona's] close kinship with the mothers”.[\[149\]](#) By contrast, certain animals either appeared more frequently in Epona's artwork or were symbolically much more relevant. Of these the horse, ass, raven and serpent were perhaps the most important.

**Horse & Ass.** The horse was absolutely fundamental to Epona's identity and nature, and it was the only symbol invariably used in all her artwork. She was so strongly associated with horses in fact, that even the image of a mare and foal on their own could represent her. As a result, the symbolism of the horse is especially important and will be explored in detail in Chapter Three. But Epona was also associated with the horse's close cousin, the ass or donkey, and it is important to note that it sometimes replaced the horse in her artwork - a fact that significantly altered the artistic meaning.

Perhaps the oldest symbolism of the ass lay in its association with fertility - especially its head.[\[150\]](#) Fertility was a major theme in Epona's art, and this aspect of the ass' symbolism lends pointed significance both to her gesture of tenderness in touching their heads, and to their act of nibbling corn or fruit directly from her lap. The Romans recognized the ancient fertility symbolism of the ass by associating it with the rustic god Priapus - the protector of livestock, fruit plants, gardens and male genitals. These associations probably played some role in the meaning of the asses in Epona's artwork. But to the Greeks, the ass symbolized infatuation (unreasoned passion) and love or admiration. These qualities were central to the feelings associated with Epona's worship, as was abundantly clear in the 1st century BC inscription to “Eponina” (a term of special endearment).[\[151\]](#)

In classical myth generally the ass represented lust, lewdness and comical stupidity - often combined with laziness or sloth. These themes were summed up in the ribald 2<sup>nd</sup> century novel in which a man is turned into an ass, undergoes various ordeals, and then returns to a more enlightened manhood through the spiritually transforming medium of the roses sacred to Isis... *and Epona* (see 'Roses', below).[\[152\]](#)

**Raven.** A powerfully evocative bird, the raven was an important symbol in Epona's artwork. Among the Gauls it was the companion of goddesses “whose main concerns were healing and prosperity”,[\[153\]](#) whereas in Ireland it was the bird-form of a trio of goddesses strongly associated with battle and

death.[154] All of these goddesses were sovereign Mothers, and thus inherently concerned with the womb - and the tomb - of earth. It is not surprising therefore that, to one degree or another, death was linked with fertile abundance and healing in the Celtic goddesses associated with this striking bird. The raven itself, on the other hand, was considered an oracular “talking bird” powerfully associated with the underworld. In this connection it was understood as “giving voice to the utterances of the divine”.[155] This was true not only in Celtic (Irish and British) mythology but also in classical religion, particularly in connection with the Greek (and Roman) god Apollo - a god with whom Epona was very closely associated (see Chapter Six).[156]

**Serpent.** Perhaps the oldest and most complex of all animal symbols, the snake has primarily represented sexual or agricultural fertility and renewal ever since it was first depicted in Paleolithic antler and rock carvings.[157] Alternately revered and reviled as a poisonous killer representing death, the serpent also symbolized wisdom, healing, and physical and spiritual rebirth in the periodic shedding and renewal of its skin.[158] Among the Celts, the snake had the same healing and chthonic symbolism as in the Mediterranean world: its paramount role was beneficent and health-giving - a protector against disease, war and the terrors of death.[159] It had a universal role as mediator between heaven and the underworld, but rather than being a “tempter” in the Jewish or Christian sense it was the wise or cunning initiator, and was often associated with a “tree of life”.[160] In connection with Epona, it is also extremely significant that the serpent was believed to be androgynous: an emblem of all self-fertilizing (or self-renewing) deities: it could take on the feminine regenerative power of the earth but was also the “husband of all women” and frequently associated with pregnancy (see Chapters Four & Nine).[161]

**Dog.** Always associated with loyalty, devotion and protective vigilance, [162] the dog apparently had “three primary symbolic functions” in both ancient Mediterranean and Celtic religion: healing, hunting and death.[163] The Celts associated dogs with healing waters, for instance, and a dog typically accompanied healers like Asclepius,[164] the semi-divine son of Apollo who was specifically mentioned in inscriptions to Epona.[165] Similarly, the divine or otherworldly hunt was a theme common to both Mediterranean and Celtic mythology,[166] and the dog-companion in Epona's imagery may well connect her with the classical hunter-goddess Artemis-Diana who was also accompanied by a dog.[167] The dog was also commonly associated with the Celtic Mother goddesses,[168] and this was probably due to its earth-underworld symbolism. A companion in life, the dog was also seen as a guide and guardian on the passage to and through the underworld. In this connection, dogs were associated with all messenger

deities, such as the Greek Hecate and Hermes-Mercury. As Apuleius put it in the 2nd century AD, “the dog... denoted the messenger going hence and thence between the higher and infernal powers”.[\[169\]](#) This symbolism was profoundly relevant to Epona (see Chapter Three).

## PLANT SYMBOLISM

Epona's plants symbolized her fertility and abundance as a primal Mother goddess, as well as her fundamental involvement in the mysteries of life, death and rebirth. The plants particularly associated with her included grain, fruit (especially apples), roses, pine, and what may have been Mana Ash.

**Corn.** In the older English sense of the word, “corn” meant cereal grains such as wheat, barley, rye and oats - not the *maize* native to the Tehuacan Valley of Mexico. Cereal grain was the “fruit” of the union between sun and earth, germinated in the rich womb of the earth. It was a primary emblem of Mother goddesses among the Celts, the Phrygians (Kybele), the Greeks (Demeter), the Romans (Ceres) and the Egyptians (Isis). Wheat, in particular, not only represented fertility and abundance but was also the basis of wealth in the ancient world. By extension, bread was the “staff of life”: the nourishing gift of Mother Earth.

Beyond this however, grain was a powerful image of the continuity of life - of life emerging from death: not only in the spring crops and autumn harvest, but also in the mythic and mystical resurrection of the god, hero or initiate.[\[170\]](#) As an image of immortality, a stalk of wheat - “the most perfect object of mystic contemplation” was the final revelation of the Eleusinian Mysteries of “the two goddesses” (Demeter and Persephone).[\[171\]](#) Likewise, Kybele's son and lover Attis was “the reaped yellow ear of corn”.[\[172\]](#) While women continued to be equated with the Earth Mother, men had become identified with the wheat born from her womb. Like the Greek goddess Demeter, when Epona was shown holding a basket of corn, or feeding it to her horses or asses from her lap, she was the source of life, prosperity and renewal - all intimately linked with immortality in the womb of the Grain Mother.

**Fruit.** Epona was also frequently depicted holding fruit, either on its own or together with corn and/or bread. The combination, like bread and wine, not only represented “the balanced product of agricultural labours and provision for life”,[\[173\]](#) but was a pre-Christian form of “holy communion” - the sacramental meal. This was brought home in an especially profound way when Epona's horses were shown eating directly from her lap. In ancient art, fruit typically represented a paradisaical state of abundance, prosperity, and earthly pleasures or desires.[\[174\]](#) At the same time, fruit was often used in offerings to the dead. It symbolized immortality as the culmination of one

state and the seed of the next.[175] For the Celts, as much as for the Greeks and Romans, there was no contradiction between the pleasures of the flesh and a euphoric afterlife since it was seen as a place of endless joy, feasting and pleasure - especially for heroes (or initiates).[176]

Most often, Epona was shown holding apples. Throughout the ancient world its bright colour, rounded shape, and womb-like centre made the apple a symbol of fertility, joy and sexual pleasure; knowledge, wisdom and immortality; but also of strife and death.[177] Perhaps in illustration of this odd contrast, apples were sacred to Aphrodite-Venus as an emblem of love and sexual desire while apple branches were an attribute of Artemis and used in the rites of Diana.[178] Similarly, among the Celts the apple was a magical fruit associated with the Otherworld: "To enter the Otherworld before the appointed hour marked by death, a passport was often necessary, and this was usually a silver *branch* of the sacred apple-tree bearing blossoms".[179] Epona's apples therefore, hinted at a wide range of symbolic meaning - both Celtic and classical.

**Roses.** The symbolism of the rose was complex: heavenly perfection and wholeness on one hand, but earthy passion, sensuality and seduction on the other; fertility, but also virginity; love, joy, beauty and desire, but also pain, death, and sorrow.[180] Embracing all of this, the rose was an emblem of the profound mysteries of life and death signifying secrecy and the unknown, [181] but also resurrection and immortality. It was the quintessential feminine "cup of eternal life" filled with the divine nectar of love and madness.[182] Sacred to Aphrodite and Isis, garlands of roses were also put round images of Epona and placed with offerings at her shrines. It was in this connection, in the 2nd century AD, that Apuleius made roses the vital connecting link between Epona and the Mysteries of Isis (see Chapter Nine).[183]

**Pine.** The pine-tree represented vitality, fertility and "evergreen" immortality, whereas the phallic and flame-shaped cone signified the fecundity of the male seed - the masculine creative force.[184] For the Celts it was a symbol of phallic fertility linking sky, earth and underworld.[185] This was paralleled among the Greeks who saw it as an emblem of the sky-god Zeus, but also of Dionysos (who was strongly associated with death and the underworld), and - intriguingly - of Artemis, whose erotic intensity famously denied the release of male seed.[186] The sky-earth-underworld symbolism of the pine was certainly present in Epona's case, and the link with Artemis may well have been deliberate (see Chapter Eight). But it was also undoubtedly linked with the same kind of androgyny symbolized by the serpent - especially where the pine cone and serpent appeared together in her art work (see Chapter Nine).

**Mana Ash.** The bronze Wiltshire figurine of Epona seated in the

Anatolian Mistress-motif so typical of the classical Kybele (above), has a very intriguing detail - illustrated in the drawing on the right.[\[187\]](#) Epona was shown displaying leaves on a patera, the shallow libation dish that replaced Kybele's drum. The shape of these leaves and their arrangement on the stem is characteristic of the Mana Ash (*Fraxinus ornus*), a tree native to southern Europe and southwestern Asia Minor. Not only did Epona's "territory" fall within this distribution (see Chapter Five), but there were other more specific reasons for thinking the leaves she displayed may have been those of the Mana Ash.

Figure 1 Detail of Wiltshire figurine showing Manna Ash leaves on Epona's Patera & Thigh.

The first of these was the patera itself, a “utensil” used for ritual libation in the Eleusinian Mysteries [188]. This makes it a virtual certain form of ritual drink. The Manna Ash was fermented to make an intoxicating drink, which was imbibed at the end of a fast by those who participated in the Eleusinian Mysteries (see Chapter 1). The sap from fermented honey was used in the Eleusinian Mysteries, for example, and it is not unreasonable to assume that the sap. The sap was readily available, a lot of it was used when fermented, probably had much

The Greeks associated the tree with the personified plural of the word for Earth (Gaia), conceived when she was in the form of a tree. Ouranos that fell after he was castrated by Gaia, shining brilliance of *aethir*” he castration [191] - mythic references. But there was also a strong link with Demeter and Artemis, whose connections with Epona have already begun to emerge in her artwork (see above). The priestesses of these goddesses were called *Melissae* - the plural of the Greek word *μελισσο* which meant “she who makes honey”. [192] The name was a poetic allusion both to the erotic nocturnal rites they performed, [193] and to gathering “nectar” for the intoxicating ambrosial “food of the gods” that Virgil called “heaven's gift, the honey from the skies” - possibly another reference to the exuded sap. [194]

The relevance to Epona comes from a lost 5<sup>th</sup> century BC play by Aeschylus called 'The Priestesses', in which he said “[t]he bee-keepers are at hand to open the house of Artemis”. [195] The term “bee-keepers” was a mistranslation: the word Aeschylus used was *μελισσονόμοι*, meaning honey-making “laws, customs or traditions”. Since the passage occurs in the context of the story of Iphigeneia, [196] there is no doubt that these were priestesses of the *Tauric* Artemis - a version of Artemis that originated in what is now the Crimea and was very closely linked with Epona in a number of ways (see Chapter Eight).

## SYMBOLISM OF OBJECTS

**Orb.** The orb had two distinct but closely-related symbolic aspects. The



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first was wholeness.[\[197\]](#) It had been used as a symbol for the whole earth, for example, since the 3rd century BC when the Greeks established that our planet is spherical.[\[198\]](#) This was this basis for the second aspect of the orb's symbolism: it became an emblem of far-reaching dominion, either of a deity or a sovereign.[\[199\]](#) It was an attribute of Kybele, of Zeus/Jupiter, and of Apollo (probably in his role of driving the chariot of the sun across the sky) and, in the Roman Empire, it symbolized absolute authority and power (i.e., sovereignty).[\[200\]](#) The 2nd century AD relief carving of Epona from Kastel in southwestern Germany on the previous page,[\[201\]](#) shows her aside her horse holding an orb in her right (dominant) hand. Yet, behind this triple emphasis on her sovereignty, the older symbolism of the orb still quietly alludes to the all-embracing wholeness and abundance of the “Good Goddess”: like the role of the horse in human life, Epona's sovereignty was inherently benevolent.



*Figure 13 Epona with Orb.*



**Yoke.** Sovereignty implies submission: this is the symbolic meaning of the yoke Epona cradles in her left arm in the bronze Wiltshire figurine (not however visible in the drawing of her on page 43).[\[202\]](#) The yoke was a common symbol of submission in the ancient world. Quite apart from yoking animals to pull ploughs, or wagons and chariots, captives and slaves were also made to wear them. Old Testament biblical references from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC typically refer to the yoke with adjectives like “grievous” and heavy”.[\[203\]](#) Yet even there we read “[i]t is *good* to bear the yoke in youth”, and in the New Testament we are enjoined to “[t]ake my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and *you will find rest for your souls*”.[\[204\]](#) This was also the positive message underlying Epona's yoke - a fact made abundantly clear not just in inscriptions to her as “Good Goddess” or “*Eponina*”,[\[205\]](#) but in the kindness she shows toward her horses in so much of her artwork. The equally obvious love and devotion of these same horses also showed that their submission to her was eager and willing - neither a weakness of character, nor a grievous and heavy subjugation.

**Basket.** A very ancient “implement”, the basket had symbolic similarities with the cornucopia as an emblem of fertility and abundance. A full basket of fruit represented an abundant harvest, and was used in offerings of the “first fruits” from the womb the Earth Mother. In funerary art, and in the Mysteries, it indicated immortality.[\[206\]](#) An emblem of Demeter (and Ceres), a lidded basket called a kalathos was used in the Mysteries of Mother and Maiden at Eleusis and elsewhere to store the sacra (sacred objects).[\[207\]](#) A similar role was played in the Dionysian Mysteries by the liknon: a winnowing basket said to contain fruit or wheat and a fig-wood phallus - symbols of fertility and life in or through death.[\[208\]](#) The Greek word liknon shows the essentially feminine nature of the basket: it literally meant “cradle” or “birthplace” - euphemisms for the vulva and womb.[\[209\]](#) It was an ancient symbolism: in Sumerian, for instance, one word was used to denote a sheepfold, an apple tree, a woman's lap, and her vulva and womb: they all contained fruitfulness and abundance.[\[210\]](#) Thus, whether Epona was shown holding a full basket of wheat, bread or fruit, or allowing her horses and asses to eat from her “lap”, she was the nurturing Earth Mother providing the sacramental meal from the abundance of her fertile womb - the “bread basket” of life.

**Phiale or Patera.** A broad, shallow bowl or dish, the phiale (Greek) or patera (Latin) was used for ritual libation - a word that meant “to pour out (an offering)”.[\[211\]](#) A central and vital aspect of ancient Greek (and later Roman) religion and culture,[\[212\]](#) libation was required to supplicate the gods properly: invocation and prayer were inseparable from the act of filling a cup or phiale and pouring out an offering before drinking. Even at symposia

(relaxed gatherings for the exchange of ideas), after opening the first krater (a large urn) of wine, it was customary to make a libation to Zeus and the Olympians.[213] This was a kind of “first fruit” offering that stood out from other gifts of food because it was irretrievable - it could not be brought back. [214] Greek art often shows the gods holding a libation phiale,[215] and it was also a common attribute of the Celtic Mothers.[216] Epona too was often portrayed with a patera, and frequently shown giving drink from it to a foal. Not only was this the liquid equivalent of feeding horses and asses from her lap, but was clearly the act of a “nourishing goddess” giving from her abundance.[217]

**Key.** When it comes to Epona's key, illustrated by Ava Crabbe on the front cover of the book and reproduced above, we are entering a whole new domain of symbolic meaning in her artwork. The suggestion that it was a stable key is almost certainly wrong.[218] For one thing, it is very unlikely that the Celts - or the Romans - locked their stable-doors: fire was an ever-present danger in an age without electricity, and horses were simply too valuable to risk trapping them inside a burning stable. Apart from that, its large size emphasized its importance and suggested a far more significant religious or magical function.[219] An uncommon attribute in Romano-Celtic art, a much more likely explanation was that Epona's key was “an underworld motif, the key to heaven”. [220]

The key has always been a pivotal symbol of sovereign power and authority. Although an emblem of the spiritual or magical authority, both to bind and loosen (to forbid or permit),[221] it was almost always a symbol of access.[222] As an attribute of Kybele, Persephone and Hecate among the Greeks, for instance, the key was a symbol of the power to access the underworld.[223] For the Romans, on the other hand, it belonged to Janus as a symbol of his power of access to the realms of gods and men.[224] In addition to being a straight-forward emblem of her sovereignty therefore, Epona's key almost certainly represented both the power to access the underworld and the possession of its secrets. Since these included fertility, abundance and prosperity, as well as birth, death, and renewal, this was almost certainly also the key to immortality (see Chapters Eight and Nine).



*Figure 14 Epona's Key*

**Thyrsos.** Famous as an emblem of Dionysos, the thyrsos was a stalk of giant fennel tipped with a pine cone and often wreathed with ivy and ribbons. It has been argued that the thyrsos was a fertility symbol,[\[225\]](#) and it clearly had very strong phallic connotations. But according to a tradition preserved by Euripides, Dionysos received his thyrsos from Kybele after she had healed him of his madness and initiated him into her Mysteries.[\[226\]](#) In that context it was a symbol of liberation - a theme foreshadowed in Greek myth by the story of Prometheus stealing fire from the gods to give to humanity: he hid the burning coals in a hollow stalk of giant fennel.[\[227\]](#) Since fire was one of the ingredients Demeter used to make Demophon immortal,[\[228\]](#) Prometheus' gift held more than ordinary significance and the thyrsos was certainly more than just a fertility symbol.

Euripides referred to the thyrsos a number of times in his play, not simply as a “wanton wand” or “ivy staff”, but also as a spear or javelin-like weapon.[\[229\]](#) These were not simply arbitrary references but, rather, instances of the ancient magical language of poetry:[\[230\]](#) they intentionally evoked well-known myths, for example, of Dionysos' battles against the Argives, the Amazons and the Indians - battles of consciousness in which his *spiritual* victory as “Liberator” over the tyranny of rational disbelief was inevitable and complete. In another important sense, this “weapon wreathed with ivy-shoots...” evoked Dionysos' identification with the spear-carrying Thracian sky god Sabazius, who attempted to dominate the cult of the ancient Phrygian Mistress and Mother, Kybele. In this connection, the significance of Epona's thyrsos - and the story of how she came to be holding it - forms a very important part of her larger story (see Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine).

**Scourge.** Perhaps the most unexpected symbol in Epona's artwork was the scourge - a whip with multiple “tails”. See page 199 for illustration - this extremely important illustration is discussed in detail in Chapter 8, below. On the surface it seems to stand in shocking contrast with the theme of kindness and gentleness so strongly associated with this “Good Goddess”. An emblem of authority, rulership and domination in ancient symbolism, the scourge was associated with lightning and was an attribute both of some storm gods and of the generic Great Mother “in her terrible aspect”. It was also specifically associated with Kybele, Selene, the Erinyes, Menat (Hathor), Osiris and Dionysos, and the Tauric Artemis.[\[231\]](#) These attributions each represented different perceptions concerning the function of the scourge. Historically rooted in the agricultural flail used to remove the outer husk of harvested wheat, its symbolism was deeply related to the fruitfulness of the earth and territorial sovereignty. Because of this, it could represent anything from fertility at one end of the spectrum to purification, protection from evil, and

punishment at the other.[\[232\]](#) Certainly a fitting symbol for a “Divine Queen”, in Epona's hands it was more than simply a regal emblem of sovereignty (see Chapter Eight).

Having taken a brief tour of the ancient world, and explored the ways in which its perceptions and beliefs were woven into the symbolism of Epona's artwork, we now have a foundation from which to see her in her broader historical and cross-cultural context. We will be drawing on this extensively in much of what follows, and the importance of these connections will become clearer as we build our picture of Epona in Part II and begin to see the outlines of her story emerging in Parts III and IV. It cannot be emphasized too highly here however that, although Epona was a Celtic goddess, both she and her story were profoundly influenced by the ancient world and the other cultures with which she interacted.

## PART II

# The Much-Loved Goddess

## CHAPTER THREE



# Lady of the Horse

In all the artwork of Epona explored in the last chapter, there is one constant feature. Whether she is mounted aside, astride or reclining on the back of a horse, or standing or seated between horses, Epona herself is always present in human form. But the coins and other artwork we have looked at were relatively late developments in Celtic culture: before the Roman conquest the Celts only rarely pictured their deities in human form.[\[233\]](#) The whole of Nature was sacred or supernatural to them and even when they deified certain features, the human form was no more representative of divinity than animals or objects.[\[234\]](#) It was only after Julius Caesar conquered Gaul in the last century BC that images of Epona can be definitively identified by accompanying inscriptions or distinctive traits.[\[235\]](#)

Celtic art flowered under Roman influence, yet it continued to express a “fertile religious conceptuality already in existence in the free Celtic phase”.[\[236\]](#) Although the Celts did not learn to ride horses, and thus did not make it the central animal of their society and culture until the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC,[\[237\]](#) it had been an important cult animal since the Bronze Age.[\[238\]](#) Even in her fully-developed human form therefore, Epona expressed Celtic religious ideas “whose roots may be traced... [to] the Urnfield period around 1200 BC”.[\[239\]](#) In theory then, she might have become a central and defining deity of Celtic culture from its earliest beginnings. But this was long before she was given human form, and the Celts did not definitively identify any known images of the horse itself as Epona - despite their use of inscriptions (in other languages and for other purposes) dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.[\[240\]](#) Nevertheless, among the Aedui tribe in Burgundy (France) images of a mare-and-foal alone were enough to identify Epona during the Roman period.[\[241\]](#) This may well have been a late survival of a much earlier idea - one that was already implicit in her name.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The name “Epona” was Gaulish in origin. Today it is often translated as “Great Mare” or “Divine Mare”: a fitting description given the mare-and-foal imagery and, as we shall see, one well-supported in a number of contexts. But the translation of Epona's name rests on ambiguity - and not simply because of the shift in the way Gaulish adjectives were used over time.[\[242\]](#) In Epona's case, for example, that shift may have reflected changing perceptions about how Nature and the divine are related - a fundamental consideration in interpreting the relationship between the three elements of her name: 'ep' (horse),[\[243\]](#) 'on' (the part usually translated as “great” or “divine”), and the feminine suffix 'a': literally, “horse - divine - female”. The common

translation sees “horse” as the noun qualified by the female gender (a mare), and “divine” as the adjective: thus a female horse that is divine. But in the context of Celtic religion, there is a very important sense in which “female divine” must have been understood as the qualified noun, and “horse” as the adjective.

## THE “FEMALE DIVINE”

The reverence for the Divine Feminine that the Celts inherited from their Stone and Bronze Age ancestors in the Danube River basin is supported by a large amount of mythological and archaeological evidence.[\[244\]](#) Not only were goddesses “fundamental to the belief systems of the ancient Celts”, but they dominated Celtic spirituality.[\[245\]](#) Irish and Welsh myth, for example, both preserve traditions of a Mother Goddess of immense antiquity, whose name (*Danu* or *Don*) has apparently also survived in the names of the Danube, Dniester, Dnieper, and Don rivers in Europe.[\[246\]](#) In her intimate connection with the earth “womb and tomb”, this archaic Mother goddess evidently embodied the fundamentally important themes of fertility, death, renewal and sovereignty.[\[247\]](#)

The importance of the “female divine” to the Celts can be seen, for example, in the 7<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> century BC “cult wagon” from Strettweg (Austria) - in the original heartland of Celtic language and culture. As the following drawing shows very clearly, the central goddess towers over the mounted horsemen and other warriors beneath her.[\[248\]](#) Over time, the primal Celtic “Mother-Monarch” came to be represented in other goddesses.[\[249\]](#) Unlike the local territorial goddesses however, Epona retained the broader significance - and the central importance to Celtic culture - of the archaic goddess we see reflected in the Strettweg wagon.



*Figure 15 Strettweg Cult Wagon.*

The inescapable conclusion in relation to Epona's name is that “divine female” was seen as the primary element. From this perspective the simplest translation would be “Horse Goddess”, with the gender of “horse” left unspecified and inclusive. This interpretation is well-supported in Epona's artwork. Not only is she linked with colts and stallions as well as fillies and mares, but in the bronze Wiltshire figurine we saw in Chapter Two she is flanked by both a male and a female horse - and this was not the only example.[\[250\]](#)

But it is also worth noting that translating the Gaulish *'on'* as “divine” misses much of its nuance. The term actually conveyed a cluster of qualities, including: sacred, holy and pure; fair and wise; and superior, high-born, aristocratic and noble.[\[251\]](#) If we take these qualities into account, a more elegant translation of Epona's name would be “Lady of the Horse”. The term “Lady” is fully supported by Epona's intimate association with bread and wheat (see 'Corn', Chapter Two).[\[252\]](#) Even today it conveys the elevated sense in which the horse-based Celtic aristocracy certainly saw their goddess. This perception was very clearly reflected in the Latin epithets used in inscriptions to Epona. These ranged from “Good”, “August” and “Auspicious” Goddess, to “Divine Queen” and “Powerful Mistress” - all implied in the connotations of the Gaulish *'on'*. Nevertheless, the plain and more down-to-earth “Horse-Goddess” had its own hidden magical qualities.

## HORSE GODDESS

The hidden dimensions of the term “Horse Goddess” come from the fact that it can have two very different meanings. Perhaps the more obvious of these is that it suggests a goddess *of* horses: the “Lady” concerned with their breeding, care and protection. The other evokes the “Divine Mare” - the idea that Epona and the horse were intimately mingled in each other's essence, or that the horse was her special way of manifesting in the world. This ambiguity is a recurring theme in Epona's story, not just in terms of her name or her portrayal as both “Mare” and “Woman”, but in terms of her fundamental identity.

As a goddess distinct from the horses she presided over, Epona was most characteristically the “Lady of the Horse”. When portrayed aside or astride her mount she was the divine Rider in her sovereign realm. Cast in the Anatolian Mistress-motif of the “imperial” images on the other hand, she was the fair and wise Mistress over her animals. In this sense of the term “Horse Goddess”, even the mare-and-foal images may have been ambiguous: conveying the Lady's association with the domestication, fertility and protection of horses and having a special concern with the craft of horse-

breeding.[253]

As Lady and Rider, Epona was more than just the protectress of horses. She also protected mounted Celtic warriors and the men of the Roman cavalry who adopted her.[254] An inscription to Epona from a riding instructor suggests that the Celtic “Lady of the Horse” also personified equestrian skill and mastery.[255] Since the Divine Feminine was fundamental to Celtic belief, and the horse was the central feature and most cherished emblem of Celtic aristocracy,[256] images of Epona as Rider evoked the highest ideals of Celtic culture. Not least of these was the effortless mastery of the primal energies of Nature, tamed and skillfully controlled in the harmonious union of horse and rider. This was something the men and women of the Celtic warrior-elite must have treasured and identified with intimately.

The perception of Epona as a goddess *of* horses however, was only the outermost layer of her nature. At a deeper level, her identity was blended with and expressed through the horse itself. This was implicit in the second, more mysterious and magical sense of the term “Horse Goddess”. In this sense, Epona was “so closely identifiable with [the horse] that her *persona* cannot be separated from that of the creature itself.”[257] This does not mean that the Celts worshipped horses, or believed that animals were deities *per se*. Rather, they held a profoundly pantheistic or animistic belief in the divine or magical “aliveness” of the natural world: animals embodied divine qualities in the same way the Mother Goddess was immanent in the land.[258]

Epona's identification *in essence* with the horse was a perfect example. Understood in this sense, “Horse Goddess” expresses both the nature and the behaviour of horses - not just individually or as a domesticated friend to “man”, but collectively and in the wild. In fact, it was the universality of “the herd” that gave Epona some of her most fundamental qualities. As mare-and-foal, for example, she would certainly have represented - *pars pro toto* - the entire herd: all horses everywhere.[259]

More specifically, the leader of a wild herd is usually an older mare who establishes and maintains her dominant role through attitudes that let the other horses know she expects to be obeyed - despite her smaller size and strength.[260] She not only leads the herd, but also determines the route taken when they move to a new location.[261] This provides the context and foundation for the Horse Goddess' special form of sovereignty and leadership. As we shall see, the sexual dominance of mares also plays a crucially important role in Epona's story. Unlike the Celts' perceptions of the “Lady of the Horse”, which seem to have been more related to domesticated horses, the idea of the “Divine Mare” was apparently rooted in their close observation of and experience with wild horses.

It is possible that Epona's essential identification with the horse was an example of “shape-shifting”. This was a common theme among the Celts, particularly in Irish mythology,[\[262\]](#) and there are several images that suggest shape-shifting in the earlier archaeological record.[\[263\]](#) But if the Gauls believed Epona was able to shift from horse to human form, that belief probably came later in her story. The coin images of naked female riders imply that they may have had at least a mental picture of Epona in human form by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. But Diodorus Siculus' comment, that the Gallic king Brennus laughed at the Greeks for “believing that gods have human form”, may be very telling.[\[264\]](#) The Strettweg wagon (above) shows that Brennus' views were not universally held among the Celts. But it was a rare example, and it is very likely that the horse was Epona's original and *only* form until after the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. This was just before the coin from Paeonia was minted,[\[265\]](#) and a number of factors suggest there was a significant event around that time which led to Epona's first epiphany in human form (Chapter Seven).

In a subtle but important way, the Horse Goddess did have a very intimate connection with “human-ness” - probably from the very beginning. This was almost achingly evident, for instance, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC inscription to *Eponina* (“dear little Epona”),[\[266\]](#) as though she were someone's much-loved daughter. But Epona's name itself already suggested this connection: pure, fair and wise were all noble human qualities, for example, and “high-born” is a characteristically human social attribute. There was nothing artificial or even particularly new about Epona's inherent link with “humanity”. Even if she was not given actual human form until later, the divine was as immanent in Celtic humanity as it was in the land and animals.

## MAGICAL ANDROGYNY

The ambiguity implicit in Epona's name (and integral to her identity) also included gender and sexuality. Beyond a simple association with horses of both sexes, the Horse Goddess was actually identified with stallions just as closely as with mares. In a mysterious or magical sense she was both male and female. This may be most obvious in her role as guardian and fierce protector - a role that belongs exclusively to the herd stallion in the wild,[\[267\]](#) and was easily transferred to the “Lady” where domesticated horses and their warrior-riders are concerned. Epona's masculine side was also implicit in the Celt's identification of the stallion with the sun (see Horse Symbolism, below), and there was a very specific and important instance in which her androgyny was also expressed through the male sexual role (see Chapter Nine).

This androgyny drew on an archaic thread in mythology dating back to

the earliest written account of Creation in ancient Sumer.[\[268\]](#) It surfaced again in the early Iron Age fusion of Greek and Phrygian religion in relation to the goddess Kybele-Agdistis,[\[269\]](#) and - judging from the Phrygian Mistress-motif in her imperial imagery - this became a crucially important element in Epona's developing story. But her androgyny was purely Celtic: a special example of the Celts' aversion to rigid definition in religious and artistic expression.[\[270\]](#)

It was this characteristic blurring of distinctions however, that made Epona's dynamics especially fascinating. There is no way around the conclusion, for example, that she was more identified with mares in *essence* than with stallions: there is no possible interpretation of her name that would allow us to translate it as "Divine Stallion". This means the dynamics of Epona's relationship with mares must have been perceived differently than her relationship with stallions. Whether as mounted Rider or seated Mistress, for instance, Lady and mare represented a continuum between the Feminine Divine and its physical embodiment. In some sense, she was both Lady and Mare at the same time. Significantly, this was exactly the kind of union-in-essence that occurred between goddess and priestess, for example, when the Irish priestess *Medb Lethderg* became "the Goddess Medb".[\[271\]](#)

Epona's relationship with the stallion implied a very different dynamic. As Divine Mare she was clearly dominant where stallions were concerned, and this too was easily transferred to the Lady as Rider and Mistress. Not only was this dominance characteristic of the Celts' most cherished domestic animal, but it was in full accord with the dominance of goddesses in Celtic religion and culture. Yet, whether she was feeding and caring for the horses and asses under her dominion, or riding them, Epona's superiority was never arrogant and her dominance never mean-spirited or "bossy". In the older images she rides without saddle or reins, her hand resting lightly on the horse's neck. Her power and authority emanate from deep within her in the same easy, natural way that light and warmth radiate from the sun. Whether seated or riding, she is the stillness at the centre of the motion expressed in and through the horse.

In a very strong sense, this dynamic must also have been true of her relationship with gods and men. This was abundantly clear, for instance, in the Irish story of the goddess *Áine* who considered *Ailill Aulom* unworthy to be king and bit off his ear, rendering him "blemished" and thus unfit to rule.[\[272\]](#) For the Celts, kingship depended on the goddess: even kings had to bow to her sovereignty in union with the land. It is especially intriguing that Epona's androgyny (guardianship, protectiveness, solar radiance and masculine virility) only emerged in and through *her union* with the stallion.

Not only did this imply an intrinsic balance in the interaction between



masculine and feminine, but it evoked an entirely different dimension of the union implied in Epona's androgyny: one also firmly rooted in the nature and behaviour of the horse. Despite the dominance of the lead mare, there are times when she surrenders to the advances of the herd stallion - not in mechanical response to his biological role in preserving the reproductive viability of the herd,[\[273\]](#) but in the sheer intensity of her attraction to his virility, strength and bravery. In a magical sense therefore, we could say that Epona's androgyny gave divine expression to the mystical union of Mare and Stallion.

As Horse Goddess, Epona personified a complex and profoundly nuanced set of dynamics between and among the polarities of Nature and the Divine, masculine and feminine, and dominance and submission or surrender. This complexity and nuance were intimately bound up with the very rich and multi-layered symbolism of the horse itself - the oldest layers of which dated back more than six thousand years to a time when wild horses were still hunted for food, and long before they were first domesticated and bred on the Eurasian steppes.

## HORSE SYMBOLISM

Horses had been a favourite subject of pre-Celtic and Celtic art since the Bronze Age.[\[274\]](#) They played a significant role in Celtic culture and myth generally, and had “continued dominance” in the religion of the Gauls.[\[275\]](#) Although Epona was the “Celtic horse-deity *par excellence*”,[\[276\]](#) and a number of male Celtic deities were associated with horses, to some extent its symbolism also functioned independently - especially when it appeared on its own in Celtic art.[\[277\]](#)

## IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

In the oldest and most universal layer of that symbolism the horse represented power, endurance and freedom.[\[278\]](#) Our Stone Age ancestors may well have hunted horses because they believed that eating horse meat (and organs) would give them the horse's power. After the horse was domesticated, this layer of symbolism remained since it brought a dramatic increase in power and freedom to human life. Quite apart from the advantages it gave in agriculture and warfare, for example, the horse also gave people an unprecedented freedom to travel.[\[279\]](#) All but forgotten now in our modern world, this freedom is still occasionally recalled in literature and film by the archetype of the “Lone Rider” and the mythos of the “Long Ride”.[\[280\]](#) But in the ancient world, the Bactrians in what is now Afghanistan (the only people who defeated Alexander the Great) immortalized this sense of freedom in the saying “the horse is the *wings* of the man”.[\[281\]](#) No doubt the Celts felt



the same way.

In its most ancient symbolism, the horse was a *chthonic* symbol (“of, or in the earth”),[\[282\]](#) deeply emblematic of the “womb and tomb” of the goddess and her wisdom. In Old Europe and the East, the crescent-shaped hoof-prints of the horse were associated with the goddess and the moon, and thought to cause springs of water to well up from underground.[\[283\]](#) More importantly, the horse was seen as a guide in and through the underworld realm of death. It was thus associated with magical powers of divination, and thought to know the mysteries hidden there.[\[284\]](#) Since these included the secrets of germination, the horse was associated with life, fertility and rebirth and came to symbolize sexuality, vitality, youth and strength.

This intimate link with the earth and underworld was also the source of the horse's ancient association with wind, thunder-storms and rain - all so crucial to germination and growth.[\[285\]](#) Free and uninhibited, these forces of Nature are awe-inspiringly beautiful. But the power embodied in a great storm can also be frightening and destructive. Like these natural forces, the wild horse came to symbolize uncontrolled power, passion, drives and desires. After it was tamed and trained to pull a cart or chariot however, the horse came to represent control over natural forces, instincts and desires. Once people learned to ride, the horse - especially when mounted - became a widely recognized symbol of mastery, superiority, aristocratic nobility and sovereignty.[\[286\]](#)

Drawing on the old goddess-centred worldview in which the sun was thought to be born from the womb of the earth each morning - or to have its home in the underworld, and emerged from there to travel across the sky,[\[287\]](#) horse and sun became intimately linked. In Greece, Persia, Babylon and India the horse came to be thought of as pulling the “chariot of the sun” across the sky. This was the origin of its symbolic connection with light and ‘illumination’. With the gradual encroachment of patriarchy during the Bronze Age, horses came to be associated with gods of thunder or lightning and the celestial realm (where the sun wheeled) was separated from the “sublunar realm” of earth and underworld.[\[288\]](#) After this, the horse's symbolism began to include intellect and reason - qualities that were rapidly coming to be seen as celestial, solar, and uniquely masculine. Among the Greeks these qualities were summed up in the god Apollo, whose sun chariot eventually came to overlay the older feminine imagery of the goddess (Selene) and her horse-drawn chariot of the moon.

Nevertheless, the symbolism of the horse did not abandon its old association with instinct and sexual passion. With the rise of patriarchy the stallion became such a potent symbol of masculine virility that, even now, we sometimes still speak of a well-endowed man as being “hung like a stallion”.

In this connection, naming Epona in inscriptions alluding to the cult of the emperor in Rome was very likely intended to support his “stallion-like” virility - a fundamental qualification for male rulership in the ancient world. This was ironic since Epona epitomized the older goddess-centred symbolism of the horse in ways no Roman goddess could possibly have done. Although it may have been due in part to her implicit androgyny, this in itself was a result of the way the Celts had adapted and summed-up the horse symbolism of the ancient world so richly and powerfully in their Horse Goddess.

## IN CELTIC CULTURE

Horses were especially precious to the Celts - a people for whom the enchanted “otherworld” melded so intimately with the natural world, and the horse was their most cherished domesticated and spirit-linked animal. At the basic level of ordinary life, the Celts revered the horse for the freedom, prestige and wealth it represented, for the advantage it gave them in warfare, and for the fertility and sexual vigour it embodied so powerfully.[\[289\]](#) These qualities were all immensely important to them. Their love of freedom, for instance, was one of their distinguishing characteristics - a fact strikingly illustrated in the freedom and exultation of the naked female riders astride their horses in Celtic coin imagery.[\[290\]](#) These images recalled the most ancient perceptions of the horse's raw power and uninhibited freedom in the wild. In this same basic sense, a Celtic warrior's prestige was due in large measure to his - or her - horse. While owning a horse was the hallmark of Celtic nobility however, the depth of the feelings they had for their horses was warmly summed-up in the story of the Gallic chief Vercingetorix, who loved his horses so much that he sent them away to protect them during the Roman siege of Alesia.[\[291\]](#)

In the same vein, giving was a tangible expression of abundance and a central feature of Celtic culture. The horse was a primary symbol of prosperity and wealth - the medium for the Celts' remarkable generosity.[\[292\]](#) But “wealth” also meant living large, drinking life to the full, and meeting death in the same way: even battle was a matter of Celtic largesse in its fullest sense, and fertility and sexual vigour were fundamental expressions of this same deep vitality and zest for life. The horse was the lynch-pin that brought these qualities and values together in a single composite symbol of all that the Celts considered good and noble - not just in their way of life but also in themselves as a people: it was thus a regal emblem.[\[293\]](#)

Beyond what the horse represented in these everyday ways, it also had a long history of magical and religious meaning in Celtic thought. The ancient goddess-centred symbolism of the horse can be seen, for instance, in Epona's association with ravens, dogs and graves, as well as in symbols of fertility and

abundance such as baskets of corn and fruit. We see it far more clearly in the key she holds to the secrets of the underworld, and her role as trusted companion and guide in death - if given its head (allowed to lead) the horse knows its way even in the darkest night. But for the Celts, the association of the horse with the “womb and tomb” of the goddess was not simply about germination and the renewal of life in Nature. For them this aspect of the horse's ancient symbolism included the journey to life beyond death - both in the otherworld, and in the renewal of life in reincarnation. As Julius Caesar put it: “The principal point of [the Celts'] doctrine is that the soul does not die and that after death it passes from one body into another...”[\[294\]](#)

## SOLAR SYMBOLISM

The most central religious significance of the horse among the Celts probably lay in its association with the sun - the most dominant feature of Celtic religious thought from the pre-Celtic Bronze Age right down to Roman times.[\[295\]](#) This solar association fit very closely with - and continued - the older symbolism of the horse in the ancient world (see above). Solar symbols such as the spoked-wheel or disc appeared frequently with horses in Celtic imagery for well over a thousand years.[\[296\]](#) In fact, they were so closely linked that the horse seems to have been virtually interchangeable with the wheel as a solar symbol in Celtic art.[\[297\]](#) This was well-illustrated, for instance, by the repeated pairing of horse and sun-disc or wheel on Celtic coins,[\[298\]](#) and this was probably the context in which rare images of Epona driving a horse-drawn wagon were understood.

Unlike their patriarchal neighbours to the east, the Celts also continued to associate the sun with the underworld - a fact demonstrated by the frequent presence of solar symbols in grave-sites.[\[299\]](#) In this connection it has been suggested that the Celtic sun-god possessed “an underworld role”,[\[300\]](#) and that these grave deposits may have been invocations to him both as a protector and “a light in dark places”.[\[301\]](#) Certainly, the presence of solar symbols on gravestones “would fit well with the idea of rebirth after death”.[\[302\]](#) Yet it is very significant that the Celts intimately associated the sun with fertility, abundance and healing: all of which were primarily earth- and goddess-related before the Roman period.[\[303\]](#) Even in Romano-Celtic art, sun-wheels appeared with horns of plenty and were included in images of Celtic mother-goddesses.[\[304\]](#) In one case, where a goddess and sky-god are shown side by side, it was the goddess who held the sun-wheel.[\[305\]](#)

Like the horse, solar symbols apparently functioned independently in Celtic art and perhaps - like Epona - the sun itself was seen as inherently androgynous. Nevertheless, its association with fertility and the feminine seem to have been primal. This was the obvious theme, for example, of the

nude Celtic “Venus” figurines with solar symbols placed on their breasts, abdomen and thighs or near their genitals.[\[306\]](#) But the sun's role in fertility was evident even in what might appear to us as the most ordinary of ways. In striking contrast with lands further east where the searing heat of the sun brought death to crops in high summer, its gentler warmth and light produced luxuriant crops in central and western Europe.

The Celts also associated both the horse and the sun very strongly with healing and water.[\[307\]](#) Their religious veneration was especially focused on springs that welled up from the underworld - like the waters (amniotic fluid) that burst from the womb before birth. The association of solar and equine symbolism with fertility and healing was particularly strong at hot- or mineral springs throughout the Celtic world. We see this, for example, in Epona's association with healing springs at Luxeuil-Les-Bains in north-eastern France, and even more emphatically at the hot-springs of Saulon la Chapelle and Allerey (Cote d’Or).[\[308\]](#)

It would be far too simplistic - and probably quite wrong - to say that Epona was a solar goddess because she was so essentially identified with the horse. A number of Celtic goddesses had “a solar dimension” however,[\[309\]](#) and it would certainly be fair to say that Epona's identification with the horse connected her more closely with the sun than any other Celtic goddess. Nevertheless, when the Celts first began to portray their solar deity in human form it was as a god - not a goddess. The earliest known example, dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, was the bearded figure holding a solar wheel in the panel from the Gundestrup Cauldron pictured below.[\[310\]](#) In this and later representations he was often accompanied by horses or mounted on horseback. But unlike Epona he was never essentially identified with the horse and his only invariable attribute was the solar wheel.

*Figure 16 The GundestrupCauldron.*



The relationship between the solar god and the Celtic Divine Feminine is perplexing. Although the majority of his imagery is undeniably masculine he could be shown seated and holding a cornucopia like the Celtic Mother goddesses,[\[311\]](#) and his link with fertility and healing was also expressed in his frequent association with sacred springs. This suggests that goddesses had a more primary association with the sun - or that the god came later and may have reflected a shift in Celtic religious beliefs, with an increasing emphasis placed on patriarchal dominance.[\[312\]](#)

By the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, the Gauls had been in close contact with the Greeks for at least three hundred years, had felt the lingering impact of the former Persian empire in Phrygia, and had come into close contact with Phoenician culture through their alliance with the Carthaginians against the Romans. Male gods were dominant among all these peoples, and the imagery of the Romano-Celtic period certainly reflected the influence of these more patriarchal cultures on portrayals of the Celtic sun god. This can be clearly seen in the similarity between the radiant halo sometimes given to the Romano-Celtic sun-god and the image of the Phoenician sun god *Malakbêl* below.[\[313\]](#)



*Figure 17 The Phoenician sun god Malakbêl*

While the influence of patriarchy on Romano-Celtic imagery cannot be denied, the central importance of the Divine Feminine among the Celts raises another possibility entirely. Even during the Roman period, it was common for Celtic goddesses to be paired in “marriage” with Romanized Celtic gods. [314] The fact that these goddesses retained their Celtic names (unlike the Romanized gods), and were sometimes portrayed separately from the gods they “married”, suggests that they continued to be seen - at least by the Celts - as independent and autonomous. [315] This would follow naturally from the free Celts' long-held belief in the sovereignty of their goddesses. From the perspective of the newly-subjugated Gauls and Britons therefore, it seems very likely that these divine marriages implied the goddess' conferral of her sovereignty on the Romanized gods. If this was indeed the case, then the Romano-Celtic sun god would have been no exception.

Rather than reflecting a shift toward patriarchy, the Celtic sun god was almost certainly seen as receiving his sovereignty from the goddess even from the very beginning - regardless of when he first began to figure in Celtic religious belief. This is practically guaranteed by the fact that the horse had functioned as a solar symbol among the Celts since the later Bronze Age. [316] The natural dominance of the mare underscored the Celts' long-held belief in the inherent sovereignty and natural dominance of the Divine Feminine.

At the same time, the intimate relationship between the Divine Feminine and masculinity in Celtic solar symbolism was also essential to fertility - the one quality most fundamental to the Celts' life and religion. Quite apart from sovereignty, the “marriage” - or union - of earth and sun was (and is) fundamental to life - and thus to abundance and prosperity, and to health and wholeness. This was almost certainly the underlying significance of the marriage between the native Gallic god Luxovios (meaning “light”) and the goddess Bricta, for instance, who presided over a local healing-spring shrine at Luxeuil-Les-Bains. [317] The fact that Epona and the Romano-Celtic solar-sky god Jupiter were also worshipped at Luxeuil implies a similar union on a more universal scale. [318]

Given the ancient sun-symbolism of the horse among the Celts, Epona's association with solar gods is hardly surprising. Apart from the Celtic Jupiter, who was depicted at Luxeuil on horseback carrying a solar wheel, [319] she was also implicitly connected with the Celtic Apollo - an unmistakable solar god whose Gaulish epithet *Atepomarus* meant “great horseman”. [320] Whatever the specific nature of her relationship with the native and Romano-Celtic sun-gods might have been (see Chapter Six), there is no question that -



as Horse Goddess - Epona's deep association with the sun was vital to understanding her in her entirety.

The solar dimension of Epona's significance cannot be separated from the other aspects of her identification with the horse. Both in the most ancient layers of its symbolism, and in how these were adapted and developed by the Celts, the horse embraced an extraordinarily complex range of contrasts. The most fundamental of these was the primordial axis rooted in the underworld and crowned by the sun - the pivotal theme in a symbolism that bridged the polarities of earth and sky, of light and dark, of life and death, and of feminine and masculine. But like Epona herself, these dichotomies in the horse's symbolism were not static. Nor were they merely symbolic opposites. By its very nature the horse implied movement between these extremes and, in this respect, it could be said that the essential quality at the heart of all horse-symbolism was its *liminality* - a quality intrinsic to both the Divine Mare and Lady of the Horse.

## A LIMINAL GODDESS

The word "liminal" came from the Latin *limen*, which meant "threshold" and implied movement from one state or place to another.[\[321\]](#) In the early 1900's, the term "liminal" began to be used to describe the middle-stage in rites of passage from a previous identity or status to a new one created through ritual.[\[322\]](#) In this often disorienting transitional stage, old hierarchies and structures are dissolved or reversed, allowing the awareness of a new order to take root.[\[323\]](#) Unlike the original Latin word, its modern use implies movement in one direction only. But, with this one caveat, its meaning captures the essence of the horse in its symbolic ability to cross the boundaries separating basic dimensions of human existence. The horses buried under the threshold of a Romano-Celtic shrine in Britain suggest that the Celts themselves were keenly aware of its inherent liminality.[\[324\]](#)

In effect, the ability to cross from one dimension to another erases the boundaries between them - or, more accurately, transforms them into portals or passageways to greater wholeness. In some sense therefore, liminality implies a larger whole or bigger picture embracing and transcending the boundaries that separate domains. In a spiritual or religious context we might expect the awareness of this "bigger picture" to be something all deities possessed. But there were very few gods or goddesses in the pantheons of the major pagan religions who were able to cross back and forth, say, between the celestial realm and the underworld. It was more common among the magical beings in Celtic mythology, but even so there were none whose nature and range of powers were as inherently and characteristically liminal as Epona's.

## HEALTH & WHOLENESS

The ability to cross back and forth between dimensions was fundamental to her being and power. In its broadest sense, her liminality comes close to the original meaning of health as “wholeness”.[\[325\]](#) In a very pragmatic way we can see liminality in the transition from illness to health that Epona's association with healing-springs implied.[\[326\]](#) Her presence at hot-springs was also a special reminder of her close connection with the sun, and thus with the wholeness of life itself: a characteristically Celtic picture of health, wealth and happiness would certainly have included the warm sun over ripening crops, and an abundance of food and ale on the table while horses grazed contentedly on lush green grass. The sun - and later, the earth as a sphere - also represented the “wholeness” that both included and transcended local tribal territorial boundaries: a symbolism implicit in the Horse Goddess and her sovereignty among tribes throughout all (or most) of the Celtic lands.

Liminality was also implicit in Epona's role as fertile Mother (Chapter Four), forming and giving birth to the “wholeness” of life, and providing the nourishing abundance that kept body and soul together. That abundance came from the underworld and Epona's liminality became explicit not only in her role as a mother-goddess, but as guide and companion on the underworld journey from life to death, and from death to new life in the germination and ripening of crops; in conception and birth; in “otherworld” feasting; and in rebirth and immortality - another type of wholeness. Apuleius' reference to Epona's roses was also significant in this connection, since this was the flower that brought about his transformation from ass to man - a transition to greater spiritual integration and wholeness through ritual initiation into the Mysteries of the goddess.[\[327\]](#)

## FREEDOM & SURRENDER

Liminality was also implicit in the contrast between Epona wild and free, and the more measured dignity and power of the sovereign Mistress. However, it was not simply that Epona could change from wild exuberance to a slower, calmer and more measured pace. This is normal behaviour even in wild horses and, as Divine Mare, she clearly embodied the freedom of the wild herds. Rather, Epona's liminality in this respect had more to do with the fact that she mediated the transition from freedom to domestication through taming and training. In doing so, she initiated a transformation to a new and higher kind of liberation in devoted submission to her as Lady and Mistress.

Once again, the implications were very different for mares than for stallions. The mare's inherent ability to embody the Divine Mare transcended any sense of separateness or duality between them. For a mare, the liminal phase of taming and training suggested a process of surrender in which her

devotion was evoked and transformed into direct participation in the transcendent freedom and sovereignty of the Lady. The Celtic coin images of the naked rider illustrate an inner experience of ecstasy in female empowerment - one entirely self-contained in the liberation of union between goddess and mare as a single being.

By contrast, there was an intrinsic duality between Epona and the stallion. The connotations of taking a stallion between her thighs, and of riding him hard to achieve union in ecstatic abandon, were subtly different than with a mare. Even in that union, the underlying duality remained: whether as Divine Mare or as Lady and Mistress, some degree of separation would always exist between Epona and her stallion. Because of this, the implications of being tamed and trained seem to have been expressed more definitively in the stallion. In a very strong and paradoxical sense, although his natural deference to mares would have translated easily into the liberation he would find in devoted submission, Epona's androgyny gave expression to his ferocity as a guardian and protector.

These aspects of Epona's liminality were clearly grounded in the daily reality of taming and training horses. But that they applied just as much to humans was suggested by Epona's scourge (see Chapter Two), both in her very strong connections with the Tauric Artemis (Chapter Eight), and with the training of heroes (Chapter Nine). The idea of submission and surrender to the goddess was inherent in the Celtic ideal of sacred kingship generally,[\[328\]](#) and specifically perhaps in an Irish kingship ritual recorded by Gerald of Wales in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (see Chapter 10). It was also implicit in Apuleius' mention of Epona's roses - explicitly in the context of spiritual transformation and liberation through submission and devotion (see above, and Chapter Nine).

## HUMAN & DIVINE

This brings us to a final and fundamental aspect of Epona's liminality: her ability to bridge the boundary between human and divine. Because the horse was so central to the Celts' way of life, and to their perception of their own highest and most noble qualities, the Horse Goddess brought divinity to the human heart. Epona's presence must have been felt in literally hundreds of ways every day - not just in riding horses or seeing, hearing and smelling them everywhere, but in grooming and caring for their daily needs. As Apuleius noted, there were little shrines to Epona in stables - not dusty and forgotten, but decorated daily with fresh roses.[\[329\]](#) Similarly, the small portable bronze or pipe-clay figurines of Epona found by archaeologists were probably placed in house-hold shrines and also tended daily.[\[330\]](#) This means she was present and participated actively in the day-to-day lives of the men

and women who loved her. No doubt she played a profoundly important role in nurturing their awareness of the magical otherworld they believed in so deeply.

There were also larger healing shrines and temples dedicated to Epona, like the reconstructed Gallo-Roman fanum (temple) at the Beaune Archaeodrome in the Côte d'Or department of Burgundy in eastern France. [331] During the Roman period these shrines were devoted to more complex religious observances including libations of wine, incense and animal sacrifice. [332] Although influenced by the Romans, these observances were almost certainly based on much older Celtic ritual practices devoted to Epona. It was in these rituals that her liminality would have unfolded in its most fully human-centred sense. Certainly this would have been the case in rituals of kingship and of initiation - both of which involved transition from a previous identity or status into a new awareness and position in the order of things.

The transition from prince to king was the paradigmatic case in point, and Epona's role as a sovereignty goddess links her directly with this central aspect of ancient Celtic culture. But the kingship rituals could not have taken place without the priestesses who embodied the goddess, and the priests who sacrificed the bulls, built and kept the sacred fires, chanted the sleep charm and dreamed the identity of the chosen prince in the *Tarbhfhess* ("bull sleep"). [333] Nor were these the only native Celtic rituals in which such men and women officiated (see e.g., Chapter Seven), and they would certainly have required training and initiation - despite the fact that their abilities and roles in this regard were both considered hereditary. [334] There is also a considerable body of indirect evidence that Epona was "borrowed" by the Greeks and became a central deity in their Mysteries (see Chapter Eight). This implies that her priestesses and priests were also involved - a fact supported by ancient authority. [335]

The idea that there was a parallel between Epona's horses and her priests and priestesses is not simply metaphorical. Invoking her in inscriptions alluding to the cult of the emperor in Rome, may not have suggested that he was personally "hung like a stallion". But there can be little doubt that Epona was petitioned in order to endow him with stallion-like virility - or to support, enhance and protect that virility. Similarly, the mare referred to in Gerald of Wales' account of the Irish kingship ritual (above) may well have been a priestess. Where the Horse Goddess was concerned, identifying the priestess as a "mare" in a sovereignty ritual was equivalent to identifying the princess-priestess Medb Lethderg as "the goddess Medb". Even if taken literally, Gerald's report provides an explicit historical basis for the intimate connection between goddess, horse and human.

Kingship was not the only example of ritual transformations in which

Celtic priestesses played the central role. Although the story of Étaíne transforming a man into a god occurs in a mythical context,[\[336\]](#) for instance, it reflected very real beliefs and practices. Among these, it illustrated three very important facts: that liminality lay at the heart of Celtic ritual; that ritual transformation had purposes other than kingship; and that the Goddess-as-woman was the mediator of ritual transformation in men. All of this was summed up in the symbolism of the horse and personified in Epona - not only in terms of the liminal underworld journey from life to death and rebirth, but in the transition from freedom in the “wild” state to “taming”, training and spiritual liberation through devotion and service to the goddess.

## EPONINA

“Dear little Epona”, as the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC inscription called her, thus embraced far more than meets the eye. As Horse Goddess she personified a rich and complex set of perceptions that not only unified Celtic life and religious thought, but that were fundamental to deeply-held beliefs throughout the ancient world. Even at her most ordinary, Epona expressed the inherent sovereignty and centrality of the ancient Divine Feminine - not just in her identification with the animal lynch-pin of Celtic culture, or in “holding the key” to the underworld secrets of fertility, but also in the solar warmth and radiance pervading the Celtic sky.

Epona was clearly understood, felt and cherished in the most personal of ways. As Divine Mare and Lady of the Horse she was profoundly significant not just to her own people, but also to the Romans and - apparently - to the Greeks as well. But we have only uncovered the surface layer of who she was in all her complexity. Much of that complexity revolved around the primordial axis of her liminality: the fundamental relationship between sun and earth. In the ordinary sunlit world, Epona provided a matrix that nurtured the nobility, freedom and generosity of a proud people. But the foundations of her liminality lay in the underworld: it was her “womb and tomb” that encompassed the inherent unity of life and death, and that “gave birth” to spiritual transformation. In these ways, as we shall see in the next chapter, Epona was a particularly powerful - and unique - expression of the Mother-goddess in its most ancient Celtic conception.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Mother, Maiden, Healer & Warrior

In the early 1950's, Epona was described as “a specialist mother presiding over Gaul's most important beast”.[\[337\]](#) This seemed to imply that her “motherhood” was specifically related to horse breeding, and even in this very restricted sense, there is no doubt she was tremendously important to the Celts. But much about Epona was still hidden in the 1950's, and had yet to be discovered by archaeologists. After a further forty-five years of study she was recognized as “primarily a kind of mother-goddess”.[\[338\]](#) Since mother-goddesses were profoundly important to the Celts, this new perspective had far-reaching implications. It meant not only that Epona's religious significance went far deeper than previously thought, but also that her range of concerns was vastly wider in scope than simply enhancing fertility in horses and protecting mares when they foaled.

As a Celtic mother goddess, Epona embraced a rich domain of religious belief that stretched back into the dim and distant past. This domain of the primordial Mother was reflected as much in the Mountain Mother of the Minoans and Phrygians, and in the Earth or Corn Mother of the Greeks, as in the tribal Mothers revered by the Celts during the Roman period. This was the archaic basis of Epona's parallels and connections, for instance, with Kybele and Demeter: a crucially important aspect of her larger story (Chapter Seven). The broader perspective on Epona had therefore opened up fruitful new vistas: not simply on her role and religious importance to the Celts themselves, but on the hidden significance of the goddess presented to us in the artwork, inscriptions and literature of the Roman period.

In this respect, the phrase “*primarily a kind of*” reflected more than just the professional caution of a respected archaeologist. It allowed for the ambiguity of Celtic religious perception in general, and was also particularly relevant to Epona. Although many of her qualities stemmed from the fact that she was “primarily” a mother-goddess, she also expressed some very uncharacteristic qualities. Even as “a kind of” mother-goddess, Epona was not typical and the ways in which she differed from other Celtic Mothers have never been fully explored before now.

## THE CELTIC MOTHERS

The cult of the mother-goddess was widespread among the Celts, throughout Europe as well as in Britain and Ireland.[\[339\]](#) Although there were differences in the ways they were represented in art and myth, the Celtic



Mothers all shared certain features that “establish their essential identity”. [340] Like most Celtic goddesses, they embraced a complex and often deeply contrasting range of roles [341] and were strongly associated with fertility and the reproductive cycle in nature (including animals and humans). [342] But unlike other goddesses, the Mothers were especially concerned with “procreation” - i.e., with fruitfulness, or “bringing forth” (offspring). [343]

This distinction was an important one. [344] Intimately related to the ability to conceive or germinate, fertility or reproductive viability is the sexual potential for fruitfulness: it is necessary for, and implied in, bringing forth offspring. But, in the same way that sex does not necessarily lead to giving birth, fertility is not procreation. Evidently the Celts inherited their intense preoccupation with fertility in all its forms from their Neolithic ancestors, [345] and it dominated their cult practices during the Iron Age. [346] But this focus on fertility was brought to its highest religious expression in the cult of the Mothers, where the central emphasis was on the “bringing forth” so essential to life. [347] The Mothers were portrayed seated and fully clothed in Romano-Celtic art, thus veiling their fertile female sexuality. [348] By contrast, their maternal concern with fecundity and well-being was reflected in their frequent association with sun, water and healing, [349] and emphasized by attributes such as baskets of fruit and loaves of bread; fish; cornucopiae (horns of plenty); patera; and children (sometimes breastfeeding) or young animals - all symbols (directly or indirectly) of “offspring” brought forth from the womb of motherhood in its widest sense. [350]

Fecundity (fertility and fruitfulness) was of immediate and pressing concern in the rural farming life of the Celts. [351] Their crops, herds and flocks, as well as wild game and fish, all depended on it. More than just a matter of basic survival, fecundity profoundly affected the quality of their day-to-day lives: the prosperity they enjoyed, or the hardship they had to endure. [352] To survive and prosper, their food sources had to thrive. For the Celts this depended on, and was fundamentally rooted in, the fertility and fruitfulness of the earth: the life-giving and life-sustaining “womb” of the primordial Mother.

In addition to fertility, fruitfulness and abundance (or hardship), the Mothers' identification with the earth-womb was also the basis of three other fundamental qualities: their “essentially territorial character”; [353] their sovereignty; [354] and their association with death and the underworld. [355] Unlike Romano-Celtic gods, for example, the names of the Mothers often referred to tribal lands, regions, or even whole Roman provinces. [356] Their sovereignty was thus implicit, even when not stated more emphatically as in Irish mythology. [357] The connection of the Mothers with death and the underworld can be seen in their frequent association with graves and



cemeteries,[\[358\]](#) and with ravens, dogs and serpents in their imagery.[\[359\]](#) Although superficially paradoxical, this death-underworld theme drew on a vital and ancient observation - one summed-up during the late 1<sup>st</sup> century AD in the idea that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; *but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*”[\[360\]](#)

## THE TRIPLE MOTHERS

In general, there were three main types of Celtic mother-goddesses. Some appeared alone in inscriptions or (more often) in artwork, or were paired with a Romano-Celtic god in divine couples.[\[361\]](#) By contrast, among the Santones of Aquitaine (e.g., at Saintes and Poitiers in western Gaul), mother-goddesses were portrayed in a double form.[\[362\]](#) But perhaps the most common type were the “Triple Mothers” portrayed in art and myth in groups of three, and referred to in Latin inscriptions as the *Deae Matres* (“goddess mothers”) or *Matronae* (“mothers”).[\[363\]](#)



*Figure 18 Triskele Stone at Bru na Boine.*

Triplicity was a common theme in ancient symbolism generally. Among the Greeks, for example, there were the three Fates and three Graces, the three original Muses, and Hekate Triformis.[\[364\]](#) But the Celts seem to have had a particular fondness for triplism from the earliest times.[\[365\]](#) The triple-spiral on the entrance stone of the Neolithic passage tomb at Brú na Bóinne (Newgrange) in Ireland pictured above illustrates a pattern that was widely used in later Celtic artwork.[\[366\]](#) An example was the triple-spiral beneath the horse and naked female rider on the Celtic coin from Paeonia (Chapter Two). Other examples of Celtic triplicity include the three Irish goddesses of the land (*Ériu*, *Banba* and *Fódla*), Étaíne's triple meeting with Ailill on the sacred Hill of Tara,[\[367\]](#) and the three dwarf-like figures (*Genii Cucullati*) that accompanied some single Mothers.[\[368\]](#)

Like an adjective or superlative that could be applied to many different things, triplism was a way of emphasizing importance. For the Celts, it indicated something that was especially - or most - sacred and magical. This was certainly true of the Mothers, and the idea of the triple mother-goddess probably existed among the Celts long before it was expressed artistically under Roman influence.[\[369\]](#) Nevertheless, triplism was not an essential part of their being: it was neither unique to the Mothers, nor was it always used in connection with them.



*Figure 19 The three Mothers of Vertault*

When triplicity was used in imagery of the Mothers, it served various purposes. In some cases the three goddesses and their attributes were all identical, and triplism simply emphasized their sanctity.[\[370\]](#) In other examples, the three Mothers all have different hairstyles, postures and attributes, as though each was thought of as a distinct individual expressing different maternal functions.[\[371\]](#) The Gallo-Roman relief-carving from the Vertault area of Burgundy shown in the photograph above was a good example.[\[372\]](#) Significantly, although the Mother on the left holds an infant wrapped in swaddling cloth (but not suckling), all three Mothers have one breast bared for nursing.

Perhaps the most interesting images of the Mothers however, were those depicting a difference in the age of the goddesses. In some of these, only youth and maturity were shown - not just in the double-Mother images favoured by the Santones, but also in imagery of the Triple Mothers.[\[373\]](#) It was an old distinction, probably reflecting the early division of the Celtic year into two main seasons: winter and summer.[\[374\]](#) The link between the seasons and the fertility of the land - and thus, the Mothers - was fundamental to the agriculturally-based lives of the Celts.[\[375\]](#) In other images, the Triple Mothers expressed the “three ages of womanhood” - old age, maturity and nubile youth.[\[376\]](#)

## THE YOUTHFUL MOTHER

When the youthful aspect of the Mothers was portrayed, it suggested the female fertility they shared with other Celtic goddesses. It was the artistic equivalent of using Greek, Latin or Germanic words to describe a young woman whose reproductive cycle had begun, and who was therefore “marriageable”: i.e., capable of “bringing forth offspring”. This was the meaning, for example, of the Latin word *nubilis* (“nubile”). In English we might use “maiden”. But this would only be correct in the oldest sense of the word: a Mother might be described as a “young, sexually inexperienced female”, for instance, but not as a virgin girl or “unmarried” (not sexually active) woman.[\[377\]](#) To be a Mother necessarily implied at least some sexual experience. Perhaps the best word-equivalent to Celtic images of the youthful Mother, was the Greek *nymphē* (or its Latin cognate, *nympha*) which referred to a divine (or semi-divine) being appearing in the form of a beautiful young woman - but also to a “bride or young wife”.[\[378\]](#)

The youthful Celtic Mother represented the fertile capacity to be actively and productively sexual. She was a “virgin” in the old and vitally important sense derived from the Latin *virga* and *vireo*, meaning a “young shoot” and “to be green and thrive”: ancient references to Mother Nature's fertility and

abundance.[379] In a very important sense, the youthful Mother embraced the significance of the Welsh cauldron of regeneration and plenty that could only be “heated” (activated or quickened) by the breath of nine - three times three - virgins.[380]

It would be a mistake, however, to confuse her virginity with “maidenhead”: the intact membrane (hymen) that partially covers and protects a girl's vagina until penetration. The youthful Mother represented the soul of all new beginnings, and thus embraced the wide domain of early female growth and development. Its earliest stages lay in the asexuality of the very young girl, and the first stirrings of her later sexual awakening. In these early stages, male penetration was irrelevant - even repugnant - to her self-exploration. But in due season, her self-exploration naturally and necessarily expanded to include the “forbidden fruit” of sex itself: spring is the time for planting seed in the fertile womb of earth.

No longer celibate (from Latin *caelebs*, “unmarried”, i.e., not having sex), the youthful Mother's virginity nevertheless concentrated her fertile potency and sexual intensity to a level that could be seen and felt. Contrary to popular belief, her sexual explorations did not dissipate or diminish the intensity and freshness of her fertility. On the contrary, its potency and purity were essential to her being: in her virginity she “belong[ed] to herself alone”, and she remained ever-fresh and virginal in the “unsullied and untrod-down” sovereignty of her Motherhood.[381]

The youthful Celtic Mother was the fertility of the land in its readiness to be planted and bring forth abundance. Like her mature mother-goddess self however, the young Romano-Celtic Mother was always depicted fully-clothed and her sexuality therefore veiled: her inherent fertile sexuality was entirely focused on fruitfulness and nurturing abundance. Even when one breast was bared it was intended to represent nursing, not sexuality - whether or not a baby was shown suckling or was even present in an image at all.[382]

## THE MATURE MOTHER

Significantly, in their early two-fold division of the year the Celts grouped spring with winter instead of with summer.[383] It was an optimistic view that saw the tomb of earth as the womb of new beginnings: the “maiden” as the “mother” of ripened abundance. Out of the first stirrings of fertile potential in the hidden depths of the winter earth, the awakening of spring gives birth to summer: the green shoots of maidenhood grow into the stable abundance of summer and autumn: the time of year for growth and ripening, and for harvesting and storing the bounty of life. This was the domain of the mature Mother, nurturing and protecting the prosperity she brought forth from her womb.

Just as the fresh green shoots of spring grow into the deeper-hued leaves of summer, the intensely erotic vitality of the youthful Mother matures into the established power of her older self. Crops grow and ripen, and young animals find firmness on their feet or wings as they too grow to maturity. But the older Celtic Mother was not all soft and sunlit days of honeyed warmth: death was also under her dominion. Crops, animals and humans alike must weather sudden summer storms and autumn hardships: the challenges that feed their growing strength. This too was - and is - a vital part of Mother Nature's nurturing discipline.

The theme of death drew nearer in the long autumn of the Mothers' womanhood, when the life-force begins its journey inward. The deeper wisdom of her far-seeing providence was reflected in the timing of the harvest, and deciding which livestock to keep for breeding and which to slaughter for the coming winter.[\[384\]](#) It was hardly necessary to portray the mature Mother with “lined cheeks, withered neck, and sunken eyes” as in the sculpture of the Triple Mothers from Nuits-Saint-Georges (Côte-d'Or) in Burgundy.[\[385\]](#) In her maturity she knows that the commotion of life clamouring so constantly for our attention has no substantial reality - that birth and death, youth and age, are merely a “glamour”: a spell she has woven into the deep stillness of all that is. Wizen features are merely part of the illusion, an outward symbol of life returning to its source deep within the earth.

In her wholeness, the Celtic Mother embraced each aspect of the Sacred Feminine in seamless unity. Although menarche and menopause are crucial turning points in female reproductive life, the goddess was not so easily divided. The different phases of her being blended imperceptibly into one another. It was only at the extremities, in youth and maturity, that the distinction becomes clear. But this too is an illusion, for each aspect implicitly contained the other. Only by returning to its source in the depth of the earth could the maiden-voyage of life begin anew. Like Parmenides' underworld Queen, the Celtic Mother was all and contained everything.[\[386\]](#)

## EPONA AS MOTHER

The idea that Epona was primarily a mother-goddess was true beyond all shadow of a doubt. Her symbolism fully embraced the themes of fertility, fruitfulness, death and the underworld that were so fundamental to the identity of the Celtic Mothers (Chapter Two). Inscriptions also tell us that she was often addressed in the same plural style as the Triple Mothers. The titles *Deae Eponae* (“Epona Goddesses”),[\[387\]](#) for example, or simply *Eponae* (the “Eponas”) were commonly used.[\[388\]](#) The fact that she was seen in the same way as the Triple Mothers was also made explicit in an image from

Hogondange in the Moselle department of the Lorraine, in which Epona was portrayed “exactly like the *Deae Matres*”.[389] The fact that she was associated with healing springs like those at Allerey and Luxeuil was another link with the Celtic Mothers.[390] Nevertheless, there were several significant ways in which Epona expressed divine motherhood differently than other Celtic Mothers. Three of these were particularly important.

Unlike so many of the Triple Mothers, Epona's name was not associated in inscriptions with a particular territory. This may have been partly due to the fact that she “traveled with” the cavalry units that were the main source of these inscriptions.[391] But the Mothers' connection with specific territories was also symbolized in Romano-Celtic artwork. They were almost invariably shown seated: a position that suggested being “situated” or “abiding”, as though emphasizing their identification with a particular “land-place”. In marked contrast with this however, Epona's inherent mobility was - by definition - far from “abiding” in just one place. Regardless of whether she was shown astride, aside or between her horses, her “seat” suggested that she encompassed an indefinitely wider territory than was usual among the Mothers. But, although she could roam freely across the land, she was no less an “Earth-Mother”. In a strong sense her universality connected her all the more closely with the primordial Mother of the Celts' Neolithic ancestors, and she was certainly always “grounded” and locally accessible. There can be no doubt, for example, that her presence was keenly felt at local shrines like the ones at Allerey or Luxeuil.

Another very significant difference between Epona and other Celtic Mothers was that her sovereignty was directly alluded to in virtually all her imagery, and was explicitly expressed in inscriptional epithets that referred to her as “Queen”. The only other Celtic goddesses for whom sovereignty was such a prominent theme were those in Irish myth. But even then, the reference was usually in the context of a sacred marriage to a specific king or god.[392] Divine couples were a common theme in Romano-Celtic art and, in some cases, their attributes suggested the Mother's sovereignty.[393] But, while Epona had liaisons with a number of gods and one or two goddesses (Chapter Five), she was never any god's consort or “wife” and her sovereignty was never left to guess-work.





*Figure 20 Epona at Allerey*

A third important way in which Epona differed most markedly from other Celtic mother-goddesses was her profound sexuality and its extraordinary unveiling in Romano-Celtic art (Chapter Two). It might be argued that this aspect of the Lady was quite separate from her identity as a Mother, and there is a very strong sense in which this was true - both in the fresco from Pompeii where she appears semi-nude with Isis (Chapters Six), and in the Allerey-relief shown again here.[\[394\]](#) At Allerey however, the presence of the mare and foal was an unambiguous reference to motherhood. Epona's presence in this context suggests the “Maiden” or nymph-like Celtic Mother - though her semi-nudity goes far beyond the bounds of the youthful Mothers' veiled sexuality.

## NYMPH-LIKE MAIDEN

The modern observation that Epona “appears like a nymph” at Allerey is highly significant.[\[395\]](#) No doubt the artist who carved the relief intended the comparison. Not only did it mirror the mural of Aphrodite in Pompeii (Chapter Two), but the same reclining posture and semi-nudity were used in the portrayal of a fertility goddess in Britain (she was also worshipped in north-west Spain and in southern Gaul).[\[396\]](#) The physical similarity was strikingly obvious in the stone relief pictured below.[\[397\]](#) More pointedly however, an inscription also referred specifically to this goddess as “the Nymph Coventina”.[\[398\]](#) The fact that both Epona and Coventina were associated with springs that welled up out of the ground also supported the identification of both goddesses as “nymphs” - the association of nymphs with water was well-known from classical (Graeco-Roman) mythology.[\[399\]](#)



*Figure 21 Coventina*

Epona's likeness to a nymph was so compelling that a respected archaeologist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century argued that the semi-nude figure riding to meet Isis in the Pompeii fresco was actually a Nereid (a sea nymph) - not Epona at all.[\[400\]](#) Although he was wrong (Chapter Six), his argument caused lingering doubt about the identity of the goddess in the fresco.[\[401\]](#)

The close similarity between the two can be seen in the Roman sculpture of a Nereid illustrated below.[\[402\]](#) Although not reclining, the sculpture shows very graphically just how nymph-like Epona could be. The Nereid sits semi-nude aside her “sea-horse” in almost exactly the same way Epona was depicted in the Pompeii fresco. Certainly, it was easy enough to confuse the two.



*Figure 22 The Nereid sculpture*

The nymph was a classical personification of fertile female sexuality *par excellence*. Greek nymphs combined “the forbidden allure of the virgin Artemis with the lust of the sexually aware Aphrodite”, but because they inhabited local caves, trees and springs they were more accessible than either of these goddesses.[\[403\]](#) This accessibility played a key role in their “habit of sexual relations with mortals”: interactions in which the nymph's supernatural power “balances or overwhelms the assumed superiority of the male, so that her desires are often central...”[\[404\]](#) Although compared with all the supernatural beings in the world's mythology and folklore, nymphs have been described as having “the greatest similarity” to Celtic water or tree spirits,[\[405\]](#) in terms of their interactions with men they also had much in common with the “fairy mistress” in Celtic myth.[\[406\]](#) Certainly, the nymph's peculiar combination of nubile female sexuality and local accessibility provided a well-established classical context for Romano-Celtic portrayals of a “nymph-like” Epona.

What is most interesting about the Allerey-relief in the present context however, is its complexity. Epona's nymph-like form highlighted the fertile female potential for new life: the virginal intensity and sexuality potency necessary for motherhood. But she herself was not the mother of the sleeping foal at the feet of the mare on which she reclines so alluringly. The image implies the transition between fertile potential and actual motherhood - one defined in humans and animals alike as pregnancy. From this perspective, the Allerey-relief was apparently a powerful and eloquent invocation of Epona for her protection during this “rite of passage” in a woman's life - and perhaps also in the lives of breeding mares and other domestic animals.

Pregnancy and childbirth were perilous events in the ancient world. In Rome, for example, one in every three pregnancies probably resulted in the child's death (33.3%) and as many as 2,500 women died during pregnancy or childbirth (or from post-partum complications) for every hundred thousand live births.[\[407\]](#) By today's standards, these figures were astronomically high. In the years between 2009 and 2013, for instance, infant deaths in Canada and the United Kingdom stood at only one percent, and there were only twelve maternal deaths per hundred thousand live births.[\[408\]](#) Among the Celts pregnancy must have been seen as a profoundly liminal stage in the movement from fertile potential to motherhood - one in which life and death were urgently interwoven, and the outcome was far from certain. These facts make the religious significance of the Allerey-relief all the more profound.

Curiously, the Celts do not seem to have associated pregnancy with their mother-goddesses - at least not during the Roman period. There was a

Neolithic mother-type figure with a “gravid belly and heavy breasts” found in a flint mine at Grimes Graves in England,[\[409\]](#) and there were at least two exceptions in later Welsh and Irish myth.[\[410\]](#) However, a search for academic papers devoted to pregnancy in Romano-Celtic mother-goddess imagery bore no results, and a survey of Romano-Celtic artwork itself revealed no unambiguous imagery of pregnant Mothers.[\[411\]](#) Some Mothers were depicted with a rounded belly,[\[412\]](#) but this may have symbolized well-nourished abundance rather than pregnancy. In the Vertault relief (above), for instance, one of the mothers has a rounded belly but all three have a breast bared for suckling - a strong indication that they have already given birth. At Alesia where all three Mothers have rounded bellies, although the eldest does not have a bared breast, each holds a cornucopia and is accompanied by an infant or toddler.

Taken together with the sad statistics mentioned above, these facts seem to suggest that the Celts saw motherhood as the *successful* bringing forth and nurturing of new life: that although conception, gestation and birth itself were necessary, a woman only became an actual “mother” after her baby was safely born. In its wholeness the Allerey-relief seemed to imply that Epona embraced the full spectrum - from fertile potential and youthful female sexuality, through the dangerous liminality between conception and birth, to successful fruition in actual motherhood: the sleeping foal at the mare's feet. Paraphrasing Wordsworth, she was the youthful 'Mother of mothers':[\[413\]](#) in a very strong sense, she “gave birth” to motherhood itself. Like the universality of her relationship to territory (above), this too implied a deep identity with the primordial Mother.

As both an extraordinarily nymph-like “Maiden Mother”, and an unequivocally sovereign mature Mother of the unbounded and fruitful earth, Epona was thoroughly unique among Celtic mother-goddesses. This exceptional Celtic union of Maiden and Mother was the basis of a very robust and profoundly significant parallel between Epona and the *Demeters* - that intimate association of the “Two Goddesses” Demeter and Persephone that was so central to the Greeks' most sacred Mysteries.[\[414\]](#) This was a parallel that came to play a crucially important role in Epona's larger story (Chapter Eight), and it may be significant in this connection that pigs were sacrificed to her just as they were to the *Demeters*.[\[415\]](#)

## EPONA AS HEALER

Like other Celtic Mothers, Epona was associated with health and healing. Health must have seemed an obvious expression of the Mothers' fruitful abundance, and healing was a natural extension of their nurturing and protecting roles. In a literal sense, the healing of injuries often involves

visible tissue regeneration, and when well-being is restored after the ordeal of illness we tend to feel “reborn”. These personal experiences of healing must have seemed semi-miraculous to the Celts, and they were paralleled in Nature by the renewal of life that takes place each year in the womb of the earth. Even today we recognize that “spring is a sort of resurrection...with the land coming back to life after lying dead and bare during the winter months.”[\[416\]](#) At its most profound, healing offered a glimpse into the immortality and reincarnation at the heart of Celtic religion - the most precious jewels of the Mothers' hidden treasure.

In Epona's case, her association with healing was particularly strong in connection with water and she was worshipped at a number of healing-spring shrines in Gaul.[\[417\]](#) The most exceptional examples were the healing hot springs at Allerey and Saulon-la-Chapelle in Burgundy - at both of which she appeared nude (or semi-nude) like a *nymph*.[\[418\]](#) Although it has been said that Epona “*often* appears nude...” at thermal springs,[\[419\]](#) this seems to have been based on a misconception. But even if it had been true, it was extraordinary for a Celtic Mother to appear as a nymph. The fact that she did lent special importance to these shrines, and certainly added to the significance of the Allerey-relief.

Among the Celts, water was a powerful fertility symbol in its own right and the religious significance of sacred springs, wells, lakes and rivers in Gaul and Britain centred on their regenerative properties.[\[420\]](#) This was particularly true of hot springs like those at Allerey, which were strongly associated with both the sun and the underworld. The movement of the heated waters welling up and spreading out was mirrored in the Allerey-relief by the flowing motion of the mare - as though the horse was being deliberately identified with these hot underworld waters. Although the effect is subtle, it hinted that the relief was intended to magically focus and intensify the fertile regenerative power of the healing spring. Epona's nymph-like presence at Allerey (and at Saulon-la-Chapelle) may have been a historic example of something like the mythical Welsh cauldron of regeneration: her sexual potency as a nubile nymph viewed as heating the waters to their full healing potential.

As a Mother, Epona's unparalleled blend of sexuality and virginal intensity fit this theme of regeneration perfectly. The symbolism was strengthened by the classical association of nymphs with water, and by the special connection of horses - and female breasts - with both sexual fertility and the healing properties of the sun. Taken together, the combined symbolism seems to suggest that, in addition to protecting women during pregnancy at Allerey, Epona was called on both there and at Saulon-la-Chapelle to restore fertility and heal sexual dysfunction - probably in men as



well as women.

If these were the only reasons for her nymph-like appearance however, it is perplexing that Epona was not portrayed in the same or a similar way at other hot-springs in Gaul. The only other known place where she appeared as a nymph was with Isis in the fresco at Pompeii in southern Italy. Although the symbolism of the fresco suggests she was pictured this way for other reasons entirely,[\[421\]](#) there may have been some connection with the public baths in Pompeii which were also heated by a hot spring.[\[422\]](#) But the classical association of nymphs with water, and Epona's very strong connection with healing springs, were not enough to explain why she only appeared as a nymph at these two particular thermal springs in Gaul.

## HEALING DREAMS

Each healing spring seems to have been associated with its own particular brand of illness. At Mavilly in Burgundy the main affliction was probably eye problems, for example, and at Vichy in the Auvergne both eye-problems and spinal defects were represented.[\[423\]](#) Similarly, at Allerey and Saulon-la-Chapelle the main concerns were apparently pregnancy, fertility and sexual dysfunction. But there may have been another main focus at Allerey. In a general way, the foal pictured there with Epona probably symbolized the regeneration that can be found in sleep, and it may well have suggested the “...changes in hormone levels [that] bring on a feast of dreams...” during pregnancy.[\[424\]](#) More specifically, in keeping with the theme of transition from maiden to mother, the sleeping foal almost certainly represented the “incubation” phase after giving birth - what later came to be called a woman's “lying in” period.[\[425\]](#) This is all the more likely in view of the Latin root-word *cubare*, which meant “to recline” - precisely the position in which Epona was portrayed.[\[426\]](#)

At a deeper level, the sleeping foal beneath a reclining Epona suggested ritual incubation: the ancient practice in which a sacrificial offering was followed by sleeping in a sacred place in order to receive a divinely-inspired healing dream.[\[427\]](#) Ritual incubation originated with the Greeks, who associated it with the god Apollo and (later) with his semi-divine son Asklepios.[\[428\]](#) The practice became widespread in other cultures that came into contact with the Greeks. The Romans, for example, were probably introduced to it in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC when they conquered the Campania region of southern Italy. Apparently the Greek inhabitants of Phocaea in Ionia had brought it with them in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC when they colonized Velia (modern Ascea), about 120 km (75 miles) south-east of Pompeii.[\[429\]](#)

Given the Celts' earlier contacts with the Greeks, they may have adopted incubation before the Romans. Either way, there were several places in Gaul

that were evidently associated with this healing practice by the Roman period. Inscriptions link it with a temple at Grand in the Vosges Mountains and with a Roman spa at Bourbon-Lancy in Burgundy, and the porticoes of a large shrine also suggest that incubation was practised at Alesia.[\[430\]](#) Each of these sites were directly or indirectly associated with the Celtic Apollo - a blend of the Greek (and Roman) god with native Celtic gods such as Belenos or Grannus. Apparently the most important healing-spring god in all of Gaul, [\[431\]](#) this Celtic Apollo was much like his classical counterpart in that he was closely linked with sacred springs, healing and the sun.[\[432\]](#) He was also so strongly associated with horses that he was sometimes referred to as Apollo *Atepomarus*: the “great horseman”.[\[433\]](#)

Significantly, although he had a number of divine “female partners” who seem to have given him the necessary link to the land,[\[434\]](#) the Celtic Apollo was accompanied at Grand by Sirona and at Alesia by Damona:[\[435\]](#) both of whom were native fertility and healing goddesses.[\[436\]](#) This is important here for several reasons. For one thing, in addition to being polyamorous, both goddesses were often worshipped independently - a fact that was particularly relevant at Bourbon-Lancy, where Damona appeared alone and was explicitly linked with incubation.[\[437\]](#) Also important is the fact that although Sirona was usually depicted fully clothed, she appeared semi-nude at Mâlain (Côte-d'Or).[\[438\]](#) This fertility parallel with Epona became more directly relevant at Ste-Fontaine de Freyming (Moselle), where the two goddesses were both associated with the Celtic Apollo.[\[439\]](#)

There was no direct connection with the Celtic Apollo at Allerey, and no inscriptions referring to incubation. Nevertheless, like a sign outside a modern clinic or doctor's office, the relief carving of a reclining Epona and sleeping foal was a very strong indicator that incubation was practised there. In this connection it is significant that there was an important sacred grove, spring and temple dedicated to Apollo at Autun just 30 km (18.6 miles) south of Allerey.[\[440\]](#) This was the heart of Aedui territory, a Gallic tribe that had been known as “brothers” (*fratres*) of the Romans since before Caesar's conquest of Gaul.[\[441\]](#) The emperor Augustus had built Autun for them as their Roman *civitas* or capital. But with a population of somewhere between thirty and fifty thousand,[\[442\]](#) the city would have been crowded and noisy. The hot-spring at Allerey may therefore have become a quiet and secluded sanctuary for ritual incubation in connection with the cult of Apollo at Autun.

Whether or not this was the case, Epona certainly had much in common with the Celtic Apollo. In addition to the sun, sacred springs, horses and healing, they were also both associated with ravens - the bird best known for “giving voice to the utterances of the divine”.[\[443\]](#) This is exactly what the healing dreams of incubation were supposed to be, and Epona must have been

no stranger to ritual dreaming in her own right. As a sovereignty goddess, for example, her domain would have included the tarbhfhess ritual in which druid-seers dreamed the identity of a new king.[\[444\]](#) Like incubation, it too involved sacrifice and sleep. Dream divination was a common practice among ancient peoples - especially (but not only) in connection with leadership,[\[445\]](#) and the Celts may well have adapted it for healing purposes before their introduction to incubation.

Epona's identification with the horse made her the ideal source and focus for healing dreams that emerged - like the hot-springs themselves - from the fruitful underworld home of the sun. Hot-springs were traditionally seen by the Greeks as connected with - or as portals to - the underworld,[\[446\]](#) and as emblematic of Persephone's (water) union with Hades (fire).[\[447\]](#) No doubt the Celts felt much the same. These were places where the veil between the divine and human worlds was very thin, and Epona's nymph-like sexuality and accessibility at Allerey were crucially important ingredients in the healing she offered. Here, it was not just that people could access the underworld, but that the goddess could directly touch and heal an individual person. The Allerey-relief expressed Epona's invitation to "recline" - to lay and sleep with her like the foal in the "intercourse" of holy communion: a healing dream in which she touched the mind of the dreamer personally.

## DEATH & WAR

We have already seen that the Celtic Mothers were characteristically associated with death and the underworld.[\[448\]](#) This was natural enough: the primordial Mother was both womb and tomb to all expressions of the life-force in Nature, and just as the earth "gives birth" to all life so she receives it back into herself in death. In this regard, Epona was no different than other Celtic mother goddesses - as was evident in her own association with graves and burial grounds.[\[449\]](#) But the Mothers' "very direct associations with warfare" were much more perplexing.[\[450\]](#) There are numerous ways to die that have nothing to do with war, for instance, and many a warrior has survived the battlefield only to die in old age from natural causes. But it has often been pointed out that mother-goddesses in general were both creative and destructive.[\[451\]](#) This certainly fits with the link between the Mothers and death - which, by definition, is destructive. But warfare introduces an element of intentionality, a deliberate destructiveness very different from the simple inevitability of death.

This willful destructiveness has been attributed to the mother goddess' protection of her people and lands.[\[452\]](#) From this perspective, the Mothers' association with war can be seen as a function of their territorial sovereignty - a view that seems to have a solid foundation in Irish mythology, where their

link with warfare was overt and explicit.[453] In Gaul however, the Mothers were apparently more concerned with fecundity. Usually their association with war must be inferred from their territorial nature, from their implicit sovereignty, and from the gods they were sometimes paired with in Romano-Celtic art and inscriptions. The dogs that often accompanied them also had a “guardian” function that may have been symbolic in relation to protecting their people and lands.[454]

In keeping with this view, although the word “territory” is usually derived from the Latin *terra* (“earth” or “land”) and *-orium* (“place”), an alternative theory draws its derivation from *terrere* (“to frighten”).[455] This suggests a place from which people are warned away, and fits with the idea of the mother-goddess defending the prosperity of her “land-place” and the safety of those under her care and protection. Not only is it natural and common to mark territory and warn off aggressors or competitors (and to fight them when necessary), but a human or animal mother's ferocity in protecting her loved ones is proverbial. This is a characteristic that could easily have been transferred to a protective mother-goddess.

This behaviour is typically defensive however, and only provoked when a threat is perceived. The Celts were defending their sovereign lands, for instance, when the Romans invaded Gaul and Britain. But war can also be offensive rather than defensive, and the Celts were certainly no strangers to this fact. This was the case, for example, in the Gauls’ sack of Rome in 390 BC;[456] in their invasion of Macedonia and Thrace in 281 BC and their penetration into the heart of Greece shortly afterwards; in their many mercenary engagements, and their military domination of Phrygia.[457] Offensive warfare was also a common theme in Irish mythology, and both the figure of the *Mórríghna*[458] and the story of the Connachta war on the Ulaid are good examples.[459] Thus, while maternal territorial protectiveness may go part-way to explaining why the Celtic Mothers were associated with war, it cannot be the whole story.

Warfare requires warriors however, and *vice versa*. This was a fact of supreme importance to a warrior-based culture like that of the Celts. In contrast to the modern view in which the Mothers were “associated” with warfare, the Celts themselves almost certainly personified war in the same way they personified the land: as Mother. War conceived, formed and shaped - and thus “gave birth” to and nurtured - the Celtic warrior whose life and death were devoted to her. Any farmer could fight to defend family, crops and livestock. But a farmer was no match for the trained warrior inured to pain and hardship: someone not only strong enough to wield weapons, but skilled in their use; not just brave enough to die, but with the stamina, quick reflexes and cunning needed to win battles and live. To the farmer, the aristocratic

Celtic warrior must have seemed a semi-divine son or daughter of the tribal Mother - an awe-inspiring expression of her protectiveness.

For the warrior, on the other hand, battle was about far more than simple protection. Certainly, the inviolable sovereignty of Mother-land-and-tribe must have been a central and overriding concern. But war was also a fertile mother-like source of abundance. Among the material “spoils of war”, for example, the prize might include cattle, slaves or increased territory. Even more fundamentally, the fruitful bounty provided by war included the glory at the heart of the warrior ethos. For the Celtic warrior, prestige was earned on the battlefield and war was always a heroic undertaking - regardless of its defensive or offensive nature. Since it inevitably bordered on the realm of death, battle was the ultimate measure of heroic “mettle”: whether they lived or died, the Celtic warrior's integrity and honour lay squarely in the domain of the Mothers.

## A WARRIOR'S TRAINING

We saw above that hardship and prosperity were fundamental aspects of the Mothers' fecundity. The tendency today however, is to think that the Celts tried to avoid hardship and “appease and propitiate the forces who imposed the cycle of life and death”.[\[460\]](#) But while they certainly celebrated the Mothers' fruitfulness and plenty, the Celts were a hardy people and probably valued hardship and pain as well: these were as much a part of the Celtic lifestyle as breast-milk and the summer sun on ripening grain. Indeed, the warm pleasures and prosperity summed-up in the “fat of the land” were a direct result of the harsh autumnal storms and cold of winter. Hardship, pain and death formed the “cauldron” from which regeneration and abundance were born.

There was a profound wisdom in accepting and living with hardship, and the changing balance between it and prosperity was a kind of discipline imposed by Nature - one that kept the Celts strong and vigorous instead of soft and lazy. By contrast, in the training of a warrior the Mothers' discipline became focused and rigorous: hardship and pain were balanced against the prosperity and prestige that could be won on the battlefield. A glimpse of the connection between the two can perhaps be seen in the story of the Irish hero Cú Chulainn. Near the end of his warrior training under the goddess (and mother) Scáthach, he was granted the “friendship of her thighs”.[\[461\]](#)

In many ways the training of a Celtic warrior was probably much like that of the commando, seal or special forces military-elite today. This was certainly true in terms of learning to endure hardship and pain. But unlike the modern soldier, Celtic warriors were “bred” from birth by family and culture. They would have begun learning to use a sword and javelin as children

playing with sticks, and were no doubt skilled at using a sling while still very young. More importantly, as members of the aristocracy they learned a moral code based on integrity, fairness, generosity and courage. Even the warrior's status as a hero was inherently spiritual in a moral compass implicitly centred on the sovereignty of the goddess-mother. This was very clear, for instance, in the ancient Irish concept of *fir flatha*: the prince's "truth" or integrity.[462]

The prince or king was the highest social embodiment of the Celtic warrior, and his moral integrity and "marriage" to the goddess can confidently be taken as the exemplary ethical model at the heart of Celtic culture. The ordeal that proved his integrity formed a significant part of the Irish kingship rituals, and although later corrupted by Christian bias and misunderstanding there was an account of it in the 12<sup>th</sup> century *Scél na fír flatha*: "story of the ordeals of sovereignty".[463] Called "waiting at an altar" in the account, it was a painful ordeal that involved moving nine times around an altar - almost certainly in a circle formed by priestesses using a scourge (see further, Chapter Eight). This was not the only element of the ordeal, but in this respect it was probably indicative of the Celtic warrior's training in general. It is very likely that this was the context in which Epona's scourge was understood.

## “BATTLE GODDESS”

We have already seen that Epona was an exceptional mother-goddess. In Gaul, at least, this was no less true of her association with war. At Rom (Deux-Sevres) in western France, for instance, she was explicitly referred to as *Catona*: "battle goddess".[464] But she was not a "war goddess" *per se*. Unlike the Morrigan in Irish mythology or the Greek goddess Enyo, for example, we never see Epona inciting violence or lashing her warriors into battle-frenzy with a bloody scourge. On the contrary, her imagery is filled with symbols of peace, prosperity and gentle nurturing kindness. Epona's association with battle was a particularly significant reminder of war as a source of abundance, and that the pain and hardship of life - and of war - could not be separated from the moral, social and material bounty of battle. Even her scourge conveyed calm authority, discipline and mastery: it represented both the ordeal and the ideal of the Celtic warrior's training and life.

Unlike any other Celtic goddess, whether of fertility or of fruitfulness, Epona held a unique place at the centre of Celtic culture and daily life. As Horse Goddess, she was intimately invested in the life and death, the ethos and the cosmology of its warrior-elite. Outwardly, her domain stretched from the sun above to the underworld below the wide green earth on which she and the warrior roamed together, proud and free. Inwardly, it lay firmly in the warrior's heart. Quite apart from the long physical and moral discipline of



training from childhood, or the glory that could be won on the battlefield, the warrior's relationship with Epona was immediate and personal: cultivated on a daily basis in caring for and riding a horse. Whether in times of peace or riding into battle, we can imagine she was never far from the warrior's mind - and she would be there as both guide and companion on the final ride to the underworld in death.

Epona's association with battle was inevitable, but not simply because of the mother-goddess' implicit territorial sovereignty or because she was so closely identified with the animal at the heart of the Celtic warrior ethos. Her connection with battle also had other connotations and older roots. At a very deep level, it was an expression of the fundamental link between intense female sexuality and mortal danger - of the fact that males will fight in their competing desire for female sexual favours. This was a theme often expressed in ancient art, and a good example was the Assyrian cylinder seal showing Ishtar (a goddess of love and war) with one foot planted on the back of a lion, holding her war-bow and arrows while two buck-goats fight nearby.[\[465\]](#) In this ancient context, Epona's association with battle strongly implied her own very intense sexuality. In her case however, eroticism was an incentive to heroic excellence rather than to violence *per se*.

This was clear in her very strong association with the ancient eastern and Phrygian theme of the Mistress of Animals (Chapter Two). Although she inherited the intense sexuality of the older Mistresses and goddesses of love and war, Epona was portrayed with horses rather than the traditional predatory animals implicitly linked with violent death.[\[466\]](#) Together with her horses, the imperial imagery of the Mistress suggested taming and training: a necessary prelude to the effortless mastery of rider-and-horse acting as one. This was essential to the victorious warrior-hero on the battlefield, whose highest skills and ideals were enshrined in the image of the sovereign Lady of the Horse. Simply put, instead of provoking violent strife, her eroticism incited the warrior to strive for the highest spiritual, moral and social accomplishment.

In the context of her importance to a horse-based warrior aristocracy, Epona was apparently the Celtic “battle goddess” *par excellence*. This was true in terms of training and discipline, integrity and heroic excellence, and the abundance that battle could bring. The fact that her explicit association with battle had a deep and ancient underlying connection with the open intensity of her sexuality is very significant. Quite apart from how unusual this was in a Gallic mother-goddess, it meant that battle was the bridge between the nymph-like Maiden, the fruitful Mother and the Mistress of Animals. Most importantly, this extraordinary combination of qualities and roles transformed the warrior and thus the nature of war itself. Quite simply,

in nurturing and shaping their core values, Epona was the mother of a people and culture as much as she was the fertile land and fruitful source of abundance in their lives.



## CHAPTER FIVE

# Sovereign in Earth & Sky

Very few people today have a significant personal relationship with sovereignty, and most might find the meaning of the word a little hazy. That haziness increases almost exponentially when we read that it “is possible that Epona was, *in some sense*, a goddess of sovereignty, of territory and the tribe”.[\[467\]](#) But the archaeological evidence for her sovereignty actually seems very clear and unambiguous. Not only is her imagery filled with symbolic allusions to sovereignty (Chapter Two), but we have also seen that inscriptions explicitly refer to her as “Queen”. The reasons for such academically cautious language therefore seem to be due to the fact Epona's sovereignty, and its differences from that of other Celtic Mothers, have never been fully explored. Perhaps a goddess *of* sovereignty was somehow different than actually being sovereign. Whatever the case, a sound exploration of Epona's sovereignty should probably begin with an understanding of what the word actually meant to the Celts.

## THE NATURE OF SOVEREIGNTY

According to the dictionary, sovereignty is “supreme and independent political authority” and the “dominion, rule or authority of a sovereign” - someone who is “superior to all others” in “power, rank or authority”.[\[468\]](#) Although this is clear enough, it is rather uninspiring and hard to relate to Epona. But a modern discussion viewed sovereignty as “supreme authority within a territory”.[\[469\]](#) This detail would certainly have been relevant to the Celts, and the accompanying observation - that sovereignty has an “internal” and an “external” aspect - closely mirrors the idea that among the Celts sovereignty involved “the guardianship of tribal boundaries and the keeping of peace within them...”[\[470\]](#) The same discussion also made several other points that seem relevant to Celtic culture, and add depth in terms of understanding what sovereignty meant to them.

The first of these was that the “holder of sovereignty” derives his or her authority from a “mutually acknowledged source of legitimacy”.[\[471\]](#) For the Celts, the holder of sovereignty was a king or, in some cases, a queen like Boudica of the Iceni or Cartimandua of the Brigantes.[\[472\]](#) The source of legitimacy for the sovereignty they held was a goddess - usually a local territorial or tribal goddess, but sometimes one whose territory was thought of in a larger non-local way (e.g., Don or Danu). This legitimizing source was clearly what is meant by a “goddess *of* sovereignty”. Yet sovereignty itself was also considered inherently feminine.[\[473\]](#) In a very evocative sense the “sovereignty” a king held in his sacred marriage to the land was the goddess herself. Far more importantly however, the Celtic goddess of sovereignty was

in fact *sovereign* - not just the “legitimizing source” of kingship. That her sovereign power and authority were “superior” to that of the king was abundantly clear from the fact that he could only “hold her” with her permission and approval - and that she could also depose him if she chose to, for example, because the land became barren under his rule.[474]

The dynamics must have been subtly different for a Celtic queen. In much the same way that a priestess embodied and was identified with the goddess (Chapter One), queens like Boudica and Cartimandua may have been seen as possessing implicit sovereignty. The belief in an inherent connection between the goddess and women's sovereignty may have been inherited from the matrilinear goddess-based and female-centred culture of their Neolithic ancestors,[475] and was clearly reflected in the fundamental emphasis on female fertility and fruitfulness in Celtic religion.[476] In this respect, “female sovereignty is particularly fascinating because of its dynamism and complexity...the nature of the goddess embraced not only guardianship of the land, but also promiscuous sexuality... physical force and death...”[477] Two examples of this were the power of the semi-mythical Connachta queen Medb,[478] and the profound respect classical authors accorded to Celtic women on the battlefield.[479] The close “kinship” between the goddess and women may also have been the basis for the exceptionally high position women held in Celtic culture.[480]

In this light, it is especially intriguing that the Celts placed sovereignty in the hands of kings. It could not have been due to the influence of patriarchy, since kings were so clearly thought of as consorts of the goddess: they came and went, but she remained ever the “supreme and independent authority”, superior to all others “in power, rank and authority” (see above). Celtic kingship was an arrangement that placed the highest value on the hidden power and authority of the feminine while fully embracing, nurturing - and controlling - the characteristic male focus on the external world of physical action and feats of heroism. At its heart, kingship was a matter of fertility and fecundation. The goddess only took the best and most worthy men into her bed,[481] and in “holding” her in his sacred marriage to the land the king's essential integrity and strength suffused her with all she needed to become “fruitful”. In return, he was allowed to act in an executive role under the legitimizing superiority of his sovereign goddess - and, almost certainly, under the wise and watchful guidance of Celtic women.

## SOVEREIGN POWER & AUTHORITY

In its simplest form, power is the ability to act, to influence or to produce. [482] This is something we all have to some degree. Simply being alive, for instance, implies the power to breathe, to eat and to love. But sovereign

power goes much further since it is based on supreme authority: the *right* not just to act, but to command and to make final decisions. Most significantly, supreme authority includes “the right to command and... *to be obeyed*”,[\[483\]](#) and in principle this makes a sovereign the final arbiter of justice with the absolute power of life and death. Both the concept of sovereignty itself, and its expression in Celtic culture implied submission - recognizing, accepting and yielding to a sovereign's supreme authority and superior power.[\[484\]](#)

These days the word “submission” tends to have negative connotations, and historically it often had brutal implications. A vivid example, for instance, was Vercingetorix's humiliating submission to Caesar when the Gauls' surrendered at Alesia.[\[485\]](#) In itself, the act was simply a formal recognition of Rome's newly established sovereignty over Celtic Gaul. But holding him captive for the next five years, and then brutally strangling him as a public spectacle, was intended to glorify Caesar's absolute power of life and death, and to show the consequences of the Gauls' failure to recognize Rome's dominance. Even among the Celts themselves, death was the ultimate penalty for transgressions against sovereignty. In Irish myth, for instance, this was the implication of the Mórrígan's decision to destroy Cú Chulainn for his failure to “recognize” her and yield to her sexual advances - it was an implicit rejection of her sovereignty.[\[486\]](#) The power of life and death was also held historically by Scottish highland chiefs until the early modern period.[\[487\]](#) A Cameron clansman, for instance, was shot on the spot by his chief in 1745 for killing a sheep - evidently because the man had not asked permission.[\[488\]](#)

Nevertheless, submission does not mean subjugation.[\[489\]](#) Nor does supreme authority necessarily depend on using fear, brutality or the threat of harm to compel obedience. There were none of these negative implications, for instance, in Epona's sovereignty - and no sign in her imagery of the resentment that fear-based coercive power inevitably breeds in those on the receiving end. Ironically, she even won the hearts and minds of the Romans without bloodshed or brutality. Epona's sovereignty was consistently and profoundly beneficent, inspiring instinctive loyalty and obedience: the submission it implied was subtle, and it cultivated strength of character rather than drawing on or benefiting from weakness.

Even so, the power of life and death lay at the heart of all sovereignty - not simply internally, but also in the defense of territorial boundaries against external threats and in expansion into new territories. This was a very real and compelling issue in the ancient world generally, and certainly relevant in the warrior-based tribal culture of the Celts. Although they shared the same basic language and beliefs, they were divided into roughly three hundred fiercely independent tribes or tribal confederations.[\[490\]](#) Each of these tribes had their own land and territorial Goddess whose sovereign authority within the tribe's

territorial boundaries was inviolable. Yet inter-tribal raids and feuds were common, and there was a constantly growing need for new tribal territory. This was certainly a context in which battle and death were not only a constant theme, but also intimately associated with the sovereignty of the mother-goddess: the transgression of tribal boundaries was as much an insult to the goddess as Cú Chulainn's arrogant rejection of the Mórrígan's sexual advances, or of a clansman killing sheep without his chief's permission.

## BEYOND TERRITORY

Sovereign authority also extended beyond the boundaries of Celtic tribal territories. The late Sir Iain Moncreiffe wrote, for example, that by “ancient custom” a chief's influence “extended not only to the younger branches of his [clan] who had acquired territories of their own elsewhere...but to individual members of the clan who had settled outside clan territory...”[\[491\]](#) The source of this ancient custom lay in a goddess whose sovereignty embraced *a people* bound by ties of kinship, tribe and religion - not just by the land on which they lived and died. Irish mythology provides a clear example in the Túatha Dé Dannan - the tribe or people of the goddess Danu, who arrived in Ireland led by their king.[\[492\]](#) Both their name and the kingship they brought with them suggest that they had identified with Danu's sovereignty as a people long before they established territorial lands in their new home. This same identification of sovereignty with a people rather than a territory was also historically evident in mediaeval Scotland, where kings or queens were styled “of Picts” or “of Scots” rather than “of Scotland”. Even today, Mary Stuart is still far better known as “Queen of Scots” than as Mary, I of Scotland.

The ancient identification of the goddess with her people must have existed from a very early time among the Celts. Although their culture certainly spread by diffusion, the need for new territory must have been the driving force behind Celtic migrations from their original homelands near the source of the Danube. Identifying their sovereignty Goddess with themselves rather than with a particular territory would certainly have facilitated the transition from one “land-place” to another. Nevertheless, the idea that the authority structure of a “wandering tribe [was]... *completely disassociated* with a particular piece of land” misses the mark entirely.[\[493\]](#) Quite apart from the Celt's deeply pantheistic or animistic belief in the divine or magical aliveness of the natural world,[\[494\]](#) the marriage to “the land” so necessary to kingship was fundamental to the fertility and abundance that lay at the heart of their notion of sovereignty. In a “wandering tribe” we are probably seeing a more transcendent view of the goddess - one in which she was *universally* immanent in the earth as well as in people and animals. Personifying her in the features of the local landscape and establishing new territorial boundaries

was simply a way of making a particular “land-place” their home.

This dual aspect of female sovereignty can be seen very clearly in Irish myth. While the Goddess Ériu was the “spirit or essence of Ireland” as a whole, for example, other goddesses such as Áine or Medb held more localized tribal sovereignty. In either case, this involved far more than simply the personification of the land: the goddess was responsible not only for the fertility and abundance of the earth, but also for the prosperity and well-being of her people. This required the wisdom of foresight and good management, and was implicitly bound up with the ancient perception of sovereignty as *feminine* - i.e., with the qualities and complexity of womanhood conceived of as both essential and divine.[\[495\]](#)

## DIVINE QUEEN

Epona's sovereignty was constantly alluded to in her artwork. Whether sitting aside her mount or between her horses in the “imperial” images, or carrying an orb or scourge, we are left in no doubt about her sovereignty. This was made explicit in inscriptions when she was referred to, for instance, as *Eponae Reginae* (“Epona Queens”) in the plural style of the Triple Mothers.[\[496\]](#) Her imagery also eloquently expressed the firm but loving nature of her power and authority, and the instinctive love and obedience that it elicited. This too was evident in the inscriptions dedicated to her and, together with her wide-spread popularity, it shows that it was not simply horses that responded to Epona in this way.



*Figure 23 Epona Macedonian relief*

Significantly, there was no saddle or bridle depicted in the older images of the Lady aside or astride her horse - nothing that equestrians of the time normally used to control or direct their horses. This was a common feature even in otherwise sophisticated and detailed artwork, and it is particularly noteworthy in imagery depicting Epona aside a horse - the most common way of portraying her in Gaul. Riding “side-saddle” means the rider cannot use their thighs and knees to keep their seat and guide their mount. The implication is that Epona's power and authority emanated from her being, and that her horse was responding to her directly: no intermediate or external means of control were needed. In many images, she was shown with one hand placed lightly on the animal's head or neck. But this was clearly more a gesture of love and reassurance than a means of controlling the horse. Even where reins are pictured, as in the Pompeii fresco for instance, she does not use them and there is never any sense in these images that she was “holding on”. The impression conveyed is that horse is a living expression of Epona's will in action. She directs and guides it by thought alone, and the horse seems eager to fulfil her wishes.

Much the same is true of the “imperial” images, such as the 4<sup>th</sup> century relief from Macedonia pictured on the previous page.[\[497\]](#) Epona sits on a throne (or stool) as sovereign Mistress, and the power and authority she emanates seem to evoke genuine loyalty: the horses appear devoted to her, and their obedience is clearly willing. There is no hint of punishment and death such as we might expect from the Mórrígan, for example, and no trace of the “cruel, jealous [and] capricious” power of the Connachta Queen, Medb.[\[498\]](#)

On the contrary, although the themes of life and death run rich in the symbolism of Epona's imagery, her sovereignty as both Lady and Mistress is matched and complemented by the adoration, willing submission and devoted service of her horses. Unlike the Mórrígan or Queen Medb, her power and authority depended on the subtle feminine magic of attraction and love. This clearly had a strong sexual foundation. Epona's horses are often shown nibbling from her lap or her feminine basket of abundance, and it is significant that the two horses in the foreground of the Macedonian relief above are both stallions. But in her Lady and Mistress imagery, Epona's nymph-like eroticism was sublimated or raised to a higher spiritual level of attraction. In this imagery she is fully clothed, and it is the magic of love that attracts and binds her horses in devotion to her and supplies the abundance by which she rewards their obedience. In the same vein, Epona's power of life and death was also transformed. Rather than causing death (or inciting violence), she becomes the rider's guide and companion on the final journey into the underworld, and to ride with her carried the implicit promise of



regeneration and immortality.

There is no doubt that Epona's sovereign power and authority also extended to people. The artistic themes of sovereignty, her scourge and orb, and the title "Queen" would be inexplicable if this were not so. The horse was emblematic of the Celts' most cherished values, and the Horse Goddess was clearly not just an "August" (exalted, majestic) queen of horses.[\[499\]](#) Her artwork, and the terminology used in inscriptions to her, both expressed an intimate sovereignty-relationship with her people. Referring to her as *Eponae Reginae* was a reminder of her status as a Triple Mother,[\[500\]](#) and thus an explicit recognition of her sovereignty in a human context: the Mothers were central to the intimately connected Celtic concepts of fertility, fruitfulness and sovereignty.

What is not immediately clear however, is the extent to which people - and men in particular - responded with the same willing submission and service we see in the horses that accompany Epona. Because we tend to think of submission today as weakness, the idea of a proud Celtic warrior giving his submission willingly seems dissonant and unlikely. Cú Chulainn's arrogant reply to the Mórrígan, that "[i]t wasn't for a woman's backside I took on this ordeal!", seems far more likely.[\[501\]](#) Yet this may have been due to a fundamental difference between Epona and the Mórrígan, whose immediate decision to destroy the hero came from her indignant outrage. But Epona's implicit skill and finesse in taming and training wild stallions suggests that she would have taken a very different approach to Cú Chulainn, both initially and in response to his resistance.

In this respect it is significant that Epona was so popular with the cavalrymen of the Roman legions,[\[502\]](#) many of whom were drawn from the highest ranks of the Gallic warrior-elite.[\[503\]](#) Not only did these Celtic warriors introduce their Roman counterparts to Epona, but she became a favourite alternative to the exclusively male military cult of Mithras.[\[504\]](#) These facts speak volumes about men's feelings for Epona, and even if this does not tell us anything specific about the quality of their devotion, it was certainly a far cry from Cú Chulainn's reaction to the Mórrígan. There is also evidence from Dacia, in northern Thrace, that Epona may have been at the centre of what is known today as the "Danubian Horsemen" cult. This is relevant in the present context because the imagery of the cult typically shows the goddess sitting in the imperial style of the Mistress, flanked not just by horses but by two mounted horsemen who are facing and saluting her.[\[505\]](#)

The imagery is particularly interesting since it was in her role as Mistress of Animals that Epona was most implicitly connected with taming and training. The extent to which her horses symbolized the same transition into "domesticated" submission and service in men was reflected in the deference

of the mounted horsemen to their goddess. In this connection, it also seems significant that three priestesses at a central altar (a triple image of the embodied goddess) are attended by naked young male supplicants, while clothed men work nearby. This strongly suggests the kind of male training that might lead to the goddess-centred devotion we see in the mounted horsemen (see further, Chapter Eight).

That devotion was key to the submission and obedience at the core of all sovereignty, and it is extremely significant in this regard that the Celts saw sovereignty as feminine. A warrior's devotion to a "Queen" who was Horse Goddess, Mother, Mistress, Warrior and nymph-like Lover, as well as a friend on the final journey, was bound to be intense and wholehearted. Certainly, his loyalty and allegiance to a king or war-chief admired for his strength and prowess on the battlefield would have been of an entirely different order. But if both men embraced Epona's sovereignty, along with many thousands of brothers and sisters in arms equally devoted to her, we can begin to see something of the tremendous unifying power Epona's sovereignty may have held at its core.

## A QUESTION OF TERRITORY

Epona's identification with the horse reminds us constantly that she lived at the vibrant centre of Celtic culture and personified its most cherished values. By her very nature, she was sovereign in the hearts and minds of her people. Unlike other Mothers, her "seat" was not stationary and her sovereignty was not bound to a particular tribe or local territory: she travelled with the "wandering tribes", just as she rode into battle with their warriors. This does not mean that she, above all others, was *the* Celtic sovereignty goddess. But there was certainly a very strong sense in which Epona's sovereignty - and her relationship with "the land" - transcended tribal divisions and local territorial boundaries.

This becomes very clear in the map on the next page.[\[506\]](#) It shows the location of just a few of the Epona images and inscriptions that have been found all across Europe and Britain - from the shores of the Black Sea in the east to near the Irish Sea in the west, and from the Netherlands in the north, to Algeria in the south.[\[507\]](#) There are also reasons for thinking she may have been known and worshipped in Ireland and Wales (Chapter Ten),[\[508\]](#) as well as in Turkey (Chapter Seven). This very wide distribution was certainly due in part to her popularity with the Roman legions.[\[509\]](#) But the absence of images or inscriptions in the Middle East suggests that the legions were not entirely responsible for spreading her worship. We saw that Romano-Celtic art and inscriptions reflected a pre-existing "conceptuality" where Epona was concerned,[\[510\]](#) and the fact that the Gauls had introduced Epona into the

legions indicates how important she already was in their eyes. To a very considerable degree the distribution we see in this map can - with good reason - be thought of as representing Epona's native "territory".

Figure 24 Epona's Territory.



It was not a territory bounded by the natural features of a local or regional landscape, or by an ocean, like the territories of other Celtic sovereignty goddesses. In fact, the most distinctive feature of Epona's 'territory' was that it was *unbounded* - capable of embracing any and all the lands in which the “wandering” Celtic tribes might find themselves and settle down. This was another quality Epona shared with the primordial Mother. But in Epona's case, this quality was directly related to her identification with the horse and its cherished place and central role in Celtic culture. This identification made her the vital spiritual link among the tribes. In the strongest possible sense, she was the sovereign female emblem of Celtic culture as a unified whole - representing both its characteristic love of freedom and independence, and its fundamental rootedness in earth and nature.

In this light, Epona might justifiably be called *the* pan-Celtic goddess. Yet there is absolutely no sense that her sovereignty overshadowed that of other goddesses in more local or regional territories. Rather, despite her obvious connection to the fertility and fruitfulness of the earth, her sovereignty seemed to function separately - often in parallel with that of other more local goddesses, both generally and at specific shrines such as at Luxieul, but at another level entirely.

## A BRIEF LOOK AT ORIGINS

Despite her widespread association with Celtic lands, the fact that she was “primarily” a Mother raises the question whether there was a particular place where Epona was most “at home”. She must have originated somewhere, and it seems natural to think she might have been more strongly associated with that place than anywhere else. If we were to take her artwork and inscriptions as an indication, for instance, their greatest concentration lay in the area shown on the map above by the circle with diagonal lines - in the eastern part of what Caesar called “Celtic Gaul”, which we know today as eastern France.[\[511\]](#) She was pictured on nearly three-hundred stone monuments alone in Gaul,[\[512\]](#) not to mention other forms of artwork such as pipe-clay figurines,[\[513\]](#) metal-covered wooden statuettes,[\[514\]](#) embossed metal plaques and bronze sculptures.[\[515\]](#)

This huge concentration of archaeological evidence might lead us to think that Epona's homeland was in Gaul itself. We might even imagine that she was the *Gallic* sovereignty goddess in the same way that Ériu was sovereign over Ireland, or that Brigit (or Brigid) was sovereign among the Tuatha Dé Danann.[\[516\]](#) But it was only in later years during the Roman period that this density of artwork and inscriptions developed in Gaul.[\[517\]](#) The earliest evidence for Epona actually came from Aquitaine and - oddly enough - from

Pompeii in Italy.[\[518\]](#) Before these were discovered however, early artwork and inscriptions from what is now Romania and Bulgaria led one scholar to propose that Epona was introduced into Gaul from the east.[\[519\]](#) It was an interesting idea, and one that would help explain the Anatolian Mistress theme that was so common in Epona's artwork outside Gaul. But because there was contemporary (and earlier) evidence from northern and western France and Italy the idea never caught on.

More recently it has been suggested that Epona first emerged as a “fusion Celtic-Germanic-Roman goddess” after Caesar conquered Gaul.[\[520\]](#) But this completely ignores the fact that (apart from the Mistress theme) Epona's nature was utterly Celtic. There was nothing Roman about her other than the artistic style in which she was portrayed, and presumably the supposed “Germanic” influence would have come from the Treveri - a *Celtic* tribe whose territory spanned the border of what is now Germany and northern France. But we have already seen that the Treveri portrayals of Epona astride her horse were almost certainly derived from coin images of naked female riders dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (Chapter Two).

The assumption that Epona did not exist before the Roman conquest because there is a lack of definitive archaeological evidence is also naive. If images of a mare and foal could represent her to the Aedui during the Roman period, then an actual mare and foal were the living epiphany of the Horse Goddess from whatever point in time she was first conceived. Quite apart from the Celts' well-established aversion to portraying deity in human form (and recording their religious beliefs in writing), they did not need images of a goddess who was so patently present and so centrally important in their daily lives. That she first arose in the Gallic mind is certain - but when that happened, and whether it was in Gaul or further east, still remains to be seen (Chapter Seven). Nevertheless, the sheer volume of later archaeological evidence from Gaul does require an explanation, and brings us back to the subject of Epona's sovereignty.

If we look more closely at the density of artwork and inscriptions in Gaul, we can see that it clusters around the two main centres shown on the map on the next page:[\[521\]](#) the lands of the Aedui, Arverni and neighbouring tribes, primarily in Burgundy and the Auvergne; and the Treveri lands in the Moselle department of the Lorraine. The larger of these two clusters was the one centred in Burgundy, and it was there that many of the older Epona images and inscriptions have been found. The most common of these images were formal “side-saddle” depictions of her sovereignty. This was in contrast to the smaller and slightly later cluster among the Treveri, where the rare but favourite type of image showed Epona astride her horse. The distribution of Epona finds within the Burgundy cluster seems to radiate outward from

Alesia (modern Alise-Sainte-Reine) in the Côte-d'Or department. Significantly, this was where the Gauls made their last stand against the Roman legions in 52 BC, and where the Roman conquest became complete with the surrender of Vercingetorix - the Arverni chief who united and led the Gallic tribes against Caesar. In the wake of his conquest, Caesar left for Rome with his legions.



*Figure 25 Epona's Distribution in Gaul.*



Life in Gaul probably returned more or less to normal after that, but the Gauls were now a subjugated people, and the fact that Caesar kept Vercingetorix prisoner for six long years before publically executing him must have saddened and angered them deeply. Nostalgic memories of their freedom would have kept these feelings smouldering, and there must have been many times over the next three hundred years when their anger was provoked and feelings ran especially high. The situation finally came to a climax in 260 AD, when the Gauls' revolted and formed the "Gallic Empire". [522] During this entire period, Epona would have been a powerful reminder of their former freedom. In the tribal lands around Alesia in particular, she would have been a heartfelt and eloquent anthem to the deep Celtic sense of female sovereignty rooted in the earth beneath the feet of Rome's dominance. It makes sense that the most popular images in these lands were those of Epona formally expressing - emphasizing - her sovereignty in her seat aside her horse.

By contrast, the Treveri preference for images of Epona riding astride her horse seemed to emphasise independence - and perhaps a more pointed opposition to Roman domination. This certainly seems to be the message conveyed in the Treveri relief-carving from the (modern) Contern Commune, Luxembourg. [523] Epona's right fist is raised in a way strongly reminiscent of Queen Boudicca in Britain, of whom it was said that she marshaled her warriors against the Romans "with her fists and her friendly thighs". [524] Ironically, it seems that the Roman artistic style was being used to express the indomitability of the Treveri in the face of their Roman oppressors - a much more aggressive expression of native Celtic sovereignty than images of Epona aside her horse.

In all likelihood, the flowering of Epona's artwork in Gaul between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD was a response to the widely-felt need of the Gallic tribes to reassert their sovereignty - whether aggressively or in more subtle and peaceful ways. But that response could *only* draw on an already established belief in Epona's sovereignty. The fact that she could be portrayed with such well-defined characteristics shows that she had lived in the Gallic mind for long enough to have matured before Celtic artists adopted the Roman style. The original "idea" - or conceptual nucleus - of the Horse Goddess probably took centuries to develop the qualities that eventually came to define her nature in Romano-Celtic art. But regardless of when and where she first "appeared", Epona's sovereignty clearly embraced the Celts as a people (or culture) and she was "at home" wherever she was invoked in any or all of their lands.

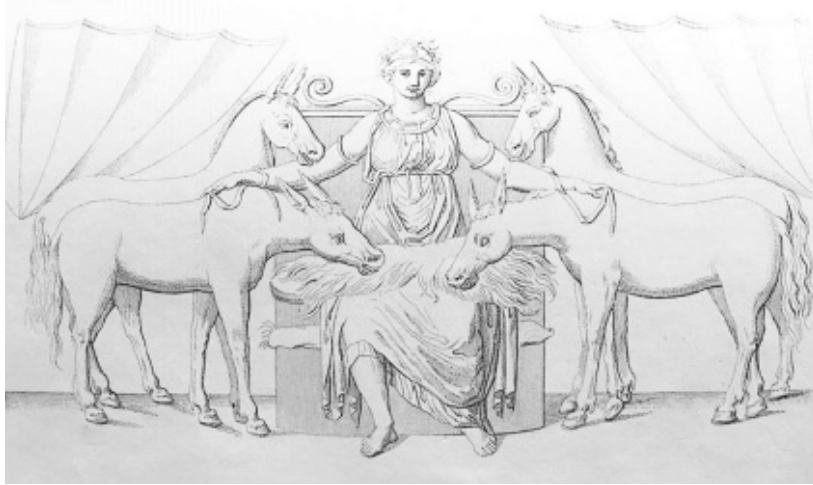
## QUEEN OF HEAVEN

Celtic culture, and the fertility and fruitfulness of the earth, were not the only areas in which Epona's sovereignty held dominion, however. As Horse Goddess, she was also intimately connected with the sun - and not only among the Celts. A curious remark by Prudentius, a Christian writer seeking to discredit Epona in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, asserted that “[n]obody enthrones the goddesses Cloacina or Epona above the stars...”[\[525\]](#) Since Cloacina was the Roman Goddess of sewers, he probably included her as a way of evoking disgust. But even the fact that Epona was often thought of as a goddess of stables would have made the idea of enthroning her “above the stars” seem ridiculous. It is curious however, that Prudentius chose that particular way to ridicule her. No doubt he intended his reference to a throne and stars as an indirect comparison with the Christian God on his throne in heaven. But Prudentius was a highly educated man, and his comparison would have lacked any real teeth if no one had associated her with such an elevated position.

## IN ROME

As it turns out, there was a painting of Epona that once adorned the walls of the Circus Maximus - the grand stadium in Rome where chariot races and other forms of public entertainment were held. The painting was reproduced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century engraving shown above,[\[526\]](#) and Prudentius would have been familiar with the original since he served in Rome at the request of the emperor Theodosius I.[\[527\]](#) What is most interesting about this painting is that Epona was in fact seated on a throne - not the simple stool we would expect to find in a lowly stable. The curtains and effulgent light behind her were also far more reminiscent of a throne-room than a stable. This much of Prudentius' remark at least was solidly grounded in “known fact”. Even at this late date it seems she was still remembered as “Queen”, and no one had to “place” her on a throne: she was already sitting on one.

*Figure 26 Epona Feeding Asses.*



Prudentius' reference to “the stars” was more obscure. For him, no doubt, it was a plain almost folksy way of referring to the “Celestial Sphere”. This was the crystalline sphere to which the fixed stars were attached according to astronomers since the late 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. In Homer's time, it had been known as the realm of *aether*, the “clear sky” or “upper air” where the gods lived and Zeus reigned supreme, and it was more or less identical with the Judaic concept of *shamayim* (“heaven”) where God sat enthroned *above* a solid transparent dome (the “firmament”) surrounding the earth. St. Paul later referred to these “heavenly realms” in his letter to the Ephesians.[\[528\]](#)

At the time Prudentius was writing, “heaven” had been under the (almost) exclusive dominion of male gods in the ancient world for the better part of three thousand years. The Roman sky god Jupiter and the Judeo-Christian Yahweh were simply the latest in a long line stretching back to the Sumerian god An - a name that translates as “heaven” or “sky”. Though both words originally meant the same thing,[\[529\]](#) they had developed slightly different connotations by the 5<sup>th</sup> century. By then, terms like “the stars”, the “celestial sphere” and the “vault of heaven” were all closely related synonyms for the sacred dome of the sky. Even in Latin, *coelum* meant both heaven and sky: the *medium coeli* (“mid-heaven”), for example, was the place in the sky where the sun reaches its highest point at mid-day.

As an educated man, Prudentius must have known much of this background, and his image was a clever one: subtly, yet powerfully, it evoked deeply held and cherished patriarchal assumptions. Enthroning Epona above the stars would have been tantamount to making her “Queen of Heaven” - something no Roman man would ever have allowed unless she was married to a dominant god. Prudentius' image was doubly clever since it would have appealed to both pagan and Christian men alike. Among pagan Romans, Juno was the undisputed “Queen of Heaven” under the dominion of her husband and brother Jupiter. For Christians, that honour belonged to Mary, the mother of Jesus.[\[530\]](#) There was simply no place in the patriarchal religions of the Roman world for Epona to be enthroned “above the stars”.

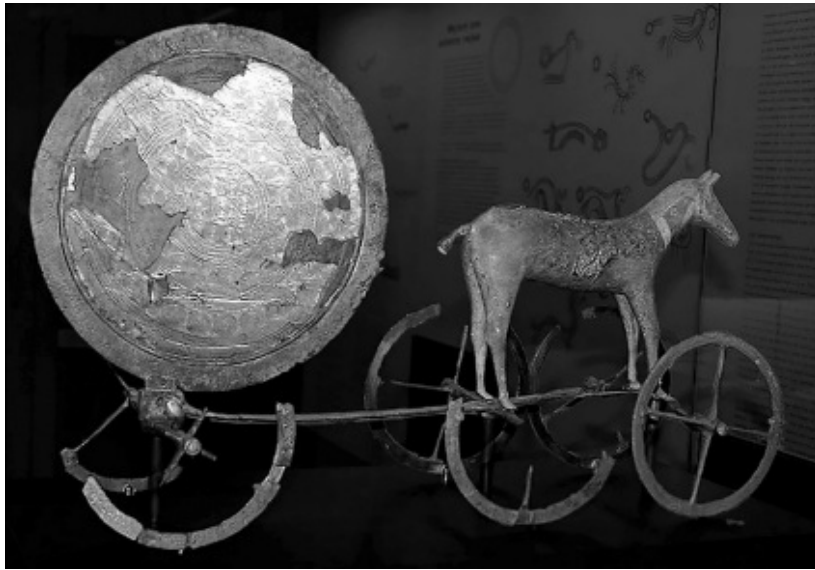
Nevertheless, Prudentius had no reason to attack her in this way if she were not already thought of in these terms. A simple goddess of horses, asses and stables would never have been perceived as a threat to the sanctity of heaven - pagan or Christian. However, a goddess who had her own feast day in the Roman calendar, and who had long been referred to as both “Queen” and “August” - a venerable and majestic goddess who inspired awe and admiration - was a very different matter. Even so, there was still no obvious reason to think Epona's majesty included a throne “above the stars”. From all

that we have seen so far her sovereignty was firmly rooted in the fertility and fruitfulness of the earth, and there was certainly nowhere more “earthy” than a stable.

During the Bronze Age however, the horse had become strongly associated with the celestial realm: not just with sky gods of thunder or lightening, but with intellect and reason - qualities that were seen as inherently solar and celestial (Chapter Three). The Greek god Apollo who most represented these qualities, had been worshipped in Rome since at least the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, and the emperor Augustus made him one of the most important gods in the Roman pantheon.[\[531\]](#) By Prudentius' time no one in Rome would have been unfamiliar with Apollo's horse-drawn “chariot of the sun” - though they were not thought of as “above the stars”. The Celtic Horse Goddess on the other hand, was obviously “above” her horses - superior to them not only as goddess, but also as Rider. It was only a short step to think that Epona might sit on “the throne of heaven”.

## HORSE, SUN & WHEEL

It was not only in Rome however, or just among educated Romans, that horses were associated with the sun and sky. The Celts had also made this connection. But for them, the identification of sun and horse was much more immediate and direct. Their religious view of the “celestial sphere” itself also seems to have been far simpler than that of the Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians. Although the Gauls possessed an extremely accurate calendar, based on very sophisticated observations and measurements of the sun and moon,[\[532\]](#) the most exalted and universal Celtic religious symbol was the sun itself - not so much the celestial sphere it moved across.[\[533\]](#)



*Figure 27 Figure 27 The Trundholm Chariot.*

The Celtic identification of horse and sun probably developed from the same wide-spread Bronze Age idea that gave rise to Apollo's horse-drawn sun chariot - it was a common Indo-European theme. A Danish example dating from about 1300 BC, for instance, was the Trundholm Chariot shown in the beautiful photograph above.[\[534\]](#) By the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC however, the Celts had reduced this idea to its essentials and symbolized the solar chariot with just a wheel.[\[535\]](#) It was a good symbol: its hub could be seen as the sun itself while its spokes represented the sun's rays, and its rim the sun's halo of light.[\[536\]](#) Nevertheless, as a symbol it lacked one vital element. By itself, a wheel is a passive thing: it needs a power source to set it in motion and keep it rolling.

In the Bronze Age analogy, that power was represented by the horse pulling the wagon or chariot, and it was natural for the Celts to link the horse with the sun-wheel for the same reason. This was not just an abstract or arbitrary symbolic link: horses played as central a role in their culture as the sun did in their rural farming lives and religion. The combined symbolism was therefore profoundly important, and horse and wheel were frequently paired in Celtic coin-imagery from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC onward.[\[537\]](#) Although they became more or less interchangeable as solar symbols in Romano-Celtic art,[\[538\]](#) their combination in the earlier coin-imagery evidently allowed the expression of complex ideas that lay at the very heart of Celtic religion: the meaning seems to have changed depending on whether the wheel was placed above or below the horse.

When the horse was placed above the wheel, for instance, it seems to have represented the sun's inherent "horse" power being carried on its journey through the heavens by the solar chariot - much like the Trundholm Chariot above.[\[539\]](#) However, the horse's deep underworld associations may have been paramount in these images. From this perspective, placing the solar wheel below the horse may have suggested the sun's nocturnal and winter resting place within the earth. A very similar idea was probably implicit in the connection of solar-wheels with graves and burial sites, and in their frequent association with the Mothers during the Roman period.[\[540\]](#) The idea of the sun within the earth implied fecundation - the primal source of fertility and wealth: both of which were summed up in the horse. It was thus a very appropriate image for coins. But it also strongly suggested regeneration in the "rebirth" of the sun in the dawning light of morning and the new green of spring.

By contrast, coin imagery in which the wheel appeared above the horse seemed to draw on a newer idea. Here, instead of the wheel representing the

old solar chariot, it had now come to symbolize the sun itself. Instead of the horse pulling the sun's chariot in its daily and yearly journey across the sky, the image suggested the solar rider on horseback. The same idea may have been implicit in calling the Celtic Apollo “Great Horseman”, as well as in other horse-riding versions of the native Celtic solar/sky god during the Roman period.

## THE SOLAR GOD

There is no way of knowing when the Celts first thought of the sun as a male deity rather than an amorphous supernatural force[541] - or explicitly identified with a goddess, as it was in Ireland.[542] Nor is it clear when the Celtic solar-sky god was first portrayed in human form. The earliest anthropomorphic cults were apparently more concerned with female fertility, [543] and although he may have been pictured for the first time on the Gundestrup cauldron in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (head, shoulders and arms with a wheel), it was not until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD that he was finally given fully human form.[544] Even so, associating the sun with a wheel-carrying and/or horse-riding god did not suddenly happen during the Roman era - any more than Epona first arose under Roman influence.[545]

In general, the functions of the Celtic solar-sky god were very closely related to those of the Mothers and revolved around the themes of fertility, healing, protection, war and death.[546] But among the various Gallic, British and Irish tribes, his specific functions varied along with his name. In his native Celtic form, for example, he was the lightning-like Loucetius (“bright, shining or flashing”); the wheel-carrying Taranis (“thunder”); the more specifically solar gods Belenos (“shining one”) and Grannus (“sun” or “bearded”); and the Gallic Lugus, whose counterparts in Ireland and Wales were Lugh and Lleu.

To some extent, this solar-sky god functioned independently in Celtic religion - both in his native and in his Romano-Celtic forms. But it would be a mistake to imagine that he held the same kind of dominance and independence in the Celtic pantheon as the Greek and Roman sky-gods he was later identified with so closely. In fact, it is probably fair to say that he cannot be fully understood outside the context of his relationship to the mothers. The juxtaposition of sun, light and life with death, darkness and the underworld was a central and recurring theme in Celtic religion,[547] and the relationship of sky and earth not only lay at the very heart of that dualism, but was (and is) the foundation of all fertility, fruitfulness, and life itself.[548]

In his earliest conceptual form, the Celts probably saw their solar-sky god as the son of the Earth Mother - continually returning to her tomb and womb in the autumn to be reborn in the spring, and rising to full maturity as her



lover and consort in the summer months. The Welsh god Mabon (Divine Son or Youth), for instance, was called *ap Modron* - “son of the Divine Mother”[\[549\]](#) - and was viewed as the first-born of creation.[\[550\]](#) The British and Gallic version of the same god was Maponos (Divine Youth) whose mother's name was Matrona (“Mother goddess”),[\[551\]](#) and it is significant that during the Roman period he was identified with the classical “divine youth” Apollo.[\[552\]](#) The Irish equivalent among the Tuatha Dé Danann was Óengus Óg (“young”) - son of the mother goddess Boann (“White cow”) whose milk formed the Milky Way.

That he continued to be thought of as the Mother's consort and lover seems clear from the divine couples theme in Romano-Celtic artwork. It has been said that the divine couples may simply represent the masculine and feminine elements of a cult concept, and that it is difficult to establish “who is the main deity and who is the consort”.[\[553\]](#) Yet the nature of this relationship between earth and sky was expressed elliptically in ways the Celts must have understood contextually. It is significant, for example, that the goddess often holds the attributes usually associated with the god - as when Rosmerta is pictured with the Celtic Mercury holding his caduceus and purse,[\[554\]](#) or when the goddess pictured with the Celtic Jupiter is shown holding “his” solar wheel.[\[555\]](#) Similarly, an inscription at Clarensac in the south of France explicitly associated the sky-god with Mother Earth,[\[556\]](#) and the seated wheel-god from Naix-aux-Forges in the Lorraine held two cornucopiae - a preeminently feminine symbol of fertile earthy abundance.[\[557\]](#) Likewise, the serpent twined round an oak tree behind the god at Séguret (Vaucluse) in Provence was almost certainly an underworld symbol of regeneration (see further, Chapter Six).

These examples all point to the underlying sovereignty of the goddess as the implicit context in which the solar sky god acted and was understood. The vital heart of Celtic life and religion was the fertility and fruitfulness of the earth, and the “emanations of the sky” (sun and rain) were fundamental symbols of life.[\[558\]](#) In this context, the god's primary role was that of fecundation - and protecting and safeguarding the peace needed to sustain the Mother's abundance. In this light, the theme of the divine couple was the model - or reflection - of the territorial goddess taking a “mortal sovereign as mate”.[\[559\]](#) There may have been contexts in which things were viewed differently, but given the primacy of the goddess in Celtic religion and the intimate relationship portrayed in the examples above, there can be little doubt that the Celts thought of their most important god as subject to her sovereignty.

## SOVEREIGN IN EARTH & SKY

As Horse Goddess, there is no way of avoiding the conclusion that once she had formed in the Celtic mind, Epona must have been implicitly - even intrinsically - linked with the sun: both as Divine Solar Mare, identified as essentially with the sun as she was with the horse, and as Lady and Rider of the solar horse. It may well have been the idea of the solar chariot that inspired the bronze plaque dedicated to Epona at Alesia, shown in the photograph above.[\[560\]](#) Just as the horse represented the power that moved the sun - or the inherent power of the sun itself - the Driver of the solar chariot or the Rider of the solar horse *could not have been seen otherwise* than as setting the course, direction and pace of the sun in its daily and yearly journey. In this context the conclusion is inescapable: whether as Divine Mare who knew the pathways of the underworld, or as Driver or Rider, it was Epona who determined the seasons and set the limits of day and night. This was a sovereignty, in other words, in which even the sun must be seen as implicitly obedient to her will.

*Figure 28 Epona's 'Chariot'.*



This celestial sovereignty of the Horse Goddess had far-reaching implications. It is not just that it somehow made Epona more majestic and venerable - more “August”. Nor was it just that from this perspective her authority was more pervasive and encompassing - bringing the springs, rivers, lakes, trees, mountains and valleys of Celtic tribal lands into harmony with sun and sky. But paradoxically, Epona's celestial sovereignty also grounded Celtic spirituality. In her identification with horse and sun, she was the fundamental link between Celtic religion, astronomy and agriculture.

In their close communion with Nature, the Celts could see that the sun's course, direction and pace all change constantly throughout the year - and that they do so in ways that can be relied on year after year. The accuracy of the Gallic calendar shows that they observed and measured the motion of the sun (and moon) very carefully. Because of this they knew that the sun rises higher in the sky (and nearly three times faster) after the mid-winter solstice when the days start getting longer, and that after mid-summer exactly the opposite happens. By observing and measuring these changes they were able to predict the right times to plant and harvest their crops, and when to perform the rituals and celebrate the festivals that connected Celtic culture and religion with the great “Wheel of the Year”. At some level, all of this was made possible through Epona's celestial sovereignty and power: the Divine Queen who brought wise and predictable order to the wholeness and cyclic fertility of nature - an order essential to the sun's fertilization of Mother earth and the resulting abundance born from her womb.

Apart from her essential identification with the horse however, Epona's inherent connection with the sun and celestial sovereignty was never explicitly stated. It was delicately present in her association with hot-springs and in her bared breasts when she appeared semi-nude, and it was alluded to more directly - though still elliptically - in the Pompeii fresco (Chapter Six). But even the more overt expression of her solar sovereignty at Pompeii was not meant to replace the solar sky god or to usurp or undermine his role. It is significant, for instance, that Epona was never depicted with a solar wheel, and that the solar sky god was never identified with the horse in the essential way that she was.[\[561\]](#) Although he was often shown mounted and carrying a wheel, for example, he also often appeared with only a wheel. Because of this it seems that he was identified with the sun in a functional way, while Epona's more essential identification with the solar horse and inherent celestial sovereignty both remained understated and in the background. From this perspective, their implicit relationship (Chapter Six) was much like that between a mortal Celtic king and a territorial sovereignty goddess.

In fact, in a very strong sense, the divine archetype of the solar sky god was mirrored in the mortal king - a close and intimately related parallel to the way Epona's celestial and terrestrial sovereignty also mirrored each other. On earth, at least in principle, her influence embraced all Celts everywhere just as the sun's influence extended from the eastern to the western horizons of Celtic life and lands. In turn, this pervasive presence was a straightforward reflection of the central role universally played by the horse in Celtic culture. More than any other Celtic deity, Epona lay at the nexus that connected Celtic culture with the day-to-day practicalities of life - one determined by seasonal changes in the astronomical relationship between earth and sky. Unlike any other Celtic Mother or territorial goddess, Epona's terrestrial and celestial sovereignty brought the lands, daily life and spirituality of the Celts into conscious harmony with the heavens, the earth, and the underworld.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Liaisons of Love & Power

The love-lives of goddesses and gods was a favourite theme in ancient mythology. Their stories served as explanations for the creation of the universe, for the unfolding drama of life, and sometimes as models for union with the divine. Essentially, these myths of love and sexuality expressed an ancient recognition of polarity: that creative tension between opposites that generates all life and awareness. From the earliest myth of creation written in the early Bronze Age onward, these myths mirrored the archetypal relationship between heaven and earth in the fecundation of the soil by sun and rain. The Celts knew this relationship well, and it ran through their artwork as a constantly recurring theme. Yet because they did not leave written accounts, we are left to guess the details of the stories they told in the long winter nights. Epona was no exception.

Despite the many clues in the symbolism of her imagery and in the deities she was associated with in art, in inscriptions, and at sacred shrines and sanctuaries, the details of her love-life were still largely hidden. Nevertheless, we can get a clearer picture when we realize from Romano-Celtic artwork and earlier coin imagery that Celtic mythology paralleled - and drew on - the myths of their Greek, Phrygian, Thracian, Danubian and Roman neighbours. In Epona's case, key aspects of her story were interwoven with these other mythologies, and the picture that emerges is that her strong sexual appetite and rich and satisfying love life were not just incidental. They were fundamental: her larger story revolved around her sexual liaisons, and the details of her love-life are therefore as important as they are titillating.

Quite apart from the absence of written myths, Epona's love-life was also hidden in her artwork. The Celts seemed as reticent to reveal their deities' sexual intimacies as they were to portray their goddesses and gods in human form. It is as if they did not want to reduce the numinous power of the divine to the realm of the familiar and the ordinary. Personalizing this tendency, we could say that Epona herself was extremely discrete: so much so, in fact, that it is often hard to tell the difference between her sexual liaisons and her close working relationships. Sex was strongly implicit in certain encounters however, and it is clear that she was both independent and polyamorous - never the wife or consort of any god. Her liaisons with them centred on her sovereignty, endorsing and grounding their power but also extending her authority into their spheres of influence. The prime example was her relationship with the Celtic solar-sky god. Perhaps more intriguing, and certainly more subtle and complex, were Epona's "affairs" with goddesses - bisexual liaisons in which her androgyny figured prominently, even if only expressed discretely.

In terms of archaeological evidence, there is not much to work with. During the Roman period, inscriptions often mentioned Epona together with other deities.[\[562\]](#) But being mentioned with a particular god or goddess - even in several different inscriptions - was only mildly suggestive unless there were other reasons for thinking there was an intimate liaison between them. Sharing a sanctuary or shrine was potentially more indicative, since the combined presence of two deities “may itself imply [the sexuality of] divine marriage”.[\[563\]](#) However, these sacred places were often dedicated to multiple deities only casually associated with each other.[\[564\]](#) The best indicator of an intimate liaison was actually being pictured together with another deity.

As for the gods and goddesses that Epona “consorted” with, the most definitive evidence comes from the Roman period when native Celtic and Roman deities were fused in a complex blend of religious symbolism. These hybrid Romano-Celtic gods were quite distinct from the purely Roman gods (and goddesses) Epona interacted with in Rome itself - deities originally borrowed from the older Greek, Etruscan and Latin pantheons. She also had a deeply meaningful liaison with a goddess from Egypt in southern Italy, and there were hints there too of intriguing encounters with gods and goddesses from Greece. During the Roman period therefore, we could say that Epona moved in three very different but inter-related “social circles”, each with its own set of potential sexual partners.

## ROMANO-CELTIC LIAISONS

In the Romano-Celtic world, the identification of native Celtic gods or goddesses with Roman deities was very complex: there was no simple one-to-one correspondence, and equating the functionally well-defined Roman gods with the “shadowy, multi-functional character of Celtic deities” was bound to be problematic.[\[565\]](#) In some cases the deities involved had seemingly contradictory roles. Celtic war goddesses for example, were depicted “*only* under the guise” of Minerva.[\[566\]](#) But in her capacity as goddess of medicine, Minerva was also identified with the British goddess Sulis.[\[567\]](#) Sometimes more than one Roman deity was identified with the same Celtic god or goddess. Mars and Mercury, for example, were occasionally confused,[\[568\]](#) and Mars, Apollo and Jupiter were each identified with the native Celtic solar-sky god in different ways and for different reasons. Epona's encounters with these hybrid deities were therefore complex and multifaceted.

The most significant of these liaisons revolved around Epona's implicit relationship with the native Celtic solar-sky god. As we saw in the last chapter he was closely associated with the Mothers and, like them, embraced a wide range of functions including fertility, healing, death and war.[\[569\]](#)



This broad range was reflected in the fact that it took three very different Roman deities to express the same functions. In all three cases, the most common way of depicting the Romano-Celtic solar-sky god was as a warrior on horseback: the divine Sky Horseman.[\[570\]](#) This was a purely Celtic feature not associated with the Roman gods in their classical form,[\[571\]](#) and drew directly on the Celtic concept of the horse as a solar symbol. In this very distinctive guise, the Romano-Celtic solar-sky god was implicitly associated with Epona - not only as a primal and (virtually) pan-Celtic Mother, but as the Celts' one and only "Horse Goddess".



*Figure 29 - Image from Histria*

This concept of a divine Sky Horseman was a later development of the older and simpler Bronze Age idea of the solar horse. Since the Celts did not represent their solar-sky god in fully human form until the Roman period, and the Roman sky god was not “equestrian”,[\[572\]](#) it is very likely that the Celts borrowed their concept of the Sky Horseman from the Thracians during their eastward expansion into the Balkans in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. The Scordisci tribe, for example, lived shoulder to shoulder with the Thracians in Moesia (eastern Serbia, Macedonia and western Bulgaria) from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.[\[573\]](#) During that period, one of the most popular cults in Thrace - from Moesia to Scythia Minor (eastern Romania and Bulgaria) - was that of the “Thracian Horseman” who was characteristically depicted as in the Romanian relief shown on the previous page from Histria on the shore of the Black Sea.[\[574\]](#) Despite the Celts' resistance to portraying their own deities in human form, the *concept* of the Sky Horseman seems to have diffused throughout Celtic culture and provided a pre-existing model for their solar-sky god by the Roman period. An interesting link between the characteristic Thracian Horseman imagery and the Romano-Celtic solar-sky god can be seen in the serpent twined round the tree: the same detail is present, for instance, in a depiction of a wheel-bearing Celtic Jupiter at Séguret in south-eastern France.[\[575\]](#)



*Figure 30 Thracian Horseman*

More importantly, the funerary stele from northwestern Bulgaria shown above makes it abundantly clear that the intimate relationship between the Sky Horseman and Epona had already become well-established in the Celtic mind by the 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.[576] The placement of the Horseman in the upper register probably reflects his sky domain, and it is significant that he is riding toward the death-and-regeneration symbolism of the serpent in the tree. [577] It seems to represent an entrance to the underworld, and suggests the heroic journey. Meanwhile, Epona's position in the lower register implies the fertile underworld itself. She is the sovereign underworld Mother in the classical Mistress style so reminiscent of Kybele after the the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

The “imperial” Anatolian Mistress style depended on the presence of (at least) two horses. But here, an important feature of the design seems to be their gender and sexual attraction. In contrast with the Macedonian relief pictured in the last chapter in which the attention of both horses is focused on Epona,[578] the two horses in this relief are clearly focused on each other. Not only does the slightly larger size of the mare on the left probably indicate her dominance over the stallion she nuzzles,[579] but the exquisitely-carved posture of both horses also implies their intense mutual attraction. Given the approach of the Horseman above, and Epona's presence below, the scene strongly suggests a fertilizing union of “earth” and “sky” is about to take place - a union that will bring about the renewal of life in death: a hopeful message appropriate to a funerary stele.

This primal relationship between sun-god and earth-mother was an ancient theme among the Thracians. The “womb cave” in the eastern Rhodope Mountains of southern Bulgaria was a striking expression of this belief. A remarkably vagina-like opening leads into a naturally eroded limestone cavern deliberately enlarged and shaped into a 65 ft. deep “place of conception constantly washed by water seeping through the walls”. [580] At the far end of the cave there is a womb-like altar carved out of the rock, and at midday a shaft of sunlight from an opening in the ceiling of the cave “projects a perfectly recognizable representation of a phallus onto the floor”. [581] The light slants across the interior of the cave as the sun moves and the phallus grows longer, penetrating more deeply toward the “womb altar”. When the sun reaches its lowest point in the sky during the winter months, the sun's “phallus” becomes long enough to reach the altar and “symbolically fecundate the womb”. [582]

This was the same ancient archetypal theme underlying Epona's *necessarily* sexual liaisons with the native Celtic solar-sky god. It was implicit in her relationship to the Thracian Horsemen in the Bulgarian

funerary stele, and this Sky Horseman theme was almost certainly the model on which her relationship to the Celtic Mars, Apollo and Jupiter was based. Although not always depicted on horseback, these three Romano-Celtic deities were each associated with the horse and/or the wheel - not just as interchangeable Celtic symbols of the sun, but as implicit indicators of their primal and necessarily sexual relationship with Epona. The Celts' continuing association of the solar sky god with the horse - and thus with Epona - can also be seen in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Romano-Celtic) silver disc from Pessinos in Galatia (Gauls' home in Phrygia) pictured below.[\[583\]](#) Although from the Roman perspective the god portrayed was Sol Invictus (the “unconquered” sun) who was quite separate from Jupiter, Apollo or Mars, that distinction was blurred for the Celts. For them, the three Roman gods were as much “Sol Invictus” as their own native solar-sky god.

## MARS

Perhaps the simplest Romano-Celtic expression of this Sky Horseman was in his identification with the Roman god Mars. Mars *Corotiacus*, for example, was depicted as a mounted warrior trampling a prostrate enemy on a bronze statuette from Martlesham in Suffolk, Britain.[\[584\]](#) This was highly reminiscent of the Thracian Horseman who was commonly portrayed battling a beast with a spear.[\[585\]](#) Also reminiscent of the Thracian Horseman was Mars' identification with the British and Gallic god Nodens, who was associated with hunting and dogs.[\[586\]](#) The Romano-Celtic god's celestial nature was emphasized in northern Gaul and at Bath in Somerset (England) by Mars' identification with Loucetius, whose name meant “bright, shining or flashing”.[\[587\]](#) Similarly, in his identification with the Iberian god Neto, Mars apparently wore a radiant crown “like a sun god”.[\[588\]](#) We see the Celtic association of the sun with water and healing in Mars' identification with Condatis in Britain and also with Lenus, who had a major healing cult among the Treveri at Trier in northern Gaul. Mars *Nodens* was also associated with water and healing, as was Mars *Vorocius* who was invoked as a healer of eye afflictions at the curative spring shrine at Vichy (Allier) - despite being depicted as a warrior: the connection between sunlight and the ability to see must have seemed fairly obvious.[\[589\]](#)



*Figure 31 Sol Invictus*

In all these capacities, Mars' contribution to the Romano-Celtic fusion was due to his Roman role as a guardian and protector - a role that included warding off hostile forces. Unlike his Greek counterpart Ares, the Roman war god's masculine aggression did not incite violence. Rather, he was seen as the driving force behind war as a way of achieving or safeguarding peace and abundance.[590] As guardian and protector, his energies were directed toward creating and preserving conditions in which crops could grow - i.e., fertility and stability. In this sense, aggression was a natural aspect of Mars' virility - his life force (“*vis*”) and manly power (“*virtus*”). It was this virility that inspired the Romans to name the month of March (“*Martius*”) after him: “because at that time all living things are stirred toward virility and to the pleasures of sexual intercourse”.[591]

In effect, Mars represented the life-enhancing vigour of Spring and the erect penis: his virility represented the sun's fecundating heat as it penetrates the moist earth. This was the essence of Epona's relationship with the native solar-sky god, and the basis of the Celtic Mars' tacit sexual relationship with her. The two had much in common where fertility, abundance, healing and war were concerned, and there is certainly no doubt that Epona took earthy pleasure in the virility of her male partners. Even if there were no more specific evidence for their affair, it would be safe to assume they were implicitly understood as “lovers”.

The 'locus classicus' for their liaison however, was Mars' mythic “infidelity” with Venus - a theme based on the much earlier affair between Ares and Aphrodite in Greek mythology. The story had been a favourite subject in Roman art, poetry and literature since at least the 3rd century BC, when Mars and Venus were placed together in the Lectisternium - a ritual feast to the gods.[592] Epona's near-identification with Venus in her nymph-like portrayal at the hot springs of Allerey has already been noted (Chapter Two), and the parallel between the two goddesses was clearly deliberate. It is certainly not hard to imagine that it was intended to evoke the famous story as a context for Epona's sexual liaison with Mars in his identification with the native Sky Horseman.

## APOLLO

Unlike Mars, Apollo was not invoked in inscriptions with Epona outside Rome. Nevertheless, he was strongly identified with the Celtic sun god in Gaul and Britain.[593] This was a direct transference of his classical association with the sun and solar chariot among the Greeks and Romans. In his Romano-Celtic guise however, Apollo's classical link with the solar horse was transformed and he became a mounted Horseman in fully human form



rather than a charioteer. Again, it was probably the Thracians who influenced the Celtic perception of Apollo in this regard. The tiny bronze figurine pictured above was found very close to the Bulgarian “womb cave” described above, and “follows the long-established pattern of Thracian horseman finds in the area”.[\[594\]](#) Among the Celts, he was invoked as *Atepomarus* (“great horseman”) in the Centre region of France,[\[595\]](#) and linked with votive horse figurines as Apollo *Belenus* in Burgundy - deep in Aedui territory, where inscriptions and artwork dedicated to Epona were most heavily concentrated.  
[\[596\]](#)



*Figure 32 Apollo Horseman.*

Apollo's classical role as a healer provided another strong link with the native Celtic sun god and solar horse. As Apollo *Granus* he was closely associated with healing mineral- and hot-springs from Hungary to Britain and he was invoked, for example, at both the water sanctuary at Grand in the Vosges Mountains (Lorraine) and the hot-springs at Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen, Germany).[597] We have already seen that he was particularly associated with ritual incubation (Chapter Four),[598] and it is significant in this connection that the classical Apollo's closely-related power of prophesy was strongly linked with his presidency at the Oracle of Delphi - a presidency he gained by defeating the serpent of the Goddess.[599] The myth and the Oracle were famous throughout the ancient world, and the myth is particularly significant here for two reasons. First, it provided a strong parallel to the Thracian Horseman's battle with a "beast": a theme that, as we will see below, was very important in Romano-Celtic art. Second, the Celts were not about to let Apollo usurp the authority of their goddesses and firmly tied his association with incubation - and thus prophesy - to the fertility and healing of Sirona and Damona, and perhaps even more fundamentally to Epona's sovereignty.[600]

We have already seen how closely connected Epona and the Celtic Apollo were (Chapter Four) and, although elliptical and discrete, "incubation" was strongly suggestive of their sexual liaison - especially at Allerey where Epona reclined in nymph-like invitation. Double *entendre* was very common in ancient symbolism and we see much the same thing in Poseidon's daughter Aethusa, for example, whose name was an epithet for a portico open to the sun's fertilizing rays - a metaphor for her own sexual liaison with Apollo, in which she conceived Eleuther ("freedom").[601] This was exactly the kind of sexual relationship portrayed so graphically in the Bulgarian "womb cave", and alluded to in the Bulgarian stele of Epona and the Sky Horseman. Epona's nymph-like sexuality at Allerey was also significant since many (if not most) of the classical Apollo's lovers were water nymphs.[602]

Unlike the Greek nymphs however, Epona's sovereignty introduced a striking new element. In a fundamentally meaningful and important way from the Celtic perspective, her sexual union with Apollo restored the primal authority of the Sacred Feminine that he had usurped at Delphi in his classical form. In pragmatic terms, this meant that although the *practice* of ritual incubation remained in his special sphere of influence, both the god himself and the process as a whole - from the underworld source of the dreams, to their fruition in the mind and health of the dreamer - came under Epona's dominion.

## JUPITER

The Roman god Jupiter was modelled on the Greek sky-god Zeus, who had become identified with the Thracian-Phrygian god Sabazios before the 5th century BC.[\[603\]](#) Sabazios, in turn, was identified with the Thracian Horseman: they may originally have been the same god, brought by the Phrygians in their migration to Anatolia from the Balkans. During the Roman period, the identification of Sabazios with Jupiter became the rule throughout the Roman empire and he was invoked as “Jupiter-Sabazios” in inscriptions from Anatolia, Thrace, Dacia (Romania, Moldova), Moesia (Bulgaria), Dalmatia (Yugoslavia), the Greek mainland and islands, Italy, Gaul, Germany and Africa.[\[604\]](#)



*Figure 33 Zeus-Sabazios, Danubian Celts, 3rd c. BC.*

That the Celts had been aware of Zeus-Sabazios since at least the 3rd century BC, is shown by the Celtic coin from Moesia pictured on the previous page. [\[605\]](#) The coin was an imitation of those produced in Macedonia by Phillip III, and bears the head of Zeus on one side with the Thracian-Anatolian Horseman on the other. It was thus very natural for the Celts to extend the Greeks' identification of these gods to their own Sky Horseman - and, later, to the Romano-Celtic Jupiter.

Unlike the Celtic Apollo who was so closely identified with the sun itself, the Celtic Jupiter had a wider scope “as all-powerful ruler of the immensity of the luminous atmosphere”.[\[606\]](#) This wider celestial role can be seen in the fact that he was linked with local Celtic sky gods in the mountains of Gaul, Noricum (Austria and Slovenia), Pannonia (Hungary), Dalmatia and upper Moesia.[\[607\]](#) He was also identified, for example, with the Celtic thunder/storm-god Taranis (though thunder was only one of Jupiter's classical attributes) and, like Mars, was also sometimes equated with Loucetius.[\[608\]](#) This was not the Jupiter of formalized Roman state religion. As Miranda Green reminds us, “in the fluid religion of the Celts, nothing can be neatly compartmented”,[\[609\]](#) and the Celtic Jupiter was “associated only with natural phenomena of sky, weather and fertility through sun and rain”.[\[610\]](#)

The most common way of depicting the Romano-Celtic sky god was as a warrior riding his horse over “a hybrid creature...with a human head and torso but whose legs are in the form of snakes”.[\[611\]](#) In this guise, he was frequently placed at the top of elaborately-carved “Jupiter-columns” that ranged in height from 4 to 15 metres (approx. 12 to 45 feet).[\[612\]](#) About one hundred and fifty of these impressive columns are known and were erected in the western Roman provinces (especially eastern Gaul and the Rhineland) during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD.[\[613\]](#) The very fine example from Steinsfurt in southwestern Germany, on which Jupiter was depicted with his classical lightning-bolt, can be seen in the excellent photo on the next page by René and Peter van der Krogt.[\[614\]](#)



*Figure 34 Jupiter Column.*

The rich symbolism of the Jupiter-columns has been discussed in detail by Miranda Green, and is fascinating in its own right.[\[615\]](#) Most significant here was the relationship between the Sky Horseman and the creature beneath his horse's hooves. It has been suggested that this imagery drew on the mythic battle in which Zeus and his fellow Olympian gods defeated the old Titan gods[\[616\]](#) - a theme borrowed by the Greeks from earlier Hittite and Mesopotamian mythology.[\[617\]](#) Typically, these myths ended with the domination - not the death - of the older gods and, in the Hittite and Mesopotamian versions, the older deities were called the “defeated” or “fettered gods”.[\[618\]](#)

In this context, Miranda Green saw the Romano-Celtic Jupiter as the “image of sky, light, good and life, in dualistic and interdependent combat with an earthbound, dark, and perhaps evil monster”.[\[619\]](#) Her suggestion that the forces portrayed were viewed as both opposing *and* interdependent is reflected in what she believed may have been a deliberate ambiguity in the artwork: as she put it, the sky god is “rearing over, riding down, or...*supported* by a humanoid monster”.[\[620\]](#) This can be seen more clearly in another very fine photo of the Steinsfurt column by the van der Krogt shown below.[\[621\]](#) Although clearly dominated by the mounted Sky Lord, the earth-born creature is not entirely beaten down or crushed and continues to provide a firm foundation of resistance - there is a dynamic and creative polar tension between them.





*Figure 35 Jupiter (detail).*

However, there was a more specific Greek myth that may have influenced the Romano-Celtic artwork, and it seems to shed more light on the creature beneath the horse's hooves. This was the epic story of the battle between Zeus and the serpent-limbed Typhon, who “from the thighs down...had great coils of vipers”.[\[622\]](#) This story also had an Anatolian basis: not only did it take place along the Cilician coast of Anatolia,[\[623\]](#) but it was based on the (Anatolian) Hurrian-Hittite myth of the sky/storm god Teshub battling the serpent-like monster Illuyankas (or Ullikummi).[\[624\]](#)

The difference between the two Greek myths in terms of their influence on the Jupiter columns is subtle but important. First, although the Titans and the serpent-limbed Typhon were all born from the womb of Gaia (Earth), the Titans' father was Ouranos (Heaven) - the original Greek sky god who was Gaia's son and consort. The Olympians' battle with the Titans was basically a “civil war” between the new and old gods, rather than tension and interdependence between the forces of light and dark. By contrast, Typhon's father was Tartarus: personification of the deepest darkest depths of the underworld, home (and prison) of monsters and terrifying things that go “bump in the night”. In addition, Zeus' battle with Typhon - the “most fearsome of all creatures” and the “father of all monsters”[\[625\]](#) - was intensely personal and fought at great cost to the new sky god. Typhon won the first round. He cut Zeus' tendons from his arms and legs, put them in a bear-skin sack, and left the sack in the Korykion cave along with Zeus' body. It was a shamanic death-like defeat, and the sky god's ultimate victory was only possible with the help of Hermes, who recovered the severed tendons.[\[626\]](#)

Here was an archetype that the warrior-based Celtic culture could genuinely admire - one they could raise aloft and place at the very top of these monuments dedicated to the courage, determination and ultimate victory of their sky-god in his role as protector and defender against the monsters of the night. He was the epitome of the Sacred Masculine, and his magnificent stallion-like virility could not fail to attract Epona. As protectress and kindly guide through the terrors of the underworld in her own right, she would naturally admire this personal expression of genuine stallion-like masculinity. There was a fundamental simpatico between them. But this was far more than the harmony of simple friendship, or the congenial basis of a good “working relationship”. The Celtic Jupiter was battling, subduing and keeping at bay the very monsters that threatened Epona and those she loved, and he was risking much to do so. Her love for him could only have been profound, awakening her divine elixir - the nectar, for him, of love and madness. In the rising of its ambrosial scent to meet him, both would yearn for his warm rays to penetrate

and fecundate the abundance of the fertile earth... her equine womb.

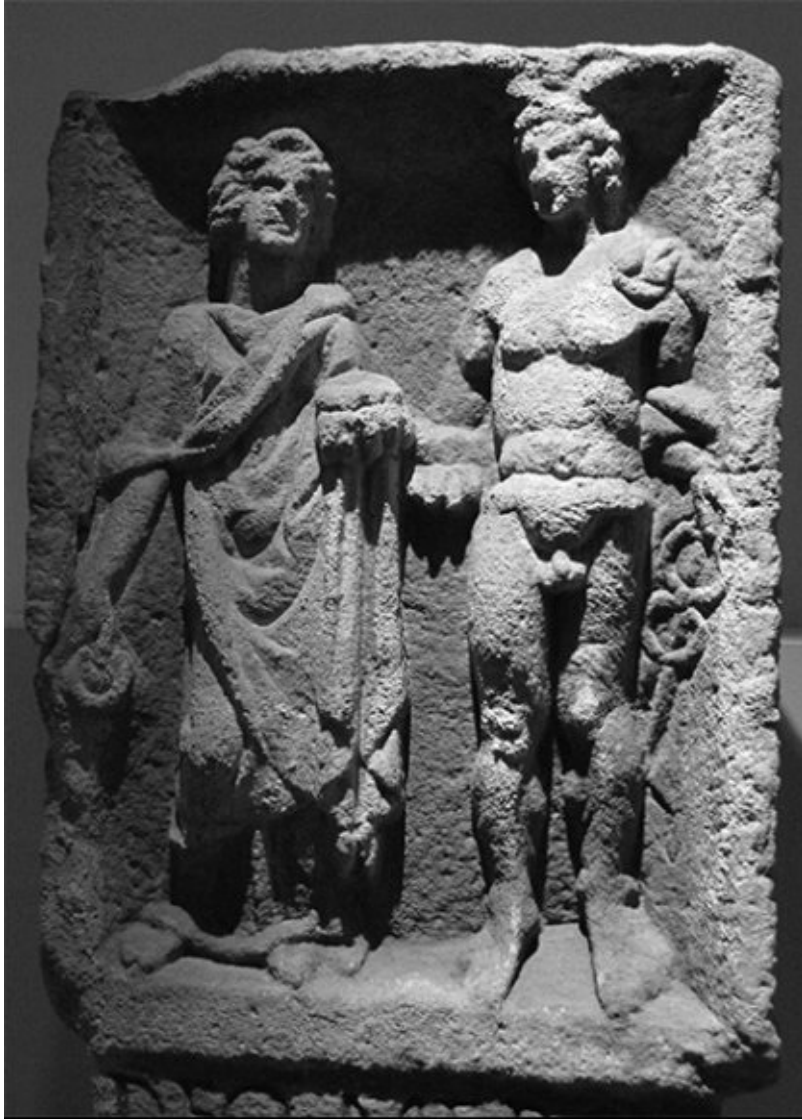
Their union was inevitable - a fundamental “fact of life”, known and understood by all. Yet among the Celts, discretion surrounded it as though held in the utmost sacred regard. It was never made explicit in Epona's artwork. But she and the Celtic Jupiter were invoked together at the healing-spring shrine of Luxeuil-les-Bains in eastern Gaul.[\[627\]](#) Originally dedicated to the local god Luxovius (“light”) and his consort Bricta, both the local shrine and the divine union itself were given a more universal dimension by the invocation of the two pan-Celtic deities. Although Epona was no god's wife or consort, the implication was clear: like the local divine couple, she and her solar-sky Horseman were also conjugally intimate. This was the “sacred marriage” of earth and sky in its most ancient and universal sense. For the Celts it was the paradigmatic marriage to the land, in which the territorial goddess conferred her sovereignty on the celestial god - the “all-powerful ruler of the immensity of the luminous atmosphere” was her chosen king.

Today we might expect the story of Epona's love-life to end here. But love and sexuality were understood differently among the Celts. Quite apart from the general sexual freedom of Celtic women noted by Cassius Dio,[\[628\]](#) the rich love-life of a sovereignty goddess was exemplified in Irish myth by both Queen Medb, who was said to have taken five “husbands”, and by her more ancient namesake Medb Lethderg at Tara who apparently took nine.[\[629\]](#) In much the same way, Epona's liaisons with the Celtic Sky Horseman in his various forms could be seen as primordial “climaxes” in the embracing significance of her wider love-life - the Sky Horseman was not her only lover. Perhaps the best example of this was the Celtic Mercury.

## MERCURY

The Celtic Mercury was strongly associated with fertility, abundance, commerce and prosperity. In addition to the purse he carried, for instance, he was depicted with three phalluses at Tongeren (Tongres) in Belgium, frequently associated with the Triple Mothers, and often seen as the special consort of the Gallic goddess Rosmerta whose name meant “Good Provider”.[\[630\]](#) Significantly, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century relief from Eisenberg in the Rhineland-Palatine below,[\[631\]](#) it is the goddess who holds his purse in her right hand - an indication that she was considered dominant. The fact that only his head appears in the Strasbourg relief however, suggests that a more magical-spiritual theme lay behind Mercury's liaison with Epona.

*Figure 36 Epona with Hermes-Mercury.*



*Figure 37 Mercury with Rosmerta*

The head was the part of the body that represented thought and knowing. In this connection, Mercury was reputed to be the most clever of the gods and, in his Greek and Roman forms, he was credited with the invention of the alphabet, numbers, weights and measures; astronomy; music, the lyre and syrinx (panpipes); and the cultivation of the olive tree.[\[632\]](#) Caesar wrote that among the Gauls he was also regarded as the “inventor of all the arts”.[\[633\]](#) It was probably because of this that he was identified with the Gallic god Lugus, whose Irish equivalent was Lugh *Ildánach* (“skilled in many arts”) - the youthful sons of the Divine Mother. Also closely associated with Mercury's head was his more famous classical role as herald and messenger of the gods and his capacity as the god of skill in speech, eloquence and social intercourse.[\[634\]](#) On the surface however, these various associations had very little direct connection with Epona.

It is not until we look more closely at the source of these attributes that we begin to see his fundamental connection with Epona. Originally a phallic god associated with the fertility of the land, his Greek name Hermes referred to pillars of stone (“herms”) placed at borders, boundaries and crossroads to guide travellers, and in front of temples, tombs, and in public places to turn away evil influences. This practice was later adopted by the Romans, who used herms in much the same way that mile-markers and signposts are used today. These stone pillars typically bore the god's head and shoulders together with appropriately-placed male genitals, as in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC example from the Greek Island of Siphnos pictured on the left.[\[635\]](#) In the Strasbourg relief with Epona (above), Mercury's head artistically called attention to these origins and more ancient symbolism.

Figure 38 - Herm of He



Beyond their shared concerns with fertility, abundance and prosperity, it was as a *liminal* god - the guardian of boundaries, and as a primary link between the upper and lower worlds - that Mercury was most closely connected with Epona. In this capacity he was both the bringer of prophetic dreams and the guide of souls to and from the underworld: the ultimate source not only of all fertility and abundance, but also of all true knowledge, invention and dreams. This was the basis of his mythic role as messenger of the gods, and it was in this capacity that he aided Zeus in overcoming the sky god's temporary defeat at the hands of Typhon.

Knowing the secret pathways of the underworld was something Mercury shared intimately with Epona, and it is significant that he was identified with the Gallic god Visucius along the frontier between north-eastern Gaul and Germany where the Strasbourg relief was discovered.[\[636\]](#) The Gaulish name probably derived from the proto-Celtic root (*witsu-*), “knowing”,[\[637\]](#) and thus was very much in keeping with the theme of the head portrayed on the relief. This intimate underworld “knowing” and their mutual concern with fertility of the land, makes it very likely that the liaison between Mercury and Epona was sexual. The fact that Epona appears in the Strasbourg relief riding aside her horse in formal sovereignty strengthens that likelihood since, among the Celts, fertility required and depended on “marriage” to the land. There must be more to the story, however. The classical Mercury's sex life was prodigious (he had over forty lovers), and Epona was depicted twice in the Strasbourg-relief.

The carving may have deliberately evoked a parallel with - and contrast to - the myth of Mercury seducing the water-nymph Lara while escorting her to the underworld at Jupiter's behest.[\[638\]](#) She had been banished by the sky god (and had her tongue torn out) in punishment for revealing Jupiter's sexual “indiscretion” with her sister, and in her seduction by Mercury she was cast in a thoroughly submissive role. The basis for the parallel with Epona was her own nymph-like nature and implicit liaison with Mercury, but the contrast lay in her inherent sovereignty. Not only could she “consort” with whomever she chose, but the fact that she was shown riding in both directions - as though both to and *from* the underworld - emphasized her independence and freedom to come and go as she pleased. In contrast to Lara, the Strasbourg-relief seems to proclaim that Epona was subject neither to the political oppression of the Romans nor to the patriarchal double standards of their gods. On the contrary, the relief suggests that Epona was both sovereign and dominant and that in “knowing” her, Mercury had become *her* herald: that it was her message of

fertility, abundance and prosperity he conveyed to the Romano-Celtic world.

Epona's sovereignty would not have been tolerated in Rome itself, of course: she was the goddess of a defeated and subjugated people. But there were important ways in which her independence and sexual freedom were useful to the Romans - and her association with horses provided a rich symbolic medium in which to put these “rustic” Celtic qualities to work.

## LIAISONS IN ROME

Most of the inscriptions that included Epona with Roman gods and goddesses in Rome itself were dedicated by the *equites singulares*: the equestrian guard and personal cavalry of the emperor.<sup>[639]</sup> These inscriptions followed a fairly standard pattern in naming deities of particular importance to the unit. They included the “Capitoline Triad” (Jupiter, Juno and Minerva), together with deities offering military protection (Mars, Minerva and Victoria), and deities giving strength, healing, good fortune and prosperity (Hercules, Apollo, Fortuna and Mercury). Among others they also frequently included Diana, the Celtic Matres (Mothers), and the *Campestres* - the Gallic goddesses of the *campus*: the special field used for cavalry training, assembly, and displays of skill.<sup>[640]</sup> It is not hard to see why the Horse Goddess became an important part of the recipe. After the Gauls began to be heavily recruited into the auxiliary wings of the *equites*, Epona came to play a vital functional role in the daily life of the unit and developed a practical “working relationship” with the other deities invoked by the cavalry. But Epona's most significant liaison in Rome was not with any of the deities invoked in the inscriptions of the *equites singulares*.

The only clue to this tryst was the very significant timing of her feast day on December 18<sup>th</sup> - three days before sun reaches its lowest point in the sky, and a week before the Roman celebration of the winter solstice and/or the *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* (“Birthday of the Unconquered Sun”) on December 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>[641]</sup> The Romans may have been aware of Epona's association with the Celtic solar-sky god, but this was not what they were drawing attention to in the timing of her feast day. For them, its significance lay in the fact that it fell between the sacrifice in honour of Saturn on December 17<sup>th</sup> and the day of the winter grain-storage festival honouring his consort Ops (“plenty”) on December 19<sup>th</sup>. After Julius Caesar's calendar reform in 45 BC, the sacrifice to Saturn was the official day of Saturnalia (though private festivities went on for the whole following week). Caesar's successor Augustus then extended the state-sponsored holiday to include all three days - an act that placed Epona's feast prominently on the middle day of one of the most important festivals of the Roman year.

The Saturnalia was more than just a time of feasting, gift-giving and



revelry. It was famous for celebrating freedom of speech and role reversals, [642] and it might be argued that Epona's feast day was an example of elevating a lowly - and foreign - Goddess of horses and stables to a seat at the table with one of Rome's most venerated gods as a divine parallel to masters serving their slaves. This was exactly the kind of irony Prudentius had aimed for in his comment about enthroning Epona above the stars (Chapter Five).

Even in Rome however, Epona was never simply a goddess of horses and stables - no matter how much Prudentius later hoped to cultivate that impression among potential converts to Christianity. On the contrary, although she was a foreign goddess and thus of lower standing than the high gods of the Roman pantheon, she was nevertheless a celebrated member of divine "high society" and was repeatedly included in inscriptions that invoked the patrician Capitoline Triad.[643] As "Horse Goddess" she was not only sacred to the imperial horse guard, but to the entire *ordo equester* (Order of Knights) and hereditary *equites equo publico* (Knights of the Public Horse) of the Roman aristocracy. It was in this context that she was associated with the cult of the Emperor. More pragmatically, Epona's adoption by the cavalry made her of vital strategic importance to Roman military success, and thus to Rome's wealth - a fundamental aspect of Saturn's domain: his temple at the base of the Capitoline Hill housed the state treasury.

Saturn (later equated with the Greek god Kronos) was Rome's first and oldest god, and in more ancient times the Capitoline Hill had been known as *Mons Saturnius*: the Hill of Saturn. The god of generation and dissolution, of renewal and liberation, and of agriculture and wealth, his reign was thought of as a Golden Age of peace and plenty. Far from representing a role-reversal then, the prominence given to Epona's feast day was - at the very least - a recognition of her fundamental contribution to Rome's protection and abundance. But even this was only the surface layer of its meaning and significance.

Throughout the ancient world, wealth and plenty were based on wheat and other cereal grain crops - the abundance of which depended on the fertility of the soil. For the Romans this was the special domain of Ceres: the central Goddess of the "Aventine Triad" (the three main deities of the plebeian common people, or "masses"). Ceres was the matron goddess of tenant farmers, estate managers, agricultural factors and importers - the mainstay of Roman agriculture. The coin pictured below was minted to commemorate the Cerealia, her main (grain) festival held during the last two weeks of April just before the spring seed-sowing.[644] She was portrayed holding the torch of sexual purity (*castitas*) and three grain-ears, with the serpent of renewal at her feet. As the faithful, devoted and fruitful Earth Mother, Ceres was expected to provide a role-model for married women

upholding traditional patrician values and her participation in the licentious revelries of the Saturnalia would have been considered morally inappropriate. Yet fertility was of paramount importance to Rome's continuing agricultural wealth during the depths of winter in preparation for the spring sowing.



Figure 39 Ceres coin.

In this context, Epona offered a more flexible alternative as a kind of “emissary” of fertility. On one hand, she was closely linked with Ceres. The spring Cerealia opened with a horse-race in the Circus Maximus: its starting line lay beneath Ceres' temple on the Aventine Hill.[645] This was certainly one of the main reasons why the walls of the massive stadium were adorned with Epona's portrait. On the other hand, placing her feast day between that of Saturn and Ops suggested a much more intimate liaison.

Like the Greek priestesses from Campania who were granted Roman citizenship so they could officiate at the Greek rites of Ceres and Proserpina (Demeter and Persephone) “with a foreign and external knowledge, but with a domestic and civil intention”,[646] Epona's own “foreign and external knowledge” would have been both desirable and morally acceptable: as fertile nymph-like maiden, she would stir the embers of the old God's “eld” and ignite his passion for Ops. The implication that she shared their bed was not at all far-fetched. Taking someone foreign or of lower social standing into a Roman couple's bed was an accepted way of arousing a partner or spouse, [647] and adding this “dimension” to the shared erotic experience fit in well with the unrestrained revelries of Saturnalia.

At a more profound level, Epona's participation provided a vital catalyst for Saturn's liberation and renewal - a central underlying theme of the Saturnalia. In the mythology borrowed from the Greeks, Saturn (Kronos) had been imprisoned by Jupiter (Zeus) in the underworld together with the other Titans. At the start of the Saturnalia however, the wool that bound the feet of Saturn's temple effigy was removed for the holiday as a symbolic act of liberation temporarily restoring his Golden Age of peace and plenty.[648] Awakening the god's sexual desire - his ability to fecundate the earth - was an essential part of “grounding” - and, thus, symbolically completing - this restoration.

There are several reasons for thinking that Epona was identified in these activities with Libera, Ceres' female co-deity in the Aventine Triad. Libera (“free”, “unimpeded”) had been identified with Ceres' daughter Proserpina since the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC when the Greek Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone were officially instituted in Rome as the *ritus graecia cereris*: the Greek rites of Ceres.[649] Together with her consort-brother Liber (who was equated with the Greek god Dionysos),[650] she presided over fertility and uninhibited freedom in speech and self-expression: a domain that centred on fertility, ecstatic release and the subversion of the powerful - particularly traditional patrician morality and official civil and religious authority.[651]

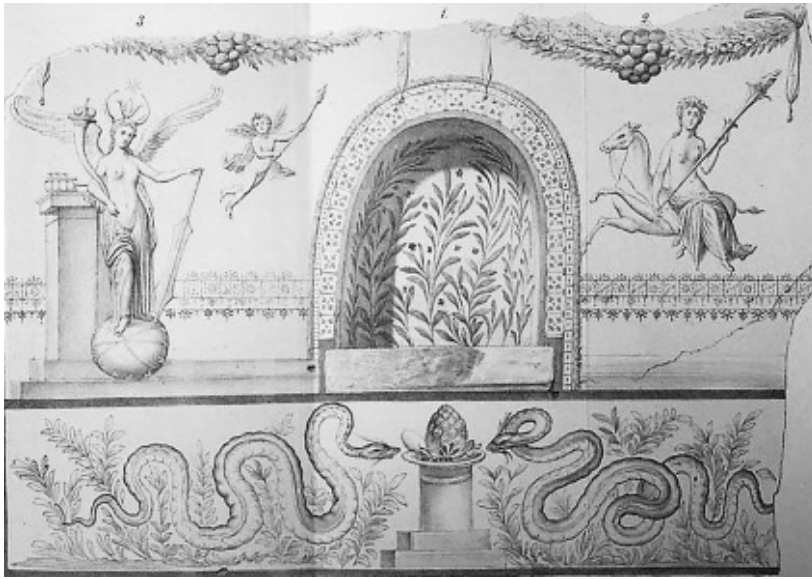
Epona's links with Libera were not hard to find. Like Libera she was

fundamentally associated with fertility, naturally evoked associations with the freedom of wild horses, and was closely (and otherwise inexplicably) connected with Ceres in the horse-races of the Cerealia. Her presence in Rome also fundamentally altered the fabric of traditional patrician religion - not simply through her inclusion in Rome's pantheon, or the timing of her feast day in the Roman calendar, but in crossing the divide between plebeian and patrician religious worship: as Horse Goddess she merged Aventine and Capitoline religious concerns. More pointedly, Epona's involvement in the restoration of Saturn's reign of peace and plenty was a perfect example of subverting established patrician morals and religious authority.

This association with Libera may also shed some light on Epona's presence and liaisons in southern Italy. Libera's official identification as Ceres' daughter connected her very strongly with the Mysteries of Demeter and her daughter Persephone in Sicily and the adjacent Campania region on the Italian mainland. These Mysteries had been celebrated in the Greek colonies there since at least the 5th century BC, and Ceres' oldest and most authoritative cult centre was the Temple of Demeter at Enna, "the navel of Sicily." There were also very strong mythological, geographical and ritual links between the Sicilian and Campanian cult-centres of Demeter and Persephone (Chapter Eight), and it is significant that the earliest-known evidence for Epona comes from very near the Greek cultic heart of the Campania region.

## LIAISONS IN SOUTHERN ITALY

The Pompeii fresco, painted sometime before 79 AD when Mount Vesuvius erupted, is the oldest known artwork in which Epona appears. The fresco itself no longer exists, and we know it only from the 19<sup>th</sup> century engraving, made by the archaeologist who originally identified the figure on horseback as Epona.[\[652\]](#) As we saw in Chapter Four, an archaeologist by the name of Reinach later argued that the female rider was a Nereid and that the artist had mistakenly replaced her mythical sea-horse with an actual horse.[\[653\]](#) Then, in the 1970's, Witt saw the mounted female figure as the Roman goddess Luna.[\[654\]](#)



*Figure 40 Epona & Isis at Pompeii.*

Reinach and Witt however, had completely failed to grasp the significance of the fresco as an allusion to a profoundly sacred ritual in the Mysteries of Isis. Every element in its composition was intended to convey numinous significance, and it was certainly not a subject about which an artist would have made careless mistakes - or in which a mistake would have been allowed to stand uncorrected. Thus, there can be no doubt that the horse was intentional, and we have already seen that Epona's nymph-like appearance at Allerey was intentionally similar to the Roman conception of a Nereid (Chapter Four). It is also extremely significant that Apuleius made an elliptical reference to Epona in the context of healing and initiation into the Mysteries of Isis.[\[655\]](#) Likewise, the idea that the female rider was meant to be Luna can be easily dismissed. Although she was associated with horses (typically driving a team of horses in her chariot), she was invariably pictured with a crescent moon - a feature noticeably missing from the rider in the fresco. But neither Luna nor a Nereid riding a mistaken horse would have made symbolic sense in the context of the special ritual alluded to in this work of sacred art.

In terms of Epona's liaisons however, the Pompeii fresco was unique and revealing. In comparison to any of her other “affairs”, its implications were by far the most explicitly sexual. Yet even in the context of its private setting, the fresco was characteristically discrete and restrained. It illustrated only the prelude or approach, not the liaison itself. Epona rides her prancing steed toward Isis, who stands waiting at the altar. Nevertheless, the presence of Eros “in the air” between the two semi-naked goddesses, the phallic thyrsi held both by the god of desire and by the approaching goddess, and the altar itself, all indicated the nature of the rendezvous about to take place: the two goddesses were about to enact the *hieros gamos* ( ἱερό γάμος) or “sacred marriage”.

This in itself was startling. The sacred marriage was always and everywhere a union of the divine Feminine and Masculine. But even literary references to sex between women were rare among the Romans at the time the fresco was painted. Ovid was probably expressing the (male) consensus view when he wrote that “...no female is seized by desire for female”.[\[656\]](#) Clearly, the fresco was not presenting a Roman-inspired theme - regardless of the Roman influence on its artwork.[\[657\]](#) There can be no doubt that it reflected “foreign and external knowledge” in the union of two very definitely non-Roman goddesses.

Despite being expressed wholly in terms of the Female Divine, the fresco preserved the archetypal theme of marriage between the divine Feminine and

Masculine in several ways. Here, Isis is the fertile earth and Mother. She stands holding both the feminine cornucopia of earthy abundance and the rudder by which she guides the course of human lives. Land and sea are encompassed in the entirety of the earth-sphere beneath her foot, and her naked vulva is her glistening throne - the sacred entrance to the source and centre of Life, and the basis of her earthly authority and power.

Epona, on the other hand, was shown in the masculine role so much a part of her intrinsic androgyny as Horse Goddess (Chapter Three). Her bared breasts suggest the nurturing warmth and light of the sun (Chapter Two), and she rides in the sky above the earth - the feet of her mount have not yet touched the ground. Here, she is revealed for the first and only time in her celestial sovereignty as the Solar-Sky Rider. Unlike Isis, her vulva is covered and our attention is directed instead to the “honey-dripping wand” she bears: [658] that phallic pine-cone tipped and seed-spreading shaft of giant fennel the Greeks called a *thyrsus*. Its phallic symbolism was intentional. Its duplication in the hands of Eros (the Roman Cupid), and the way he holds it, are both strongly suggestive. But this was also the sense conveyed in the context of Dionysian revelries by allusions to the thyrsos as a “wanton wand” or “javelin-like” weapon: [659] well-known metaphors befitting the patriarchal phallus-centred sexuality of the (Greek and) Roman world, where the penis was typically compared to a weapon. [660]

The fresco is replete with Dionysian symbolism. The *thyrsos* itself was normally an emblem of initiation into the Dionysian Mysteries, but in the context of the Isian Mysteries it had taken on another meaning entirely. Since the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Greeks had identified Dionysos with Isis' brother and consort Osiris: the Egyptian Lord of the underworld. [661] Epona's thyrsos therefore was very likely an oblique reference to the magical phallus Isis made for Osiris after he was dismembered by his brother Set, and on which she conceived her son Horus. [662] From this perspective, Epona was being identified with - or at least cast in the role of - Dionysos/Osiris: the clusters of grapes above the goddesses, and the pine cone and serpents in the lower register, were all symbolic references to this Greek god of wine and liberation who spent the winter months in the underworld. The parallel is clear and unequivocal, but the question is “why?”. By itself, Epona's native androgyny was not enough to explain why she would be appearing with Isis as Dionysos/Osiris in southern Italy.

A partial answer to this question may lie in the fact that the Romans had long equated Dionysos with Liber - the brother, consort and *male aspect* of Libera: goddess of wine, liberation and fertility. The implicit androgyny of the Roman pair was a prominent trait in Dionysos: Euripides had referred to him as “that womanly man”, for instance, with “woman-witching beauty” in



his soft form.[\[663\]](#) In Epona's own inherent androgyny, she was apparently being equated with Dionysos *as Libera*.[\[664\]](#) This certainly helps explain Epona's association with the Dionysian symbolism of the fresco. But it also raises deeper questions about why this sacred marriage was taking place between two goddesses, about why Epona rather than some other goddess was chosen for the male role, and about why she was identified with Libera not just at Pompeii but apparently in Rome also.

There was clearly a hidden story here - one presumably well-known to initiates of these Mysteries, but kept from outsiders. Secrecy was typical of Mystery cults in the ancient world, and Epona's presence in the Pompeii fresco certainly went far beyond a simple sexual liaison with Isis. But in tracking down this underlying story, we will have to leave behind the Horse Goddess as she was popularly known and search out her deeper secrets.

## PART III

# HER DEEPER SECRETS

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Origins, Mythic & Real

*“Myth, as it has survived, may have been just the beginning of a larger story - the other elements of which were lost or only known within the Mysteries.”* [\[665\]](#)

The only myth that has come down to us about Epona is a very brief little story about the peculiar way in which she was conceived and born. But this story is something of a riddle. Although it was circulating in Italy in the first century AD and contains elements that are much older than that, its historical sources are clouded in confusion and misinformation. Given Epona's importance among the Romans, it also seems unusually short on details. In fact, it was deceptively simple and not only hid more than it revealed but did so in a particularly obvious way. Because of this, it is hard not to escape the conclusion that it was calculated to intrigue - deliberately intended to arouse curiosity, and thus stimulate a search for the larger story to which it was just the beginning. But this only makes sense if we remember Epona's involvement in the Mysteries of Isis. A universal feature of all the ancient Mysteries was their secrecy: it was forbidden to speak or write openly about them to the uninitiated. Riddles, intrigue and misinformation were common ways to hint at and to obscure their secret rites - and often, the “unspeakable” name of the goddess at their centre. [\[666\]](#)

To search out the real historical sources of this little myth about Epona and discover the larger story it hides, leads us far from the more well-known aspects of the Horse Goddess. Here, we are entering the pathways of her deeper secrets as though following her into the underworld itself. Ancient art, inscriptions and literature can offer us very little help on these pathways except insofar as they hint at Epona's deeper secrets. The only way forward is to become a detective. But if we follow the clues carefully enough, Epona's myth reveals that she had a deeply-hidden (and very surprising) “secret identity”, and this in turn tells us much about where she really came from.

## MYTHICAL BEGINNINGS

The most frequently cited early-modern source for Epona's myth was a book called *Magia Naturalis* (“Natural Magic”), published in Naples (Italy) by Giambattista Della Porta in 1589. The English translation, made about eighty years later, contained the following lines:

*“The same author (Thales) in his ‘Parallels’, reports out of Agesilaos, his third book of Italian matters, that Fulvius Stella loathing the company of a woman, coupled himself with a Mare, of whom he begot a very beautiful maiden-child, and she was called by*

*a fit name, Epona.*"[667]

This little passage has given rise to much confusion. Thales, for instance, was a Greek philosopher in the 7<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Della Porta had mentioned him in the preceding paragraph in connection with a story written by Plutarch in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD called the "Banquet of the Seven Sages". This story included a conversation about another "babe gendered of a man and a mare" - one described as half-human, half-horse.[668] Presumably because of the similarity between the two stories, the English translator assumed Della Porta was still referring to Thales as "the same author" in the following paragraph about Epona.

Another source of confusion came from Della Porta himself. By referring to the "Parallels" he gave the impression that his source for the myth about Epona was Plutarch's Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans - a very popular book in its day, commonly called the "Parallel Lives" because of the way Plutarch paired his Greek and Roman biographies. But Della Porta was actually drawing from the Parallela Minora ("*Minor Parallels*"): stories that formed part of the Moralia, but which historians now believe were written slightly later by an anonymous author using Plutarch's name - a common practice among ancient authors. The specific passage Della Porta was paraphrasing actually reads:

*"Fulvius Stellus hated women and used to consort with a mare and in due time the mare gave birth to a beautiful girl and they named her Epona. She is the goddess that is concerned with the protection of horses. So Agesilaüs in the third book of his Italian History."*[669]

This Agesilaus was a Greek historian who wrote some time before the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Nothing is known about him personally, and only fragments of his work have survived through the writings of Plutarch (or the "pseudo-Plutarch") and Stobaeus.[670] Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing where he got Epona's story from, or how old it was when he came across it. Without new evidence therefore, this is as far back as we can go in terms of a specific historical source for Epona's myth.

Like the nearly identical story in Plutarch's "Banquet of the Seven Sages" however, the core of the myth in the Parallela Minora is genuinely archaic. The idea of a man mating with a horse dates back in Greek mythology to at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, and is probably much older. Aeschylus, Pindar and Euripides, for instance, all drew on the myth of Ixion: the Thessalian king of the Lapiths whose son Kentauros mated with the Magnesian mares to produce a race of centaurs.[671] When, where and why this idea became associated with Epona is a riddle to which only the myth itself can provide any real clues.

Whatever our modern reaction to it may be, the idea of sex between a man and a mare is not the strangest part of Epona's myth. Hidden behind this dramatic detail there are several aspects of this little story that are very odd indeed. Among these, the most obvious was the name of the man who supposedly fathered Epona. Only somewhat less obvious, was the related question of how he was able to father a goddess. But the least obvious was the complete anonymity of the mare who was said to be Epona's mother. Together these elements were like layers of an onion and, when peeled back, pointed to deeper levels of Epona's larger story.

## IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER

The Roman name given to Epona's "father" was very peculiar indeed, though not because it was Roman instead of Gaulish.[\[672\]](#) It might easily have been inserted into an earlier Gallic version of the myth. Nor was it odd that there was no *praenomen*, or personal name.[\[673\]](#) From about the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC onwards, Roman personal names were gradually replaced by the *cognomen* or family name and, for formal purposes, the *gens nomen* or clan name was typically followed by the cognomen.[\[674\]](#) "Fulvius Stella" was thus a perfectly correct example of this late Republican custom, and Fulvius was the masculine form of the nomen Fulvia - a clan that had played a significant role in Roman political and military life since the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and was raised to the *nobiles* (aristocracy) in 322 BC.[\[675\]](#)

Tying Epona's parentage to a specific historical and noble clan was also not particularly strange. She had been adopted into the heart of Roman religious life; and was closely connected with the cult that celebrated the Emperor's status as a 'god'. Using genuinely archaic material to create a flattering "myth" that one of the Clan had sired her would have strengthened their ties with the Emperor, and would thus have provided useful political "credentials" more generally. Associating the myth with Plutarch's name would also have added tremendously to its authority. He was the high priest at Delphi (a position the Romans respected highly), and was well-connected in the Graeco-Roman world. Many of the essays in his '*Moralia*' were based on actual conversations he had with influential people from all over the Empire, and his '*Parallel Lives*' was extensively copied and widely-read.

There was just one small hitch. Although "Stella" was a fairly common cognomen among soldiers in the Roman legions,[\[676\]](#) it was not one of the six family names used by gens Fulvia.[\[677\]](#) The fact is, there *could not* have been anyone by the name of "Fulvius Stella". Not only was the name fictitious, but this would have been obvious to everyone since each gens had its own long-established and well-known set of cognomina. This was the truly bizarre quality about the name of Epona's "father" - and, given Epona's

importance in the religious life of Rome, it was like waving a big red flag that said “there is more here than meets the eye”.

In Latin, *stella* meant “star”. The name might therefore have been metaphorical - a reference to the “rising star” of gens Fulvia. They were originally a plebian clan from Tusculum (south of Rome), where a special college of Roman *equites* (knights of the nobility) was formed to oversee the cults of the gods - especially that of the Dioscuri (often depicted as horsemen).[\[678\]](#) The Fulvia may well have played a key role in popularizing Epona among the *equites*, and may have adapted an older myth to advance their social status: identifying their rising star with Epona's “father”, and thus connecting the Clan with the cult of the Emperor.

At the same time however, this may only have been the outer layer of a meaning hidden by a play on words. By dropping a single letter, the nomen Fulvius becomes the Latin word *fulvus* which meant “tawny-yellow”. Combined with the word *stella*, the altered name described a very specific star - Rigil Kentaurus (“Foot of the Centaur”), now better known as Alpha Centauri: the third-brightest star in the sky and the brightest in the constellation of the Centaur. This was a mythical origin worthy of the Horse Goddess - the “beautiful girl” born of a Mare.

Wrapping a hidden meaning inside an obvious one was a “perlocutionary” device familiar to the Romans.[\[679\]](#) It was typical of the language of diplomacy and had a well-established counterpart in the Mysteries, where riddles, allusion and misdirection had an ancient pedigree. Empedocles, for example, had used a similar word-play in alluding to Persephone (a goddess who could not be named outside the Mysteries) as Nestis: a Greek word which not only meant “fasting” (a central aspect of her Mysteries), but was also the name of a local goddess identified with Persephone in Sicily.[\[680\]](#)

In Epona's case, associating her with Rigil Kentaurus formed a direct parallel to Isis in her ancient association with the star Sirius: a significant parallel, no doubt, for initiates of the Isian Mysteries. Rigil cannot be seen north of Memphis, the ancient spiritual centre of Egypt (near Cairo), and was therefore hidden from view in southern Italy. Nevertheless, it was well-known in northern latitudes. The Greek astronomer Eudoxus had described Kentaurus and its stars in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and his work was popularized in the next century by Aratus in his Greek poem 'Phaenomena'. This was later translated into Latin by Cicero, and thus became very popular. By the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC both the constellation and its brightest star were widely-known throughout the Greek and Roman world.

Kentaurus also had ancient credentials in Greek mythology, where it was

firmly associated with Chiron: a famous and exceptionally noble centaur (half-man, half-horse),[\[681\]](#) closely connected with the hero Heracles - said to have given gens Fulvia its *sacra* (rites of sacrifice and prayer) after he had performed his twelve labours.[\[682\]](#) Unlike other less noble centaurs (the offspring of Ixion's son), Chiron was conceived when the god Kronos took the form of a stallion in his union with the nymph Philyra. A healer, astrologer, teacher and oracle, his nobility was exemplified by sacrificing his immortality to save Prometheus from the terrible punishment he was made to suffer for bringing fire to humanity. Chiron was thus intimately linked with the salvation of humanity: sacred fire was not simply a source of heat and light in ordinary life, but also the means of achieving immortality within the Mysteries.[\[683\]](#) For his great sacrifice he was honoured with a place among the stars as the constellation Kentaurus.[\[684\]](#)

Still, the name “Fulvius Stella” could not have been meant to imply that Chiron was actually Epona's father. The constellation was a memorial to him, not a celestial embodiment of the “living” centaur capable of fertilizing the womb of a mare. But associating Epona with this constellation was symbolically fitting. Like Chiron, she too had a dual nature: part goddess in human form, and part Divine Mare intimately identified with the horse. Furthermore, her association with centaurs must have been a common one: it was probably not a coincidence that Epona's Roman feast day fell three days before the sun leaves the sign of Sagittarius (the Archer), which was historically represented as a centaur and also connected with Chiron.

There was another curious detail about Epona's “father” however, that is not explained by the veiled reference to the star and its constellation. This was the strangely incongruous assertion that he “hated women”. It might have been a mythographer's addition, perhaps in an attempt to explain why a man would “consort” with a mare. But in Greek and Roman mythology full divinity required two divine parents,[\[685\]](#) and Agesilaus leaves no doubt that Epona was indeed a goddess. Her father, therefore, must necessarily have been a god rather than a mythical mortal man. This strange detail may therefore have been left as a clue to the larger story of Epona's hidden origins. Before exploring this possibility further however, something needs to be said about the identity of Epona's mother - a point on which Agesilaus was completely silent.

## THE UNNAMED MOTHER

The Greek historian may not have known who Epona's mother was, of course: her identity may have been lost by the time he came across the myth. But lineage was important in the ancient world - no less so for goddesses and gods than for humans. Even different or conflicting versions of a deity's



origin-myth usually named both parents, and the fact that Agesilaus said nothing at all about this crucial detail suggests that he knew more than he revealed. The omission created a riddle, and the clue to its answer was readily available: Epona's mother not only had to be divine, but also a goddess known to have taken the form of a mare.

As it happens, there was a Mother goddess in classical Greek mythology who fit these requirements perfectly. She was the matron of an archaic horse-cult in which she was portrayed with the head of a horse,[\[686\]](#) and she figured prominently in the most famous and long-lasting of all the ancient Mysteries.[\[687\]](#) She was even called “Great Mare” since, in one well-known myth, she took the form of a mare to hide from a god who desired and pursued her.[\[688\]](#) When the god discovered her (because she could not hide her divinity among the ordinary horses), he took the form of a stallion and raped her. From this union she bore two “children”: a famous stallion named Areion, and a daughter who could not be named outside the Mysteries and was referred to only as Despoina (“Mistress”).[\[689\]](#)

The goddess at the heart of this ancient myth was Demeter, and it is extremely likely that whoever generated the myth recorded by Agesilaus saw her as the Mare who gave birth to Epona. However, there is no way to prove this because of the secrecy that surrounded the identity of Demeter's daughter. Naming Demeter would have revealed that, at least in some circles, Epona was being identified with Despoina - a revelation that would have violated that secrecy: as Pausanias put it, “the real name of Despoine I am afraid to write to the uninitiated”.[\[690\]](#)

Seen in this light, other details of Epona's myth start to fall into place. The god who pursued Demeter in the older myth was Chiron's half-brother Poseidon: a god who had an ancient and special connection with horses. In addition to being represented as a horseman and honoured with chariot races and horse sacrifices, he was said to be the father of the first horse.[\[691\]](#) He thus had much to recommend him as Epona's mythical “father”. It is also very significant in this connection that Poseidon Hippios (Horse) was identified by the Romans with Consus - the tutelary god of the harvest and stored grain whose winter festival fell two days before Epona's feast day and was celebrated with chariot races in the Circus Maximus - and by leading horses, mules and asses through the streets adorned with garlands and flowers.[\[692\]](#)

Poseidon's violation of Demeter could not be ignored, however. In stark contrast to Chiron, who was conceived in consensual love between Kronos (the father he shared with Poseidon) and Philyra, Despoina was a child of rape. This may well have been the intended sense in which Epona's father was said to “hate women”. The veiled reference to Rigil Kentaurus can thus be seen as a way of giving Epona a more noble heritage by making her Chiron's

“niece” and “foster daughter”. Most importantly, it connected her to the tradition of liberation at the heart of the Mysteries: a heritage her “uncle” had sacrificed his immortality to preserve. As a result, Epona not only “inherited” Chiron's role as healer and teacher, but also an active role in the Mysteries - not only those of Isis, but apparently those associated with Demeter and Despoina.

The myth offers no clues however, to the real marrow of the larger story that was “lost or only known within the Mysteries” - the crucial question of how Epona came to be seen as Demeter's daughter. The Greeks' identification of non-Greek deities like Epona with their own gods and goddesses was a wide-spread and well-known phenomenon.[\[693\]](#) But identifying her with Despoina required that she had at least some characteristics in common with the unnamed goddess. Perhaps even more importantly, it necessitated an intimate association with Demeter herself. Establishing what Epona's connections with these two goddesses were therefore, should bring the outlines of her larger story into clearer focus.

## THE UNNAMEABLE DAUGHTER

In modern Greek, *despoina* (δέσποινα) means “lady”. But in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century it was still understood in the ancient sense of “Mistress”, probably derived from *des potnia* (δέσ ποτνια): the mistress, or lady, of a household.[\[694\]](#) As a general term of respect it denoted the absolute female ruler of a domain but without the negative connotations that the male equivalent despotes (δεσπότης), or “despot”, has today.[\[695\]](#) Demeter herself was sometimes known as “Despoina”, for example, and so were Aphrodite, Artemis, Hekate and Persephone.[\[696\]](#) But in the context of the Mysteries (Chapter Eight), the term was used as a special title to refer in an elliptical way (i.e., without naming her) to Demeter's daughter by Poseidon.

The main centre of the cult associated with this Despoina was at Lykosura in Arcadia (on the Peloponnese peninsula), and in the 1920's it was believed that the cult remained tied to this one sanctuary.[\[697\]](#) But the Mysteries of Demeter and Despoina were almost certainly known in Anatolia and the wider Mediterranean world, and by the 1980's a standard text on Greek religion even seemed to imply that these Arcadian Mysteries were an ancient version of the wide-spread Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone.[\[698\]](#) Certainly there were strong similarities between the two Mystery cults, and after Despoina became identified with Persephone, they must have been virtually indistinguishable to outsiders.[\[699\]](#)

Despoina's identification with Persephone probably had its Bronze Age roots in the Mycenaean Greek's association of Persephone with Poseidon - not as a sea god, but in his original form as the god of the underworld,

earthquakes and underground waters.[700] Springs, streams and wells were Poseidon's ancient domain, and they continued to play an important role in the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone.[701] It was in this context, for instance, that Empedocles' located his coded allusion to Nestis' identification with Persephone in terms of “moistening the spring of mortals with her tears”. [702] The Homeric Hymn to Demeter described her also as “creating a spring of running water with her tears”. [703]

The relevance for Epona was elliptical and indirect - as would befit a secret identity. Not only was she also intimately associated with underground springs (Chapter Four), but in Greek mythology the first horse (“sired” by Poseidon) was said to have caused a spring to well up from the underworld by striking the ground with its hoof.[704] When this was combined with Epona's own intimate underworld associations, and the fact that she too was known as “Mistress” and “Queen”, the Greeks had ample reason to identify her with Despoine-Persephone: their own Mistress and Queen of the underworld. But the deciding factor in making that identification would probably have rested on the strength and intimacy of Epona's links with their mother, Demeter.

## MYTHIC CONNECTIONS

Epona certainly had much in common with Demeter. She too was a Mother, intimately connected with wheat and abundance, and her very strong associations with fertility and the underworld were the central themes of the Thesmophoria: the ancient women's festival held around the beginning of November in honour of the Greek goddess. While these correspondences would probably have been enough for the Greeks to identify Epona with Demeter herself however, there was nothing here that suggested a mother-daughter relationship. On the other hand, Demeter's archaic horse-cult, her portrayal with a horse's head, and the fact that she was called “Great Mare”, all provided exactly the kind of background needed. The myth in which she had taken the form of a mare and given birth to an unnamed (and thus unknown) daughter by Poseidon, offered a perfect context in which to connect her and Epona as mother and daughter. Epona's own motherhood, fertility and abundance etc., would all have helped cement this relationship since, even in antiquity, Demeter and her daughter were seen as two aspects of a single goddess: the “Demeters”. [705]

There was also another very compelling reason for the Greeks to think of Epona as Demeter's daughter. This was her strong association with the Anatolian theme of the Potnia Theron or Mistress of Animals: a theme, as we saw in Chapter Two, that pointed to the Phrygian “Great Mother”, Kybele. This was immensely important. Greek colonists in Anatolia had identified the Phrygian goddess with Demeter since the 7<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, and the idea

soon spread back to mainland Greece and the Greek colonies in Sicily and Campania.[706] It was an idea that found fertile soil in the Greek mind, since its roots lay in the intertwining of Minoan and Mycenaean traditions with the cult of the Great Mother before 1200 BC: a fact demonstrated in the Mycenaean record of an offering to the Divine Mother - and “Mistress of Horses” - at Pylos, not far from Lykosura.[707]

The importance of Demeter's identification with the Phrygian goddess - and its relevance to the idea that she was Epona's mother - was nowhere better illustrated than inside the sanctuary at Lykosura. Pausanias tells us not only that there was an altar dedicated to the Great Mother just behind the altars to Despoina and Demeter, but also that there were relief carvings of the Phrygian Korybantes (and Cretan Kouretes) on the base of the central statue of Despoina and her mother. He also tells us there was a temple to Artemis at the entrance to the sanctuary, and a statue of her beside Demeter in the main temple. Although in both cases Artemis seemed to be taking Hekate's role in leading souls - or initiates - to the underworld, Pausanias goes on to cite the Arcadian belief that Artemis was the daughter “not of Leto, but of Demeter”. [708] This belief points once again to the very strong and ancient connection between these Arcadian Mysteries and the Anatolian goddess, since Artemis too was identified with both Kybele and the (Eastern) theme of the Mistress of Animals.[709]

The altar to the Great Mother, the presence of Artemis, and especially the location of the Korybantes reliefs, were all emphatic statements - not simply of the cult's general connection to Anatolia, but of the importance of Demeter's identification with the Phrygian Great Mother. That this identification lay at the heart of, and was somehow fundamental to, Despoina's cult and the Mysteries associated with it was evident from Pausanias' very revealing comment that although he knew why the Korybantes were depicted on the base of the statue, he chose to “pass them by” in silence:[710] a very strong hint that they played a key role in these Mysteries.

In light of Kybele's profound significance in the Arcadian Mysteries, the importance of Epona's own association with the Phrygian goddess cannot be emphasized too highly: this was probably the “clincher” for the Greeks in associating her with Demeter, and thus identifying her with Despoina. It is most significant therefore that this association was expressed (primarily) through Epona's Anatolian “Mistress of Animals” theme - a guise in which Demeter herself apparently never appeared. This suggests that the Phrygian goddess may have been thought of as Epona's mother before the Greeks identified her with Demeter's daughter(s).

## TIMES & PLACES

Attempting to locate the origins of the story behind Epona's myth in terms of times and places takes us out of the realms of riddle, and anchors us firmly in the 'haven' of historical fact. But it is nevertheless still a “detective story”, and thus no less concerned with sifting clues and weighing the evidence. This becomes very clear when we look at the evidence for the three main regions where Epona might first have become associated with Demeter-Kybele and identified with Despoina-Persephone.

### ARCADIA

It seems unlikely, for example, that this occurred at Despoina's sanctuary in Lykosura. There would be no obvious evidence of Epona here, of course, since Despoina's identity was such a well-guarded secret. But this was also the heartland of her Arcadian Mysteries: the place where we might expect her secret identity to be most thoroughly Greek (and probably also the most distinct from Persephone). Apart from that, the sanctuary had been there since at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC even though the central sculpture of Demeter and her unnamed daughter was not carved until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.[\[711\]](#) This means that Despoina's secret identity had already been established before the Celts invaded Greece in 279 BC. When the Gauls did come, the Patraians managed to keep them out of the Peloponnese and Epona could only have come to Arcadia later and by another route.[\[712\]](#) But even if she was identified with Despoina in Lykosura at a later date, there must have been a foundation - a background story that associated her with the Phrygian Great Mother, and thus with Demeter. If initiates of the Arcadian Mysteries ever saw Epona as the secret identity of the goddess they called “Despoina”, it was probably because these associations had already become well-established elsewhere.

### SOUTHERN ITALY

Another possible place to look for Epona's first identification with Despoina might be southern Italy. The Pompeii fresco shows that Epona was definitely known in Campania, and this may well have been where Agesilaus discovered the myth he recorded about her in his 'History of Italy'. There was also a potential foundation for her identification with Despoina-Persephone. The Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone had been established by Greek colonists in Sicily and southern Italy (Magna Graecia) since the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The Romans were strongly influenced by these Mysteries from the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC onwards. Not only did they see Demeter's temple in Sicily as Ceres' oldest and most authoritative cult-centre, but it was the Greek colonies in Campania that supplied Rome with the “foreign” priestesses that

performed the “Greek rites of Ceres”.[\[713\]](#)

Kybele too had a strong presence in Campania, where it has been said that she “lived on intimate terms” with Isis - a way of expressing the fact that the two goddesses had much in common, and may at times have been identified with each other.[\[714\]](#) It is particularly interesting therefore, that the Phrygian goddess was depicted in the classical style of the Anatolian Mistress (seated and flanked by lions) at her temple in Pompeii or Herculaneum in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.[\[715\]](#) If her mother-daughter relationship with Epona had already been established, Kybele's association with Isis added a very important dimension of meaning to Epona's liaison with Isis (Chapter Eight). It also highlights the fact that portraying Epona aside her horse - and not as the Mistress - was a deliberate choice, and was significant in its own right.

On the other hand, Kybele does not seem to have been connected with the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone in Sicily or southern Italy. We know that the Romans brought her to Italy directly from Pessinos or Pergamum in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC,[\[716\]](#) and this may explain the “disconnect” with the established Greek Mystery cults in Magna Graecia. Very likely, Kybele arrived in Campania from Rome rather than with the Greek colonists who brought Mystery cults from Greece via Anatolia. More telling than any of this however, is the complete lack of evidence that Despoina had any cult presence of her own in Campania unless it was through her identification with Persephone - and/or with Epona. This fact alone makes it clear that Campania could not have been where Epona was first identified with the Arcadian Mistress, and was probably not where Epona's myth originated either.

Nevertheless, Campania did preserve a very significant clue that pointed to another possibility entirely. That clue lay in Epona's thyrsos in the Pompeii fresco, which was an integral part of a symbolic context that drew on the Greeks' identification of Osiris with Dionysos.[\[717\]](#) But the thyrsos itself had originally been given to Dionysos by Kybele when she initiated him into her Mysteries in Phrygia.[\[718\]](#) It therefore suggested an indirect link between Epona and the Phrygian Mother. More importantly, since it was fundamental to the masculine role Epona was about to take in her approaching union with Isis, the thyrsos was a powerful symbolic allusion to Agdistis - the Greek-Phrygian goddess identified with Kybele,[\[719\]](#) who was famous for having both male and female genitalia,[\[720\]](#) and who was castrated by Dionysos.[\[721\]](#)

All of this obviously had profound implications in the context of the Pompeii fresco itself. But it also strongly suggests that there was a background story - one that evidently included Dionysos in some way, and that explained how Epona came to possess the thyrsos and why she was chosen for the masculine role. Most significantly, each element and



underlying theme or allusion in the fresco - including Isis herself - seems to imply a far deeper connection with Kybele than appears on the surface. It is reasonable therefore, to think that Epona's story somehow revolved around the Great Mother and that the thyrsos was a focal clue pointing to Phrygia: the ancient centre of Kybele's worship, where Dionysos castrated Agdistis and was healed and given his thyrsos, and where the Gauls who gave "birth" to Epona made their home in Anatolia. Only there did all the elements converge to form the historical and mythical background - not just for the Pompeii fresco, or for Epona's enigmatic myth, but for the larger story in which she came to be associated with Demeter and identified with Despoina and Persephone.

## PHRYGIA

The home of the Great Mother in Phrygia was at Pessinos - the ancient town where, according to Strabo, she was worshipped as Kybele-Agdistis. [722] Although her identification with Demeter must have occurred first among the Greek colonists in Aeolia or Ionia (both on the west coast of Anatolia), it undoubtedly spread inland in the wake of Alexander the Great's conquest in 334-3 BC. Much the same thing must have been true for the myth of Despoina: the powerful link between the Phrygian Great Mother and the Arcadian Mysteries at Lykosura was probably first formed in Anatolia. It is telling in this connection, for instance, that Homer mentioned Despoina's brother Areion, [723] and that the author of the Iliad is now thought to have lived in Ionia during the 8<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. [724]

There can be little doubt that Kybele's identification with Demeter and the myth of Despoina were both widely-known among the Greeks in Anatolia by the time the Gauls arrived and settled in Pessinos. After their attempted expansion into Greece had been repulsed at Thermopylae in 379 BC, three Gallic tribes (about 20,000 men, women and children) made their way across the Bosphorus into Anatolia. In return for their mercenary services in Bithynia, Nicomedes I apparently gave one of these tribes - the Tolistobogii - lands in Aeolia, Ionia and Phrygia. [725] When this tribe chose to settle around Pessinos, they were brought into close contact not only with Kybele-Agdistis but with the complex tangle of myths and associations that surrounded the Phrygian goddess.

Newly arrived, the Gaul's first priority must have been to establish territorial sovereignty in their new home. This may have accounted for much of their early aggression toward the Greeks and Phrygians. [726] But behind this aggression lay their profound need to develop a firm spiritual connection with the land itself. Given their reverence for the Sacred Feminine, there can be little doubt that they recognized and respected the inherent sovereignty of

the ancient Phrygian Mother. But she was not their goddess, and there was no tradition allowing them to connect with her - no way for them to participate directly in the fertility and abundance of their new territory.

The obvious solution to their dilemma was to build a relationship between the ancient Mother and their own sovereignty goddess - a goddess who, by definition, had no geographically-bounded "seat" and was inherently capable of travelling with them from their homelands. We cannot be certain it was Epona that they brought with them to Phrygia, of course, but there are good reasons for thinking that it was and that she had existed in the minds of the Celts long before this even if only in rudimentary "religious conceptuality".[\[727\]](#) How her story developed from that point on would have been profoundly influenced by the Gauls' perception and experience in Anatolia.

In terms of their need to establish a connection with the land, for instance, the problem that confronted them must have been how to build the necessary relationship between Epona and the ancient Phrygian goddess. Unlike the Greeks, who had identified Kybele with Demeter despite the enormous differences between them, the Gauls seem to have chosen to develop and define Epona's inherent qualities in ways that corresponded with Kybele-Agdistis - apparently on the basis of empathetic responses to the needs of the Phrygian Mother.





*Figure 41 Cybele on Lion Altar relief.*

One of the most important and obvious examples of this would have been the adoption of the Mistress of Animals theme. The horse-mastery for which the Gauls were famous suggests that this theme was already implicit in their Horse Goddess. Yet thinking of her as a Mistress of Animals was a momentous development. It would have given greater definition to those inherent qualities while firmly linking Epona with a long-standing lineage of eastern goddesses, and subtly nudging her early conceptualization toward human form.

The Gauls' natural inclination probably would have been to visualize Epona sitting astride her horse, rather than on a throne between them. Yet even in the early stages of taking human form, it is clear that her essential identity was carefully preserved. She could be thought of sitting aside her horse in the formal sovereignty position just as Kybele sat aside her lion (see previous page),[\[728\]](#) or on a throne between her horses in the same way the Phrygian Mother sat between her lions (Chapter Two). Either way, her horses were not replaced by the lions that eastern influence had given the Anatolian goddess. Although consciously imitating the Phrygian goddess, as the Celts soon started doing with Greek deities in their coin imagery, the respective domains of the two goddesses were nevertheless kept quite separate and distinct.

These were not the only areas in which Epona's inherent qualities corresponded closely with the Anatolian goddess. In her natural state, the Gauls must have thought of their Horse Goddess as wild and free - qualities that were preserved in the imagery of the naked female rider on the Celtic coins from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC onward.[\[729\]](#) This ecstatic wildness provided an intimate link with Kybele, whose Phrygian rites were celebrated with wild music and ecstatic dancing.[\[730\]](#) But when combined with Epona's inherent androgyny, this same wildness suggested a far more profound connection between the two goddesses. Certainly it would have touched a raw nerve for the Greeks in Phrygia, since they saw Kybele-Agdistis' androgyny as the source of her wild and uncontrollable nature - traits so threatening to the gods that they had her castrated.[\[731\]](#) The Gauls, on the other hand, must have listened to this story in horror. Castration was a recognized way of making an unruly stallion docile, but the idea of castrating even a hermaphrodite goddess would no doubt have appalled and angered them deeply.

We may well be seeing a later reflection of their defiant response to this travesty in the consciously developed androgyny of Epona's role in the Pompeii fresco. Though the fresco served more immediate purposes in terms of the Isian Mysteries in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the underlying symbolism

alluded very strongly to these older themes. But Epona's more defined androgyny would have taken time to develop and needed a story of its own to give it substance. In this regard, Agdistis' myth was probably only part of what prompted the Gauls' response to the assault on Kybele. On another front entirely, the cult of the Thracian-Anatolian sky god Sabazius was attempting to dominate the religion of the Phrygian goddess - a theme also reflected much later in a 2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> century sculpture: the all-but-buried head of Kybele's bull was made the foot-rest for the mounted sky god's horse.[\[732\]](#) To the Gauls, for whom the Sacred Feminine (and the bull) was central and sacrosanct, this would have been sacrilege enough. But Sabazius had also become identified with Dionysos, the god said to have castrated Agdistis.[\[733\]](#) No self-respecting Celt could have resisted the compulsion to act in the face of such profound injury and insult to their own goddess, and their sympathies for the Phrygian goddess were probably high. But this combination of myth and actual events also provided a perfect opportunity to forge the connection with Kybele that both she and the Gauls needed so badly.

## PHRYGIAN BIRTH-RITE

The feelings evoked were no doubt felt most intensely in and around the sacred centre of Kybele-Agdistis' worship at Pessinos, and we can imagine the druids of the Tolistobogii coming up with a plan. First, with all due solemnity and ritual, Epona would become the Great Mother's "foster daughter" - a familiar practice among noble Celtic families, and one that often led to the development of strong emotional bonds between those involved.[\[734\]](#) On this basis, the young and vigorous Gallic Horse Goddess would champion both her foster-mother and the ancient sovereignty of the Sacred Feminine in what was a very real spiritual battle against the advancing patriarchy of the encroaching god.[\[735\]](#)

Since the Great Mother "of all gods and humanity" was always and only depicted as a woman,[\[736\]](#) Epona would have to take on human form to truly become Kybele's foster-daughter: she could have no substantial relationship with the Phrygian goddess without taking this "shape-shifting" step. But to achieve this while still preserving the essential qualities of her identification with horse and herd, Epona would have to be given a dual nature: part Divine Mare, part Lady and Mistress.

However, her "birth" in human form was no casual intellectual exercise. Nor was it simply a matter of propaganda. On the contrary, in Phrygia in the first quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, it would have been a strategic and powerful magical act in a profoundly significant spiritual battle. In modern terms, the druids were about to create an egregore ( ἑ γρήγορος): a magical "thought-

form” constructed from the richest symbols of liminal power and sovereignty they possessed.[\[737\]](#) To do this, they would first have to create a clear mental image of Epona in human form with her qualities, abilities and mission well-defined - a task in which their priestesses probably played the leading role. The ritual that followed would then have imbued the goddess with the Gauls' own vital energies, before setting her free to influence the thoughts and feelings of the people: Phrygians, Greeks and Gauls alike.

Since myth and ritual were so closely connected in ancient religion, the ritual's design may have been influenced by pre-existing myths. There were certainly several to choose from, and the Greek myth of Kentaurus siring the centaurs comes readily to mind. But it may also have been as the classical scholar Jane Harrison believed: that myths evolved out of rituals based on simpler beliefs and perceptions of meaning.[\[738\]](#) What was necessary in Epona's case was to be reborn in human form while preserving her “horse-nature”. In that light, nothing could be simpler or more appropriate than having her real mother be a mare - perceived as inherently divine and the natural leader of “the herd”. This meant that Epona's human form had to come from her father: a role that undoubtedly fell to the tribal chief or king, as in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Irish ritual recorded by Gerald of Wales (Chapter Ten).[\[739\]](#) Here, in these simple beliefs and perceptions, was a plausible basis for Epona's origin myth.

In all likelihood the ritual was primarily a Gallic affair, attended by the Tolistobogii and important members of the other Gallic tribes in Anatolia, and carried out by druid men and women. Given its profound significance and far-reaching implications, it may even have been attended by representatives from some of the Thracian-based Gallic tribes. It was probably also attended by priests and priestesses from Kybele's temple whose presence was necessary to witness the birth of their goddess' foster-daughter, and to perform the rites that would sanctify and confirm Epona's new relationship with her.

The occasion would have called for great feasting and merriment, and there can be little doubt that the residents in the entire region - Phrygians, Celts and Greeks alike - were keenly aware of what was happening. Like any small community, even if widely spread-out, the salient details of such an important event would have become common knowledge within days or weeks. Given the religious significance of the event, and of the reasons for it, these details would also have been remembered: encapsulated, repeated time and again, and probably modified imperceptibly or deliberately over time - but certainly remembered. This was just the beginning. The Gaul's deeply-needed sovereignty-link to the land had been established. Now it was time for their goddess to assert that sovereignty on behalf of her foster-mother and the

primacy of the Sacred Feminine in general.

## RESTORING THE NATURAL ORDER

In her magically-charged new human form Epona would have “moved out” quickly to accomplish her task - much as the young Sumerian goddess Inanna had done over two thousand years earlier after the God of wisdom and magic had invested her with the *me* (“powers”).[\[740\]](#) Although this next phase would be a defining one for Epona in a number of ways, her immediate mission was clear: to bring the sky god into submission, and thus restore the vital balance in Nature - that necessary fertile attraction between sun-sky and earth that, for the Celts, depended so fundamentally on the sovereignty of the goddess.

This attraction was much like the early stages of love (*eros*), when the males of the species “court” the females. In the glow of their aphrodisiacal desire they tend to be particularly deferential and eager to please, and their naturally aggressive virility is turned to displays of strength, providing and protection. Under Aphrodite's erotic spell as Mistress “a tremendous power is revealed...[even the] dread beasts of prey...obey the higher law of sexual union.”[\[741\]](#) Indeed, even the all-powerful Greek sky-god Zeus succumbed to this erotic attraction when: “...*craving [Aphrodite] but not attaining he scattered his seed on the ground, and shot out the hot foam of love self-sown...*”[\[742\]](#) This was extremely significant, not only in view of Epona's links with Aphrodite (Chapter Two), but because Zeus had been identified with Sabazius in Anatolia and Thrace since the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.[\[743\]](#) The Greek story of Zeus' “undoing” in his attraction to Aphrodite, and his identification with Sabazios, therefore provided an archetypal precedent and natural recipe for Sabazius' ultimate healing.

The real emotional trigger for the Gauls in Phrygia was Sabazios' identification with Dionysos - an identification that originated in the cross-fertilization of Thracian Orphism with the Satrai oracle of Dionysos-Zagreus in the western Rhodope mountains.[\[744\]](#) Although in that version of the story Dionysos was the son of Zeus and Persephone (as Earth Mother),[\[745\]](#) Thracian Orphism preserved the archaic formula in which the son grew up to become his own father: from this perspective Sabazios, Zeus and Dionysos-Zagreus were all different names for the same god.[\[746\]](#)

Despite the fact the Thracian cult centred around the Earth Mother and her sexual union with the sun, it nevertheless produced secret initiation-based, aristocratic, and exclusively-male societies.[\[747\]](#) This was probably due to the influence of the strongly male-dominated Persian Achaemenid Empire that expanded into Thrace in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, and that ruled Anatolia until Alexander's conquest about fifty years before the Gauls' arrival in Phrygia.

[748] The combined effect of these mythic, cultic and cultural influences produced the patriarchal undercurrent “on the ground” in Anatolia - particularly around the home of the Great Mother in Phrygia.

Not surprisingly, there was some confusion (outside the Mysteries) about the identity of Dionysos-Zagreus. As Diodorus Siculus put in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC:

*“He was also called Dimetor [“two mothers”]... because the two Dionysoi were born of one father, but of two mothers. The younger one [the “Greek Dionysos”] also inherited the deeds of the older [Zagreus], and so the men of later times, being unaware of the truth and being deceived because of the identity of their names, thought there had been but one Dionysos.”* [749]

This confusion was compounded by the fact that the Greek Dionysos had been intimately associated with the cult of Kybele from a much earlier time - an association Euripides had drawn on, for instance, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. [750] But to the Gauls, the Greek Dionysos who had been driven mad by Hera in her anger at Zeus' infidelity with Dionysos' mother Semele - the Dionysos who Kybele healed and initiated into her Mysteries - must have been indistinguishable from Thracian-Anatolian Dionysos-Zagreus who castrated Agdistis and was attempting to dominate Kybele. The Gauls no doubt saw these transgressions as clear examples of the god's “madness”, and their druids must have visualized Epona's victory in subduing and healing him in great detail.

In doing so they probably pictured it much as the Sumerians had seen the young Shamhat, priestess of a much earlier Mistress of Animals, using her sexuality to tame and “civilize” the wild Enkidu:

*“Shamhat...smiled at the raw material for her civilizing art. Shamhat spoke in a passionate whisper: 'Here is he, wild in form, a form needing my fire to make it civilized. I shall show him my body [and] let him smell my exciting musk. I shall cover his body with my body [and] heat his hammer with my burning bush. I will raise his trembling hammer. I will let it beat my anvil-womb and show him my civilizing force. I will change his scent from wild to tame, and his herd will flee.' Shamhat showed him her civilizing force for seven nights. Shamhat changed his scent so the herds stampeded from him in terror”.* [751]

The theme of intense female sexual attraction and its power over males was an ancient and familiar one. It was a central aspect of the eastern Mistress of Animals, and the fact that Artemis' virginity was “peculiarly erotic and challenging” was probably one of the primary reasons why she became so closely identified with Kybele. [752] It was much the same for the Celts: the

virgin was “a powerful source of fertility, precisely because her sexuality was particularly intense”.[\[753\]](#) In this context the intoxicating feminine charms of Epona's new human form gave her all the aphrodisiacal power she would need to complete her mission. In all likelihood, this was the source of her nymph- and Aphrodite-like qualities in later Romano-Celtic art. No doubt the story the druids circulated described the arrogant sky god being subdued by Epona's power and beauty and, in their “fertile religious conceptuality”,[\[754\]](#) they probably visualized her taking the sky god's spear or thyrsos (his “wand of power”) and mounting his horse - making both her own in the process. In the ancient world, these trophies would have been indispensable and unmistakable symbols of her unequivocal dominance.





*Figure 42 Maenad & Satyr.*



The bards who told and re-told the story would almost certainly have improvised on these details by having Epona “mount” the god (with the thyrsos) instead of the horse. Embellishment was well within the scope of their art, and dear to their listeners. But the Gauls would almost certainly have felt that this was exactly the kind of humiliation the god deserved. It would have seemed small recompense for the castration of Agdistis, and this detail would have established Epona's audacious androgyny in a way that her victory alone could not have done. In this form, the story would have been extremely popular among Gauls and Greeks alike. The Greeks would probably have equated it with the story of Dionysos' penetration with the fig-wood phallus, and with the implied penetration of the satyrs by the thyrsos-wielding maenads in classical Greek art as in the photograph above.[\[755\]](#)

In more profound religious terms however, the god's humiliation was also symbolic of the sun being “brought low”[\[756\]](#) in preparation for his sexual reunion with the Earth Mother. Thus, all the underlying elements we see in the Pompeii fresco were present in Phrygia over three hundred years earlier.

## LOOSE ENDINGS

At first sight, the fact that no archaeological evidence for Epona has been discovered in Anatolia poses the strongest argument against it being where she originated in human form. However, considering what we do know, this lack of evidence is hardly surprising. Given the Celtic aversion to recording their religious beliefs, it is only to be expected that they would not depict Epona in artwork until long after they had begun to conceive of her in human form. For the Greeks, on the other hand, the “barbarian” Gallic goddess was probably not important enough at first to make an interesting artistic subject. Her only significance to them would have been in connection with Demeter and her unnamed daughter(s). But once these connections had been made, the deep secrecy surrounding the identity of both Despoina and Persephone would have mitigated against any open or artistic reference to Epona.

As far as Romano-Celtic art was concerned, the situation in Anatolia was vastly different than in the more westerly Roman provinces - especially Gaul. First of all, Rome had little direct influence in Anatolia until after its victory over Mithridates VI in 85 BC, and then the Romans only maintained a minimal military presence in the Asian province.[\[757\]](#) From this point onward the Gallic tribes in Phrygia were staunchly loyal to Rome, and needed no images asserting Celtic sovereignty and independence as they had in Gaul. When Augustus made Galatia a Roman province in 25 BC, centres of emperor worship - like the Phrygian temple rebuilt to venerate Augustus by the Gallic king's heir, Pylamenes - served as models for other provinces

throughout the empire.[\[758\]](#) The face of Gallic religion had thus changed dramatically during their sixty-year allegiance to Rome. By the time the Romans might have influenced Galatian art, Epona's original *raison d'être* in Phrygia no longer existed. Although she may have continued to play a hidden role in the Anatolian-based Mysteries, her popular worship had almost certainly long-since moved westward.

In the absence of evidence, the story of Epona's emergence in Phrygia outlined above has necessarily been a speculative “construction rather than a reconstruction”.[\[759\]](#) Nevertheless, it does fit the known facts and explains the themes we see later in Romano-Celtic art. Meeting a basic criterion for scientific theory, the story could also easily be disproved by discovering incontrovertible evidence of her origin elsewhere.[\[760\]](#) But, as it stands, the most likely place for Epona to have emerged in human form was Phrygia - probably within the first year or two after the Tolistobogii had settled around Pessinos.

We know that she existed in the minds of the Celts before she was depicted in Romano-Celtic art,[\[761\]](#) and the sacred symbolism on Celtic coin imagery of the naked female-riders strongly suggests that the Horse Goddess had already been conceived in human form before the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Given the pressing Gallic need for a spiritual connection with the land in Phrygia, becoming the Great Mother's “foster daughter” was a powerful stimulus for her birth in human form to occur. This also provides the simplest and most plausible explanation for the Romano-Celtic portrayals of Epona both aside her horse and as Mistress of Animals, as well as for her functional androgyny in the Pompeii fresco.

That a ritual of some kind was performed to imbue Epona with human form is virtually guaranteed by the profound religious importance of the event. That it was the ritual described in the myth of her birth is also strongly supported by Gerald of Wales' account of a nearly identical ritual performed in 12<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. As for the magico-spiritual details of the construction presented above, there are many historical accounts of the ways magic was performed in the ancient world, and many Insular Celtic descriptions of related druid rituals and magic. The *Tarbhfhess*, or “bull sleep”, performed as part of the rituals of sovereignty, is a closely-related example.[\[762\]](#)

What is centrally important here however, is that Epona's origin myth was very likely to have been a description of the way in which she was actually given human form - one that survived at least in part because it was both shocking and fascinating. Since the Greeks had already equated Kybele with Demeter, a Phrygian origin provides a firm basis for identifying Demeter as the Mare in Epona's story. Her prior relationship with Kybele provided the necessary historical context for the mythic rapprochement of Despoina, the

Great Mare, and Epona's unnamed mother. It also makes historical sense that her identification with Despoina first occurred in Anatolia (probably in Ionia or Aeolia), and that the idea then diffused westward across the Aegean to the Greek colonies in southern Italy together with the story of Dionysos' humiliating defeat. Not only does this account for the presence of Epona's myth in Italy, but it also explains the details in the Pompeii fresco and her very strong association with Ceres and Libera-Proserpina in Rome - neither of which can be explained simply on the basis of her adoption by the equites singulares in Gaul.

By contrast, Epona's diffusion among the tribes in Thrace and beyond was artistically typified by the Mistress of Animals theme. Here, it is extremely significant that the 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> century cult of the “Danubian Horsemen” apparently not only centred on Epona as “Mistress”, but also included the Thracian Horsemen whose deference to the sovereign goddess was integral to the restored natural order in which their alter-ego, the now-healed solar-sky god as the Earth Mother's son, was once again portrayed as resplendent in the sky above.[\[763\]](#)



*Figure 43 Danubian horsemen with Epona.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Heart of the Mysteries

When we hear the word “mysteries” today in relation to ancient spiritual knowledge, it might conjure up any number of images and associations. But for the Greeks, and later for the Romans, the word had a very specific meaning - at least in its generally recognizable features. It referred to secret initiatory rites or rituals centring around a specific deity (or group of deities), and to the equally secret teachings and knowledge that were revealed to initiates in the process. Typically, their goals were also very specific: they offered some form of immortality and apotheosis through union with the deity at their centre.

There were several different versions to choose from. The oldest were the Mysteries of Kybele, of Demeter and Persephone, of Despoina, and of Dionysos - all of which had roots reaching back to the Bronze Age and beyond. The Mysteries of Orpheus appeared in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (but probably had more ancient roots), whereas the Mysteries of Isis were a relative new-comer in the form that spread around the Mediterranean between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Much the same was true of the Persian influences on the Mysteries of Mithras, which the Roman army fostered exclusively for men during the same time period. Although these various Mystery cults were all distinct, with their own particular emphasis and flavour, they were also closely interrelated. Their central deities often played a role in the Mysteries associated with another deity, and people were frequently initiates of more than one Mystery cult or school.

The terms “cult” and “school” are typically used by historians in their ancient sense - with meanings quite different from those we might think of today. In contrast to the modern idea of a cult (a group with socially deviant beliefs and practices that preys on the naive), the original Latin word *cultus* meant “cultivation” (like tilling the soil), “worship” and “reverence”. Similarly, the word “school” came from the Latin “*schola*” and meant having the leisure time for learning - away from the demands of the work-a-day world. It also meant the followers of a particular deity (or teacher), as well as the teachings themselves and the place where teachers and students met.[\[764\]](#)

Plato gave a very useful picture of the teacher-student aspect, for example, in Socrates' conversation with the priestess Diotima in which she teaches him about the role of eros (love as desire) in the union with the divine.[\[765\]](#) The “school” aspect was evident both in the discussion itself, and in Socrates' repeated references to himself as her student. In addition, the subject they discussed concerned a very special type of knowledge and learning arising out of the rituals at the heart of the Mysteries. The dialogue

also makes it clear that the older Mysteries were open to both genders, and that their rituals depended on the erotic polarity between men and women - a fact we also see in the frequent ancient references to their “orgiastic” rites. [\[766\]](#)

The word “orgiastic” also requires some explanation. The Greek word ὄργια (“orgia”) originally referred to the spontaneous (unscripted) and ecstatic nocturnal rites that were characteristic not only of the Mysteries of Kybele and of Dionysos, but also those of Demeter and Persephone. [\[767\]](#) These *orgia* centred around the cultivation of eros - as described in philosophical terms by Diotima, and in more allegorical terms in the story of Eros and Psyche (soul) illustrating the transformation of sexual desire into spiritual longing and devotion. [\[768\]](#) The core idea was simple: eros connects body and soul, and fuels our union with the divine.

With the exception of the Mithraic Mysteries (and the exclusive male societies of Thracian Orphism), the Mysteries all centred on the Sacred Feminine: union with the divine meant union with the goddess in the womb and tomb of the earth. This was true even in the Dionysian (and Greek Orphic) Mysteries - a fact implied in mythic references to Dionysos being healed and initiated into the Mysteries of Kybele, but also illustrated in a set of wall murals at the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. In the damaged panel shown on the following page, [\[769\]](#) for instance, Dionysos reclines in the lap of the enthroned goddess. In an adjoining panel, a young woman prepares for her initiation and ultimate union with the god. Through her experience of entheos - having the “god inside” her - she would identify with the goddess in whose lap he reclined. As a result, she would experience a two-fold union with divinity: in both its male form, and in its profound female depth and centrality within her.

For both men and women, union with the goddess required a journey to her underworld realm of death and rebirth. It was an extremely ancient theme - probably dating from before written history began. It first appeared in writing in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC in the Sumerian story of Enki's journey to the underworld and his union with its Queen, Ereshkigal. Inanna-Ishtar also made this epic journey to death and rebirth in Ereshkigal's realm. [\[770\]](#) Later, in Greek myth, Heracles and Orpheus both made the heroic journey and, in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Greek philosopher Parmenides gave a beautiful account of his own journey to the underworld - and decorously described his union with the goddess in terms of being “instructed” in her wisdom. [\[771\]](#) In the imagery he used, Parmenides was also alluding unmistakably to the sun's annual death, union and rebirth in the womb and tomb of the earth. This was the archetypal pattern underlying the journey mirrored for millennia by gods and goddesses, by heroes, and by initiates in the rituals of the Mysteries.



*Figure 44 Dionysos in the lap of the Goddess*



Epona must have been completely at home in this context. Long before she was given human form, the Horse Goddess was intimately associated with the sun's journey to, and union with, the earth: it was as archetypal a theme for the Celts as it had been for the rest of the ancient world. We can see this with Epona as the Lady guiding the solar stallion to the underworld, and as the Earth Mother receiving his fertilizing rays. This dual aspect was also expressed in her guidance and protection of the warrior-hero on the journey in and through the realm of death to regeneration and rebirth. Union with her was also implicit in the Celtic rituals of kingship. Even in her purely Celtic guise therefore, Epona was pre-eminently well-suited to the Greek (and later Roman) Mysteries. All that was needed was a close enough cultural contact for the Greeks to realize these connections with their own pantheon and mythology.

## MYSTERIES OF “THE MISTRESS”

When they did become aware of her, the Greeks' first instinct might have been to equate Epona with Hekate - a goddess who could also travel at will to and from the underworld. But the Gallic-Phrygian idea that she was the daughter of Kybele no doubt had a powerful impact on them. Her obvious mythic connections with Demeter, and her close resulting parallels with Despoina made identifying the two goddesses almost inevitable - certainly easy and natural - right from the beginning. The idea would have spread quickly, first in Anatolia and Thrace, and then in other parts of the Greek world. Within a generation or two, the Mistress' secret name was likely to have become “Epona” in many places where these Mysteries were kept. Due to the secrecy that surrounded Despoina's identity (and the Mysteries in general) however, knowing what this actually meant for Epona depends entirely on discovering clues like the ones explored in the last chapter. To do this, the most helpful place to start is probably with the heart of Despoina's Mysteries in Arcadia.

## THE ARCADIAN MYSTERIES

Judging from the layout of Despoina's sanctuary at Lycosura,<sup>[772]</sup> the archetypal journey of the sun and its union with the earth were symbolically summed up in Demeter. But the seasons, cereal grain and other fruits of the earth that lay at the centre of Demeter's “power and favour” were not the focus of these Mysteries.<sup>[773]</sup> According to Pausanias, she was “a *second* goddess in the Mysteries of her daughter...”<sup>[774]</sup> Kybele too, the great “mother of all gods and all men”,<sup>[775]</sup> was physically placed in the background. Nevertheless, the fruitfulness of both Mothers was clearly the

cause and ultimate *raison d'être* for their daughter's Mysteries: the ancient belief was that all things come from and return to the “womb and tomb” of the Mother.

The presence of Artemis however, provided a major clue to the more immediate purpose of the Despoina Mysteries. Significantly, her temple stood at the entrance to the Arcadian sanctuary and she was represented by two large statues - one at her temple, and the other holding a torch and serpents at Demeter's side in the central sculpture in the inner sanctuary.[776] It is tempting to identify her role in these Mysteries with that of Hekate. The two were often equated from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC onwards,[777] and it is extremely likely that Artemis was seen as leading initiates to the Mistress in the inner sanctum. However, the fact that she was believed to be the daughter of Demeter in Arcadia,[778] and was identified with Kybele as Mistress of Animals,[779] both suggest that the dedication of the temple at the sanctuary-entrance to Artemis *Hegemone* - “Leader” - held a special significance beyond any equation with Hekate.

This deeper significance was hinted at by the Kouretes and Korybantes carved on the base of the central sculpture - the ecstatic Minoan and Phrygian fraternities of naked but helmeted and spear-carrying young males, whose presence at the sanctuary Pausanias chose to “pass by in silence”. The key to the secret he would not reveal lies in the fact that these mythical fraternities were rooted in the real training and initiation of young males as warriors or guardians devoted to the goddess.[780] It was a training that persisted from the Bronze Age right down into classical times. In the Iliad, for instance, Agamemnon tells Odysseus to pick out the best or bravest young warriors (*kouretes*),[781] and in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC/AD Strabo recorded a long-standing tradition that the Kouretes of Aetolia and Acarnania (on the Greek mainland opposite the Peloponnese) had been imported from Crete.[782]

The Mycenaean Greeks, who had absorbed so much of their culture and religion from Minoan Crete, settled extensively throughout this part of Greece as well as in Ionia and in the Peloponnese. It was almost certainly this Minoan influence that inspired the Spartan “*agoge*” - the training of young males dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century BC attributed to Lykourgos, the legendary lawgiver who brought rigorous discipline to Spartan society.[783] Most significant in the present context however, was the fact that Sparta was only 30 miles (50 km) southeast of Despoina's sanctuary at Lykosura where the ecstatic Kouretes and Korybantes danced at her feet.

Famous throughout Greece, aristocratic families from other Greek city-states sent their sons to Sparta to train in the *agoge* (“rearing”) and the Romans later copied it in the training of their own young men.[784] Starting at the age of seven, boys were taken from their families to live in groups

called “herds” (*αγελαι*) and their training continued until they were twenty, when they became full members of the Spartan army. In basic outline, the *agoge* was highly competitive and discipline was rigorous. In addition to encouraging conformity, obedience and absolute loyalty, the training focused on military and hunting skills together with athletics, dancing, singing and social skills.[785] The girls (probably from a similar age) exercised naked with the boys, and were encouraged to humiliate them.[786] No doubt this played a significant role in their training. Hardship, austerity and pain were the dominant themes from beginning to end, but the presence of the girls and the role-model of the dancing Kouretes and Korybantes suggests that rather than merely learning to endure pain these young males learned to transform their pain into erotic ecstasy.

In fact, this seems to have been a central goal of the *agoge*. We get a further hint of it in a curiously paternal phrase Pausanias used when he referred to the “scourging of the lads” at the altars of the Tauric Artemis.[787] He attributed the practice to Lykourgos, and it was clearly a part of the *agoge* since the only Spartan “lads” exempted from the training were the first-born sons of the two ruling families (those not considered fit enough for the training were exposed as babies to die).[788] Evidently the scourging was presided over by priestesses who ensured that the scourgers did not “spare the lash”. [789]

This sounds brutal, of course, and it is not surprising that the scourge often symbolized judgement and severe punishment.[790] But, while Philostratus called this ritual at the altars of the Tauric Artemis “a contest of endurance”, [791] it was not a punishment for wrong-doing. That there was another purpose for scourging in the ancient world was beautifully exemplified by the Egyptian goddess Menat (Hathor) driving away both evil spirits and *care* with her scourge, [792] and by the ritual use of the scourge in the Greek Anthesterion and Roman Lupercalia festivals to purify and increase fertility. [793] Paradoxically, the scourge could be seen as an instrument of *happiness*, and where Artemis was concerned in the *agoge*, the ecstasy of the scourging was implied by the “peculiarly erotic and challenging” intensity she exuded as an intrinsic part of her inviolable virginity. [794]

Apparently, at Despoina's sanctuary in Lykosura, Artemis was seen as the “Leader” of the Spartan “herds” and, like any true Mistress of Animals, her primal power over “the lads” lay in the glistening throne of her erotic attraction. [795] In the same way that Aphrodite's power to transform the “dread beasts of prey” was a reflection of the Sumerian Mistress Inanna more than a thousand years earlier, [796] Artemis' erotic power and scourge mirrored the “whip, the goad, and the halter” Inanna had used on her lovers (both animals and men). [797] Caught in the net of her inescapable erotic

allure, but denied release by her inexorable virginity, the Spartan lads must have felt something akin to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (the mystery that terrifies yet fascinates and compels):[\[798\]](#) their pain transformed to ecstasy in her numinous power.

In a very strong sense, Artemis and Despoina represented two aspects of a single process. Both considered daughters of Demeter, the two goddesses were essentially one. The denial of sexual release symbolized by Artemis' virginity was poignantly juxtaposed with the anticipated release in union with the Mistress at the heart of these Mysteries. When Artemis finally led the “lads” to the inner sanctum to experience that union, their release would come in blissful and unconditional surrender - one in which, beyond all fear of pain and death, they would give their absolute loyalty and devotion to the Mistress. The presence of the ecstatically dancing Kouretes and Korybantes in the central sanctuary practically guarantees that these Mysteries were dedicated to an initiation-based military training, and it comes as no surprise to learn that it was “especially [youths] of noble and distinguished birth” that were treated in this way.[\[799\]](#) Like Leonidas and the three hundred Spartan men who died holding off the massive Persian army at Thermopylae, this was a training for heroes.

## BEYOND ARCADIA

It is possible that Greek colonists from Arcadia took the Mysteries of Despoina with them to Aeolia or Ionia on the west coast of Anatolia.[\[800\]](#) But since both the Arcadian Mysteries and the Spartan *agoge* were so strongly influenced by the training of the Kouretes and Korybantes, it is very likely that the underlying theme of these Mysteries originally came to Arcadia from Crete *via* Anatolia. In any case, by the time the Gauls arrived in Phrygia in the 3rd century BC, there can be little doubt that local versions of the Despoine Mysteries were practised in Greek colonies throughout Anatolia. It was in these colonies that Epona was most likely to have become an integral part of these ancient Mysteries.

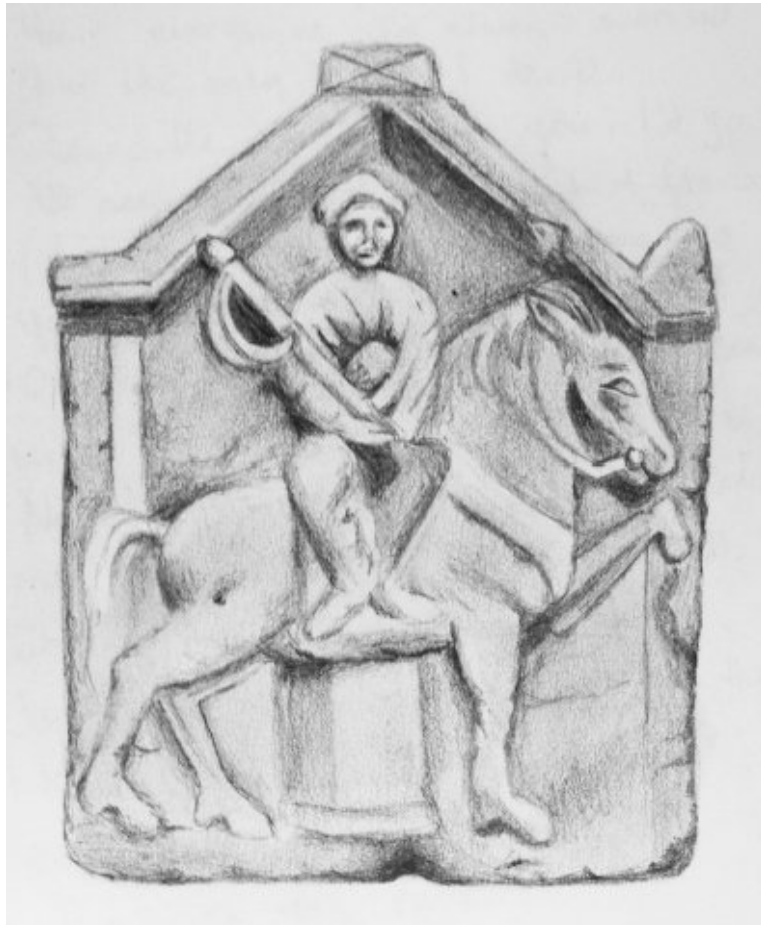
In addition to her identification with Despoina however, it is also extremely likely that Epona was identified with Artemis. Unlike Artemis, of course, she was not a paradigm of virginity in the Athenian (or modern) sense. We have already explored several of her sexual liaisons, and sexual union was fundamental to her roles both as earth Mother and as sovereignty goddess. Nevertheless, her nymph-like allure was certainly a match for Artemis' erotic intensity, and as Mistress of Animals she was entirely capable of denying sexual release while intensifying the male desire for union. This was implicit in her role as underworld guide (her own similarity to Hekate), since the journey itself served to delay the release that would finally come in

union with her. But beyond this, these “daughters” of Demeter also shared something else of vital importance: like Artemis, Epona too carried a scourge.  
[\[801\]](#)

Perhaps the most unexpected and surprising of the symbols used in Epona's artwork, her scourge can be seen very clearly in the illustration of a relief carving from Gourzon-Le-Châtelet pictured on the following page.[\[802\]](#)

But this was not the only example. A beautifully decorated metal-on-wood figurine of Epona with a detachable scourge was recently found in a well at Saint-Valérien (Yonne) in northwestern Burgundy.[\[803\]](#) The Celts' practice of depositing votive offerings of a martial nature in water was common enough to have been noted by Greek and Roman writers,[\[804\]](#) and this find suggests that there may well be other examples that have not yet been discovered. In any case, although the artwork and locations of both the figurine and the Gourzon-relief were Gallo-Roman, they clearly drew on a well-established tradition concerning Epona.

It has been suggested that Epona used the scourge to “direct” her horse.  
[\[805\]](#) This was extremely unlikely however, since we have already seen that she needed no saddle or reins to guide her mount (Chapter Three). Quite apart from this, although equestrians sometimes use a riding crop, and a whip might be used (lightly) in driving a horse-drawn carriage or chariot, a *scourge* would never have been used on a horse for either purpose. On the contrary, the scourge was invariably used on humans. While in other hands it might have represented the authority to punish wrong-doing, when held by Epona it can only have symbolized fertility and freedom from care in submission to her sovereignty - almost certainly through a purifying and ecstatic heroic discipline.



*Figure 45 Epona & Scourge*

In the Gourzon-relief, it is especially significant that Epona's feet are resting on an altar. This places the use of her scourge firmly in the context of sacred ritual, exactly as it was in the temples of Artemis - not only at Despoina's sanctuary in Lykosura, but throughout Anatolia.[\[806\]](#) This makes it extremely likely that the Greeks identified the two goddesses, and that Epona's scourge originated as a direct borrowing from the Tauric Artemis. In this connection it is significant that Plutarch related a story about a Gallic priestess of Artemis at Pessinos: a goddess, he informed us, "*whom the Galatians especially reverence*".[\[807\]](#) Since there is no particular reason to think that the Gauls had a special place in their hearts for Artemis, it is far more likely that Plutarch was drawing on the earlier identification of Epona with Artemis - possibly to avoid any implication that she was the secret Despoina.

While Artemis and Despoina represented two distinct roles or phases in the Arcadian Mysteries, Epona embraced both in the journey to the underworld and the ultimate union with the goddess. Her adoption into the Despoine Mysteries in Anatolia would thus have had an element of economy. In contrast to Lykosura, the same Mysteries could be enacted with a single "Leader" and Mistress. This would have been equally true (if not more so) in Thrace and along the Danube, where the Tauric Artemis had no special affiliation and Epona's presence as Mistress was especially strong.

## THE DANUBIAN CULT

Epona's adoption into these Mysteries - as both "Leader" and Mistress - would certainly help explain why she apparently became the goddess at the heart of the so-called "Danubian Horsemen" cult that was active along the Danube from Thrace (Bulgaria) to Noricum (Austria) in the 2nd century AD. [\[808\]](#) The central element in the imagery of the cult was a goddess - either standing or enthroned - flanked by two riders on horseback in the middle register as in the 2nd - 3rd century plaque from Thrace pictured at the end of Chapter Seven.[\[809\]](#) These miniature icons (they fit in the palm of the hand) seem to have been a very clear symbolic reference to Epona's role as Mistress in a context that was just as clearly Mystery-related. However, since the cult evolved over time and integrated elements from a variety of cultural and religious sources, there has been much scholarly debate about who this central goddess was. Nevertheless, the general consensus now seems to be that at least in the later stages of the cult's development she was indeed Epona.[\[810\]](#)

In the earlier icons, there was only one rider - portrayed in the likeness of the Thracian Horseman (Chapter Six): a motif preserved in the twin riders of the cult's later imagery. The earlier versions seem to express the theme of the



hero's deferential relationship to the goddess who, in the earliest icons, stands to the side welcoming him. At a slightly later stage when the goddess was moved to the centre and shown in the “imperial” style of the Anatolian Mistress flanked by the twin riders saluting or bowing their heads in submission to her,[\[811\]](#) the imagery expresses the same theme - one closely-related to the roughly contemporary Bulgarian funerary stele, shown again below. The syncretic nature of the cult can be seen in the fact that the riders have been variously interpreted as *Kabeiroi* (closely associated with the Phrygian Great Mother), as “*Thraco-Mithraic*” riders,[\[812\]](#) or as *Dioscuri*: the Greek twins Kastor and Polydeuces (Castor and Pollux).





*Figure 46 Thracian Horsemen & Epona*

The Dioscuri twins were both horsemen (who carried off and “married” Phoebe and Hilaeira, the “daughters of the white horse”), and had a very strong and ancient association with Sparta. They also participated in the hunt for the Calydonian Boar that Artemis sent to ravage Calydon in Aetolia because their king failed to honour her (ironically the beast was brought down by Atalanta, a virgin huntress devoted to Artemis). Perhaps most significantly however, the Dioscuri were said to be the inventors of war dances (like those of the Kouretes, the Korybantes, and the *agoge*-trained Spartan warriors), and images in which they too attended a goddess were widespread.[\[813\]](#)

It is clear that the Danubian cult centred around a solar-celestial, earth-underworld theme in which death and regeneration were juxtaposed. The Dioscuri brought this into sharp relief through their prominent dual association with death and immortality. In this connection the theme of the boar-hunt also takes on greater significance, since it was a primary characteristic of the Thracian Horseman and implicitly underscored the heroic warrior aspect of the Danubian cult. According to the Greek geographer Strabo, boars were noted for their height, speed and pugnacity, and were dangerous to both wolves and humans who approached them.[\[814\]](#) Because of this, the boar-hunt has long been seen as building the kind of character and courage needed in young warriors.[\[815\]](#)

In this connection, it has also been pointed out that the small size of the Danubian cult icons were typical of mobile military units,[\[816\]](#) and the martial aspect of the cult is probably what suggested the “Thraco-Mithraic” interpretation of the horsemen. However, while Mithraism may have had some influence on the cult's development,[\[817\]](#) it is certainly significant that Epona was seen as a “popular female *alternative* to Mithras” on the “limes” (the fortified frontiers of the Roman empire).[\[818\]](#) Certainly the Danubian cult could not have been strongly influenced by Mithraism since it excluded women. Quite apart from the centrality of the goddess, the priestesses pictured at the altar in the lower register of the icons must have been a vitally important element of the cult from its earliest beginnings. By the same token, the solitary rider's devotion to the goddess in the earliest cult imagery had no Mithraic counterpart. He was clearly the original heroic role-model for the cult's warriors, and as the Thracian Horseman he had been widely popular long before the the 1st century AD when the Romans adopted Mithras. The resplendent solar god in the upper register of the cult's imagery was also pre-Roman, and almost certainly originated in Thracian Orphism: even in the Danubian cult, his relationship to the Earth Mother was evidently of paramount importance.

Likewise, the idea that Epona was introduced into the cult from Gaul by the Roman legions also flies in the face of the evidence. Most importantly, if that had been the case, we would expect her to be mounted aside her own horse - a form that would have been completely alien to the fundamental theme of the riders' devotion and deference to the goddess. Instead, the cult imagery reflects the eastern Mistress of Animals theme: both in the enthroned "imperial" or Anatolian style of the later images, and in the Syrian-Mesopotamian motif of the standing Mistress used in the earlier cult imagery. Indeed, the standing version may well have reflected Epona's identification with Artemis (Chapter Two) - and her early adoption into the cult. Apart from this, the development of the cult's imagery also seems to have moved from east to west: from Lower Moesia (Bulgaria) along the Danube toward Noricum (Austria).[\[819\]](#)

When these points are combined with the very strong parallels between the imagery of the cult (in all its phases) and the Bulgarian funerary stele (above), two things become clear. First, Epona was already intimately associated with the ancient theological (goddess-centred) theme central to the Danubian cult. Second, she was implicitly connected with the single Thracian rider in its earliest imagery. Regardless of whether she replaced a local goddess, or was the original goddess before the Anatolian Mistress style of portrayal became standard, these facts suggest that her presence in the cult had an older, richer, and more eastern milieu than simple contact with the Roman legions can explain.

When it comes to identifying Epona as the central goddess, the most controversial elements are the fish that form a constant theme in the imagery. A number of suggestions have been made about their possible origin and significance, and the syncretism of the cult has often been pointed out.[\[820\]](#) But fish were a recurrent theme in Gallo-Roman imagery of the Celtic Mothers, and the fact that Epona was "primarily" a (Gallic) mother-goddess is therefore symbolically congruent.[\[821\]](#) When this is combined with Epona's popularity as an alternative to Mithras, and with the very close links she had with Despoina, the Dioscuri, Artemis and the *agoge*, these elements strongly suggest the Danubian cult originated in a fusion of ancient Thracian religion with the Anatolian-based Despoine Mysteries - with Epona as their central Mistress.

This idea is reflected in the Gourzon-relief and the Saint-Valérien figurine. Although in both cases Epona was shown mounted aside her horse (the style most common in Gaul), her scourge can only be explained on the basis of her intimate connections with Artemis and the Despoine Mysteries in Anatolia. Rather than being adopted into the Danubian cult through contact with the Roman legions, it seems Benoit may have been partially right after

all.[822] After her westward diffusion through the tribes in her earliest human form (reflected in the naked female riders of Celtic coin imagery), the Danubian cult seems to have played a slightly later role in the transmission of the Mistress and her Mysteries from Anatolia to the Roman legions on the limes and in Gaul. From this perspective, the Gourzon-relief and the Saint-Valérien figurine illustrate a later fusion of the Mistress and Lady in Gaul during the Roman period.

Certainly there are hints that the Celts adopted this “eastern” fusion, and even that Epona diffused through the tribes in this form as far as Ireland. The idea of the hero being trained by the goddess in the arts of war, for instance, was reflected in the story of Cú Chulainn and Scáthach.[823] Similarly, the theme of a hero being scourged by the goddess appears in the story of Cú Chulainn's failure to recognize the otherworldly “woman” Fand.[824] It also seems likely that the scourging of “the lads” at the altar of the goddess was the original form of the ordeal of “waiting at an altar” described in the 12th century *Scél na fír flatha*. [825] Since the ritual was related to sovereignty, it could only have taken place at an altar dedicated to the goddess. It is also significant that it involved pain, and that the purpose of the ordeal was to “prove” (i.e., to test and develop) the integrity of a prince - or hero. Though completely misunderstood in the Christian re-telling, the fact that the ritual culminated in drinking from an “enchanted chalice” may well have reflected the erotic ecstasy of the earlier eastern *orgia*. Perhaps most significantly, the ritual was said to have been brought to Ireland by a student of Fénius Farsaid: a legendary king of Scythia (home of the Tauric Artemis), whose “school” was “collected from the Greeks”. [826]

It is not hard to imagine aristocratic Celtic warriors and Roman *equites* adopting a Mystery cult so closely related to the famous Spartan *agoge* - especially one that embraced an equestrian elite, with Epona at its heart. If the imagery of the Danubian cult can be taken as an indication, the Despoine Mysteries had changed in their diffusion westward. The horsemen devoted to Epona in the upper register clearly show a new equestrian emphasis, though there were still naked young men on foot pictured with the priestesses in the register below. Regardless of rank, it is a safe bet that the ritual scourging during their initiation carried enormous prestige amongst these young men as proof of their integrity, devotion and heroic masculinity. [827]

In this light, it comes as no surprise that Epona's cult was a popular alternative to that of Mithras - particularly given its inclusion of women and its erotic aspect. In fact, it would be far more surprising if it had not been so popular. Whether as part of a heroic training, as an ordeal that tested integrity in Celtic kingship rituals, or as the basis of initiatory rites into what eventually came to be called “knighthood”, the scourging of the lads in the

cult of Epona must have been a very powerful and highly prized sacred ritual among the warrior elite. Nevertheless, we see quite a different aspect of the Mistress in the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone in Campania.

## MYSTERIES OF “THE MAIDEN”

Since Despoina had long been identified with Persephone, it is natural to think that Epona too may have been equated with the Queen of the Greek underworld - not at Eleusis, where the main centre of her Mysteries was located, but elsewhere in the Greek world. Like Despoina however, Persephone's true identity was hidden outside her Mysteries and she was typically called *Kore* - the Maiden. This was why Empedocles could only refer cryptically to the fact that, in Sicily, she was identified with the local goddess Nestis.[\[828\]](#) If Epona too had been identified with Persephone, it would have been a similarly well-hidden and closely-guarded secret.

There are several hints that this was indeed the case. Among them was the timing of Epona's feast day in the Roman calendar. There has been some caution about accepting this date as official, since the calendar that recorded it was found in a rural area near Mantua in Lombardy, northern Italy - formerly in Cisalpine Gaul.[\[829\]](#) However, since this was where veterans of the legions under Augustus settled,[\[830\]](#) it is very likely that the rural calendar reflected the official day on which Epona's feast was held in Rome, and this is certainly supported by her overt association with Ceres and her more allusive link with Libera - the Roman Demeter and Persephone.[\[831\]](#)

Most importantly, Epona's feast day would not have been chosen arbitrarily. Her native Celtic association with fertility was hardly sufficient to warrant such a prominent place in the year, and there were Roman goddesses who could easily have played that role. Venus, Fecunditas and Feronia all come to mind as examples, and Libera herself would have been an obvious choice as a goddess of fertility and the earth. She was a plebeian goddess however, and thus the antithesis of the values fundamental to patrician morality. More importantly perhaps, Libera had been officially identified with Persephone and the Greek rites of Ceres in Rome since the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. This was a “foreign” association that would have compromised the fundamentally Roman nature of the festival dedicated to Rome's oldest god. Epona however, provided a perfect alternative. Her role in the elite Roman cavalry suggested an obvious link with the acquisition and protection of Roman wealth (Saturn), while her association with Ceres and Libera tacitly acknowledged the necessary connection between fertility (Libera) and the earth-based wealth of cereal grain (Ceres).

This leaves us with a question: how did Epona come to be associated with Ceres and Libera in the first place? Their connection was not something the

*equites* would have picked up from other cultures and brought back with them to Rome. Ceres and Libera were Roman goddesses, and their relationship only had meaning within Rome itself. Epona's association with them must therefore have come about in Rome. But while her native fertility, abundance and underworld symbolism no doubt played an important part in this connection, there was an earlier precedent in southern Italy.

## GREEK CAMPANIA

The Pompeii fresco was clearly inspired by Greek rather than Roman sources. Not only was the general symbolism overtly Dionysian, but Epona's thyrsos was not an attribute the Romans would have found associated with her in Gaul and brought with them to Italy. The fresco is the earliest portrayal of Epona that we know of, and it can only have originated under the influence of the Greek colonies that had been established in southern Italy between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. The Euboeans, for example, had settled at Naples right next door to Pompeii; and the Phocaeans had founded their colony at Elea - the Roman Velia (modern Ascea), about forty-five km (less than 30 miles) south of Pompeii. Significantly, it was Naples and Velia in particular that typically supplied the “foreign” priestesses who conducted the Greek rites of Ceres and Proserpina (Persephone) in Rome.[\[832\]](#)

It has always been assumed that Epona came to Italy from Gaul with the Roman *equites*, and this was probably true in Rome itself. But it may not have been the case in southern Italy. For the Greeks, the key to seeing Epona as Demeter's daughter was her connection with Kybele and Artemis as Mistress of Animals. But this association would almost certainly have been unknown to the Romans in Gaul in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD when the fresco was painted. Even if the *equites* had come into contact with the idea in Thrace or Phrygia it would have been unlikely to influence the Greeks in southern Italy - or powerful enough on its own to influence the association with Ceres and Libera that underlay the timing of Epona's feast day.

A more likely explanation is that Epona had already been identified with Despoine-Persephone in Anatolia before the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, and was brought to southern Italy through continuing contacts between the Greek colony at Elea and their former home in Ionia.[\[833\]](#) When the *equites* later brought Epona to Rome, the priestesses of the Greek Rites from Naples and Velia would have recognized her, and highly-placed Roman initiates would then have been in a position to influence the establishment of Epona's feast day.

The groundwork for Epona's identification with Persephone in southern Italy had already been laid. In the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Parmenides (who was born in Elea and founded the Eleatic school of philosophy) described being



taken to the underworld to meet an unnamed goddess in a chariot driven by “young women, girls, daughters of the Sun”.[\[834\]](#) These “immortal charioteers” who had “left the Mansions of Night” to fetch him were almost certainly the *Horae*, or “seasons”: *Thallo* (“green shoots”), who accompanied Persephone during her ascent from the underworld in the Spring; *Auxo* (“growth”), a title for Persephone herself; and *Karpo* (“fruit”), a title for both Persephone and Demeter (*Karpophorus*, “fruit-bearing”).[\[835\]](#) Parmenides was providing clues to the identity of the goddess he could not name. He was also locating her Mysteries - and his journey to meet her - in the context of the sun's seasonal journey of renewal.

This archetypal theme was fundamentally important not just to Parmenides himself, but also to the Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone - the most ancient and venerable of all the Mysteries. It was also the underlying theme expressed in the Pompeii fresco. But long before Epona had been brought to birth in human form, Parmenides had prefigured her presence in the fresco by pointing out what might seem an insignificant detail. In his terse description of the mares that drew his solar chariot, he informed us that they were “aware just where to go”.[\[836\]](#)

The “Daughters of the Sun” had served poetically to identify the goddess at the heart of these Mysteries, and they spoke the “soft seductive words” that “cunningly persuaded” Justice to open the gates of Hades. But it was the divine mares, pulling the chariot of the Sun “as far as longing can reach”, that knew where to go on this archetypal journey. Together, Parmenides' mares and maiden charioteers formed a single composite being whose hidden identity was revealed by Sophocles at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC when he had Oedipus declare that “*veiled Persephone lead[s] me on!*”.[\[837\]](#) Thus, in Parmenides' famous Proem - from the Greek heart of southern Italy - we get a glimpse of just how easily and intimately the Greeks would have equated Epona with Persephone. Not only did this Divine Mare and Lady of the Horse guide the descent of souls and initiates down into her underworld realm, but green shoots (*Thallo*), growth (*Auxo*) and fruit (*Karpo*) accompanied its re-emerging Maiden Queen regardless of whether her name was Greek or Gaulish.

## THE NATURE OF HER MYSTERIES

It was not just her name that was secret. The hidden goddess at the heart of these Mysteries was *the secret*: she herself was the *arrhetos Koura*, the ineffable or “unspeakable maiden” (Persephone was the only divine being to whom the Greeks ever gave this epithet).[\[838\]](#) This central mystery - beyond all words to describe - was surrounded by other lesser secrets that were also forbidden to speak, and all of this was set in a mythical context known to

everyone but seen only as preparation for the ultimate revelation.[839]

Like the Mysteries of Despoina, those of “the two goddesses” (Demeter and Persephone) were also a heroic kind of “training”: Heracles and the Dioscuri, for instance, were exemplary mythical initiates.[840] Rather than training warriors devoted to the goddess however, the Maiden and Mother offered a path to immortality - or blessed life after death - for anyone brave enough to face the terrors of the journey into darkness.[841] As Sophocles put it, “Thrice blessed are those mortals who have seen these rites and thus enter into Hades: for them alone there is life...”[842] This path, “far away from the beaten track of humans” was for those, like Parmenides, who wished to be instructed and learn “the unshaken heart of persuasive Truth” in the revelation of the goddess at the journey's end.[843] It was a Mystery “school” in the old sense in which Socrates was Diotima's student. But as she told him, her teachings on the nature and role of *eros* formed part of the *myesis*, the “lesser mysteries”. [844] Socrates had yet to experience the *epopteia*, the revelation of the most hidden mysteries through the *orgiazein*: the transformation to a higher spiritual state through the nocturnal rites of the *orgia*. [845]

The ancient and principal centre of “the mysteries” (*ta mysteria*) was at Eleusis, about 30 km (15 miles) from Athens. But, from the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC onward, what Diotima had called the “lesser mysteries” took place at Agrai in Athens during the festival of Dionysos in the month of Anthesterion (February-March). This was the first preparatory stage of initiation: the *myesis*, or “introduction to the secret”, consisting of “things said” (*legomena*) and rituals involving “things shown” (*deiknymena*) and “things done” (*dromena*). [846] One of the most important of these rituals was the purification. Because it was illustrated in artwork, and thus apparently not secret, Kerenyi believed the purification was a prelude to the *myesis*: necessary only for blood-tainted warriors and heroes. [847] But in Greece, the month of February was the established time for purifications connected with the underworld, [848] and Heracles' purification was part of the preparation for his mythic underworld journey. [849] His purification would thus have been expected, and therefore there was no need for secrecy about this general aspect of the *myesis*.

What was secret however, was the method used. The ancient Greeks used a number of different methods for purification including water, fire and incense. [850] In the artwork we are shown only the exemplary hero sitting like Demeter - veiled or blind-folded on the sacrificial ram's “fleece of purification” - while a priestess holds an empty *liknon* or winnowing fan above his head. [851] In another relief, a priestess holds a burning torch beneath the hero. [852] But the key was the *liknon*. Whether or not it was “mysticized” as Harrison thought, it suggested a method based on separating



the wheat from the “chaff” or husk (winnowing) by threshing the grain (beating with a flail) and allowing the wind to carry off all but the pure living kernel. This was a perfect metaphor for the purification of the lesser mysteries: a familiar aspect of ordinary life that fell directly within the realm of Demeter - the grain-Mother who provided access to the Maiden-goddess at the heart of these Mysteries.[\[853\]](#)

Nevertheless, the liknon was symbolic and thus a non-specific allusion. Its vagueness showed that the method of purification was a secret, and therefore part of the “things done” rather than a preliminary to the myesis. The artwork did nevertheless provide a more specific clue to the nature of the purification method, and to the fact that it was part of the myesis for all initiates - not simply a preliminary for warriors and heroes tainted by blood. The clue lay in the fact that the high priest (*hierophant*) was dressed as (i.e., identified with) Dionysos, whose festival provided the context in which the lesser mysteries took place. Apart from the very strong connection with the Dionysian Mysteries that this implied, it also suggested that the method of purification used in the myesis was probably the same or very similar to the one used during the Dionysian initiation.



*Figure 47 Dionysian Purification.*

That method was illustrated in the wall mural from the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii pictured on the previous page.[854] Unlike the artwork alluding to Heracles' purification, there was no need for secrecy in this mural since it would only have been seen by initiates. In it, the young woman on her knees is about to be caned on the purple-draped post in front of her by the winged female figure standing just beyond the post with the cane in her right hand. The wings indicated that “the limits of nature were surpassed in an additional, purely visionary dimension”,[855] and suggest that her initiation was intended to lift the woman into that dimension. The fact that the scene was part of a series of murals depicting her initiation as a whole makes it clear that the purification was integral to the process.

More significantly, not only was caning directly analogous to threshing the grain to remove its husk, but the purified living kernel that remained was personified in Dionysos *Liknites* - graphically pictured as a divine child *in the liknon* at Eleusis.[856] Certainly this was a purification by “fire” (like the burning heat of a torch held close to the skin), and in Heracles' case we would probably be very close to the truth if we interpreted the empty liknon held over his head as summing-up both the method and its intended result.[857] This was all the more likely since the high priest, the embodiment of Dionysos, had to undertake the first act of purification (the sacrifice) with the initiate.[858]

The myesis continued for just over a year and a half,[859] and it is an open question how much of that time was devoted to purification. The general mythical context for the lesser mysteries was Demeter's grief after Persephone had been abducted by Hades. More specifically, in terms of the purification, the context was Demeter's attempt to give the child Demophoon immortality. The Homeric hymn tells us that to do this, she *repeatedly* “anointed” him with ambrosia and put him “deep in fire” each night.[860] This was almost certainly reflected in the nocturnal rites of the *orgia*. It is also significant that Empedocles, an initiate of these Mysteries, placed his own teachings at a stage beyond both the purification and the *paradosis* (παραδωσεις) - a word that meant to “deliver up” or “surrender”. [861] It is most likely that the purification involved repeated returns to the “fire” until a climax was reached in the surrender of the *paradosis* - a point at which the initiate was open, and thus truly ready to learn. This was the point at which we see Heracles, “grown much more beautiful” and clothed in a fringed white garment covered with Dionysian deer skin as he stood ready before Demeter.[862]

We know that the myesis included further sacrifices and continued to include “things said”, as well as “things shown” and “done” with the ritual

paraphernalia hidden in the *cysta mystica* - the large basket on which Demeter sat, and around which a large serpent was coiled.[863] But as this twenty-month-long preparation drew to a close, there were two other specific things that had to be done: a nine or ten day fast, and the preparation of the *kykeon* - the special drink made from barley-water, Pennyroyal (probably for flavouring) and, quite likely, the euphoric milk of the Poppy. The entire *myesis* was summed up in the formulaic password (*synthema*) that the initiate of the lesser mysteries would later give in order to enter the sacred precinct at Eleusis: “I fasted, I drank from the *kykeon*, I took out of the big basket, worked, placed in the little basket, and from there into the big basket”. [864]

When the *myesis* at Agrai finally came to an end in the month of Boedromion (September-October), it was followed by a public procession along the Sacred Way from Athens to Eleusis. There, inside the *Telesterion* that could hold a thousand people, the true initiation took place: the *epopteia* in which the goddess' being, beyond all words to describe, was revealed in the blaze of the great fire that suddenly rose up in the vast darkness when the *Anaktonon* - like the *megaron* at Lykosura - was opened.[865] In the shocked silence that followed, the high priest sang out in a loud high-pitched voice, “[t]he Mistress has given birth to a holy boy, Brimo has given birth to Brimos...” [866] Amid the fires of the womb-like underworld the “queen of the realm of death” had given birth to a divine child, the winnowed kernel of life in the *liknon*. Then, in the rippling stillness of dawning realization, the ineffable mystery that cannot be spoken (even here in these words) was silently summed up in the single stalk of wheat held up by the high priest for all to see: life springs from death; end and beginning were seamlessly united in the Maiden Queen and Grain Mother - “the *Demeters*”, exactly like the *Deae Eponae*, were one and the same goddess.[867] The initiate had finally become an *epoptika*: one who “has seen”.

## BEYOND ELEUSIS

Outside Attica and throughout the Greek world the *myesis* and *epopteia* were enacted as two stages of a single initiation at *Eleusinia* - temples devoted to these Mysteries of “the two goddesses”. This must have been particularly true in colonies such as those in southern Italy, established when the two stages were still carried out within the sacred precincts at Eleusis itself. Thus the tradition was preserved more or less in its original form for nearly a thousand years. But there were also inevitable variations in the things said, shown and done from one Eleusinian to another - subtle differences in emphasis that stemmed both from the rich complexity of the mythic background, and from the pure conceptual simplicity of a truth beyond words to describe.

Dionysos, for example, was connected with the Mysteries of Persephone in vitally important ways. This was already hinted at in his identification with the high priest of the lesser mysteries, in his intimate association with the liknon, and in the symbolism of the deerskin worn by the purified Heracles. But the connection ran much deeper. The rape of Persephone - the mythic basis of her link with the underworld - begins as the ground of the Nysan Plain “gapes” open and Hades emerges to abduct her.[868] This held hidden significance since the Nysan Plain was particularly sacred to Dionysos, and Nysa was considered his birthplace and first home. More importantly, his epithet - “the gaping one” - was formed from the same word used by the Homeric poet to describe the opening of the ground.[869] We see another hint in Demeter's refusal to drink the Dionysian wine offered to her as she grieved over the loss of her daughter.

It was Heracleitos that made these poetic allusions explicit when he declared: “Hades is Dionysos”.[870] But even this profound revelation did not exhaust the richness of his connection with the Maiden Queen. An Orphic teaching related by Nonnus held that Dionysos was “born in dragon-bed... when Zeus put on a deceiving shape of many coils, as a gentle drakon [serpent] twining around her lovely curves, and ravished the maidenhood of unwedded [i.e., maiden] Persephoneia”.[871] It was a story with ancient roots in Zeus Meilichios, the chthonic (underworld) serpent-form of the god *as Hades*[872] - an archaic remnant preserved in the serpent coiled round the *cysta mystica*. Although wrapped in enigma, the circle becomes complete in the divine boy to whom the Queen of death gave birth: a boy who was ambiguously both Dionysos Liknites - the child and purified kernel of life in the liknon - and Plutos (wealth), the grain-child of Demeter.[873]

These were undoubtedly among the *legomena* and *deiknymena*, the “things said” and “shown”, in various ways during the rituals at the *Eleusinia* in Campania and Sicily. Their fundamental importance was also embedded in the symbolism of the Pompeii fresco, which was more than just an illustration of a central Isian rite. It also expressed the underlying theme at the heart of the Eleusinian-based Mysteries that both fostered and cradled the Mysteries of Isis in Campania. The cross-fertilization between the two Mystery cults was not accidental. Demeter “the Eleusinian” and Isis (another goddess who grieved and wandered) were honoured together on the island of Delos, and the accompanying inscription identified Demeter as both “maiden and woman”. [874] The hidden unity of the Eleusinian Maiden and Mother was thus mirrored in the approaching union of Epona and Isis in the Pompeii fresco - probably the most explicit and eloquent allusion to Epona's identification with Persephone (and Libera) we are ever likely to find.

One final piece of the puzzle in terms of Epona's most secret identity as

Demeter's daughter comes from Eleusis itself. There, at the entrance to the sacred precinct, was a small temple dedicated to Poseidon and Artemis Propylaia (“guardian of the gate”) - the ancient father and sister of Despoina. [875] Although the little temple was built by Marcus Aurelius in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, it clearly reflected a long-established tradition: even here, at the geographic heart of the most ancient and sacred Mysteries, the Arcadian Mistress and Eleusinian Maiden were implicitly understood as one and the same goddess. We see a glimmer of the same implicit connection in Diotima, the priestess from Mantinea - just 30 km (15 miles) from the sanctuary at Lykosura - who spoke so knowledgeably to Socrates of the myesis and epopteia.

Given the level of secrecy - on pain of death - that surrounded the goddess at the centre of these Mysteries, it is hardly surprising that the myth Agesilaus recorded in his “book of Italian History” did not reveal the identities of Epona's mother and father. To have done so would have been an unthinkable violation of both the Arcadian and the Eleusinian secret. Yet, just as Nestis embodied that secret in Sicily, it is extremely likely that Epona was enthroned at the innermost heart of these most sacred Mysteries in Campania. However, the various threads of Epona's story - of her identification with Despoine-Persephone, of her association with Artemis, of her role in the Danubian cult and her presence in the Pompeii fresco - only start coming together in relation to the gods and heroes she inspired, and the wholeness she brought about. It is to this that we must now turn our attention.

## CHAPTER NINE

# An Alchemy of Wholeness

Whether Epona first emerged in the Neolithic or Bronze Age, or in the minds of the Celts after the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, her qualities and sphere of influence gradually became more defined. But even before the concept of the Horse Goddess had formed, and long before she was given a name, she was probably perceived simply as the Divine Feminine immanent in the animals that played such a central role in Celtic life - a vital feature of the numinous world in which the Celts lived.[876] Observation and love must have blended with the ancient symbolism of the horse to imbue her with the qualities she developed. Nevertheless, it would have taken time to see her special epiphany in the mare and then to conceive of her as Divine Mare, leader of the herd: the embryonic beginnings of her motherhood, underworld wisdom and inherent sovereignty. It would have taken longer still to think of her as Horse Goddess, embracing both mare and stallion within her being: the seeds both of her androgyny and of her transcendence to Protectress, Mistress and Rider.

At this stage, Epona was ripe for birth into “womanly” form in the early decades of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. In many ways this was a new beginning. All that had gone before could be compared to conception and gestation in the womb of the Celtic mind. But her birth in human form marked her emergence into a multicultural “world of affairs”, and it was from that point forward that her embryonic qualities began to develop the definition we see later in Romano-Celtic art from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. In light of the lineage she was born into, and the multicultural influences on her, it is not surprising that Epona's growth in human form went through stages that mirrored far older goddesses. In a very strong and important sense, these stages seem to express an archetypal pattern - one inherent in every girl or young woman as she too develops into a mature “Queen” and “Mistress”.

The mythical archetype of this pattern lay in the Sumerian stories of Inanna's transformation from a “woman who walked in fear” of the sky and air gods to a sovereign Mistress and Queen of Heaven, before whom even these imposing celestial gods bowed down.[877] Inanna's growth from young womanhood was reflected more than two millennia later in Epona's growth from “beautiful girl” to Queen of Heaven and Earth.[878] Just as Inanna's mature authority was prefigured in the story of the Hulupu Tree (the source of her “shining throne”),[879] the foundation of Epona's sovereignty lay in the natural dominance of the Divine Mare. Both goddesses also had centrally-important interactions with a Queen of the earth and underworld.[880] Although there is no sign that Epona ever “walked in fear” of any god, the development of her inherent qualities was - like Inanna - also triggered, fueled and (largely) defined through her struggle with the dominance of celestial



gods, in her victories over the challenges they posed, and in her profoundly transforming relations with the masculine from that point onward.

With Inanna at the beginning of written history, and in Epona in the last centuries of antiquity, we see the outlines of an ancient spiritual 'alchemy': a process that concentrated, purified and refined not only their own inherent qualities, but also those of the gods and men they interacted with. In fact, it was a process with two connected threads, intimately entwined like spiralling strands of DNA: one that ran from young womanhood to the mature sovereignty of the sacred Feminine, while the other led from primitive manhood to the devoted and heroic masculine. In a profoundly meaningful way, it was an alchemy that depended on discovering and integrating the qualities of “the other” within themselves. Both were vitally necessary, and neither was more important than the other. Yet this alchemy depended fundamentally on the inherent sovereignty of the goddess. It was a process in which the Feminine necessarily took the initiative and dominant role - a process that demanded “a right approach to the feminine essence of nature, whether this functions in inanimate form or in women themselves”.[\[881\]](#) Only then could the Feminine work her profoundly transformative magic.

## LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

The first step was to meet and overcome the challenge of the masculine. For Inanna this came after Enki, the Sumerian god of wisdom, had given her all his *me* (powers, attributes) in his intoxication - presumably with the beauty of Inanna's “wondrous vulva” as much as, if not more than, with the beer they shared.[\[882\]](#) The challenge came when Enki realized what he had done, and tried desperately to get the *me* back. A great magical battle ensued, which Inanna won and then discovered “more *me* than Enki had given her”.[\[883\]](#) In this encounter, Inanna not only took possession of Enki's powers and gained his devotion but also found powers that already belonged to her without knowing it. There were still several challenges for her to face before the sky and air gods would finally bow to her, and Enki's assistance was crucial in overcoming the deadliest of these - her descent into the underworld. But her battle with Enki was essential, and the story illustrates very succinctly how her inherent qualities emerged into conscious definition in the process.

Epona's story has both deep similarities and striking differences. In meeting the challenge posed by Zeus-Sabazios-Zagreus (Dionysos), for instance, she took on the “sky and air” god right from the start: there were no intermediate steps. But whether he surrendered his horse and “staff of power” (as Enki had surrendered his *me*), or she took them as symbols of her victory, they clearly represented powers or attributes she had gained from him in the encounter. At the same time, they were the medium for the definition of her

own inherent qualities. The “beautiful girl” was no longer simply immanent in horse and herd: in human form, she would need a horse to express her transcendence as Rider and Protectress. Similarly, possessing the god's lightning bolt, spear or javelin-like “wanton wand” gave deliberate expression to her implicit androgyny as Horse Goddess.

For both Inanna and Epona, meeting and overcoming these initial challenges laid the foundation for their further victories - not simply by taking the “manly” powers of the gods they faced, but by discovering their own qualities and power. It is deeply significant, for example, that among the “womanly” *me* which already belonged to Inanna when she unpacked her “Boat of Heaven” was the most fundamentally important one of all: “the perfect execution of the *me*”.[\[884\]](#) A man or a god might possess them as Enki had done, but only a woman or a goddess knew how to make them perfectly effective. Similarly, although a god might ride the solar horse and carry the solar wheel, only Epona could guide his pace and direction or set the perfect timing for their union.

These few examples illustrate the outlines of this ancient alchemy. But “the devil (or God)”, as they say, “is in the details”.[\[885\]](#) To see what part they played in Epona's hidden story we need to look not only at the mythology, literature and art of the cultures that influenced her, but at priestesses who embodied the goddesses in the lineage that gave “birth” to Epona in her human form. Just as Medb Lethderg was completely identified with the goddess in Ireland, for instance, Inanna's priestess Shamhat was a human “Mistress of Animals” when she tamed and trained Enkidu (Chapter Seven).[\[886\]](#)

## RITUALS OF TRANSFORMATION

The *locus classicus* for this feminine-centred alchemy at the heart of Epona's story probably lay in the “head-overturning” rituals described in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC by Enheduanna, high priestess of Sumer:

*“...in sacred rite [Inanna] takes the broach which pins a woman's robe/ breaks the needle silver thin/ consecrates the maiden's heart as male/ gives to her a mace/ for this one dear to her she shifts a god's curse - a blight reversed/ out of nothing shapes what has never been/ her sharp wit splits the door where cleverness resides/ and there reveals what lives inside...” Meanwhile “... a man who spurned her she calls by name/ makes him join woman - breaks his mace/ gives to him the broach which pins a woman's robe...These two she changed, renamed... ordained sacred attendants of ecstasy...”*[\[887\]](#)

Both the ritual itself, and the words used to describe it, show how entwined and interdependent the feminine and masculine strands of this

process actually were. They could not even be defined without referring to each other. But by the time Enheduana wrote these lines patriarchy was already well-advanced and her terminology has to be understood in that context. She was clearly referring to a ritual that restored female power, and in consecrating the maiden's heart as "male", Enheduanna was implying more than an external or superficially dominant role. Not only did the heart symbolize the young woman's core being (her thoughts and feelings), but splitting open "the door where cleverness resides" and revealing "what lives inside" were clear references to qualities that belonged inherently to her. The line "out of nothing shapes what has never been" can therefore only refer to her transformation and new-found freedom to express her "male" qualities openly. As the psychologist Esther Harding put it, "[s]o long as the masculine side of women's nature was allowed to remain...undeveloped and unconscious, it either slept unrecognized or functioned in a purely instinctive fashion."[\[888\]](#)

In this light, the symbolism of the mace was highly significant. A type of ancient club, it had a large rounded head at the end of a long shaft - a preeminently phallic symbol, and one that had become an emblem of male power and dominance. But the phallus also represented the fecundating power that had originally belonged to the goddess. In the earliest written creation story, the Sumerian goddess Nammu fertilized her own womb to conceive and give birth to "the great gods".[\[889\]](#) Since the masculine could only come into being from the womb of the feminine, there was a sense in which this male instrument was simply the outward expression of her own fecundating power. Giving the mace to the maiden therefore symbolically restored the primal power and authority - and the natural dominance - that already "lived inside" her.

Conversely, making the man "join woman" was synonymous with re-discovering the unconscious feminine source of his being. "[B]reaking his mace" symbolized an emasculating reorientation to the inner sovereignty of the goddess - both in his own soul and in her priestesses. In the Sumerian temples of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, the head-overturning ritual was a return - in ecstasy - to the natural order of a goddess-centred universe.

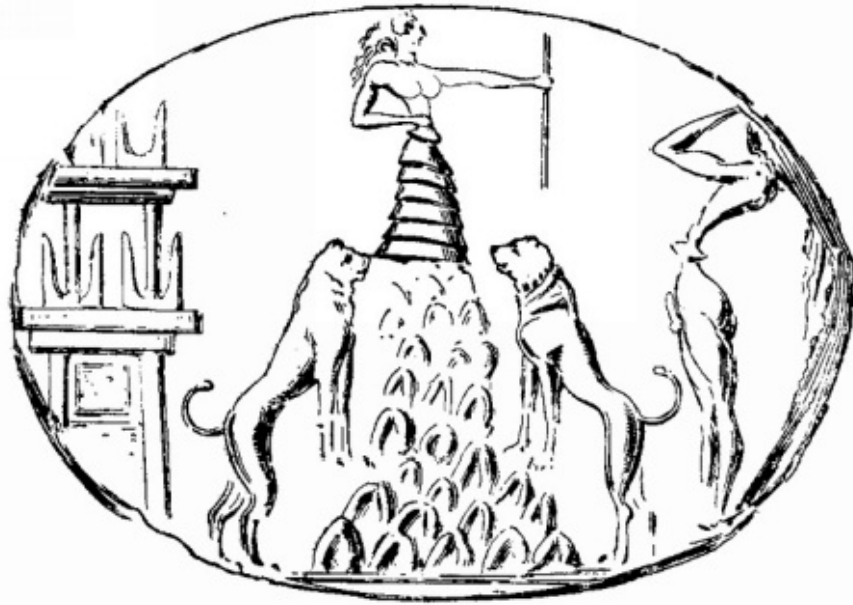
A number of the same elements were also present among the Minoans on Crete, and on other islands in the Aegean. Unlike Sumer where the head-overturning rituals were temple-based, the alchemy practised by Minoan women evidently lay at the heart of their culture. Two pieces of Minoan artwork illustrate this alchemy and its central cultural importance in a particularly succinct way.



*Figure 48 Minoan Queen*

The first was a wall mural from the Minoan community on the island of Thera (modern Santorini). Dating from about 2000 BC, the central section of the mural pictured on the previous page shows a woman dressed in traditional Minoan style with her breasts bared, sitting on the raised dais of a queen.[\[890\]](#) The gryphon beside her was a royal emblem: a creature with the head and wings of an eagle (lord of the air) and the body of a lion (king of beasts). The woman appears to be receiving a tribute from a monkey-like figure with very human features. The background is dotted with crocus blossoms - the saffron plant cultivated by Minoan women as a spice, an aphrodisiac and analgesic for menstrual cramps. The full mural includes young women harvesting the flowers and bringing them into the palace for preparation before being traded with other cultures around the Mediterranean.

The second illustration, pictured below, is a drawing of a Minoan ring-seal dating from about 1500 BC and found in the palace ruins at Knossos.[\[891\]](#) It shows the same basic theme as the mural above: a raised female figure holding a rod (an ancient symbol of power and leadership), with two devoted lionesses at her feet. The temple behind her tells us she was a goddess - probably the one the Greeks called Rhea: the “Mountain Mother”. The man standing beneath and in front of her is positioned slightly above the lions but, like them, is gazing up in full and rapt attention at this radiant epiphany of female power and authority on the mountain-top above him.



*Figure 49 Minoan Mistress of Animals.*

Together, the two pictures illustrate a continuum between the woman on the throne and the goddess on the mountain. The lion theme seen in the gryphon, and expressed more fully in the ring seal, suggests that both the queen and the goddess were “Mistresses of Animals”. The lion or lioness was a universal eastern emblem of the Mistress in the ancient world, and appeared frequently in images of Inanna-Ishtar, the Egyptian Q'desh, the Syrian Mistress and the Anatolian Kybele to name just a few of the many examples. [892] In the Minoan mural however, the gryphon's head and wings were also significant: they suggested the lifting of the woman's conscious awareness into the far-sighted realms in which we can imagine eagles soaring with the mountain goddess. The mural thus seems to depict the idea of a human queen consciously embodying the goddess: the archetypal Mistress of Animals and “Queen of Heaven and Earth”.

In both pictures, the central female figure is also shown in direct relationship to a significant secondary figure: the monkey-like creature in the mural, and the man in the ring seal. The similarities between the two pictures imply that there was a deliberate symmetry underlying them - a continuum between animal and man just as there was between woman and goddess. The setting of the mural in the context of the crocus harvest also suggests that manhood - like saffron - was cultivated by women, and that here we are being shown an early stage in that work.

The monkey-like figure possesses near-human qualities: it is able to stand upright (in a human rather than a simian way); has prehensile hand-like dexterity and intelligent facial features. The act of tribute also reflects deference - a human, rather than animal, quality. The fact that the creature has no genitals is significant. The resulting sexual ambiguity stood in marked contrast to the man in the ring seal, whose erotic response to the goddess is very explicit and obvious. Nevertheless, the figure was almost certainly intended to be seen as male: much like Enkidu in the Gilgamesh Epic, this man-beast is almost completely covered in hair. Perhaps Minoan women had no sexual interest in men at this animal-like stage of development. It is worth noting however, that his sexuality probably played an important part in the cultivation of the manhood we see in the ring seal. His tail links him very closely with the invariably male and highly sexual satyrs later associated in Greek myth with the cult of both Rhea and Kybele. [893]

Another element of this very ancient Minoan 'alchemy' expressed later in Greek myth was summed up in the story of the nymph Melissa, who brought men out of their wild state and taught them “*the feeling of modesty*”. [894] Almost certainly a survival from the archaic Minoan cult of the Bee goddess,



Melissa's name comes from the Greek word *melisso* (μελισσο) meaning “bee” or “she who makes honey”. Like Shamhat, whose civilizing art made the man-beast Enkidu “like a god”, Melissa nursed the infant sky-god Zeus in the Diktaean Cave with a mixture of her honey and her sister Amaltheia's milk. Significantly, the priestesses of Demeter and Persephone - and of Artemis - were all known as *Melissae* (“honey or bee priestesses”):[\[895\]](#) a point of particular relevance to Epona in her identification with the Maiden and Mistress.

These priestesses brought the mythic back-stories and ancient artwork to life in the realm of rituals like those described by Enheduanna - rituals in which the “head-overturning” civilizing art of Bronze Age Sumer had become the Iron Age alchemy of the Greek *orgiazein*: the transformation to a higher spiritual state through the ecstatic nocturnal rites of the *orgia*.[\[896\]](#) Regardless of what names they were given, there were apparently three main stages in this process: a crude state in which men, viewed as animal-like and sexually undesirable, were purified; a more refined state in which men were seen as beautiful, ultimately heroic and sexually desirable; and the early beginnings of a god-like state often expressed symbolically in a divine male-child born, nurtured and protected in the womb-like “cave” of the goddess. Even in this infant god-like state however, the Epic of Gilgamesh made it clear that he still had to be taught “how to listen when someone speaks”[\[897\]](#) - a skill that could not be learned without her civilizing “fire”, combined with the feeling of modesty nurtured by “Melissa's” ambrosial honey.

## ALCHEMICAL FIRE

The Gilgamesh epic makes it abundantly clear that Shamhat's “fire” was sexual: as Diotima informed Socrates over sixteen hundred years later, *eros* was fundamental to the process.[\[898\]](#) But as a priestess of Inanna, Shamhat's fire undoubtedly included more - a point Gilgamesh made explicit when he referred to “the whip, the goad, and the leash” the goddess used on her lovers. This aspect of the refining or purifying process was also implied in the rod or cane held by the Mountain goddess in the Minoan ring-seal. It was an archaic symbol of female authority, and probably derived from the goad originally used by Neolithic women to herd their animals. It was also the precursor to the mace given to the maiden in the head-overturning ritual described by Enheduanna - and to the scourge we see in Epona's hands about two thousand years later. In stark contrast to Gilgamesh's resistance however, the man in the Minoan ring-seal was unmistakably aroused by this epiphany of Feminine sovereignty.

The eroticism of this transformative “fire” was implicit in many of the key elements underlying and informing Epona's story. We see signs of it in



the Minoan cult of the Bee goddess whose honey was intrinsically linked with her sting; in the ecstasies of the naked Kouretes and Korybantes dancing round the infant child of the Minoan and Phrygian Mountain Mother; in the scourging of “the lads” at the altars of Artemis; in Demeter anointing Demophoon with her ambrosia before immersing him in fire to make him immortal; and in the *orgia* of the Mysteries of Kybele, Despoina, Persephone and Dionysos. Throughout antiquity the purifying 'alchemical fire' that transformed “man-animals” into heroes and gods evidently blended pain with erotic desire to achieve its goals.

There was no obvious sign that Epona used the full range of her transforming fire in her first encounter with the solar sky god in Phrygia. But given the historical and mythological context, it seems likely that she did. Zeus' discarded lightning-bolt on the ground beneath the naked female rider in the Redones coin (illustrated here again on the next page) suggests that Epona had replaced its “fire” in bringing about the god's ecstatic surrender. But even if she had not, the scourge she carried in later Romano-Celtic art reveals the lineage to which she belonged. In using it, both she and her priestesses - like the *melissae* of Despoina, Persephone and Artemis - would have brought the primal and ecstatic inner fire of Feminine sovereignty into more conscious expression.

This transforming fire however, was not the whole story. As the Sumerian head-overturning rituals showed, another profoundly transformative aspect of this ancient alchemy lay in men's reorientation to the primal power and authority of the Feminine - in and through the act of “breaking his mace” and giving him “the broach which pins a woman's robe”.

## EMASCULATION

Superficially, making men “join woman” referred to placing them in the submissive role that women had increasingly found themselves in under the encroachment of patriarchy. But calling these ancient rituals “head-overturning” implied a more profound change in perspective - for men as much as for women. In modern terminology, Enheduana's poem suggested that by revealing “what lives inside” these rituals revealed both the masculine side of a woman's psyche and the unconscious feminine side - the soul - of men.[\[899\]](#) In the language of the times, this meant that they restored both the intrinsic sovereignty of the Feminine and a *corresponding* submissiveness and devotion to the goddess in men.



*Figure 50 The Redones coin.*

Where men were concerned, this was achieved through emasculation - taking away their masculine or manly qualities through the symbolic castration of “breaking his mace”, and the feminization implied by wearing “the broach which pins a woman's robe”.

This Sumerian model or paradigm was also expressed in various ways in other cultures. The monkey-like figure in the Minoan mural above may reflect emasculation, for example, and another mural portraying men worshipping a Minoan woman reflects their submission to Feminine sovereignty. We can also make an educated guess that the training and initiation of young Minoan men included the dedication of their genitals to the Mountain goddess, and there was also the very strong Minoan link with the satyrs of later Greek myth. Hesiod, for instance, considered the satyrs “brothers” of the Kouretes, [\[900\]](#) and these “man-animals” may well have derived from the monkey-like figure depicted in the Minoan mural. Both apparently represented an early stage in the civilizing art that raised young Minoan men to become Kouretes.

It is highly significant therefore that an artistic theme used by Greek painters portrayed the feminization of satyrs in nocturnal rituals that reversed the normal pattern of sexual penetration. In the explicit imagery of the scene on the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Greek drinking cup pictured here again below, [\[901\]](#) the satyr was shown in a very obvious state of sexual arousal with his thighs opened to a maenad priestess wielding a phallic thyrsos - the symbolic and functional equivalent of the Sumerian mace. Also significant was the fact that the priestess was shown with her vulva turned away from the satyr - a feature that suggests much the same idea as the lack of genitals on the monkey-like figure in the Minoan mural. Although these Greek scenes were invariably placed in a Dionysian context, the nocturnal rites on which they were based probably derived from the civilizing art of Minoan women and almost certainly reflected a practice dating back at least as far as the head-overturning rituals of Inanna.

*Figure 51 Maenad & Satyr.*



Feminization and castration were also explicit in the closely-related cult of Kybele in Phrygia. Both were evident in Attis' mythic self-castration and female clothing - features mirrored historically in the *castrate* priests of the cult.[902] In striking contrast with the Kouretes and Korybantes, whose manly virility was cultivated in dedication to the goddess, both Attis and the priests of the cult sought a more profound identification with the Feminine. These themes were also present in the Eleusinian Mysteries that derived so much of their symbolism from the Minoan and Phrygian cults. The high-pitched voice of the hierophant was probably due to castration,[903] for instance, and literal or symbolic emasculation was implicit in the cut stalk of wheat he displayed at the high point of the final revelation.

The Greeks also preserved a strikingly close parallel to the Sumerian head-overturning ritual in the myth of Heracles' submission and service to the Lydian "Queen" Omphale. Although there were many variations on story, the essence remained the same. After murdering Iphitos in "a fit of madness", Heracles surrendered his mace-like wooden club and lion skin to Omphale and was made to "join woman". In classical Greek and Roman art, Omphale wore his lion-skin and held his club while he wore women's clothes and held a spindle and yarn - symbols of women's work. Like the Kouretes and Korybantes however, Heracles' feminization was not permanent. The symbols of his virile phallic power were later restored when his club and lion-skin were returned, and Omphale embraced him in "sacred marriage". Since her name meant "navel of the world", Heracles' emasculation and ultimate union with her probably represented his re-orientation to the Feminine in submission and deference to the sovereignty of an Anatolian Earth Mother.

However, emasculation was not simply a means of raising animal-like men to a more refined and heroic masculinity, or a remedy for the madness of overly aggressive "heroes". It was also used on gods: Anu ("Heaven") was castrated by his son Kumarbi in Hurrian-Hittite mythology; the Greek god Ouranos ("Heaven") was castrated by Kronos under Rhea's direction; and, in the Orphic theogony, Kronos too had his "manhood" cut off (and swallowed) by Zeus.[904] But the most revealing example of all - and the most relevant to Epona - was the feminization of Dionysos.

Ancient writers tended to view his feminization as a strategy to hide from the wrath of Hera, whose jealousy over Zeus' infidelity was blamed for Dionysos' "madness" (although this was also associated with the frenzied and ecstatic intoxication induced by the god).[905] As an explanation for his feminization however, Hera's wrath was simply the acceptable public (patriarchal) version of the story: an attempt to explain why any male, man or

god, would surrender his masculinity in submission and service to a goddess or a woman. But it was this “madness” that finally brought Dionysos to Kybele for healing and initiation into her Mysteries.[906] We see his healing feminization through the eyes of Nonnus when he described the god being nurtured “*on the arm of buxom Rhea [Kybele], stealthily draining the breast of the lion-breeding goddess*”, and as putting on “*all a woman's many coloured garments*”, fastening “*a maiden's vest about his chest and the firm circle of his bosom*”, and fitting “*a purple girdle over his hips like a band of maidenhood*”. [907]

Like the transformation of the head-overturning rituals, Dionysos' feminization was more than simply a matter of clothing. Aeschylus described him in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC as a “man-womanish” god, and Euripides referred to him as a “womanly man”. [908] Both were testaments to a more profound change - one that implicitly included a very specific sexual act involving his penetration by a fig-wood phallus. Once again there was a public version of the story: in exchange for showing him the way to the underworld, Dionysos agreed to have sex with his guide Polymnos (or Prosymnos) when he returned. When he did return however, the man had already died. To honour his debt Dionysos made the phallus and penetrated himself on Polymnos' grave.

There was more to this story, though, than meets the eye. As Pausanias put it, “[t]he nocturnal rites performed every year in honour of Dionysus I must not divulge to the world at large”. [909] Nevertheless, the essential elements were not hard to see. The journey to the underworld was the first step of initiation into the Mysteries, and the man who showed Dionysos the way played the same role as the *dadouchos* who lit the way into the Telesterion at Eleusis with his torches. [910]

The idea that Dionysos penetrated himself, on the other hand, was a deliberate misdirection. The dominant or lead role in the Dionysian rites that Pausanias was referring to belonged to the priestesses, and the phallus was one of the sacred “tools of working” kept in the *liknon*. [911] Not only was the act of penetration directly paralleled in illustrations of the priestess penetrating a satyr in the nocturnal Dionysian *orgia*, but the fact that it took place at a grave was also significant. Although usually a place of entry into the underworld in death, this story associated the grave with the god's return to the world above - and thus with his spring-time “awakening”. In the official Anthesteria festival in Athens, the rites of his awakening were performed in secret by the *gerairai*, the fourteen (or sixteen) “venerable women” of the city. [912] Dionysos' mythic penetration therefore, was almost certainly performed ritually by priestesses.

As Burkert pointed out, the Dionysian phallus symbolized arousal for its

own sake rather than procreation: “the maenads always fend off the advances of the satyrs, if need be with the help of their thyrsos wands”.[\[913\]](#) In a woman's hands, both the thyrsos and the phallus severed from the fig-tree became a “sacred wand” - the direct parallel of the mace given to the maiden in the Sumerian head-overturning rituals.[\[914\]](#) In his ritual identification with the god,[\[915\]](#) the reversed penetration deepened a man's feminization by allowing him to experience himself as “female” - thus “joining woman” in a deeply visceral and transforming way. At the same time, it gave full-bodied expression to the “male” side of the goddess and her priestesses.

All of these role-reversing elements - both mythological and historical - from Sumer to Minoan Crete, Anatolia and Greece were eloquently summed up in the Dionysian symbolism of the Pompeii fresco. But Dionysos was far more central to Epona's story than the fresco alone would suggest. In this respect, his identification with Osiris (another dismembered lord of the underworld) was almost an aside, though the story of Isis replacing Osiris' lost “manhood” through her magic was certainly not irrelevant. For Epona, Dionysos was the crucial link - not just in her relationship with more familiar gods, but in giving definition both to her own inner androgyny and to her role in cultivating the sacred masculine in gods and men.

## THE SACRED MASCULINE

The idea behind the modern phrase “sacred masculine” is an ancient one. Like its feminine counterpart, it implies an embodiment of divine qualities: a god in human flesh - an apotheosis in which men are raised to the highest possible expression of heroic and god-like masculinity. In mythology the underlying idea was summed-up in the hero who struggles against impossible odds, at great personal cost, and is finally rewarded with some form of immortality. The essential qualities of the sacred masculine therefore seem to rest on a paradoxical blend of vulnerability and strength; of exceptional courage and bravery mixed with the willingness to sacrifice personal desires and even life itself in the service of some greater good, even if that is simply to protect the life of a small child - the same qualities found in the mare's choice of a herd stallion.

Mythology provides many examples of such heroes, and the contrasts between them show that the hero's quest was not always successful. The Sumerian Gilgamesh lost the flower that could have given him immortality, for instance, whereas the Greek Heracles was finally made a god. Despite the strong patriarchal influence on these myths, the hero's success or failure depended in large measure on his relationship to the goddess: Gilgamesh's rejection of Inanna forms the background for his failure, for instance, whereas Heracles' purification, his service to Omphale, and his favour with



Persephone were fundamental to his ultimate success. In both stories, the primal centrality of the goddess and the intimately related “civilizing art” of women are discernible beneath the patriarchal veneer that overlaid them.

The sovereignty of the goddess, and the natural dominance restored to women in the head-overturning rituals, had its “fiery” aspects: the goddess' authority was inviolable, and her implacable justice could be frighteningly severe if provoked.[\[916\]](#) We have also seen several examples of the alchemical “fire” used in women's civilizing art. But this was very different from the brittle, often-brutal dominance and rigid control so common among men in a patriarchal world: men alienated from the feminine source of their being, men who spurned the goddess, and who feared and hated her power as much as their own inability to understand and control her fluidity - men who rejected the strength, wisdom, love and leadership of their mothers, sisters and female lovers.

Perhaps more than any other goddess in antiquity, Epona showed that the ancient civilizing art was performed in firm but loving ways to raise men to their highest potential in the sacred masculine. Its techniques were designed to separate men from their brutish animal state; to winnow the soft inner kernel of manhood from the hard outer husk of pride and arrogance, and to cultivate the sacred flower of virile and heroic masculinity. Its intermediate goal was a masculinity that respected and admired the goddess in women, that was utterly devoted to her and that deferred to her strength and wisdom - a masculinity that knew “the feeling of modesty”, could “listen when someone spoke”, and would willingly die to defend and protect her and those she loved. But beyond this, the civilizing art sought to cultivate a god-like masculinity that could stir her ambrosial elixir of immortal life and awaken and satisfy her own deepest yearning for surrender, secure in the knowledge that her power would be forever cherished - never undermined or usurped.

## THE CELTIC JUPITER

Among the Celts in the Roman period, the epitome of the sacred masculine was the Celtic Jupiter - the heroic solar-sky god raised high on columns of stone, symbolically riding down an underworld monster. The artwork representing him had fused the classical Roman sky god, who never rode a horse or bore a solar wheel, with the Celtic sun god and solar horse. But the image of the monster beneath the hooves of the sky god's horse belonged to old Anatolian, Greek and Thracian mythology. The image fused the very ancient Hurian-Hittite sky/storm god Teshub battling Illuyankas, the Greek sky god Zeus vanquishing Typhon on the Cilician shores, and the Thracian Horseman riding down his prey. Leaving aside the implication that the Celts had adopted this powerful mythic theme in their contact with



Anatolian and Thracian cultures, and that it had diffused westward through the tribes, its presence in Roman-Celtic art implies a profoundly relevant network of underlying associations.

These associations were labyrinthine and convoluted, but there was a connecting thread. Perhaps the best entry-way into this labyrinth now is through the Thracian Horseman, who was so intimately and unequivocally associated with Epona in the Bulgarian funerary stele.[\[917\]](#) What is most relevant about him here was his association with the Thracian-Phrygian god Sabazios. This very close association seems to have amounted to an actual identification of the two gods in Thrace. But, be that as it may, the Thracian Horseman provided an important link between Sabazios and Epona - a link also alluded to more directly in her presence at the centre of Danubian cult imagery.

Sabazios was a vitally important element in Epona's hidden story. In both the Danubian cult, and the much older mysteries of Thracian Orphism, he was the solar son and lover of the Earth Mother in that archetypal cycle of birth, death and regeneration that brought about the life-sustaining abundance of Nature. It was in this sense that his cult has been linked with the sanctuary at Perperikon in Bulgaria,[\[918\]](#) and it was a theme fundamental to Epona's role both as Mother and as Mistress of the solar stallion. It was especially in her role as solar Mistress that we begin to see Epona's "civilizing art" in relation to Sabazios' dominating presence in Anatolia - especially in Phrygia, where the Great Mother had reigned since the Stone Age. However, it was his identification with the Greek sky-god Zeus that was most relevant to Epona's larger story.

Specifically, it was Sabazios' identification with Zeus that formed the definitive roots of the later Celtic Jupiter mounted on horseback and dominating the monster of the deep.[\[919\]](#) The Thracian-Phrygian god was typically portrayed on horseback, and it was as Zeus that he was represented with his horse's hoof on the head of the Great Mother's nearly-buried bull.[\[920\]](#) The classical identification of the Roman Jupiter with Zeus provided the link with the Celtic Jupiter used in Romano-Celtic art. But what is most significant is the striking transformation from the image of dominating the goddess' bull to that of defeating the Typhon-like monster beneath the hooves of the Celtic Jupiter's horse. This change suggests that the sky god's masculine vigour had been re-directed to more constructive and appropriate ends - to protection, rather than patriarchal domination.

This transformation had deep roots in the mythic and cultic context of the civilizing art in Anatolia. In Lydian and Phrygian inscriptions, for instance, Zeus-Sabazios was associated with Artemis (in her identification with the eastern Mistress, Anaitis) and with Demeter - both key figures in the making

of heroes and gods.[\[921\]](#) The other central female figure in this regard was Kybele, with her ecstatically dancing Korybantes: virile warriors devoted to protection rather than domination. In this context it is deeply significant that Epona was intimately associated with all three of these goddesses, that her scourge can only be interpreted as an instrument of ecstatic purification in a heroic discipline, and that she was invoked together with the Celtic Jupiter at Luxeuil in eastern Gaul.[\[922\]](#) The idea that the horse-riding sky-god had accepted her “fire”, had been taught “the feeling of humility”, and had learned to channel his aggression to protect “the herd”, therefore provides a satisfying and mythically consistent explanation for this subtle but important change in his symbolism.

## ZAGREUS & DIONYSOS

The story becomes most convoluted in relation to Sabazios-Zagreus and Dionysos. Zagreus apparently had his earliest origins in Minoan Crete as an archetypal “Lord of animals”, the heroic hunter who captured wild animals alive: the meaning of the Greek word *zagreus*.[\[923\]](#) He was later adopted into Greek mythology and art as the “oriental” Dionysos with his classical retinue of wild animals.[\[924\]](#) But in Cretan and Orphic theogony this “first-born Dionysos” was seen as the child of Persephone and Zeus:[\[925\]](#) the foundation for his identification with Sabazios - another son of the Earth Mother and a solar-celestial father god. In both cases, the son grew up to become the consort and lover of his goddess-mother and, hence, became his own father: the archaic image of the annual renewal of the life-force in Nature in the form-giving fertile womb of the Earth Mother.

The Minoan Lord of animals was an important part of the picture. For one thing, the archetype was undoubtedly based on the real training of young men to hunt and capture dangerous animals such as the wild bulls used in the bull-leaping displays seen in Minoan art. This was certainly a heroic act, and the training for it was undoubtedly connected with the civilizing art at the core of Minoan culture. Zagreus was therefore a striking expression of the sacred masculine. But it is also profoundly significant that although the type of mastery over dangerous and predatory animals was very different, the archetype was clearly modelled on the much older idea of the Mistress of Animals. The implication is that the civilizing art raised men to an essential equality with women, although that “sameness” was expressed in distinctly different areas of life and on qualitatively different levels.

The Greeks' adoption of Zagreus however, introduced a patriarchal bias into the picture. Significantly, he was portrayed on a Greek bronze shield from Crete stepping on the head of a bull.[\[926\]](#) The image almost certainly derived from Minoan artistic expressions of the Hunter's prowess in a

goddess-centred culture, but the Greek shield foreshadowed the more pointedly patriarchal symbolism underlying the statue of Zeus-Sabazios planting his horse's hoof on the head of the goddess' bull in Anatolia. It was this Greek bias, strongly reinforced by the more aggressively patriarchal Achaemenid empire, that produced the situation on the ground before the Gauls arrived in Thrace and Anatolia. This was where Zeus-Sabazios and Sabazios-Zagreus had become identified with each other, and it was natural that this complex god therefore became the focus of the attack on the Great Mother's sovereignty in Anatolia.

The story of the “younger” or “twice-born” Dionysos, though mythically distinct, was nevertheless intimately entwined with this back-story. It is not surprising that Zagreus and Dionysos were often seen by classical writers as the same god. Zagreus' identity as Persephone's child and consort, for example, merges with Dionysos' identification with Hades - the chthonic or subterranean form of his father Zeus. There was also a primary connection in Dionysos' “madness”. Although often associated with the “mania” or trance-like frenzy induced by the enthusiasm (*entheos*) he evoked in his devotees when he possessed them,[\[927\]](#) it was Dionysos' own madness that eventually brought him to Kybele to be healed and reborn through initiation into her Mysteries. This was closely paralleled by the patriarchal madness that compelled Zagreus to castrate Agdistis. Similarly, Zagreus' mythic dismemberment by the Titans was directly paralleled by Dionysos' feminization.[\[928\]](#) His submission to the Great Mother, expressed in his healing and initiation into her Mysteries, restored the power taken from her - almost as if it were an act of penance for her castration.

Then, just as the dismembered Osiris' manhood was replaced by the phallus Isis made for him with her magic,[\[929\]](#) and Heracles' re-oriented masculinity was restored when Omphale returned his club, Dionysos' virility was restored in the thyrsos-wand he received as a devoted initiate in the Mysteries of the goddess. In his hand, Sabazios-Zagreus' destructive spear or “staff of power” and Zeus-Sabazios' lightning bolt were transformed into the ivy-covered emblem of liberating ecstasy and joy. Dionysos then became a central figure in rites that overturned a social order based on patriarchal values - not just in the secret *orgia* of the Eleusinian and Dionysian Mysteries, but in public festivals throughout the Greek world.

The basis for this labyrinth of mythic associations and historical events had roots stretching back to the Stone Age. But their nexus in the latter half of the Iron Age lay in Anatolia, and it comes as no surprise that Epona became so intimately entwined with this ancient alchemy once the Gauls had arrived in Phrygia. Her connections with Kybele and Artemis placed her in the thick of the story as a Mistress of Animals. Like Gilgamesh before them, both

Zeus-Sabazios and Sabazios-Zagreus were indissolubly linked with the civilizing art of the Mistress: an art that produced both the heroic Celtic Jupiter and the healed Dionysos. In effect they were the same god, and Epona's intimate association with them in the Romano-Celtic period implies and reflects a relationship that began when he was still “raw material for her civilizing art” as Shamhat had put it.

This was made all the more explicit in the Pompeii fresco by the fact that Epona held a thyrsos - an emblem echoing with all the implicit symbolism of Shamhat's civilizing art and Inanna's head-overturning rituals. Distinctively associated with Dionysos but held by Epona, it could not help but symbolize his emasculation: it was Nammu's fecundating instrument, the maiden's “mace”, Inanna's “goad”, Rhea's cane, and the maenad's phallic “wand” all rolled into one. It placed them both in the Phrygian context of the god's madness and healing transformation through the *orgia* of the Mistress. Epona's hidden identity could not have been more explicitly revealed. Whether as *Potnia Theron* or *Despoina*, the “daughter” of the Great Mother or the Great Mare, or the secret underworld Mistress and Maiden whose consort was Hades-Zeus-Dionysos, the fresco linked her directly with the gods' reorientation to a masculinity that deferred to the goddess and appreciated the complexities of womanhood. The young re-formed Dionysos had become a god who knew how to “party with the girls”. But Epona's presence in the Pompeii fresco also alluded to an entirely different dimension of wholeness - one that had much more to do with the Feminine than with the cultivation of the sacred masculine.

## FEMININE WHOLENESS

In discussing this ancient civilizing art, it is easy to get caught up in what was done to the males in the process, and thus to lose sight of what was happening within them. The profound reorientation of core values that this created resulted in an inner spiritual and psychological wholeness - one that both integrated and centred around the Feminine. But it is just as easy to lose sight of what was happening within the goddess and her priestesses. In a crucial sense, this was more fundamentally important than cultivating a more complete manhood: the ancient 'alchemy' depended on the transformative magic of the feminine - and thus on revealing and restoring “what lives inside”. This was implicit in Enheduana's poem describing Inanna's head-overturning ritual. The primary focus was on the transformation of the maiden - that of the man was secondary.[\[930\]](#) That ritual however, was simply the first step in a *woman's* awakening to the wholeness of the sacred feminine.

For a woman, as much as for the goddess herself, that wholeness

necessarily included the masculine side of her own psyche. But in the head-overturning rituals, the first step lay in undoing “the broach which pins a woman's robe” - a symbolic act that served a two-fold purpose. The broach was an emblem of her womanly submission and, in undoing it, she was following Inanna in rejecting the patriarchal values that made her walk “in fear” of gods and men. It was also an act that enabled her to step out from under the robe that hid her nakedness, and thus a restoration of her feminine sexual power. She could rejoice in her “wondrous vulva” as Inanna had done before visiting Enki, the god of wisdom.[\[931\]](#) Her raw sexual power paralleled Inanna's: implied in Enki's intoxication, and in the beautiful rhythms of the poetry that described him giving all his *me* (powers) to her in pulsing waves so like those of male orgasm - each pulse punctuated by Inanna's exultant cries of “I take them...I take them”.[\[932\]](#)

Feminine sexual power has always been able to master men and gods - at least until they awaken and want their 'me' back, as Enki had done. But consecrating the maiden's heart as “male” opened her to the original androgyny of the Feminine seen in Nammu, in Kybele-Agdistis, and in Epona. This connected her with her own creative initiative and self-fecundating power and, in doing so, restored her nascent ability to *create* “the great gods”: the basis of the feminine transformative magic or alchemy at the heart of the civilizing art. Giving her the mace, the symbolic root of male sexual and political power, extended the natural creative dominance of the Feminine that “lived within” out into the world.

The mace's capacity to penetrate had a number of implications beyond the obvious one. It was symbolic, for instance, of the rod of rulership or staff of power and of the “talking stick” - the caduceus or herald's staff that signified a messenger of the divine. It was the fiery solar-ray penetrating the soft moist earth to bring the renewal of abundant life. In a subtle shift of emphasis, it was also the purifying cane that threshed the husk from the living kernel of wheat, or the scourge that brought happiness and freedom from care: the same liberation symbolized by Dionysos' ivy-wreathed thyrsos. In each of these ways, the mace enabled the power of the maiden to penetrate more deeply than was possible with her sexuality alone and, in doing so, made men “join woman”.

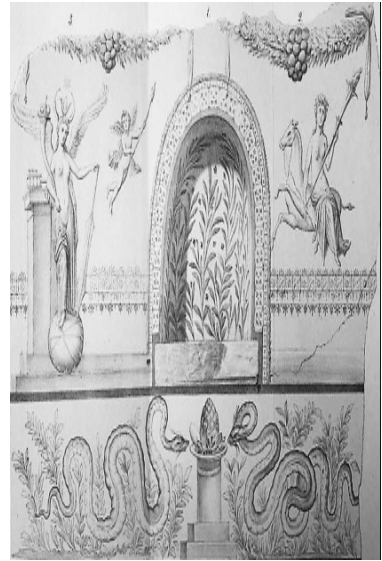
Fully embraced within the Feminine, the archetype of this penetrating androgyny was implicit in Inanna's journey to the underworld and her meeting with its Queen: her “dark sister” or alter ego, Ereshkigal.[\[933\]](#) Significantly, it was a journey Enki had already made to mate with Ereshkigal - the origin of the magical tree in which Inanna later found the symbols of her sovereignty and power.[\[934\]](#) But Inanna did not know the underworld, and her wisdom - her wholeness - was therefore incomplete.[\[935\]](#) The “knowing”

she needed was the *gnosis* of union, and her journey was implicitly sexual: she descended from her shining celestial throne to penetrate the dark depths of Ereshkigal's domain. Moving through the seven vaginal gates, she had to surrender the symbols of her celestial and earthly sovereignty one by one until she reached the deep womb of the underworld utterly naked and vulnerable. [\[936\]](#)

Her final surrender to the underworld Queen in death was a far more intimate union than Enki's could ever have been. [\[937\]](#) In her “maleness” Inanna had become the “sperm” and, like its death after penetrating the ovum, this union produced a kind of “genetic” fusion that gave birth to an entirely new Feminine wholeness. This was more than simply the original creative androgyny of the Great Mother who “curled in upon herself” to conceive “the great gods” - more, in other words, than simply the power to give life. Rather, this wholeness now included the absolute power of life and death. By calling on Enki's magical help to restore her to life, Inanna also embodied the principle of life's renewal. In embracing all of this she finally became the fully-fledged Queen of Heaven, Earth and underworld - a powerful and primal symbol of feminine wholeness.

This unparalleled event in Sumerian mythology was reflected over two thousand years later in the Pompeii fresco, shown again below (Chapter Six). [\[938\]](#) Not that the Sumerian story had any direct influence on the content of the fresco. It didn't need to. This theme of feminine duality and wholeness was a primordial one and, as such, was implicit in both the androgyny of Kybele-Agdistis in Phrygia, [\[939\]](#) and in “the Demeters” - that Greek duality and fusion of the Eleusinian Maiden and Mother that “opened up a vision of the *feminine source of life*”. [\[940\]](#)

*Figure 52 Epona & Isis in Pompeii.*





The duality and implied union of the two goddesses in the Pompeii fresco created a different emphasis in its vision, however - not just of “the feminine source of life”, but of inner transformation. While the Mysteries enacted in *Eleusinia* throughout the Greek world revealed the Maiden-Mother giving birth to her divine son, the Isian fresco recalled the ancient idea that the fecundating power of “maleness” itself had originated in the androgyny of the goddess. In her earlier victory over the solar sky god Zeus-Sabazios-Zagreus (Dionysos) Epona had repossessed her own inner maleness and, like “the maiden” in the head-overturning rituals, now held the god's primal symbol of male power. But in quiet contrast to the intense phallic arousal suggested by the upward curving shaft of the thyrsos held by the god of desire, the message conveyed by Epona's thyrsos was one of simple instrumentality: it has become a tool for providing and planting the seed of life in the fertile womb of earth. The contrast was extended to subtly emphasize her androgyny by hiding the glistening centre of her womanhood beneath the solar-coloured saffron robe, while the falling folds of Isis' violet robe unveiled her “wondrous vulva”.[\[941\]](#)

The fresco illustrated a crucial phase in Epona's journey of becoming. Having reawakened and distilled her inherent “maleness” through her encounter with the solar sky god, and thus firmly establishing her celestial sovereignty, the Queen of Heaven then had to reunite with her “female-ness” as Queen of Earth. Based on the archetypal journey of the sun toward its union with the earth, Epona sits aside the solar horse in sovereignty. But the Pompeii fresco was above all a vision of divine feminine re-integration. Like Inanna's union with Ereshkigal, Epona too must surrender completely to her own feminine nature - personified by Isis - in order to be reborn in sacred Feminine wholeness: a wholeness symbolized by the quintessentially feminine rose that was sacred to both goddesses.[\[942\]](#)

Rather than cancelling out her maleness however, the inner re-union enacted in this ancient ritual raised the androgyny of the goddess (and her priestesses) to a new level of conscious integration and balance. Far from making masculinity irrelevant, it was raised to its highest expression in - and through - the Feminine. Fueled by its erotic desire for beauty, masculine arousal provided the fertilizing medium for this inner transformation and, in the final surrender of this alchemical union, its being and essence was embraced within and entirely absorbed into the original androgyny - the now renewed wholeness - of the womb of life.

This wholeness that now embraced the masculine, also transformed it. The mystery of sacred Feminine entirety portrayed in the fresco was



indissolubly linked with the cultivation and completion of the sacred masculine - first within the goddess and her priestesses, and then in gods and men through union with the feminine source of their own being. In what may have been the first novel ever written, for instance, the “hero” was told that in order to be transformed from the ass he had made of himself, he must eat roses - the sensual emblem of Epona and Isis.[943] In a very strong sense the roses symbolized the body of the goddess, and eating her roses was the feminine equivalent of the ecstatic Dionysian *entheos* - taking the “god within” by drinking the “blood of the vine”. [944] It was an ancient mystical act of union through participation later copied in the Christian Eucharist, [945] and in the context of Apuleius' story it symbolized the man's devoted surrender to the goddess and his willingness to be enfolded into her wholeness. [946]

When Apuleius published his story in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD it can hardly have gone unnoticed that, while he remained an ass, its central character was under Epona's special protection. But he was also subject to her sovereignty as Mistress of Animals, and the many hardships he endured while still in animal form were an integral part of the purification he had to undergo before he could be transformed. Eating the body of the goddess - the soft-petalled symbol of Feminine wholeness - brought about his transformation. But his salvation was merely the prelude to his further journey into more complete manhood. A year after his initiation into her Mysteries, in which he was finally revealed to the crowd “dressed like the sun”, [947] the goddess directed him to prepare for a new initiation - into the rites of her consort Osiris-Dionysos. [948]

The circle of wholeness was then complete and, in this vitally important sense, the Isian Mysteries - as expressed in the Pompeii fresco and Apuleius' story - offered late antiquity what had always been a twin-path to human wholeness in the divine: one that depended fundamentally on the interaction of both its female and male strands. For both however, the catalyst for this alchemical transformation lay in “a right approach to the feminine essence of nature.” [949] In their own individual ways, the same was true of the Kybelian, Eleusinian, Arcadian and Dionysian Mysteries.

This ancient path to wholeness and immortality was not lost at the end of antiquity, but the Roman ban on pagan temples and public religious worship forced the Mysteries into even deeper secrecy and hiding. The ancient world - in which Epona had been conceived in the Celtic mind, brought to birth in human form in Anatolia, and became a central figure in the Mysteries of Isis, “the Demeters” and Despoina - had come to an end. But Epona herself was still being mentioned by Christian writers like Prudentius and Fulgentius in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, [950] and the seeds of her message had been planted

deeply in the fertile womb of the European collective unconscious. Turning the page on her ancient past, we can now explore how those seeds germinated unseen during the Middle Ages, how they may have put up their first green shoots in early modern America, and how they have come to flower in our own times.

# PART IV

# Seeds of Renewal

## CHAPTER TEN

# The Middle Ages

There is a certain dark truth in the idea that the Roman emperor Theodosius ushered in the European “Dark Ages” when he banned pagan religion in favour of Christianity in 393 AD.[\[951\]](#) Two very significant and telling events quickly followed. The first was the deliberate destruction of the temples housing what remained of the great Library of Alexandria by the Christian Patriarch Theophilus.[\[952\]](#) The seven-hundred-year-old library charged with collecting all the world's knowledge was more than simply a massive collection of unique ancient books. It was also part of an unparalleled centre for research and learning - home to an international community of resident and visiting scholars, students, and their families who were drawn by the ancient wisdom nurtured there under royal Egyptian support. Its destruction was a monumental loss, mirrored a few years later by the brutal murder of an extraordinary woman at the hands of a Christian mob. The murdered woman was Hypatia, a highly respected philosopher, mathematician and astronomer who was head of the influential Platonist school connected with the Alexandrian Library.[\[953\]](#)

These two events set the tone for the wilful ignorance and fanatical intolerance that came to typify so much of the Christian era. After Theodosius' permanent east-west division of the Roman Empire, Latin became the exclusive language of the educated upper classes in the western Empire. Because of this, ancient writings in other languages were lost to literate Europeans.[\[954\]](#) For the next five hundred years the “Latin west” produced no new learning; no original philosophical thinking; no contemporary written history, secular literature or art; and very little in the way of new architecture. Europe became a cultural and intellectual dead zone in which disease, hardship and a dwindling population were rampant.[\[955\]](#) These were “Dark Ages” indeed, and stood in stark contrast to the religious tolerance, pursuit of learning and prosperity that - despite its wars and deadly struggles for political power - had generally characterized the ancient pagan world.

Nevertheless, the idea of the central and sovereign Sacred Feminine went very deep. Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries in Alexandria it became the core of what modern historians call Neo-Platonism: the philosophy that later influenced the Renaissance so powerfully.[\[956\]](#) But this Feminine core of Neo-Platonism was hidden as deeply as the teachings and practices of the ancient Mysteries: it would never have been accepted by Christianity, though Neo-Platonic ideas did influence several prominent Christian thinkers. Much the same was true of the *Kore Kosmou* (“Cosmic Maiden”) in Hermeticism, or the *Shekinah* at the heart of Zoharist Kabbalism. After Latin became the

only common language of literacy in Europe, and Christianity the only religion allowed, these “mystical” philosophies and the pagan goddesses at the heart of the ancient Mysteries became inaccessible to European thought.

These developments put Epona in a unique position at the beginning of the Middle Ages. Although she was not the only goddess representing the sovereignty of the Divine Feminine, her immense popularity and Western-European Celtic roots meant that she was effectively the only goddess that continued to permeate the European mind at its deepest levels. No doubt people in rural areas continued to worship her long after Theodosius had cleared the path for Christianity. But even when they had finally been converted to Christianity, Epona remained a part of their everyday lives. She was literally “carved in stone” in the towns and villages of rural Europe and Britain where people lived and walked each day. She was also ubiquitously present in the horses that remained such an essential part of medieval life. The Horse Goddess - and all she represented - was thus deeply embedded in the European and British psyche.

We can see this expressed most directly, perhaps, in the medieval literature of the Celts themselves: in the characteristics of certain Irish goddesses, for instance, and in stories from the Welsh Mabinogion. But Epona's influence was just as implicit in the ideals of chivalry and courtly love that later emerged in Europe. With good reason therefore, we might say that the Middle Ages were a time of dormancy for the seeds Epona had planted in European consciousness, but also a time of unseen germination in the “collective *unconscious*”.

## EPONA IN IRELAND

Given the universal importance of the horse in Celtic culture, and the Celts' love of goddesses, it is possible that there was a native Irish Horse Goddess long before the Middle Ages. Certainly the old name for the Province of Connacht, *Cóiced Ol nEchmacht* (“Fifth of the Great Horse-Warriors”), would support this possibility. But it is also entirely possible that Epona herself came to Ireland at a relatively early date. Not only had the Greek explorer Pytheas sailed around Britain (what he called the “Pretannic Isles”) between 310 and 306 BC,[\[957\]](#) for instance, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC La Tène-style *torc* and carved stones at Turoe found at Knock (Roscommon) and at (Galway) and Castlestrange (Roscommon) all show the cultural influence of Celtic Europe in Iron Age Ireland.[\[958\]](#)

The evidence - such as it is - for an Epona-like goddess in Ireland

however, dates from a much later time. The myths that refer to these goddesses were all written down between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, though in many cases the monks who recorded these stories drew on material dating back to the 8<sup>th</sup> and even the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries.[\[959\]](#) Often, the internal evidence shows that the earliest written sources were based on an even older oral tradition. But the Christian influence on medieval Irish literature was extremely strong, and it can sometimes be difficult to separate the original (pagan) Celtic material from that which was recorded, altered, added to, or simply fabricated by the monks who wrote the stories down.

One thing we can be fairly sure of is that if Epona was brought to Ireland before or during the early Middle Ages, she was probably given an Irish name. The name “Epona” would have been unintelligible in a Goidelic language like Irish. Although the Gaulish word *ep* (“horse”) and the Irish *ech* (or *eich*, *eith*) had a certain resemblance and a common origin, the Gaulish adjective “-on” had nothing in common with equivalent Irish words like *úasal* (high, lofty, noble or honourable), from *úas* (over, noble), from *ós* (over, above; or “of god”). But there was no Irish goddess called *Echúasal*, *Echúasa* or even *Echbandia* (Horse Goddess). As a result, searching for traces of Epona in Irish mythology means having to look for goddesses who had qualities similar to those of the Gallic Horse Goddess.

Aífe, for instance, loved her horses and chariot. But this was really all there was to connect her with Epona, other than the fact that in one story (the *Aided Óenfhir Aífe*) she was said to have come from the Armorican peninsula in Brittany and northwestern Gaul. Even this tentative connection was contradicted in another story (the *Tochmarc Emire*) however, in which she was said to live in “Alpa” (probably Scotland). Another possibility was Niamh, the daughter of Manannan Mac Lir, who crossed the western sea on a magical horse to take the poet-hero Oisín away to *Tír na nÓg*, the “Land of Youth” in the Celtic Otherworld. But while the horse and Otherworld imagery are reminiscent of Epona, the reference to the “western sea” suggests the mythical islands to the west of Ireland rather than continental Europe to the east. The tale therefore seems wholly Irish.

There was one Irish goddess however, who had much in common with Epona. She was a functionally complex goddess, with five different “personalities” in medieval Irish literature. The first four of these *personae* all featured separately in the 11<sup>th</sup> century compilation *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, while the fifth appeared in the 12<sup>th</sup> century tale *Táin Bó Cúailnge* - both of which drew on written materials dating from between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, and therefore probably drew on earlier oral traditions. Although each “personality” had different parents or spouses - a common feature in mythology generally - all five were versions of a single goddess whose name



was Macha.[\[960\]](#)

One of the many interesting things about Macha in relation to Epona, was where she was said to have come from. As the daughter of Partholón, for instance, she was described as coming to Ireland from Anatolia, via Gothia (Dacia, Moesia and Thrace), Greece, Sicily and Iberia. Similarly, as both the wife of Nemed and the daughter of Ernmas, her origins were said to lie in Scythia - an area that once included some of the same territory.[\[961\]](#) These were all locations where Epona's presence had either been very strong or where she had important connections with the Tauric Artemis.

The Christian intention behind the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* was to create a history of Ireland that linked it to the genealogies of the biblical Old Testament; and in this regard it was an imaginative fabrication. Nevertheless, the monks drew on and incorporated native (pagan) Irish material.[\[962\]](#) Thus, the eastern origins associated with the goddess may well have been preserved in stories told by the *seanchaithe*: the hereditary keepers of the old lore. The stories would have provided the monks with a useful link to biblical lands and lines of descent. If this was the case, the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* may provide an unexpected confirmation of Epona's (human-form) origin in Anatolia and her subsequent diffusion westward.

Another interesting aspect of this Irish goddess in connection with Epona was her name. “Macha” was derived from the Irish word *mach*: a grammatical form of the word *mag* (later *magh*) meaning a field, plain, or open stretch of land.[\[963\]](#) In technical terms, *mach* was the accusative case (the direct object of a transitive verb): in other words, something was happening in the field or plain. Originally, it would have been part of a descriptive phrase from which the subject and verb were later dropped. In this light, it is particularly interesting to notice the strikingly similar spelling and pronunciation between the Irish name Macha and the Greek word μάχη (*machē*) meaning “action”, especially “battle” - an attribute of both Epona and the Irish goddess.

The Greek word may have become attached to Epona as an epithet, either in Anatolia or during her westward diffusion through the Balkans. These regions were strongly influenced by the Greeks, and the term could easily have been a half-humorous reference to her “battle” with Sabazius-Dionysos. Certainly she had acquired a reputation for battle by the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC when the inscription from western France described her with the Gaulish term *Catona*, “battle goddess”.[\[964\]](#) In keeping with the origins ascribed to Macha in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, it is entirely possible that the Greek epithet reached Ireland with Epona. If so, it would immediately have been associated with the Irish word *mach* since the two words were almost identical sounding, and battles were typically fought on a field or plain. All that was necessary

was to adapt the long “e” of the Greek word to the Irish feminine suffix “a”: *mache* adapted to *mach(a)*, naturally becomes Macha.

We can easily visualize how this might have happened: everyone gathered around the hearth-fire, listening in puzzlement to a visiting bard or *fili* or drúí (poet-seer, later druid) as s/he tells them about Epona and her Greek epithet. In a flash of insight some quick-witted soul sees the connection, instantly forms a play on words, and quips “*cath macha!*” - a feminine battle field. Everyone laughs at the sudden clarity this produces: the foreign goddess has naturally been identified with the land, and the Greek word has been linked with the Irish word for battle - this goddess is the “field of battle”. In the wake of this inspirational clarity it would be natural to adopt the name “Cath Macha”, and the incomprehensible Gaulish word “Epona” would simply disappear. Later, as they began to realize that the goddess was a “field” in which many things can happen, the term *cath* would also be quietly dropped. In common use from then on, the goddess would simply be known as “Macha”.

Battle however, was neither the only nor the most significant connection between Epona and the Irish goddess. Macha's name implicitly linked her with the land which, as the wife of Nemed, she also physically claimed by clearing plains.[\[965\]](#) This was the foundation for her role as a sovereignty goddess - a role that became explicit in the story of Macha Mong Ruad (“red-haired”), the only “High Queen” of all Ireland. In a way that was very reminiscent of Epona's encounter with Zeus-Sabazios-Zagreus, Macha's claim to the crown was also initially challenged: by the five sons of Dithorba, who denied the right of women to rule.[\[966\]](#) Taking the “battle” into their camp, she visited them in the guise of a leper while they feasted. Despite her appearance, all five men desired her sexually. As they each took turns to lay with the goddess, she overcame and enslaved them and then forced them to build *Emhain Macha*: the ancient royal seat and spiritual centre of the Ulaid.[\[967\]](#) Significantly, it was Macha's sexuality that allowed her to dominate the men and thus not only assert, but demonstrate, her sovereignty: “instead of the union...endowing the man with kingship, this encounter led to his subjugation.”[\[968\]](#) This was vitally necessary however, since the sovereignty of the goddess was essential for the fertility and abundance of the land - qualities that were also implicit in Macha's name.

The word *macha* could refer to a “milking-field”, for example: a primary symbol of fertility and abundance in Celtic daily life.[\[969\]](#) These qualities were made explicit when, as the wife of *Cruinniuc*, she appeared as a divinely-swift runner who was nine months pregnant. Her husband boasted that Macha could outrun the king's horses, and she was forced to run a race against them. She won, but went into labour and gave birth to twins. Apart

from these symbols of her fertility, abundance and motherhood, the story also served two other purposes: it supplied an explanation for the name *Emhain Macha*, “Macha's Twins” - which may well have been a Filid (druid) kenning on the image of Epona as Mistress, seated or standing between two horses; and it provided vital background to the initial inability of the Ulaid to fight in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Macha had cursed them with the *ces noínden*, a nine-day weakness that made them as helpless as women in childbirth whenever they needed their strength most.[\[970\]](#) After cursing them, the goddess died - an ending that may have betrayed the later influence of Christian patriarchy in the overthrow of pagan female dominance through the “death” of an immortal goddess.[\[971\]](#)

That the rest of this story was based on pre-Christian tradition however, is clearly reflected in the name given to Macha's father, *Sainrith mac Imbaith*. Despite the inexplicable translation given by McColman and Hinds,[\[972\]](#) the name was a patronymic styling of the poetic idea expressed in the phrase *sáin rith [mac] im baith*, which meant something like “long-running sound [son] of the wild wind”.[\[973\]](#) In other words, Macha's ability to run swiftly (on which the whole story hinged) came from the enduring sound of the wind - a “lineage” that must also have implied stamina and endurance: her capacity to run swiftly over long distances or for a long time.

The fact that Macha's ability was compared with that of horses was significant - not simply because of their natural speed and endurance, or even because of their enormous value in Celtic culture. These were vitally important, of course, but the fact that the horses belonged to the *king* was an allusion to Macha's implicit sovereignty and superiority. The comparison was thus triply (emphatically and magically) significant. As told by the *seanchaithe*, this aspect of the story would therefore have called for special attention: Macha's sovereignty and fertility were being linked, inherently and indissolubly, with horses. The question is, why? No other goddess in Ireland was associated as strongly or as fundamentally with horses, and it was clearly not a requirement for sovereignty: there were other Irish sovereignty goddesses who had no connection with horses at all. When taken together with her intimate links to the land, to fertility, abundance and motherhood, and to sexual dominance and battle, this deliberate and pronounced association with sovereignty and horses strongly suggests that Macha did in fact originate in Epona. But these were not the only things that the two goddesses had in common.

Epona's raven, for instance, was mirrored by Macha's frequent association with this bird - and with its prophetic symbolism.[\[974\]](#) As Nemed's wife, for instance, the Irish goddess prophesied the destruction of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.[\[975\]](#) The fact that Macha was also associated with the hooded crow

was probably due to her identification with her sister *Badb Catha* (“Battle Crow”):[\[976\]](#) the Irish personification of battle whose epiphany was the ash-grey crow with black head, wings and tail, the cries of which - the shriek of the “pale badbs” - were an omen of Cormac's death in the *Togail Bruidne Dá Choca*.[\[977\]](#) Badb Catha and “Cath Macha” fit together like hand and glove, and their conflation probably explains the 9<sup>th</sup> century interpretation of *Mesrad Machae* (“Macha's Mast”) as the “heads of men who have been slaughtered”[\[978\]](#) - instead of literally as tree-fruit, especially nuts (symbolic of fertility and abundance, as well as of magical knowledge or wisdom).[\[979\]](#) The symbolism of the literal interpretation would have been far more congruent with Epona.

Nevertheless, Macha's identification with Badb brings us to a further point of comparison with Epona: the fact that both were considered triple goddesses. Just as inscriptions often referred to Epona in the plural as *Eponae*, Macha was associated with Badb and the Morrígan (the three daughters of the Tuatha Dé Danann goddess Ernmas) who were known collectively as “the *Morrígná*”.[\[980\]](#) In other accounts, membership in the triad varied: it sometimes included Nemain, Fea, Anand or others (possibly as alternative names for the same goddesses).[\[981\]](#) Macha's inclusion in the trio however, is significant - not only in comparison with Epona, but also in emphasizing her religious and magical importance.

The strongest and most compelling reason for seeing the Irish goddess as synonymous with Epona however, may lie in Macha's intimate association with *Emhain Macha*. This was the location in Northern Ireland of the shocking pagan Celtic kingship ritual still being enacted in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. As recorded by Gerald of Wales, the king-to-be engaged in sexual union with a white mare that was then sacrificed, boiled, and her meat feasted on while the new king drank and bathed in the broth.[\[982\]](#) The ritual was profoundly significant for several reasons. First and foremost, as far as we know it was the only one of its kind in Ireland. The sacred “marriage to the land” - the union with the goddess that was prerequisite for Celtic kingship - was usually mediated by a priestess: a woman who embodied and was identified with the goddess. Medb Lethderg and Étaíne at *Tara*, and the Connachta Queen Medb at *Cruachain*, each exemplified the practice. At *Emhain Macha* however, the goddess was identified with and embodied in a mare - something that went far beyond mere association with horses, not only for Macha herself but also in terms of the fundamental link it established between sovereignty and the horse.

The ritual also stands out because it mirrored Epona's origin myth so closely (Chapter Seven). There were differences, of course. The *Emhain Macha* ritual was concerned with establishing sovereignty, not with the

conception of the goddess in human form. But the sexual union of a human “father” with a Divine Mare was archetypally significant - especially in Ireland, where the idea was so distant both in time and space from Greek mythological influences. That Epona's origin myth was so deeply grounded in those influences, and that Macha's mythic origins lay in Anatolia, not only points to the Gauls' land-based sovereignty needs in Phrygia but suggests that the Ulaid adapted the original ritual - or the myth it gave rise to - for their own sovereignty-related needs. They would never have done so however, if Macha had not already been essentially identified with the horse to begin with.

This was simply too reminiscent of Epona to be a coincidence. But if the *Emhain Macha* ritual was a “germination” of seeds she had planted, the Horse Goddess must have reached Ireland before the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Gallic culture was virtually extinct by 400 AD,[\[983\]](#) and Epona's worship had long been dormant in Europe by the time Gerald of Wales wrote his account in 1188. In fact, her arrival in Ireland must have occurred during Irish “prehistory”, before the beginning of the Middle Ages. Both her adoption by the Ulaid, and the fundamental changes in the kingship rituals this would have precipitated, were profound religious events with far-reaching cultural and political implications. If they had occurred just before or during Ireland's written “historical” period they would have been recorded, for example, in the *Annals of Ulster* which were begun in the year 431 AD.

A clue to the timing of Epona's arrival in Ireland, or rather to the momentous changes that occurred in the wake of her adoption, may lie in Macha's association with the building (and naming) of *Emhain Macha* - now “Navan Fort” in County Armagh, Northern Ireland. The “fort” consists of a large circular earthwork bank and ditch, enclosing the remains of a late prehistoric ring-barrow and a large mound surrounded by a circular ditch. Archaeologists have discovered the remains of a wooden building underneath the barrow, and similar structures (each with a central hearth) under the mound. These buildings were apparently inhabited from about 600 BC to at least 250 BC, and then later covered by the ring-barrow and mound. Although no firm date has been fixed for the barrow, the construction of the mound has been dated to 95 BC.[\[984\]](#)

In theory, Epona could have arrived in Ireland - in human form - any time after about 275 BC, while the fort was still inhabited. However, the fact that Macha was associated with *building* this centre of Ulaid spiritual life suggests that the story referred to the construction of the ring barrow and mound. This event clearly marked a fundamental change in function - from what was essentially a fortified village to a centre of magical and spiritual power associated with the Celtic otherworld. Because it was such a significant



change, this was very likely when the Horse Goddess first became central to the new kingship rituals. But that it was “Macha” and not “Epona” who was associated with these changes strongly suggests that the Gaulish name had long been laid aside and forgotten. Since that would easily have taken a century or more, the hearth-fires around which the Ulaid first heard the stories of Epona were almost certainly still burning at the village fort before it became *Emhain Macha*.

It is significant that this Macha's father was called Áed Rúad (“red fire”): an allusion to the Sacred Fire tradition of the Érainn - the royal and *filid* bloodline to which the Ulaid belonged and which had given its name to Ireland (Ériu).[985] Like other peoples, the Érainn considered fire a sacred symbol of divine power, purification, regeneration and inspiration.[986] But it was particularly associated with the sun, and the integrity (*fir flatha*) and sexual virility so necessary for kingship, fertility and abundance. The Sacred Fire tradition was expressed in the Beltain and Samhain fires lit each year at Uisneach and at Tara, from which the hearth-fires of Ireland were re-lit.[987] Although presided over by the Tene fó Breagha (“Fire Lord of Bregia”),[988] these rituals depended on and drew from the eternal flame tended by priestesses of Brìghde at what later became Kildare Town where the surrounding fields were not ploughed and no man could enter: emblems of the goddess' inviolable sovereignty. The archetype on which these beliefs and practices were based was the sun's union with the earth and, considering the Celts' intimate association of the sun with the solar horse, it is hardly surprising that in their rituals of sovereignty at Emhain Macha the Ulaid gave the central place to their Horse Goddess.

## A WELSH EPONA

Apparently there was no evidence of Epona in Wales - no artwork or inscriptions that would tell us she was known there. But there are several very strong parallels with Rhiannon, a goddess-like character in the medieval Welsh tales popularly known as the “Mabinogion”:[989] stories for which the earliest written sources only date back to about 1225.[990] Although a number of respected historians have pointed out her parallels with Epona, [991] one scholar has recently sounded a sceptical note and it is true that there is no way to be certain Rhiannon originated in Epona.[992] Nevertheless, as Jefferey Gantz put it, Rhiannon is unquestionably “a euhemerized horse goddess - no other explanation will do”. [993] This was also the view taken by Gruffydd[994] and endorsed, for example, by Green,[995] Davies,[996] and Ford.[997] The idea that the two goddesses were originally one-in-the-same is certainly not arbitrary. Despite the late date of the written sources, and even the admixture of medieval French influences, the stories of the *Mabinogi*

were based on genuinely Celtic themes that evolved over centuries in the oral tradition of the Welsh story-tellers.[998]

The conclusion that Rhiannon was the 13<sup>th</sup> century form of a much earlier horse goddess - almost certainly Epona - is based, naturally enough, on her association with horses and the otherworld: both were intimately entwined from her very first appearance in the stories. Her otherworldly nature, and thus her divine origin, was marked at the outset by the fact that her home was *Gorsedd Arberth* (“throne of Arberth”) - a magical mound in southwest Wales connected with the otherworld. The mound was near the court of Pwyll, the Lord of Dyved (now Pembrokeshire), and it is significant that although Rhiannon rides at “a slow steady pace” on a “great pale horse” (a symbol of the otherworld), neither Pwyll's men nor Pwyll himself could catch-up with the “horse-woman”. Even with the fastest horse at the court, and despite using spurs, “the farther ahead she drew, all the while going the same pace as before”.[999]

Pwyll finally called out “Lady...stop for me”. But before she did, Rhiannon replied “... it would have been better for your horse had you asked me that earlier”. [1000] That these were her first words suggests they were of primary significance. Quite apart from the fact that kindly concern for horses was a hallmark of Epona, the nature of the exchange itself was also characteristic and familiar: both the sovereignty of the goddess and the hero's lack of concern for her dominion (the horses under her care) were implicit in her chiding.

In addition to these qualities so reminiscent of the Gallic Lady of the Horse, Rhiannon was also placed in a role that - in essence - implicitly identified her *as* horse. After being accused of destroying her baby, for instance, her punishment was to sit every day for seven years at the horse mounting block by the gate and “...offer to carry guests and strangers to the court on her back”. The birth and disappearance of her son were also intimately linked with fate of a colt foaled on May Eve (Beltaine) by the most handsome mare in the neighbouring realm of Gwent Ys Coed.[1001] When taken together, the magical and otherworldly details of these two phases of the story imply that, like Epona, Rhiannon was essentially identified with the mare. But, even beyond this, her dual nature - as both Mare and Lady (“horse-woman”) - forms what may be the most striking of her parallels with Epona.

Nevertheless, there are two mysteries that surround any definitive attempt to identify Rhiannon with Epona. The first of these is her name. Usually seen as having derived from the Brittonic *Rigantona*, meaning “Great or Divine Queen”, [1002] this closely parallels known epithets for Epona. The alternative suggestion is that it derived from the Welsh *rhiain* (maiden) and *Annwn* (the Welsh otherworld), [1003] which also has strong parallels with

Epona. Yet the fact remains that for some reason the name Epona was *not* used. This is very curious since Gaulish and Welsh were closely related and, unlike the Irish, the Welsh would have found it easy to pronounce and understand Epona's name.

The second mystery is how and when Epona might have come to Wales. Considering her popularity with the Roman legions, it seems odd that they left no dedicatory inscriptions or artwork of her during their nearly four-hundred-year occupation of South Wales.[\[1004\]](#) However, like many other Celtic deities, Epona was very sparsely represented throughout Britain despite the Roman occupation.[\[1005\]](#) She was certainly known in the West Country: the bronze figurine so reminiscent of Kybele, for example, was discovered in Wiltshire not far from south-eastern Wales.[\[1006\]](#) If she was known in Wales therefore, it seems likely that this came about through contact with the British tribes in southwest England.

Another intriguing possibility is that she was (also?) brought from Ireland with the *Déisi* who settled in southwest Wales just before the Romans left.[\[1007\]](#) This was the geographical setting for the stories in which Rhiannon appears in the *Mabinogi*, and might help explain her Welsh name: Macha would have been as unintelligible to the Welsh as “Epona” must have been to the Irish. But whether Epona came to Wales with the Irish or through contacts the British tribes, she would only “belong” in her new home if she were given a Welsh name. The remarkable linguistic and poetic skill of the bards was certainly up to the task, and it is not at all unlikely that they deliberately chose “Rhiannon” as much for its dual connotations as to emphasize her new Welsh identity.

Whatever the case, the “horse-woman” of the *Mabinogi* must have been strongly reminiscent of Epona to anyone who remembered her in France. The Welsh stories began to mingle there with the medieval romance literature just coming into vogue in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century.[\[1008\]](#) This was the literature that helped shape and promote the ideals at the heart of the High and Late Middle Ages - a context in which it seems that Epona's “seeds” found very fertile ground.

## CHIVALRY & COURTLY LOVE

In many ways the germination of these seeds was nowhere more evident during the Middle Ages than in chivalrous and courtly love - that “exaltation of femininity as an ennobling, spiritual, and moral force” that cultivated an attitude of “homage and deference” toward women.[\[1009\]](#) These ideals were expressed in the beautiful illustration pictured on the next page from a medieval song manuscript written between 1305 and 1315.[\[1010\]](#) The knight kneels in reverence to his lady, while ideally, she gives her recognition and



approval of his submission and service by placing the crested helmet on his head: a supreme accolade of noble knighthood.



*Figure 53 'Exaltation of Womanhood'.*

It is stunning to realize that courtly love (originally called fine, pure or true love) - i.e., what we know today as personal “romantic love” - was a literary invention of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The idea, and its associated emotions and behaviour, came from the Provençal poetry of the troubadours in southern France and stories like *Tristan and Iseult* and *Lancelot de la Charrette*. Before this, “love” was either divine and universal (the Greek *agape*, or Christian *charitas*), simple familial affection or friendship (*storgē* or *philía*), or erotic (*érōs*, mostly sexual). None of these types of love had anything to do with marriage which, in the Middle Ages, was still a contract arranged between families for political, social and material gain. The same was true of this extraordinary new form of “love”: the lady at the heart of the knight's love was typically already married to a man of high social status - courtly love was seldom a prelude to marriage and never to living “happily ever after”.

Much about courtly love has been debated by historians since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.[\[1011\]](#) The issues have included the influences that brought it about; the extent to which the literary phenomenon became an ideal that people actually lived by; whether it was sexual, illicit and adulterous, or erotic and spiritual but platonic; and whether there were actual “courts of love” in which cases were judged and, if so, who was present. But there are two aspects of courtly love that, apparently, have never been considered before: the ways in which it reflected what Epona had represented in an earlier age, and how her “cult” might have influenced the origins and shaped the nature of its ideals.

## EXALTATION OF THE FEMININE

By far the most outstanding feature of courtly love was the supreme importance it attributed to the feminine. A Swiss historian, for instance, noted that women were served and protected as if they were “representatives of the divinity upon earth”.[\[1012\]](#) Similarly, a German Romantic poet saw the Provençal poetry that gave rise to courtly love as “based on the worship of women”,[\[1013\]](#) and in discussing the Arab influence on courtly love a notable French painter and critic referred to it as “the cult of Woman as a symbol of the divine”.[\[1014\]](#) Somehow, the ideal of courtly love had transformed the Divine Feminine - the goddess suppressed, reviled and made inaccessible by patriarchy and Christianity - into the Sacred Feminine: the goddess directly embodied in the warm flesh and blood of womanhood.

Perhaps even more startling, the qualities in which that transformation was grounded were synonymous with sovereignty: the right not just to command, but to be obeyed. Agrippa, for example, had written that women were “preeminent by divine right and the laws of nature”.[\[1015\]](#) Similarly,

Violet Paget noted that courtly love was inspired by a belief in the “moral, aesthetical, and social *superiority* of a woman”, even to “the point of actual worship”.[\[1016\]](#) Later, Myrrha Lot-Borodine referred to “la suprématie de la dame” - the *supremacy* of the lady at the heart of courtly love.[\[1017\]](#)

It was in this light that Amy Kelly contrasted what she saw as Ovid's attitude (in *Ars Amatoria*) - that “man is the master employing his arts to seduce women for his pleasure” - with Capellanus' 12<sup>th</sup> century *De Amore* in which “woman is the mistress, man her pupil in homage, her vassal in service”[\[1018\]](#) Kelly has been criticized for ignoring evidence,[\[1019\]](#) and her “fertile imagination” and feminism have also been noted.[\[1020\]](#) But in this particular case not only was she using terms typical of the medieval poetry that popularized the ideal, but the earlier commentaries on the central importance of the feminine made it abundantly clear that a very profound form of spiritual “feminism” lay at its heart.[\[1021\]](#) Courtly love had translated the sovereignty of the goddess into the spiritual superiority, preeminence and supremacy of womanhood.

The English literary historian Thomas Warton saw this, and proposed a pagan origin for courtly love on the belief that Celtic, Germanic and Scandinavian women too had “commanded respect and submission from the male warriors”.[\[1022\]](#) Similarly, Gaston Paris described the knight's “inferiority” and fear of displeasing his mistress or ceasing to be worthy of her: “even the hardened warrior trembles in his lady's presence”.[\[1023\]](#) As an example of this, one Provençal poet wrote “I am afraid of the good one [the lady] as a child of the birch [cane]”.[\[1024\]](#) But this “trembling” was more likely due to the sheer intensity of his need than to fear *per se*. Courtly love was deeply erotic in nature: it was “a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent”.[\[1025\]](#) One poet prayed he would see his lady go to bed, “lie close to her” and “embrace and hold her nude to me”; another hoped “[w]ith kisses and laughter to uncover her beautiful body and to gaze at it by the light of the lamp”.[\[1026\]](#)

Thus, quite apart from her social position, the lady's natural dominance sprang from men's desire in a context where sexual union - and thus sexual and emotional release - was entirely at her sovereign discretion. For the most part she was sexually unattainable. The “pure love” of the troubadours was erotic and carnal but ideally remained unfulfilled.[\[1027\]](#) Paris described the lady as making “her suitor acutely aware of his insecurity by deliberately acting in a capricious and haughty manner” (i.e., by alternating flirtatious promise with hope-dashing dismissal).[\[1028\]](#) But although stirring his desire while denying his sexual release must have built the knight's longing to an agonizing intensity, it also strengthened the fervour of his devotion to her: it

“transformed desire into devotion”.[\[1029\]](#) As Paris noted in the passage just quoted above “...the lady's apparent cruelty serves to test her lover's valour...” and, as a Provençal poet wrote, he would “still faithfully serve the good one who thrashes me so severely without a birch”.[\[1030\]](#)

Bedier described courtly love as “a necessary school of honor, that claims the [argumentative, arrogant?] lover and transforms the ill-mannered... a voluntary servitude that holds ennobling power and consists in the suffering, the dignity, and beauty of the passion”.[\[1031\]](#) The full significance of these words becomes more clear when we read Kelly's description of Eleanor of Aquitaine's ducal court at Poitiers.[\[1032\]](#) The household was “a nursery and academy of prospective kings and queens, dukes and princesses”; those who came “for their vassal's homage, their squire's training, and their courtiers' service were truculent youths [argumentative, quick to fight], boisterous young men...bred on feuds and violence, men with rich fiefs and proud lineage, but with little solidarity and no business but guerrilla warfare and daredevil escapade”. Though of noble blood, these young warriors were without discipline or manners, and it was in the “necessary school” of courtly love that they were raised to a higher standard of spiritual, moral and social excellence through submission, devoted service and homage to the noble women of the court.

We can hardly fail to notice how deeply Epona was reflected in the ideals of courtly love. The ennobling spiritual and moral force of the feminine was profoundly reminiscent of the “Good” and “Auspicious” Goddess. There was also a close parallel between the superiority or preeminence of the courtly lady - the mistress of the household who “made (or dispensed) the bread” - and the “Mistress” and “Queen” on whose sovereignty the abundance of nature depended. The parallel between Epona's scourge and the poetic imagery of the lady using the “birch” - even if only metaphorically - was also very striking. Epona's nymph-like qualities, too, were mirrored in the intense eroticism of courtly love. The courtly lady's erotic allure and dominant role in the knight's ennobling submission and service had a clear counterpart in the eroticism of Epona's domination of the arrogant sky god and her role in training young warriors devoted to the goddess. The denial of male sexual release was also familiar in relation to Epona's identification with Artemis.

The one aspect of Epona's message that seems most lacking in the poetry of courtly love however, was a clear expression of the ennobled hero - a man whose sacred masculinity the courtly lady could admire, who would awaken her “*divine elixir*” and make her yearn for his “*warm rays to penetrate and fecundate the abundance of her fertile earth*”. Unlike the Celtic Jupiter, or the three hundred *agoge*-trained Spartan heroes who gave their lives protecting Greece from the Persians, the Provençal poets were all men in the grip of

“*maladie d'amour*” - love-sick in their submission to the lady, and still in the process of their ennoblement. In contrast to the training associated with Epona, the poetry of courtly love seemed to celebrate the feelings of submission and service as inherently noble, rather than as a matrix in which the sacred masculine - the genuinely heroic male - could be nurtured.

Nevertheless, the exaltation of women as “a symbol of the divine” in the royal and ducal courts of the Middle Ages, and the intimately related civilizing ennoblement of men, expressed an archetype that had existed in Europe and the Middle East since at least the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. It was a pattern that had become focused and epitomized in Epona, and the “cult of Woman” in medieval France certainly embodied much that she had represented in the ancient world. In a sense, it was as though courtly love was the social and spiritual outcome of the magical ritual that brought Epona to birth in human form - as though, in the Middle Ages, her human form took on the flesh and blood of womanhood.

That Epona was implicit in the fabric of courtly love becomes all the more obvious when we realize how closely it was entwined with chivalry: a word derived from the French *chevalier*, meaning “horseman” or “knight”. [\[1033\]](#) Most significantly, the knights who sought ennoblement through submission and service to the courtly ladies of France (and later Europe and Britain) were descendants of men who had once “ridden with” the Lady of the Horse.

## CHIVALRY & KNIGHTHOOD

What we know today as “chivalry” developed in France in the early Middle Ages from a fusion of Christianized Frankish (German) and Gallo-Roman warrior traditions that centred on military training and service. [\[1034\]](#) Chivalry referred to the values and way of life of the *chevalier*, a nobleman who owned a war horse, and who had undergone certain rites of passage or rituals of initiation. [\[1035\]](#) Before they became heavily codified in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century (primarily, it seems, to garner support for the Catholic Church in its crusades against the Muslims), these values embraced six key elements: loyalty; self-control; hardiness; largesse (generosity); benevolence toward the weak; and honour. [\[1036\]](#) No doubt some Christian influence can probably be seen in these early values. But even the protection of the weak (a quality later made much of by the Church) was as inherent in the Celtic Mother and battle goddess as it was in the wild stallion protecting the mares and foals of the herd. They were values, in fact, that clearly reflected the core ethics of both the aristocratic Gallic warrior and the Roman *equites* - early expressions of chivalry in which Epona had played a central role.

In this context, the Provençal troubadours' references to the lady's “birch”

may well have been a remnant of the “scourging of the lads”, not just in the Despoine Mysteries but in the early initiatory rites of knighthood during Gallo-Roman times. Epona's popularity as a “female alternative to Mithras” among the legions on the Roman limes may well have included this ritual purification as a time-honoured part of an ancient tradition that eventually became what we know of as chivalry.[\[1037\]](#) In fact, it may well be that the ancient rites of knighthood - including the scourging - were still practised at the time of the 3rd crusade (between 1187 and 1192).

Under the influence of the Catholic Church, we know that initiation into knighthood in the late 12th and 13th centuries involved a ritual bath, a confession of sins, an all-night vigil at the altar, a eucharistic mass, the gift of spurs, being girded with a sword, and finally the “accolade”: being struck with a fist, clapped on the back or dubbed with a sword.[\[1038\]](#) There was nothing particularly secret about these Christian rites. But according to both a 13th century story called ‘Estoires d’Outremer et de la naissance Salehadin’, and a poem called ‘Ordène de Chevalerie’, a crusading knight (Hues de Tabarie, or “Hugh of Tiberias”) was captured and promised release if he revealed the rites of knighthood to the Muslim leader Saladin.[\[1039\]](#) This suggests that there may have been a more hidden - and pagan - side to the initiatory rites of knighthood.

Nevertheless, since knights had become “truculent youths” who wandered the countryside stealing and raping women like the one in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of the Wyf of Bathe*, it was clear that by the 12th century the old values and training of knighthood (to whatever extent they were still practiced) had lost much of their power to mold men's character. It was in this context that the erotic allure of the sovereign lady, with her metaphorical “birch”, was the vital focus of a discipline that became the foundation of a knight's ennoblement - his training in the art of chivalry through the “necessary school” of courtly love.

## EPONA'S INFLUENCE

Taken together, chivalry and courtly love were a realm in which the Lady of the Horse would have felt completely at home. While she almost certainly was connected with the beginnings of chivalry however, there is very little we can point to that would show a direct influence of Epona's cult on the origins of courtly love. At most, her influence was mediated through traditions preserved by noble families and the Gallo-Roman artwork that had survived in the French countryside. The residents of Appoigny in northwest Burgundy, for example, are still referred to today as “Époniens” after the name of the Gallo-Roman villa from which the town first grew.

There were certainly other influences that were more direct. Part of the



very considerable Hispano-Arabic influence,[\[1040\]](#) for instance, may have been a memory of the pre-Islamic poet-hero 'Antarah Ibn Shaddād al-'Absī (Antar the Lion) who was said to have cut off a man's head for disrespecting a woman in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century. His poetry contained many references to chivalrous values and not only was he extremely popular among Arabs, but a poem about him also circulated in Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.[\[1041\]](#) There were also other influences, such as Neo-Platonic ideas and socio-economic factors, that inspired or shaped the development of chivalry and courtly love. [\[1042\]](#) Still, family traditions and surviving artwork that centred on Epona were not negligible forces. Even if we can only infer her influence in the case of family traditions, there are good reasons for doing so. We also have one very specific example of her possible influence on a potentially relevant and contemporary piece of religious art from the early 12<sup>th</sup> century.

In the case of family traditions, it is a truism that country people tend to hold beliefs and practices over generations. With the advantage of literacy however, noble or aristocratic families have preserved their lineage and traditions for centuries. An example of this can be seen in the heraldic arms of the MacKenzie chiefs. Said to have been created in 1265 at the height of courtly love, they reflected the Sacred Fire tradition and the family's hereditary filidhean (poet-seer, druid) role in the ancient kingship rituals of their Érainn ancestors. The family brought the tradition with them from pre-Christian Ireland to the Picto-Gaelic kingdom of Moray (Scotland) in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, and it was preserved openly by their descendants into early modern times.

In the original arms of the Clan shown below,[\[1043\]](#) the fire “exalted on the mountain-top” in the crest symbolized the sacred flame of the goddess Brìghde that was lit on “high places” (Tulloch Ard - the Clan's original motto) at the four fire festivals of the pagan year. The royal stag in the centre of the shield led “the hunter” (the knight or prince) to the otherworld to meet the goddess in the sacred marriage, and the Moray star was displayed between its antlers.[\[1044\]](#) The arms were modified in 1565 to avoid religious persecution during the Scottish Reformation, and all trace of the Clan's hereditary involvement in these goddess-centred beliefs and practices was deliberately hidden after the Witchcraft Act of 1604 by George Mackenzie, 1st Earl of Cromartie. Ironically however, while many MacKenzies today are therefore no longer aware of this ancient heritage, the chief of the Clan is still referred to in Gaelic as Caber fèidh: “Deer's Antlers”.



*Figure 54 Ancient Arms (Mackenzie).*



Here was an example of a goddess-based family tradition preserved for over a thousand years, despite the prevailing influence of Christianity. It shows very clearly that a similar tradition, centring on Epona, may have been preserved among Gallic and Roman descendants of the auxiliary cavalry and equites veterans who retired to southern France after the Roman army disintegrated during the 5th century. The same might well have been true of Berber and Iberian families who had once served in the auxiliary cavalry, and who accompanied the Arab advance into southern France in the 8th century. These were noble families, proud of their lineage. Without doubt, some among them would have cherished and preserved traditions centring on the Lady of the Horse.

These family traditions in France almost certainly intersected with Christianity and, in particular, with the cult of the Virgin Mary which saw “extraordinary growth” in western Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries. [\[1045\]](#) She was so popular, in fact, that even the field of the first Royal Arms of France was tintured with the same azure colour as Mary's robes in medieval art. Among other titles, it is significant that Mary was worshipped - then as now - as the “Queen of Heaven” and “Intercessor” for the salvation of humanity: territory in which Epona had once reigned supreme.



*Figure 55 Autun (Mary's Flight to Egypt).*

A number of historians have looked to the mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux and the cult of Mary as sources of inspiration for courtly love, and there are certainly some very deep parallels.[\[1046\]](#) But it was probably the other way round: courtly love seems to have been a major factor in the increased popularity of the Marian cult.[\[1047\]](#) It is very significant therefore that certain representations of Mary seem to owe much to Romano-Celtic artwork depicting Epona, and may thus reflect an indirect influence of the Horse Goddess on courtly love. The relief shown in the photograph on the previous page, for example, decorates the capital of a pillar in the nave of the Cathedral of St. Lazare at Autun in Burgundy.[\[1048\]](#) Carved between 1120 and 1132 by Gislebertus of Autun, the relief shows Mary aside an ass with the infant Jesus on her lap being led by Joseph on “the flight to Egypt”.

The parallels with Epona are hard to miss: in Gaul, she too once sat in formal sovereignty aside her horse with its raised foreleg and measured gait. The divine infant has replaced the foal that was so common in Epona's imagery, but is profoundly reminiscent of the divine child born to the Maiden at the heart of the ancient Mysteries. These parallels were hardly accidental. The cathedral itself, for instance, was built on the site of the old Roman *civitas* created for the Aedui by Augustus - near the centre of the largest concentration of Epona's artwork in France.[\[1049\]](#) The artist, who was profoundly influenced by Roman art,[\[1050\]](#) would therefore have been literally surrounded by images of the Horse Goddess.

Simple artistic borrowing however, does not explain the curious fact that Joseph - a biblically attested craftsman in wood, metal or stone - was pictured in the relief carrying a raised sword. This curious detail transforms him from the status of a simple craftsman and places him firmly in the context of the chivalrous knight serving and protecting his lady. Because of this, the piece strongly suggests the influence chivalry and courtly love on the cult of Mary. But it implicitly incorporates Epona's influence in the process.

This “knightly” Joseph is also reminiscent of the Kouretes and Korybantes, the guardians devoted to the Great Mother and the protection of her divine child. In this context it is certainly relevant that the Roman Church chose to name Mary *Theotokos* - “Mother of God” - at the Council of Ephesus in 431: the ancient Greek city of Ephesus in Ionia was famous for its temples to Artemis and the Great Mother Kybele. This Joseph therefore reflected a lineage of male ennoblement that stretched from the ancient Sumerian “head-overturning” rituals to the training of young males in Minoan Crete and Anatolia, and from the Spartan *agoge* to the early beginnings of medieval chivalry and knighthood in the Roman *equites* and auxiliary *alia* devoted to

Epona before the fall of the empire in the last quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

At the heart of the old Aedui territory in 12<sup>th</sup> century Burgundy, these ancient precedents could not have been mediated by Epona's Gallo-Roman artwork alone: there was simply no precedent for the sword-wielding Joseph in any of her imagery. The entwined ideals of chivalry and courtly love, and their influence on the cult of Mary, certainly provided a context for this detail. But the impetus behind Gislebertus' decision to include it must have been more specific. In this regard, the inspiration supplied by Epona's imagery was very likely accompanied by a living tradition in which she was intimately connected with the ideals of the times - an aristocratic family tradition with which the artist's craft and Romanesque leanings might well have brought him into contact.

Putting all this into perspective, it is worth noting that the ideals of chivalry - and the exaltation of womanhood at the heart of courtly love - were both preserved in aristocratic families of Europe and Britain well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many cases, they still are. Not only were “the lads” still being caned in the “necessary schools” of nobility until the 1980's, for instance, but gentlemen still stand when a lady enters the room and horsemanship remains a mark of “good breeding” to this day. In this light, although Epona is no longer a conscious part of these old chivalrous traditions, it is nevertheless very telling indeed that she is still remembered and venerated among equestrians (Chapter Twelve).

The preservation of a *living* tradition centred on Epona - or Macha - in Ireland until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and of a contemporary literary tradition in both Wales and France that embraced the very Epona-like Rhiannon, both strongly suggest that the Horse Goddess also lived on in the minds and hearts of influential families in the High Middle Ages. These families were almost certainly descendents of the Roman *equites* and auxiliary cavalry and, as we will see in the next chapter, it may well have been one of *their* descendents - from Spain - who brought Epona to the American shores of the New World.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# The “New World”

*Let us begin by honouring the First Nations, whose spiritual traditions were old in America long before the horse ran with the wild wind on its plains.*

Strangely enough, Epona's first appearance in North America may have been in a petroglyph - one of several rock engravings in a set of five caves in Oklahoma, near the middle of the continent. A local rancher showed the caves to an amateur archaeology enthusiast by the name of Gloria Farley in 1978. Farley believed the petroglyphs and accompanying inscriptions were an example of “Old World” American prehistory, and enlisted the help of other enthusiasts in various fields to study the site further.[\[1051\]](#) Controversy soon surrounded the project when their findings were published however,[\[1052\]](#) and Farley herself was criticized for having an “agenda”.[\[1053\]](#)

The idea that these petroglyphs and inscriptions were made by people from the Old World before Columbus discovered America was bound to raise the ire of most archaeologists and historians, and this idea is still highly contentious. Controversy also surrounded the identification of the individual figures engraved in the caves, and the translation of the accompanying inscriptions. Both depended to a large extent on correctly identifying and deciphering the languages in which the accompanying inscriptions were written: a task given to Harvard University’s professor Barry Fell. Although his work eventually received some validation and support from Celtic scholars in Wales and America, his translations were sharply repudiated by others.[\[1054\]](#)

In view of all the controversy it might be better to pass the entire subject by in silence - much as Pausanias did at the sanctuary of Despoina in Lykosura. Indeed, concern over the possibility of further criticism is still very strong. So much so in fact that Bart Torbert, president of Gloria Farley Publications Incorporated, felt he had to decline a request for permission to illustrate this chapter with Farley's photos and drawings.[\[1055\]](#) Nevertheless, the site itself actually exists and requires some explanation - certainly to whatever extent it may include Epona. Out of respect for Torbert's concern however, it should be stated unequivocally that this author has no personal or professional affiliation whatsoever with anyone connected with that organization or with any individual involved in any way with previous research into these caves. Unless specifically stated otherwise, what follows is entirely my own work.

## THE “ANUBIS CAVES”

The main problem with any attempt to explain these caves is that the identification of the petroglyphs and the languages in which the inscriptions were written is so closely connected to the question of *when* they were constructed (and by whom). If we accept the identification of the figures and languages arrived at by Farley and Fell *et al*, the conclusion that the site is either pre-Columbian or an elaborate hoax seems inescapable. But in fact, these are two completely separate issues. In principle, the caves and their contents could have been constructed at any time by anyone with sufficient knowledge, and for entirely genuine purposes. Side-stepping the thorny question of when the site was constructed (for the moment) allows us to explore the issue of identification without prejudice. One way to do this is to look at whether Farley and Fell's interpretation is internally coherent in its own right, and whether it is consistent with what we already know about Epona. Passing this test would suggest that their interpretation was correct regardless of who created it - and when.

The first bare fact about what Farley dubbed the “Anubis Caves” is that they are exactly aligned with the setting sun on the Autumn equinox. Much like the Bulgarian “womb cave” at Perperikon, these caves are *functional*: they tell a story, and make it come alive in an interplay of light and shadow that moves across the walls to join the separate images sequentially.[\[1056\]](#) This in itself is remarkable enough, and there is nothing particularly controversial in the comment made by one group of scholars who researched the caves directly: that creating this effect required “a considerable knowledge of astronomy...and demonstrated an exceptional ability to incorporate this knowledge into the physical features of the caves”.[\[1057\]](#)

It is another thing altogether however, when we come to the identification of the figures and languages. According to Farley and Fell *et al*, these include an eclectic mix of deities from at least two different pantheons and the use of ogham (Celtic) and Numidian (Old Berber) scripts in the accompanying inscriptions.[\[1058\]](#) A more unusual combination would be hard to find anywhere. In addition to Epona, for instance, the other figures were identified as the sun god “Bel”; the Celtic “regeneratrix” Sheela-na-Gig; and the Egyptian underworld god Anubis.[\[1059\]](#)

This eclecticism is actually very helpful since, to be at all internally coherent, the story told in light and shadow needed much more than just a knowledge of astronomy. At the very least it would also have required a knowledge of several fairly arcane subjects, including: astrology; comparative mythology; and two different scripts originating in widely separated ancient cultures. Most significantly in the present context, it would require an intimate familiarity with Epona.



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The cast of characters identified by Farley and Fell was certainly no more eclectic than the Greek, Egyptian and Celtic cast of the Pompeii fresco.[\[1060\]](#) Like the southern Italian example, which tells its own internally consistent story, we might expect and allow for a similar “multivalence” in the symbolism of the Anubis Caves: deliberate ambiguity is a hallmark of all religious symbolism.[\[1061\]](#) This too will be helpful since it puts greater pressure on the identification of the figures and translation of the scripts to remain internally coherent at multiple levels of interpretation.

On the surface, the main characters of the unfolding drama seem to be “Bel” and “Anubis” - brought into prominence by the setting sun at the Autumn equinox. Fell's translation of two relevant inscriptions reads:

*“The sun, six months north, sinks south for [a] space of months [of] equal number... In clear weather the projecting piece of rock eclipses the blaze at sunset. This shadow will reach nearly to the jaw of the image of the jackal divinity [Anubis]” and “The sun belongs to Bel - his cavern on the days of the equinox is for the chanting of prayers to Bel... Enact at sunset the rites of Bel, assembling at that time in worship.”*[\[1062\]](#)

In fact, while shadow moves toward the Anubis figure, a “wedge of light” also lights up an image of the sun, then moves onto the Bel figure before leaving him in shadow and illuminating the figure of Anubis at the moment of sunset.[\[1063\]](#) Although the sequence begins with the solar image and the “sun god” Bel, in this particular scene the interplay of light and shadow suggests that the caves were aptly named: “Anubis” is given pride of place in the final moments before the curtain of darkness falls. However, this is simply the opening act in the unfolding drama - one in which the sun begins its annual Autumn descent into “the underworld”.

Six weeks later, at sunset on October 31<sup>st</sup>, it is Epona and her horse that are highlighted by the sun. Fell's translation of the accompanying inscription reads:

*“...the Horse Goddess herself, observing the motion of the stars. At Safrain [Samhain] the sun is in Scorpio. Day of the Onset of Winter, Bel retires. Festival of Ripe Corn, Abundance. Day of Ghosts.”*[\[1064\]](#)

As if to underscore the message, a beam of light also falls on a nearby scorpion-like figure (Scorpio?) with an inscription Fell translated as “sun”.[\[1065\]](#) October 31<sup>st</sup> was the Eve of the Celtic month of Samhain: it not only marked the beginning of winter in the old Celtic calendar but also, arguably,

the *alpha* and *omega* - the beginning and end - of the entire Celtic Year. This seems intended to underscore Epona's central significance and, together with the assertion that she is “observing the motion of the stars”, suggests that she plays a pivotal role in the story.

On this interpretation of the characters and inscriptions, it seems that the Anubis Caves present a retelling of the now very familiar central theme underlying the ancient Mysteries: that of the sun's annual journey to its death and rebirth in the underworld - a journey, in this case, guided and perhaps presided over by Epona. This certainly fits in a general way with what we know about her and her relationship with the solar sky god. But we would certainly be justified in asking how a Celtic sun god and an Egyptian underworld god can be internally coherent.

## WHICH “BEL” TOLLS?

The assumption made by Farley *et al* was that the figure named “Bel” in the inscriptions was the Celtic sun god Belenus. It was a reasonable assumption to make. Judging from the imagery alone, the figure is fairly obviously linked with the sun: he is flanked on both sides by solar images, and has the same rayed aureole around his head used in Romano-Celtic images of Belenus.[\[1066\]](#) In addition, the Celtic word *Fell* used in his translation of the ogham *bel* means “bright” or “shining”:[\[1067\]](#) both primary attributes of the sun, and the root-word of Belenus' name.[\[1068\]](#) The identification also makes sense in terms of his liaisons with Epona - particularly in his Romano-Celtic identification with Apollo.[\[1069\]](#) On the other hand, Belenus had no special connection with the underworld and no obvious mythic or historical connection with Anubis. In an otherwise entirely Celtic cast therefore, the Egyptian god seems incongruous and out of place.

There is another possibility though. Apparently, the word *bel* was also used in one of the Numidian inscriptions.[\[1070\]](#) This was the language of the Amazigh (Berber) people of North Africa, whose religion blended many elements of Egyptian and Carthaginian belief. In that context the word *bel* derived from the Semitic word *baal* (“lord”) - a derivation exemplified by the Syrian sun-god Malakbêl, whose name meant “Messenger of Baal”.[\[1071\]](#) In the context of the Numidian inscription therefore, “Bel” could have referred to the Amazigh-Libyan-Egyptian god Amon (or Amun) who merged with the Carthaginian sun god *Baal* to become *Ba'al-Hamon*.[\[1072\]](#) This was the same Amon who also fused with the Egyptian sun god Ra - a god who had a very distinct and significant relationship with the Egyptian underworld and, thus, with its gatekeeper Anubis.[\[1073\]](#)

Combining ogham and Numidian scripts was a curious thing to do. If Fell's translations are correct, the ambiguity produced in the word *bel* may

therefore have been deliberate - a way of fusing the Celtic Belenus with the Amazigh-Egyptian Amon-Ra. The fact that Farley and Fell *et al* did not see this possibility is significant, since it supports the validity of their general conclusions by strengthening the internal coherence of the story they presented in the caves. Quite apart from establishing a functional link between the Celtic and Egyptian cast, Belenus and Amon-Ra can both be seen as playing distinct yet intimately related roles in the unfolding drama.

From this perspective, Belenus may have represented the sun in summer and autumn. His very strong native Celtic link with the solar horse becomes fundamentally important when we see Epona riding the stallion at Samhain. The statement that “Bel retires” (i.e., withdraws) and the simultaneous appearance of the horse suggests a transmutation:[\[1074\]](#) Belenus has become fully identified with the solar stallion - an idea reinforced by the erect phallus they both display in their imagery (a symbol of the sun's fecundating power).[\[1075\]](#) But in the context of the ancient Mystery story, the underlying purpose of the sun's journey is better represented by Amon-Ra: the Amazigh-Egyptian sun god brings the central theme of regeneration and resurrection to the forefront far more cogently than Belenus.[\[1076\]](#) The linguistic ambiguity of the inscriptions may therefore signal the fundamental transformation from the “bright” or “shining” sun god of summer and autumn to the immortal “lord” he will become through his winter sojourn in the underworld and his heroic rebirth in the coming spring.[\[1077\]](#)

## THE GATEKEEPER

There is no ambiguity when we come to the figure Farley identified as Anubis. The petroglyph in the caves[\[1078\]](#) closely resembles Egyptian tomb paintings of the god in the jackal-form pictured in the illustration on the right.[\[1079\]](#) But this was not Anubis in his original Old Kingdom role as “Lord of the Underworld”. That role was assumed by Osiris after the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC,[\[1080\]](#) and the image of the “jackal divinity” in the tomb paintings and the caves evidently borrows directly from the hieroglyphic form of the god's name that was used from then onwards.[\[1081\]](#)

*Figure 56 Anubis*

In the Anubis Caves, he is the gatekeeper of the underworld: the “Lord of the Cave Mouth” and “Guardian of the Veil” - a role in which he purified the bodies of the dead and brought their souls into the presence of Osiris, where he then “weighed” their hearts to determine their worthiness for eternal life. Presumably, it was in the context of purification that the cave inscriptions invoke him under his Egyptian name (in Fell's translation) with the words: “May Inpu wield the flail” and “may his arm be a hindrance to evil”.[\[1082\]](#) In this context, the flail had virtually the same connotation as the scourge used by Menat (Hathor) - and Epona - to purify and bring happiness and freedom from care.[\[1083\]](#)

It is also significant that, under the Greek influence of the Ptolemaic Pharaohs beginning in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Anubis was identified with Hermes. As “Hermanubis”, he “opened the roads of the Other World” and represented the Egyptian priesthood.[\[1084\]](#) This combined form of the god was popular during the Roman period and provides an implicit link with Epona, who was closely connected with Hermes-Mercury and knew the secret paths to and from the underworld.[\[1085\]](#) There was also a very strong link between Anubis' jackal-form and the dog that accompanied Epona in her Romano-Celtic imagery. Like Anubis, the dog was intimately associated with both the underworld and the role of “guardian”.[\[1086\]](#)

These points all provide general support for the identification of the cave-figures as Anubis and Epona, at least in the sense that they have well-established prior connections. But there is also an intriguing link between Anubis' role in relation to Osiris and Epona's union with Isis at Pompeii. In Egyptian mythology Amun-Ra and Osiris merge in the underworld,[\[1087\]](#) and the fact that Isis was instrumental in bringing about Osiris' resurrection is therefore particularly significant.[\[1088\]](#) Beyond simply sharing broadly similar roles in conducting souls to the underworld, the implication in the Oklahoma caves may be that Anubis is receiving and preparing “Bel” (Amun-Ra-Osiris) at the equinox for a similar resurrection at the hands of Epona from Samhain onwards. Whether or not this was the intention of the cave's designer(s), it would certainly be consistent with what we know about Epona: she was intimately associated with the sun, the hero's journey and the themes of regeneration, resurrection and immortality - both among the Celts, and in connection with the Mysteries.

## THE “REGENERATRIX”

The theme of regeneration was also emphasized in the caves by the presence of a figure Farley identified as Sheela-na-Gig, accompanying a second image of Bel.[\[1089\]](#) A 12<sup>th</sup> century carving of this “great

regeneratrix”,[\[1090\]](#) holding her vagina wide open in the usual way, is shown in the photo below.[\[1091\]](#) Usually identified as Celtic and found scattered throughout France, Spain, Britain and Ireland, her imagery has been interpreted as everything from medieval representations of female lust,[\[1092\]](#) to remnants of much older fertility cults and Mother goddess worship,[\[1093\]](#) or Neolithic frog-goddess regeneration themes.[\[1094\]](#) One interesting comparison, made to show that these images express an ancient theme, was with Baubo - the woman in Greek myth who lifted her skirts and displayed her vulva to cheer up Demeter:[\[1095\]](#) a scene reenacted on the procession to Eleusis for initiation into the greater mysteries.[\[1096\]](#)

Leaving aside academic speculation, the visual-emotional impact of Sheela-na-Gig is immediate, primal and hard-hitting. Her most direct and obvious message is an invitation: a call to return to her “cradle of beginnings” - to die, and thus to be regenerated and reborn.[\[1097\]](#) In the seamless unity of life and death, she is the embodiment of the womb and tomb - her wide-open vulva is both a passage inward to the womb, and the birth canal leading outward into renewed life. If Farley was right about Sheela-na-Gig's presence in the Anubis Caves, there could be no more appropriate figure to sum up their fundamental - and ancient - theme. On the other hand, it would argue against an early date for the construction of the caves since these images did not become popular in Europe, Britain and Ireland until after the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century.[\[1098\]](#)

*Figure 57 Sheela-na-gig.*



## THE LADY ON THE HORSE

By itself, the petroglyph Farley identified as Epona could be open to other interpretations. The engraving is primitive but seems to depict a woman with one eye, a triangular head and body, and a stripped triangular skirt, mounted aside (probably) an unmistakably *ithyphallic* stallion (he has an erection).[\[1099\]](#) If it were only based on Fell's translation of the accompanying inscription the identification of this petroglyph would certainly be open to question, and the criticisms of his work would be a serious challenge. But the astronomical alignment and imagery alone (without interpretation) guarantee that the story told in these caves is that of the sun's journey to the underworld. Taken together with the coherence established above between Epona and the fairly secure identification of Anubis and (more tentatively) of Bel therefore, she is the *only* possible candidate for the role of the mounted female rider illuminated at sunset each year on October 31<sup>st</sup>.

Fell's translation of the inscription was thus largely supportive and supplementary: she was indeed the “Horse Goddess”, fundamentally associated with “ripe corn” (wheat), “abundance”, and with the “ghosts” of the underworld.[\[1100\]](#) This is entirely consistent with what we already know about Epona, and is coherent with the story that connects her to the other figures in the caves: a story of death and renewal in which she plays a central role. On the other hand, we seem to be on less familiar ground with the assertion that she is “observing the motion of the stars” and, especially, in her very strong association with Samhain and Scorpio.

## OBSERVING THE STARS

Probably the most startling part of the inscription, the news that she is “observing the motion of the stars” is intriguingly reminiscent of Prudentius' remark about Epona being enthroned “above the stars”.[\[1101\]](#) It certainly evokes, and may reflect, the ancient idea of her celestial sovereignty. But if Fell's choice of the word “observing” was correct, it also adds a significant new dimension - not only in relation to the Horse Goddess' role in the caves, but also in terms of our understanding of Epona more generally.

Observing the motion of the stars was a crucial and sacred function in all major ancient civilizations: everything important in life, both in religion and in the fertility cycle in agriculture, depended on accurately timing and predicting astronomical events. Indeed, whatever rites may once have been conducted at this site, the astronomical alignment of the Anubis Caves is the basis of their purpose and function. Fell's translation of the inscription implies not only that the sacred knowledge of the stars belongs to the “Horse



Goddess”, but also that she is therefore central to the deeper significance of the caves.

Beyond the knowledge implied in simply watching the stars however, the word “observing” also carries other interesting connotations. Without prejudice to the question of when the caves were constructed, for instance, the original Latin *observare* meant “to watch over, to protect”; and by the late 14<sup>th</sup> century it had developed the additional sense of “to hold to” (a way of life or course of conduct): a sense that evolved in the 1560's to “attend to in practice, to keep”.[\[1102\]](#) These connotations come much closer to a fundamental recognition of Epona's celestial sovereignty - the idea that she not only watches over the stars, but keeps them to their courses.

There is a caveat though. Even if translated as accurately as possible, the original Ogham of the inscription may not have justified these subtle shadings of meaning in English. On the other hand, we have already seen that Epona was implicitly understood as a Queen of Heaven,[\[1103\]](#) and it seems natural enough that her sovereignty would extend to the motion of stars just like it did to the sun. The curious remark by Prudentius about her throne above the stars certainly supports this conclusion, and it may also be significant that before Zeus took over this role the early non-Greek (or pre-Olympian) Artemis may have been “Ruler of the Stars”.[\[1104\]](#) If this role did not belong implicitly to Epona in her purely Celtic form, she may therefore have “inherited” it through her identification with Artemis and her “defeat” of Zeus-Sabazios. Either way, it certainly seems to be a legitimate implication in Fell's translation of the cave inscription, and is further supported by the very strong association of the “Horse Goddess” with Samhain - both in the inscription itself, and in the illumination of her physical image on October 31<sup>st</sup>.

## BEYOND THE VEIL

The one area in which the Anubis Caves present us with entirely new information is in linking Epona so emphatically with the Eve of Samhain and the zodiac sign (or constellation) of Scorpio. These very specific links were unprecedented in her “Old World” Romano-Celtic artwork and inscriptions, in classical literary references, or in her Roman feast day. Yet they were not utterly groundless. Nor were the designer(s) of the caves simply making up these connections on the basis of Epona's intimate, but general, association with the underworld.

In the old Celtic calendar,[\[1105\]](#) the seasons began and ended with the “cross-quarters” of the year: the points midway between the solstices and equinoxes. These were the truly important times of the agricultural year. By contrast, the solstices and equinoxes marked the middle of the seasons - a fact remembered in the old habit of calling the solstices “Mid-Summer” and “Mid-



Winter”. Of the four cross-quarters, the most important of all was Samhain. It was a time of enormous spiritual significance. Apart from being a kind of last harvest festival at the “onset of winter”, it was a liminal time when the “veil between the worlds” was at its thinnest and crossing between them (in either direction) was most easily done. Thus, not only was Samhain a “day of ghosts”, but it was also the most appropriate time for Epona to lead “Bel” deeper into the underworld after he had been duly prepared by Anubis: the “Guardian of the Veil”.

The designer(s) of the caves may also have been drawing on the idea that Samhain was when the Celtic year began and ended.[\[1106\]](#) Although some modern scholars have argued that Samhain was not the Celtic “New Year”, [\[1107\]](#) there a number of reasons for thinking that at least in certain contexts it was the “hub” around which the Celtic religious and agricultural year revolved. We can see an indication of this in Irish myth, for instance, when the hero Cuchulain “eyes Emer’s bosom and wishes aloud that he might wander there”: Emer replies that, “No man may travel there who has not gone without sleep from Samhain...to Samhain”.[\[1108\]](#) Although sexual on the surface, the conversation was intimately related to the fertility cycle in Nature. By beginning and ending with Samhain, Emer was pointedly referring to the “womb and tomb” of the Great Mother: the same idea seen in the Sheela-na-Gig and later expressed in the line, “[f]rom me all things proceed, and unto me all things must return”.[\[1109\]](#)

Seen in this light, linking Epona so emphatically with Samhain in the Anubis Caves not only placed her at the centre of Celtic year but also implied her role as primal Mother. In the context of her association with Anubis and the Amazigh-Egyptian “Bel” it was particularly reminiscent of Isis' words when she introduced herself to Lucius:

*“I am Nature, the universal Mother... sovereign of all things spiritual, Queen of the Dead, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are. My nod governs the shining heights of heaven...the lamentable silences of the world below.”*[\[1110\]](#)

At the same time, Emer's reply also suggested the spiritually awakened state of an initiate: only the “seasoned” man who had completed the journey of death, rebirth and maturity “without sleep” could wander in the bosom of the goddess. The initiate's union with the goddess always begins with a journey to the underworld,[\[1111\]](#) and since this theme was central to the story told in the Anubis Caves it may be - in fact it seems quite likely - that initiation was part of their purpose and function.

From this perspective it is particularly interesting to note that three major Greek religious events took place around the same time as Samhain: initiation

into the greater mysteries at Eleusis;[\[1112\]](#) the Stenia festival celebrating the reunion of Mother and Maiden in the underworld;[\[1113\]](#) and the Thesmophoria festival of the Two Goddesses.[\[1114\]](#) No exact correspondence can be established between these events and Samhain Eve, since the (Attic) festival calendar used at Athens was lunar-based and began on the first new moon after the summer solstice. This meant there could be as much as a month's difference in relation to our modern calendar (or half a month in relation to the Julian calendar, before our calendar replaced it in 1582). But the Greeks also used an agricultural calendar, based on the regular rising of certain stars, and intimately related to both the Eleusinian Mysteries (harvesting and winnowing the wheat) and the Thesmophoria (sowing winter seed).[\[1115\]](#) This may be particularly significant in relation to Epona's ancient identification with Despoina-Persephone, and her doubly-emphasized links in the Anubis Caves with Samhain and Scorpio.

“Star knowledge”, it seems, “pervade[d] every aspect of Greek...literature” and was a “core subject in ancient [Greek] education”.[\[1116\]](#) More to the point, Greek astronomers inherited the zodiac originally used by the Babylonians as a frame of reference for making systematic observations of the movements of the planets against the background of the fixed stars (the most obvious implication of the role explicitly assigned to Epona in the Anubis Cave inscriptions).[\[1117\]](#) That frame of reference was based on the risings of two very bright stars that are directly opposite each other in the night sky - Aldebaran, at 15° Taurus (in April-May), and Antares at 15° Scorpio (October-November):[\[1118\]](#) degrees of the zodiac corresponding closely with Beltaine (Belenus' high-point at the start of the Celtic summer) and Samhain (the “onset of winter”).

The symbolism inherited and passed on by the Greeks for the constellation (and later the sign) of Scorpio drew on an ancient Sumerian-Assyrian myth that was later incorporated into Babylonian astronomy. According to the myth, the “Scorpion men” who guard the horizons where the sun rises and sets “open the doors for Shamash [the sun god] as he travels out each day, and close the doors after him when he returns to the underworld at night”.[\[1119\]](#) It is also noteworthy that the Babylonians placed Scorpio under the dominion of the Hurian-Hittite goddess Ishara, who was worshipped as *bel-et rame* or “lady of (sexual) love” and associated with the underworld.[\[1120\]](#) The link between Epona and Scorpio in the Anubis Caves may thus have been a carry-over from her human-form origins in Anatolia, where Ishara had certainly been known.[\[1121\]](#)

In any case, whether they knew it or not, the designer(s) of these caves were depicting a theme with extremely ancient antecedents. It was certainly a complex and innovative presentation - both culturally and mythologically.

But the interpretation arrived at by Farley and Fell *et al* cannot be faulted in terms of their identification of the figures and translations of the inscriptions. Each detail is individually consistent with what we know of ancient myth, religion and astronomy, and the pieces all fit together perfectly.

The one question that remains to be answered is *when* the “Old World” imagery in these caves was created. According to professional academic historians and archaeologists, it simply could not have been pre-Columbian. As far as they are concerned, with the possible exception of the Vikings, there was no “trans-oceanic contact” with America before Columbus in 1492. [\[1122\]](#) This view is based on rigorous standards of evidence that amateur enthusiasts sometimes possibly misunderstand or ignore. Unfortunately, the “professionals” can sometimes be very contemptuous and dismissive in response. [\[1123\]](#) But these same scholars have not been particularly helpful in determining when the Anubis Caves *were* created. To assert that they were an elaborate “hoax” is no more scientific than to believe they were pre-Columbian in origin. What is needed is a plausible story about when - and by whom - they *could* have been designed and constructed: a working hypothesis that could be tested against the existing evidence, or at least guide further research.

## CRAFTING THE CAVES

One way to begin answering the question of when these caves were crafted, is to look at who might have had the necessary knowledge to do so. From what we have seen above, we can modify our original list of the areas of knowledge required. In addition to astronomy, astrology, comparative mythology and Ogham and Numidian, they would also have needed a grounding in (and probably initiation into) the ancient Feminine-centred Mysteries, and an intimate familiarity with Epona. This was a tall order. Very few people in the world would have had even a working knowledge in these areas, let alone all of them together. This is particularly true when we consider that Numidian was an obscure ancient language; that, despite its prominence in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the centrality of the Divine Feminine was virtually unheard of in the modern world before the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and that, until recently, very little was known about Epona - and especially about her role in the Mysteries.

## MODERN CANDIDATES

There were only about four publicly-known groups (loosely considered) operating in the United States before 1978 that might possibly have fostered the type of knowledge reflected in the Anubis Caves: Wiccans; the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn; the Ancient Order of Druids in America; and the Freemasons. But none of these were likely to have possessed (or fostered) the full range of knowledge needed to design and construct the caves.

The Wiccan revival that occurred between the 1950's and 1970's, for instance, certainly embraced a concept of the Divine Feminine.[\[1124\]](#) This was particularly true among those influenced by C. G. Leyland's view of women "...as the fully equal, which means *superior sex*",[\[1125\]](#) and the central authority of the priestess in a Wiccan coven also reflects this emphasis on the Sacred Feminine.[\[1126\]](#) But while some early Wiccans or goddess-worshippers may have known about Epona in general terms, it is highly unlikely they would have been familiar with her role in the ancient Mysteries. Similarly, the astronomical alignment of the caves, the use of Numidian, and the blend of Celtic and Amazigh-Egyptian deities all go beyond the usual interests of a witch coven in the 1970's.

The sophistication of the Anubis Caves was perhaps more characteristic in some ways of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Founded in London in 1888, the Golden Dawn became what was probably the largest single influence on Western occultism in the 20th century and had already established temples in America before 1900.[\[1127\]](#) Significantly, the Order made extensive use of the Egyptian pantheon in its teachings and rituals,[\[1128\]](#) and also placed central emphasis on the Divine Feminine in its higher grades of initiation: "...*the rituals of the 6=5 upwards are under the guidance of the Shekinah...and the apparent patriarchal aspect [of the lower grades] is then reversed*".[\[1129\]](#)

Even its highest initiates may have had problems though when it came to Numidian script, and the Order apparently made little or no use of Celtic deities in its teachings and rituals. Despite listing deities from the Egyptian, Hindu, Scandinavian, Greek and Roman pantheons, for instance, Aleister Crowley (a former Golden Dawn initiate who lived in the U.S. between 1914 and 1919) included no Celtic gods or goddesses in his otherwise very comprehensive table of correspondences.[\[1130\]](#) Both Belenus and the Horse Goddess may have been known to initiates of the Order anyway but, once again, it is extremely unlikely that they would have been familiar with Epona's role in the ancient Mysteries. As a result, although temples in the chartered lineage of the original Golden Dawn survived in America for a

number of years (none past the 1970's),[\[1131\]](#) it is unlikely that any of their initiates crafted the Anubis Caves.

Much the same could probably be said for another 20<sup>th</sup> century organization that might have fostered the construction of the caves. This was the Ancient Order of Druids in America, founded in 1912. They would certainly have had the Celtic theme at heart, and the caves could possibly have been crafted as a project for advancement to the level of Druid Adept.[\[1132\]](#) But even if Epona's role in the Mysteries had somehow been known, there would have been little reason for initiates of the Order to cast her with Amazigh-Egyptian deities or to know and use Numidian script.

Among the publicly-known groups or organizations, this leaves the Free Masons. Established in Pennsylvania in 1731 or slightly earlier, Freemasonry "...is a Mystery of Figurative Death, after which there is a resurrection in symbolism".[\[1133\]](#) At its core, and in its eclectic breadth of technical, mythological and genuinely arcane knowledge therefore, there is little doubt that initiates of Freemasonry *could* (in principle) have crafted the Anubis Caves. Even a knowledge of Numidian would not be a particularly surprising accomplishment among members of its higher grades. On the other hand, the implicit emphasis on the centrality of the Divine Feminine in the caves does seem unlikely in an exclusively *fraternal* order. It is not impossible: the founders of the egalitarian and ultimately Feminine-centred Golden Dawn, for example, were Freemasons. But the choice of Epona for the central position in the Oklahoma "Mysteries", and her very specific role in the "figurative death" and symbolic resurrection of the sun god, was almost certainly outside the ken even of the Freemasons.

There is the possibility, of course, that the caves were designed and constructed by an unknown private group that had somehow acquired the necessary knowledge. But, like the better-known groups above, the one factor that argues most strongly against this was the absence of familiarity with Epona's ancient role in the Mysteries: something that could only have been pieced together from evidence that has come to light since the 1980's.

This seems to leave us in a bind. The Anubis Caves were clearly put together by someone who knew what they were doing. But they could not have been crafted before 1492 when Columbus made his landfall in the Caribbean and Epona might still have been known to certain families in Europe. Nor, for religious reasons, would the first English settlers of the Virginia Colony have been likely to bring such knowledge with them in 1607 - especially after the Witchcraft Act enacted by James I three years earlier. Quite apart from this, the Oklahoma panhandle belonged to Native Americans and was made legally off-limits to European-Americans in 1879 by Presidential proclamation.[\[1134\]](#) By this time, few if any Europeans would

have remembered Epona and her role in the Mysteries, much less possess the rest of the knowledge necessary to construct the caves.

This leaves one possible explanation that might make sense of all the evidence, and provide a plausible narrative about the creation Anubis Caves. For this we must look to the expedition under the Spanish explorer Coronado, which crossed the Oklahoma panhandle twice between 1539 and 1542.

## A SPANIARD IN THE WORKS[\[1135\]](#)

Among the roughly four-hundred European men that travelled with Coronado's expedition, there were eight mounted *hidalgo* (knights) of ancestral Spanish nobility.[\[1136\]](#) At least one of these eight men may have been a descendant of the Celt-Iberian tribes that had lived in Spain since 6<sup>th</sup> century BC; and who served in Roman auxiliary cavalry units like the Cohors I Celtiberorum,[\[1137\]](#) worshipped Epona, and would have been likely to preserve her memory as part of a cherished family tradition. The images of Epona at Talavera, Torremenga and Martiago, at Braga, Mt. Brenorio and Marquinez, and at Lara de los Infantes and Botorrita,[\[1138\]](#) all suggest that the Horse Goddess was still known in Spain in the 8<sup>th</sup> century when the aristocratic families later known as *Hidalgos de Sangre* (of “immemorial nobility”) first came into historic prominence. Just over two hundred years after the western Roman empire and its army had disintegrated, the *hidalgos* were called on to defend Spain against a massive Arab-Amazigh invasion - and to preserve Spanish values and traditions for nearly eight-hundred years until the Muslims were finally expelled from Granada in 1492.

After the initial turbulence in the wake of the Arab-led invasion, the Spanish and Amazigh co-existed more or less peacefully. Alliances were as common as skirmishes, and intermarriage must have become increasingly wide-spread.[\[1139\]](#) It was this fusion of values, traditions and bloodlines that later produced the exceptionally rich culture of Spain. But we can see interesting and relevant common ground emerging even from the beginning.

At the time of the invasion, for instance, the Amazigh were relatively new converts to Islam and many probably still had deep allegiances to their native polytheistic beliefs. These included deities they had shared with the Carthaginians (e.g., Baal) and the Egyptians (e.g., Isis, Osiris, and Amun-Ra). Herodotus noted that they “sacrificed to the Sun and Moon” and that this was common to all the “Libyans”.[\[1140\]](#) Apuleius and Augustine of Hippo apparently commented that the Amazigh also “worshipped rocks”, and there is certainly an extensive rock-art and tomb culture to support that view.[\[1141\]](#) This is particularly interesting since both Prudentius (at the close of the 5<sup>th</sup> century), and Martin of Braga (in the 6<sup>th</sup> century) denounced the Spanish peoples for “worshipping stones”.[\[1142\]](#) Apparently this was one area in



which the Spanish and Amazigh shared common ancestral beliefs and practices.

Like the *hidalgo* descendants of the Celt-Iberian warriors, the Amazighs' ancestors had also maintained a highly-respected light cavalry: they fought alongside Hannibal (and the Celts) in the second Punic War, and were later recruited into the Roman auxiliary cavalry as the *equites Numidarum* or *Maurorum*.[\[1143\]](#) Livy described them as “by far the best horsemen in Africa”,[\[1144\]](#) and it was probably through their service in the *equites* that these Amazigh horsemen came to know Epona. The fact that they did know her was graphically illustrated by the “Mistress of Animals” image of her in Algeria,[\[1145\]](#) close to its eastern border with Numidia - the former Libyan kingdom where the Amazigh were from (now Algeria and Tunisia) and after which their native “Old Berber” language was called “Numidian”.

During the Roman period these aristocratic traditions of knighthood, horsemanship and Epona would have provided strong common ground between the ancestors of the Amazigh and *hidalgo* alike. Among their descendants in the Middle Ages, the endurance of these ancestral family traditions cannot be underestimated - perhaps especially in Spain where the two races not only lived side-by-side and intermarried, but where the Pure Spanish horses bred from Iberian and North African bloodlines became a matter of national pride.[\[1146\]](#) Here, even more than in France, it is extremely likely that Epona continued to epitomize the *esprit de corps* of knighthood and nobility well into the early modern period - despite prevailing Christian and Islamic influences.[\[1147\]](#)

With this background in mind, it is not hard to imagine a noble Amazigh woman being attracted to and marrying a tall, dark *hidalgo* friend of her father or brother: it was common in medieval warfare for women and children to accompany their men.[\[1148\]](#) The marriage of a Spanish *hidalga* to an Amazigh knight would have been just as likely, but the children of a mixed marriage would have been more likely to learn Numidian “at the breast” of an Amazigh mother. In either case it was a marriage that blended ancient Amazigh religious beliefs and Numidian language with a long-held Celt-Iberian tradition embracing Belenus,[\[1149\]](#) Epona and noble knighthood. Regardless of when it took place during the eight-hundred-year Muslim occupation of Spain, there is every reason to believe that this exotic mixture was passed down through the generations and that a young *Hidalgo de Sangre* could well have brought this family tradition with him when he joined Coronado's expedition.

From a practical standpoint, there were several other things he needed - not least of which were a knowledge of astronomy and mathematics, especially geometry. Astronomy had been included in the liberal arts

curriculum (with arithmetic, geometry) at universities such as those at Palencia and Salamanca since the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, and it was standard in undergraduate education.[\[1150\]](#) If our young *hidalgo* did not receive a university education, then in addition to his military training he would have been privately tutored in reading and writing (Latin and Greek), mathematics, theology and history.[\[1151\]](#) With this background and a little initiative he could have studied astronomy from books such as Sacrobosco's 13<sup>th</sup> century *Tractatus de sphaera* - an introduction that was widely read in Europe during the late Middle Ages. More advanced books were also readily available, as were astrolabes and astronomical tables.[\[1152\]](#)

It would have taken some ingenuity to get around the Christian fervour of the Franciscan friars who also travelled with Coronado. But this might not have been as difficult as it sounds. The Franciscans believed in a “natural philosophy” that saw meditation on Nature as the first step in contemplating God, and its highest expression was the study of visible light.[\[1153\]](#) In all likelihood they would have found it commendable that a young knight wanted to construct an “instrument” from the natural features of the land to mark the sun's crossing into the southern hemisphere. It was not as important as determining the date of Easter from the Spring equinox, but they would have enjoyed the irony that while his ancestors had “worshipped stones” he wanted to use rocks to “study light” as a means of worship. For them, the project would no doubt have taken on the status of a religious mission “for the glory of God” and received their full blessing.

Our young *hidalgo* would also have needed time: it would probably have taken several weeks, if not longer, to construct the site. But with the backing and blessing of the friars, he would certainly have been given permission to stay behind for as long as necessary (probably with a small contingent of native warriors to help him) to complete the monument while Coronado returned to Mexico. Nevertheless, the time factor would have been important - and not simply for astronomical reasons. He would probably have been ordered to rejoin Coronado at some point, even if he wanted to stay in the “New World” and not return home to Spain. Certainly, it is very significant that the instructions “for the druid” inscribed on the walls of the caves were not written for those who constructed who the site.[\[1154\]](#) The author clearly expected to leave the caves, and *planned* for them to be discovered and used by others.

We could speculate about who he thought would be able to interpret his messages, let alone appreciate and use the pagan “temple” he had created. But the important question is not who he thought these people might be, but how a young Spanish knight in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century could have learned the primitive Irish Ogham used to communicate the purpose of his gift to



posterity.

It is tempting to point to the fact that the Cohors I Celtiberorum was stationed near Caersws in Wales until the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.[\[1155\]](#) But this was too early for them to have come into contact with the 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century Welsh inscriptions in Ogham. There were two possible sources much closer to home, however. There was a British (Brythonic) colony in northwest Spain, for instance, that was established in the 6<sup>th</sup> century at Britonia near Betanzos in Galicia.[\[1156\]](#) There was also Santiago di Compostela, the capital of modern Galicia. This was an important pilgrimage site during the high and late Middle Ages, and Irish pilgrims would certainly have been among those who came to venerate the saint - probably many over the years. One of these Irish visitors may have been willing to trade a long-preserved knowledge of Ogham for food, shelter and friendship. Ogham would have been an effective means of hiding a pagan tradition from the prying eyes of the Church, and certainly useful enough to pass down through the generations with the other traditions inherited by our young *hidalgo*. In fact there was a long-standing belief in Spain that the Irish were Spanish descendants, and they were accorded all the rights and privileges due to Spanish subjects - a fact recognized by royal decree in 1680.[\[1157\]](#)

This story of who crafted the Anubis Caves and when is intended to be suggestive only. The fact is, if these caves were crafted when Coronado crossed the Oklahoma panhandle between 1539 and 1542, the drama enacted in light and shadow would not have taken place on the 22<sup>nd</sup>/23<sup>rd</sup> of September and on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October as it does now. At that time the old Julian calendar was still in effect and the Autumn equinox would have occurred on the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> of September, with Samhain Eve falling on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October. Due to delays in communication with the New World, it was not until 1584 that the Gregorian calendar we use now was put into effect in the Spanish colonies. This was forty-two years after Coronado's expedition[\[1158\]](#), and our hypothetical young *hidalgo* would probably have been in his sixties.

Nevertheless, although much would have depended on chance for all the necessary ingredients to come together, this story does provide a plausible explanation both for the physical facts and for the interpretation of the figures and scripts in the Anubis Caves. Indeed, if Epona was the Lady on the horse pictured on their walls, then the *only* likely explanation is that these caves were crafted at the beginning of the early modern era. That being the case, then the “seeds” Epona had planted in the European and North African psyche were literally transplanted into the North American “soil” of these caves, and then lay dormant ~ unseen and unappreciated - until an amateur archaeologist identified her in 1978.

Like so much else about Epona, her presence in the Anubis Caves was

deeply hidden - and the controversy surrounding their discovery has tended to keep it that way. But elsewhere, the seeds of her renewal were beginning to germinate in fertile soil. After her long dormancy and century-long confinement to the dry “caverns” of purely academic research, these seeds began to “quicken” in the warm light of a wider public awareness. Around the time Farley was introduced to the Anubis Caves, Epona was beginning to be embraced not only by those interested in the revival of Celtic, Wiccan and goddess-centred spirituality, but also by equestrians. The time of her advent ~ her arrival or blossoming ~ in the modern world had come.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Advent of the Goddess

To know Epona today, we need to understand that she embodied a lineage that stretched back into the remote past - not just as one of many goddesses from across the ancient world, but as a specific epiphany of the Divine Feminine as Maiden, Mistress, Mother and Queen. She made her own unique contribution to this lineage by joining the divine so intimately with the strength and wisdom of the horse. It was a contribution that even Christianity was unable to extinguish completely. The powerful seeds Epona planted at the end of antiquity did not lay dormant in Europe during the Middle Ages, however: they germinated unseen in the bosom of chivalry and courtly love, and were nurtured by the enduring centrality of the Feminine in the flowering of the Italian Renaissance.[\[1159\]](#) At the dawn of the modern era these same seeds were vigorous enough to take root in soil of the New World - if not planted by a young *hidalgo* in the Anubis Caves in the early 1500's, then in the coming of the horse itself.

Epona's advent in the modern world though, was not without serious obstacles. By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, in both Europe and the Americas, patriarchal religion was joined by the growing influence of science. Together, they vigorously suppressed the Divine and Sacred Feminine. The torture and burning of witches was paralleled in science by a new methodology: treating “nature as a female to be tortured through mechanical inventions”,[\[1160\]](#) in order to “wrest the secrets of nature from her breast”.[\[1161\]](#) It took over two hundred years for the Feminine to start gaining ground again, and its restoration was led (fittingly enough) by Epona when - hidden away in the halls of Italian academia - a scholar named Cattaneo published his review of the known evidence for the Horse Goddess in 1819.[\[1162\]](#)

From this point onward Epona's rediscovery was paralleled by the resurgence of the Feminine, and signs that the grip of patriarchy was slowly beginning to loosen started to appear everywhere. In 1832, Goethe echoed Dante's 'Divine Comedy' when he wrote that the “...Eternal Feminine draws us on high”,[\[1163\]](#) and six years later the Pitcairn Islands may have been the first country to acknowledge women's right to vote. In 1861, the Swiss anthropologist Johann Bachofen published his shocking idea that prehistoric cultures were matriarchal and goddess-centred.[\[1164\]](#) Although still hotly contested, it was an idea that inspired generations of archaeologists, social philosophers and writers - including the American statesman Lewis Henry Morgan,[\[1165\]](#) and the German political theorist Friedrich Engels.[\[1166\]](#) Significantly, three Freemasons (an exclusively male organization) founded the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888.[\[1167\]](#) They not only took the revolutionary step of opening its first Temple to men and women equally,

but also devoted its higher grades of initiation to the goddess in her Jewish guise as the Shekinah.[\[1168\]](#)

This was the social and academic atmosphere in 1895, when Salomon Reinach began introducing Epona to a French readership in classical studies through his book and eight-year-long series of journal articles.[\[1169\]](#) The series finished just as Jane Harrison published her foundational work for modern studies in ancient Greek religion in England - a book which also drew specific attention to the pre-patriarchal centrality of the Divine Feminine in ancient myth and ritual.[\[1170\]](#) Between the two World Wars, Bertha Eckstein-Diener (an Austrian writer, feminist historian and Theosophist) gave this idea a wider readership and based her discussion of Feminine-focused cultural history on the work of Bachofen.[\[1171\]](#) Then, in 1948, Robert Graves published his extremely influential (but misinformed and misunderstood) book 'The White Goddess'. The very next year articles about Epona began appearing in the French classical studies journal *L'Antiquité Classique*,[\[1172\]](#) and four years later Thévenot and Magnen teamed up to write their influential French book on the “Gallic goddess”.[\[1173\]](#)

Then, in 1956, Marija Gimbutas introduced her theory that a male-dominated and warrior-based culture had spread into Europe in the early 4th millennium BC and supplanted the old woman- and goddess-centred cultures.[\[1174\]](#) Ultimately Gimbutas came to see a single universal Great Goddess underlying the more specialized bee goddesses, bird goddesses, snake goddesses, mountain goddesses, and Mistress of the Animals. But although her theory was not fully developed until 1991,[\[1175\]](#) her ideas were already being attacked by Ucko in 1968,[\[1176\]](#) and by Fleming in 1969.[\[1177\]](#) Gimbutas was a patient and careful researcher, and the criticisms levelled against her may have been prompted in large part by Mellaart's highly publicized and controversial “Mother Goddess” claims for his archaeological discoveries at Çatalhöyük (in modern Turkey) between 1961 and 1965.[\[1178\]](#)

Its critics aside, the idea of a pre-historic goddess-based and women-centred culture had started to grow modern wings. In 1979 Starhawk wrote that “...the image of the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine”.[\[1179\]](#) In that same year, Katheryn Linduff published her monograph on Epona among the Romans;[\[1180\]](#) and in 1986, L. S. Oaks discussed the sovereignty of the Horse Goddess,[\[1181\]](#) while Miranda Green gave a brief outline of her relationship to the Celtic Mothers and mentioned her in a variety of other contexts.[\[1182\]](#)

## EPONA IN TODAY'S WORLD

Epona's rediscovery was certainly related to the growing awareness of the Divine and Sacred Feminine, and even interwoven with it to some extent. But

the two movements were also quite distinct: there was a subtle distance between Epona and modern goddess-based spirituality, and although many people know her name she has remained relatively hidden. This is probably due to the fact that both her rediscovery and the reemergence of the Divine and Sacred Feminine have occurred during the “Age of the automobile”. The first car was invented by Karl Benz (of Mercedes-Benz fame) in 1885,<sup>[1183]</sup> sixty years after Cattaneo published his review of the evidence for Epona but ten years before Reinach introduced her to a wider French audience. But while automobile pollution has certainly sharpened goddess-oriented concern for the planet, the growth of the car industry has had little effect on awareness of the Divine and Sacred Feminine itself. By contrast, horses have been pushed aside in the name of “progress” and there is little room for a “Horse Goddess” in our modern way of life. Because of this it is not surprising that people in the goddess movement find it harder to relate to Epona than, say, Kybele, Hekate or Diana.

This is clearly reflected on the internet. A quick search today using Epona's name yields about 800,000 results.<sup>[1184]</sup> While this is far too many to explore in detail, it is fair to say that the vast majority of websites are related to horses and equestrian-related services or products. Among the other top results are sites devoted to fantasy video games, or to academic interest in Epona as a goddess: historical and archaeological papers and reviews, or general information. Sites that mention or discuss Epona in a religious or devotional way are rare. In stark contrast to the goddess-oriented websites, Epona's presence is almost palpable on sites related to horses - especially when we take the trouble to contact the people involved personally. Doing so can uncover intriguing perspectives on qualities she has always had, but that appear in a fresh new light in today's world.

Perhaps the most familiar and basic of the ways Epona's presence is expressed today, for instance, is in the care of horses and concern for their well-being. Two examples illustrate this fundamental Epona-like quality in very different ways - and that difference, too, is revealing. The first comes from Ann Heighington of the Epona Trust, who says she “originally found the goddess of ponies in an old book around 1975”.<sup>[1185]</sup> The Trust was established two years later and registered as a charity in England and France in 1997.<sup>[1186]</sup> Its mission, according to the official website, is to “relieve the suffering of horses and ponies that are sick, abandoned, neglected, ill-treated, and sometimes just too old, and to offer them a safe haven. No animal is refused.” In addition to providing board, accommodation and medical treatment, “[t]he sanctuary offers a tranquil and caring environment and provides permanent life long care”. At the time of writing, the Rescue was home to over 30 horses and ponies, with an additional 50 fostered at different

locations.[\[1187\]](#)

A second example of this care and concern for horses is the Epona Institute, founded by Monique Craig in 2008. Based on her development of the 'EponaShoe' in 2004 and 'Metron' software for radiographic imaging in 1999, the Institute is dedicated to “equine biomechanics and hoof health” and hosts related demonstrations, lectures and clinics.[\[1188\]](#) The institute also offers published case-studies and other publications as ways of learning more about certain health conditions and how individual cases can be improved through research and treatment. Clearly both innovative and multi-talented, Monique “started to look into the goddess Epona” while painting (horses).[\[1189\]](#)

These two examples could not be more distinct. Although both are concerned with caring for the health and well-being of horses, their focus and approach are utterly different. The care and concern of the Epona Trust could easily have come straight from ancient Britain and Gaul, for instance, whereas that of the Epona Institute is thoroughly modern and science-based. Both are also dependent on money for their survival. But while the Epona Trust relies on the generosity of its benefactors, the Epona Institute is commerce-oriented. These differences both expand on essential qualities of the Horse Goddess herself. In the first case we see her ability to survive and adapt to changing conditions - to preserve her ancient ways, but also to be innovative in finding the path and leading the way. In the second case we see her intimate association with prosperity, and its expression both in generosity and in commerce.

A more unexpected example of Epona's presence today turned up in an exchange with Béla Borsó at Epona Lovasiskola (“riding school”) in Hungary. Although he originally started breeding Holstein horses for show jumping competitions in 1989, Epona Lovasiskola is now an equestrian academy and breeder of the Pura Raza Española (PRE) or Pure Spanish horse.[\[1190\]](#) Béla says he found Epona's name “in an old Hungarian book”, which turned out to have been a history of famous Hungarian horses published in 1966.[\[1191\]](#) However, it was his anecdote about the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian aristocrat Móric Sándor that revealed the most surprising detail. Sándor was an eccentric, and widely known for his impromptu displays of extravagant and hair-raising horsemanship in which he evidently showed little concern for his mount. According to Béla, during Sándor's funeral the horses pulling the coffin carriage “provoked by the goddess Epona...became wild and ran away.”[\[1192\]](#)

The significance of Béla's comment however, only became clear after a conversation with Rodolfo Oliveira - a descendant of the former Portuguese Royal family, and a rejoneador (a horse-mounted toreador) who was



instrumental in making the bull-fight a bloodless sport. Rodolfo described Epona as *“the fierce Feminine in the blood lines of my stallions. She is what faces the bull in the ring. She challenges me, teaches me, takes me down paths no human can go...The men in the family all know of her presence in the blood of our stallions.”*[\[1193\]](#)

This declaration, by a man whose life depends not just on his own equestrian skill but on the quality of his relationship with the horse that carries and protects him, was stunning. No academic assertion of Epona's essential identification with the horse could possibly convey the depth of the living reality. In Europe, where perception is often still profoundly influenced by old ways of thinking and feeling, Epona is the horse - as much for Béla Borsó in Hungary and Rodolfo Oliveira in Portugal as for the Iron Age Celtic warrior. But even beyond the identification of goddess and horse, Rodolfo's words resound with other ancient perceptions of Epona: she challenges, teaches, and “takes me down paths no human can go”. This is a goddess who drives us beyond the comfortable confines of our own mediocrity and inspires us to reach heroic heights.

Europe, however, is not the only part of the world in which these qualities of the “goddess of horses and stables” are recognized. A compelling example of this is Linda Kohanov, a horse-trainer, lecturer and author of four insightful books on horse-human relationships. Based in the United States, Linda says she first heard about Epona during some research she was doing on horse-related myths in the 1990s.[\[1194\]](#) In 1997 she founded Epona Equestrian Services which, according to her website, “has received international attention for horse training and breeding innovations, as well as for educational programs that employ horses in teaching people leadership, assertiveness, personal empowerment, relationship, intuition, and emotional fitness skills”.[\[1195\]](#) Linda also developed the Eponaquest Approach™ to Equine Facilitated Experiential Learning, and her Eponaquest Apprenticeship is now offered in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand and Britain.

Linda's understanding of the “mystical nature of horses and the magical connection between horses and humans” comes through strongly in her books. They examine “the profound communion that people, and women in particular, often experience with horses”; seek to discover “what these amazing creatures have to teach us about the untapped potential of our own species”; offer a divinatory way of accessing “[a]nswers to the questions that horses pose, silently, relentlessly, to the human soul”; and take “horse-inspired insights on the nonverbal elements of exceptional communication and leadership into the realms of our workplaces and relationships”.[\[1196\]](#) This understanding was poignantly expressed in her very moving personal tribute to her horse Tabula Rasa. In it, Linda wrote that:



*“Horses effortlessly and gracefully embody the most profound contradictions... [they] actively mirror the nuances of how people show up each day, highlighting our hidden gifts, our wounds, our vulnerabilities, and our worn-out worldly habits. And yet somehow they manage to be discerning without a hint of judgement, communicating that at the core, we too are beautiful, powerful, and wise, capable of endless renewal.... Whenever I managed, through grace or sheer stubborn will, to let go of an old pattern and embody a fresh perspective, Rasa would mirror the transformation, welcoming me home to an ever deeper understanding of who I really was. And without the slightest hint of ambition, she would continually up the ante, stretching, relentlessly, my own limited ideas about my place in the world, my calling, my untapped potential, and even, as it turns out, the nature of reality itself.”*[\[1197\]](#)

In striking contrast to the heroic heights experienced by Rodolfo Oliveira as a rejoneador under Epona's protection and guidance, Linda Kohanov embraces, mediates and interprets the firm but gentle teachings of the Horse Goddess in a deeply feminine way. In doing so, and in tapping into the potential of the human soul and training of her staff to do the same, it seems fair to say that Linda is a kind of modern-day “priestess” of Epona. Yet the very act of recognizing this depends on the same essential identification between goddess and horse as that experienced by Oliveira. For those who have no access to horses however, and no opportunity to develop a deep personal communion with the Goddess as Horse, Epona offers an equally profound alternative.

## PRIESTESS OF EPONA

If Linda Kohanov is a “priestess” of Epona because she leads, guides and teaches people how to interact in a deeply personal way with the wisdom and transformative power of the horse, women who identify directly with Epona become her priestesses in a different way. Much as Medb Lethderg did in Irish myth and law,[\[1198\]](#) and as women have with other goddesses for millennia, these priestesses embody Epona in their own being.

In the ancient world a priestess of Epona would have started her training at an early age - much like the Spartan girls who began their training when the boys did at the age of seven.[\[1199\]](#) At the very latest, training would have begun when a girl first menstruated. But ideas about what is age-appropriate have changed dramatically since antiquity, and in today's world girls face a number of legal, social and religious obstacles to training from such an early age. Where Epona is concerned, there are practical obstacles as well. Unlike other goddesses whose worship was revived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Epona (and

the lineage, teachings and practices she represents) have remained relatively hidden: perceptions of her have changed markedly as new evidence comes to light,[\[1200\]](#) and what is known about her is scattered in different languages like pieces of a puzzle.

This has created a situation in which women interested in Epona have had to feel their way forward intuitively, putting the pieces together for themselves and finding their own way by trial and error rather than through a guided training. In some ways this has been a good thing. These women are true “pathfinders”, and their struggles have nourished their strength, independence and self-confidence. These are qualities we can imagine Epona would also have, and they would certainly have been cultivated in the training of a young priestess in the ancient world. But there are also disadvantages to the trial and error method. For one thing, the difficulty of discovering all the “pieces” that make up the Lady's complexity and depth means that knowing Epona well enough to be capable of training others is a rarity to say the least. Similarly, unlike their ancient sisters, women must now struggle alone with the personal and ethical issues that Epona's qualities can evoke in today's world.

Embodying Epona means consciously embracing and balancing her many contrasting qualities: the nurturing abundance of the Mother and Healer;[\[1201\]](#) the deep, knowing wisdom of the Guide in “dark places”;[\[1202\]](#) the natural leadership, dominance and sovereignty of the Warrior-Queen;[\[1203\]](#) the ecstatic sexuality and eroticism of the Maiden and Nymph;[\[1204\]](#) the Mistress' use of pain in “taming and training”;[\[1205\]](#) the cultivation of the devoted “solar hero” through the spiritual transformation of the orgiazein;[\[1206\]](#) and the poised control of the Lady and Rider.[\[1207\]](#)

As Rodolfo Oliveira and Linda Kohanov both pointed out in their own ways, one of Epona's primary qualities is the capacity to challenge, teach, and guide men and women toward our untapped potential. While this is also true of other goddesses, Epona brings this into sharp focus in a specific and ancient arena: the potential for spiritual growth inherent in the creative tension between masculine and feminine gender polarities. In identifying with Epona, her priestesses discover both their innate sovereignty and their inherently transformative power as women. They awaken to and participate in the ancient lineage of the Mistress and her role - not just in leading the “herd”, but in raising humanity to its highest and finest expression in the divine.

This means coming to terms with some difficult issues, both as part of a personal inner awakening and in relation to the nature of the priestess' work. Perhaps the most difficult of these issues today is the gender inequality and hierarchical dominance-submission themes that were fundamental to the

ancient lineage of the Mistress. In today's world these qualities tend to have negative associations, and it is easy to lose sight of their ancient role in achieving the highest potential of both the Sacred Feminine and the Sacred Masculine.

Outside mathematics, the meaning of the word “equality” has changed over the millennia. Even in the last century and a half, it meant having the same social rights and freedoms, and was used in the context of eliminating racial and social inequality - particularly in terms of the right to vote, to work, and to make decisions about one's own body. But in the wake of the feminist attack on “essentialism” in the 1980's, gender came to be thought of as “socially constructed”,[\[1208\]](#) and equality began to mean that (apart from our purely anatomical differences) men and women are more or less identical: rather like interchangeable parts in a machine. This view made it easier for women to take - and excel at - jobs that were traditionally done by men. But to say that adolescent Minoan girls and boys were equally capable of taking a charging bull “by the horns” and leaping over its back, is quite different from saying that they were essentially “the same” at the deeper levels of their being.

In the ancient world, and particularly in the lineage that Epona epitomized so richly, the essential qualities of the Feminine were not just the sacred source and centre of all life; they were also the foundation for personal, social and spiritual excellence. It was in this sense that Goethe could write that the “...Eternal Feminine draws us on high”. But under the influence of patriarchy, to be born a woman meant being powerless and inconsequential: either stupid, hysterical, weak, meek, modest and chaste; or a wanton whore, temptress and witch - a thing to be used, abused and marginalized, or to be blamed and burned at the stake. It was these so-called “feminine qualities” that feminists rightly identified as socially constructed, and they were certainly not the “essence” of womanhood. But replacing that deeply damaging patriarchal view of the Feminine by deconstructing gender essentialism left women with little or no access to the rich complexity and depth of what it meant in an ancient and universally true sense to be “Woman”. Because of this, it also obscured and neutralized the creative potential for spiritual (and psychological) growth through the dynamic tension generated by the natural polarity of gender. This potential was Epona's special domain.

In the “questions that horses pose, silently, relentlessly, to the human soul”, Epona invites us to see that the implicit sovereignty of the Divine and Sacred Feminine is essential: that the mare's dominance is both natural and vital to the survival and well-being of the herd. At the same time, she reminds us that the goal of the spiritual transformation at the heart of her lineage is

actually a dynamic equality: a sharing of power within the herd. The virile “solar stallion” who can stir her deepest “yes!” is no spineless doormat to every wish and whim of the lead mare. He plays a vital part in the herd's protection and survival, and sometimes takes a dominant - and kingly - role. In coming to terms with these essential gender differences through her personal reflection and ritual work, the priestess of Epona awakens - not to power and dominance for their own sake, but to the profoundly important role her empowerment can play in both her own spiritual growth and in that of others.

These are not the only difficult issues a priestess of Epona must face. But the most interesting and meaningful way to describe them is probably through the stories of women - and men - who have struggled with them personally. The six women and three men who agreed to share their stories here, come from different countries (Slovakia, France, Britain, Canada and the U.S.), and each discovered Epona in different ways and at various ages. The process of gathering and organizing the information they shared took place in several stages between 2007 and 2015, and included: initial questions about their general involvement with Epona; extended interviews to collect individual stories; and on-line group discussions about the nature of their work: first with the women, then the men, and finally women and men together. Following the initial interviews, a draft of the book was given to each of those participating and its influence shows in the sections 'Shared Perceptions' and 'Summary Talks' below. In writing up what follows, difficult decisions had to be made about what was most important to include. This was then organized and edited to highlight the most relevant details and to protect the real names and identities of contributors.

## EMBRACING EPONA

In listening to their stories, there is a strong sense that Epona was already present and hidden in the personal qualities of these women at the start of their journeys. This may have been especially true in terms of the things they knew instinctively about themselves, about men and about Nature - knowings that in many (if not all) women, seem to lie just beneath the surface of consciousness.

## BETH

A good example of this was “Beth”. As a child her overriding feeling as a girl was one of powerlessness. But when she discovered the feminine power of “the Goddess” as a young teenager, it came as a profound revelation. Feeling vindicated in her growing womanhood, she spent the next few years reading everything she could get her hands on about goddesses, ancient

religion and psychology. This was when she discovered Epona, and although she had little interest in her as a “Mother”, she was powerfully drawn to the Lady's dominance as a sovereignty goddess.

In her late teens she was initiated into a local Wiccan coven, and right from the beginning she admits she had her eye on the central power and authority of the high priestess. She was also curious about the role of the scourge among the other “tools” of the craft on a traditional Wiccan altar, but was unsatisfied with the explanations she was given. Someone ascribed it to what they believed was the sexual deviance of Wicca's founder, Gerald Gardner. Beth felt there had to be more to it than Gardner's personal proclivities, since she now knew there were several goddesses in mythology - including Epona - who carried a scourge. Nevertheless, she was intrigued by the erotic implications the explanation raised. She also read that the scourge was symbolic of the high priestess' power and authority, and that when used gently and repetitively it created trance-like states and helped in “gaining the Sight”.[\[1209\]](#) Her wider reading told her this symbolism was appropriate, and she liked the idea that the scourge served a useful purpose. But she was secretly disappointed (and bored) by the insistence that it was only to be used gently. Surprised at her feelings, Beth began exploring them and looking for a deeper understanding of the role played by the scourge in ritual.

Meanwhile, the coven she had joined was thrown into turmoil when its high priest moved away. The resulting power struggle among the women tore the coven apart, and it finally dissolved. For Beth this was a compelling example of the need for a strong high priestess, and she began to realize that her desire to become one had sprung from her own instinctive dominance as a woman. Linking this realization with the symbolism of the scourge, she began to see a hidden relationship between dominance, eroticism, pain and ecstatic trance. A dim outline of their combined potential in goddess-centred rituals began to take shape in her mind. After searching for another coven she could join, and dismissing them all as too “fluffy”, she finally met a man who was willing to follow her leadership in exploring the path her instincts were uncovering. Eventually, this became the nucleus for her own coven.

## JULIA

“Julia” was twenty-three when she was first introduced to Epona by a friend. Unlike Beth, she was adamant about gender equality and uncomfortable with the idea of deliberately cultivating submission in men. A warm and deeply loving person, she also had no desire to inflict pain. Nevertheless, she was deeply in tune with her own eroticism and keenly aware of her sexual power where men were concerned. When shown a diagram of the ancient goddess-centred “civilizing art”,[\[1210\]](#) she

immediately saw that it illustrated “what women do to men”.[\[1211\]](#) It was an instinctive recognition of her own deeper power, and she began to see that she could have a profoundly transformative effect on men. She also saw the erotic implications of pain and, dimly at first, how this could be used in the transforming process.

What drove her was an unrelenting yearning to know her full power as a woman, and to use it to heal and transform the world in which we live. Gradually she began to realize that a vital part of her deeper power as a woman was the capacity to see men's highest potential, and that true equality depended on cultivating the heroic and sacred masculine. She began to recognize that women's instinctive romantic need for men's complete devotion is the natural expression of a profound spiritual truth: an essential aspect of the relationship between the sacred masculine and the sacred feminine. Eventually she saw that this was the basis for health and happiness in our everyday relationships, and the foundation for social transformation and real spiritual growth.

This realization helped Julia to accept (and enjoy) her inherent leadership abilities, and to open to other truths hidden in her own deeper desires, longings and “knowings”. When it came to ritual, she found she was able to take complete control and to inflict very intense erotic pain when called upon to do so. When she did so, her deeper yearning led to a breakthrough: she discovered an ocean of power in the cosmic dimensions of her larger being - her first conscious experience of herself “as goddess”.

The other women interviewed for this chapter described very similar experiences in their own development as priestesses of Epona. “Natalia”, for example, said she felt immense power flowing through her as she stood with her feet on the earth and her head among the stars. “Yana” said it was as though the universe was attuned to her slightest wish, and she literally made gentle rain fall on the dusty ground at her feet. In all, no matter what their personal struggles had been along the way, each of the six priestesses who shared their stories eventually came to this experience in different ways.

## SHARED PERCEPTIONS

Several of the women felt it was important to point out that some of the ancient methods used in the rituals were potentially dangerous, and should not be attempted without guidance. The dangers are both physical and emotional - though for obvious reasons it is the men who are more at risk physically. This is particularly true when a woman's rage at “men” begins to surface, which can happen without much warning when a woman begins to let her power flow. It may be triggered by instinctive fear or resistance in the man she is working with, or emerge spontaneously as she taps into the deeper levels of



her own psyche. Both Beth and “Michele” said that this had happened independently to them, and “Anna” said she witnessed it happening in another circle.

All of them felt that rage is fairly common in women. It can come from old unresolved feelings of powerlessness or actual abuse, and is often connected with their feelings about how men have disrespected them. At the same time, they stressed that using the ancient methods is not a license for revenge, and that there is no place for misanthropy (hating men) in any sacred circle - particularly one devoted to Epona where men have an indispensable and honoured role to play, and cultivating the Sacred Masculine is a major goal of the work.

They also emphasized Epona's role as a healer, and pointed out that connecting with their rage in a sacred ritual context is a perfect opportunity for healing to occur without completely losing control. Yana said this was an ancient way of healing, and that in the 3rd or 4th century Iamblichus had recommended letting strong emotions out in small amounts in the rituals of theurgy.[\[1212\]](#) The other women agreed, and said how important it is to include and involve the men they work with in this process: that the men's acceptance, understanding and willingness to help is absolutely vital to woman's healing. Beth brought the discussion back to the fact that although rage feels powerful, it comes from powerlessness. The others agreed and talked about the deeper, more enduring power a woman can access once she has worked through her rage, and how discovering that deeper power is vital to the experience of embodying the goddess fully.

Beth then turned the discussion to the potential emotional traps that using these ancient methods can trigger. She talked about the exotic pleasure that courses through a woman when she exercises power in the direct ways of the ancient rituals; about how the sheer exhilaration she feels can make it easy to lose sight of the goal; and about how she began to use the rituals as opportunities to feed her growing addiction to personal power. In struggling with this, she decided to stop doing the rituals. But eventually she realized that her personal power and the exhilaration she felt in “wielding it” were not only natural (like the pleasure of eating good food or having sex), but also absolutely vital to achieving the goal of the work: cultivating the highest and finest qualities of the Sacred Feminine and Masculine.

Several of the other women faced similar struggles and had come to much the same conclusion. Julia pointed out that men can become just as addicted to submission: that repeatedly experiencing the ecstasy of erotic pain opens them to powerful unconscious cravings that can lead to emotional dependence and slavery. She talked about how this was one of her worst fears - not only because she hated the inequality it created, and having a man emotionally

dependent on her was the last thing in the world she wanted, but because she found such weakness in a man repulsive.

Natalie agreed, as did the other women, but said that after her initial reaction she realized she “kind of enjoyed” having a man in that state - as long as it was temporary. Her admission met with laughter and knowing smiles, and Yana summed it up by saying that both their feelings of repulsion and their pleasure were expressions of Epona within them. She said that emotional dependence and slavery were “the exact opposite of the strong, virile and heroic masculinity the Mistress wants in her stallions”, but that it may be necessary for a man to go through this aspect of feminization in order to reach his highest potential. All of the women felt that - both for men and for women - these emotional pitfalls were natural and understandable phases in the work: that rather than denying and avoiding them, the best strategy was to go through them, and that only then could the truly “heroic” dimensions of the work be accomplished.

Finally, all of the women who shared their stories talked about sexual orientation - both in terms of Epona and the rituals, and in terms of their own background and experience. They each said independently that while the rituals are primarily heterosexual in nature, they also include important elements of bisexuality and androgyny. All spoke of being naturally “bi-curious”, and several had had sexual encounters with other women before discovering Epona. A theme they all shared was the feeling of being “male” at times, and some even felt they had a “psychic penis”. At the same time, they all love and embrace being a woman. Surprisingly, although they agreed that emasculation of men could be a necessary and useful stage in the process, they were all unabashedly dubious about the extent to which a transgendered male could truly embody Epona. Perhaps least affected by Anglo-American “political correctness”, the priestess from Slovakia said in her thick accent “essence of woman come from womb of mother... is not given by hormone and removal of male organ in adult”. The overriding feeling among all the women was that Epona adds to the dimensionality of human wholeness by embracing androgyny and bisexuality - but that the creative tension generated by heterosexuality is as necessary for spiritual transformation as it is for abundance in Nature.

This brought the discussion to the vitally important and necessary part that men play in the work. Although the women all agreed that being a priestess of Epona involves working alone or with other women, the central theme of their work is the spiritual transformation and growth that can only be achieved - for women and for men - by working together. It was with this in mind that each of the women expressed her admiration and love for the men who had willingly devoted themselves to working with them and following



their leadership. Each seemed proud and protective of their men, and all were enthusiastic about them telling their own stories and participating in the group discussion.

## THE MEN OF EPONA

When considering the men of Epona, we can think of the Celtic kings who ruled under her sovereignty, the warriors who rode under her protection, and the gods and heroes that played a vital role in her own “becoming”. But today there can be no better role model than Rodolfo Oliveira. Riding his stallion into an arena no longer deadly to bulls, but still mortally perilous to the man, Rodolfo participates in the archetypal symbolism of an ancient ritual rooted in the deepest levels of the human psyche. When he recognizes Epona as “the fierce Feminine” who “faces the bull in the ring”, and acknowledges that it is she who challenges, teaches and “takes [him] down paths no human can go”, it is profoundly significant. Only a hero can ride with Epona on these paths. But to do so, he must open himself and surrender to her completely.

The same principle holds true in more hidden rituals, in which women embodying Epona lift men into the heroic dimensions of their own being. Here, too, a profound form of submission - of opening and surrender - is an absolute prerequisite. But like the rejeonador, this level of devotion can only be achieved after long training and repeated practice.

## DAVID

Of the three men contacted, “David” was the oldest and most experienced. He worked with Beth for about eight years, and continues to work with other women from time to time. David describes himself as a proud man. Although he had always liked, respected and even admired women, his trust had been badly betrayed several times and he used his pride as a protective shield. But women had always seemed to like him, and instinctively tried to cultivate the “inner” man behind his shield. Over the course of many affairs and several longer relationships, he began to recognize a pattern in what women were trying to teach him. Often their message came through most clearly in the pain of a break-up when he had failed to live up to the potential they saw in him. After a particularly devastating breakup that forced him to question everything he thought he knew, David met a woman who introduced him to “the goddess” in a personal way. It was an epiphany - and a turning point in his life. By the time he met Beth a year or so later, he says he was more receptive to women's “vision” and ways of thinking and knowing.

Looking back, David describes his deepening relationship with Beth as a kind of seductive dance. He found himself being led to think in entirely new

ways, and to open - almost imperceptibly at first - to ideas he would once have resisted vigorously. He began to wonder, for instance, where men “fit” in a goddess-centred world. He had always been interested in spirituality, and felt that ultimately the divine must be beyond gender. But he also saw that gender provides a creative polarity in life, like the positive and negative poles in electricity or magnetism. This fundamental polarity had to come from somewhere, and the idea of an androgynous goddess (like Namma)[\[1213\]](#) giving birth to the universe seemed like a good enough place to begin. David said that, for him, this was a more life-enhancing ideal than of a male creator god with all its associated bloodshed and suffering.

Thinking about it more deeply, he realized that if the divine is expressed in gender then it must also be present in the dominance-submission dynamic so prevalent in Nature. But, while obvious in the behaviour of animals, he had always disliked seeing this dynamic in human relationships. He hated overt displays of dominance, especially in men, and despised submission as “weakness” in either gender. In his work with Beth however, David began to see that this dynamic is as natural in humanity as in other species, and that he had been repressing it in himself: his dislike of what he saw as the “game” was his way of denying or avoiding where he stood in relation to other people. Beth helped him to realize that, like everyone else, he had tendencies in both directions but preferred to be in control. When confronted by a dominant personality instead of engaging or confronting them directly, his root strategy was to avoid submission - or, more accurately, the weakness he felt it represented.

Beth began cultivating the idea in David's mind that genuine submission to an ideal like the divine requires strength - not weakness. She pointed out that submission and obedience to military or religious superiors is not considered “weakness” in the warriors who defend us or in the priests who devote their lives to the divine. As David's understanding grew, his core values began to shift. He began to see that the life-enhancing ideal of the goddess could bring about real personal, spiritual, social and environmental change - measured in terms of health, harmony and happiness. He realized that this would require a deep commitment to the goddess-centred way of life, and saw that Beth was right: this kind of submission would take real strength of character - especially if “the Lady” was embodied in a woman rather than simply being a distant ideal.

The idea of the Sacred Feminine - the goddess embodied in Nature, and especially in women - was new to David and he liked it for many reasons. But the trust and vulnerability needed for genuine submission was something he struggled with at the deepest levels of his being. His fear of surrendering power and control to a woman was not something that could be “dealt with”

intellectually. Although he and Beth had many conversations about it, these talks ended up being more a kind of preparation than a way of resolving his issues. Beth was patiently steering him toward a more “hands on” solution. It took about two years before David was ready, but he finally agreed to (and, under Beth's guidance, had even begun to want) the ritual that brought him face to face with his deepest fears.

It was a first for Beth as well. She blended her use of the cane and scourge with eroticism, and the combined effect created a trance-like state in them both. Working her way into it slowly, she gradually increased the intensity until it was not at all “gentle”. David said she half-enticed, half drove him to an ecstatic climax in which he opened, surrendered, and gave her everything: his complete submission. Both were profoundly moved by this first experience, but Beth later worried that she had liked it too much and David tried to regain his sense of independence and control by withdrawing emotionally.

This became a recurring theme in the movement of the dance they had begun. Following Beth's instincts in working the rituals together, they went deeper and explored new realms in the underworld of the human psyche. Each time, David recoiled and withdrew emotionally afterwards. But he had developed a craving for what Beth had opened in him, and was irresistibly drawn back to it time and again. Over time his submission gradually grew deeper, but so did his growing emotional dependence: the very thing he had most feared and despised. Beth did her best to cultivate David's virility, and to help him through this dependency. She tried a number of strategies to no avail. Eventually she told him she would only have “a strong, proud stallion in her circle”, and reluctantly closed her door to him.

David struggled with his addiction for several years, until he finally realized that he had to combine and integrate his need for submission with his need for independence. Rather than an endless cycle of craven weakness and slavery followed by aversion and withdrawal, the kind of submission the Lady was looking for was heroic: deliberate and balanced, strong and controlled - much like the way Rodolfo Oliveira combined openness to Epona's lead with the skill and control of his own horsemanship. David says he is a proud man today because he passed through the “ordeal of fire” - not simply that of the scourge, but the searing fire of an inner purification that tested and strengthened him. In his love for the goddess, he had followed her through his own “underworld” and found a way to kneel in deference to her while still holding his virility, independence and self-respect intact.

David's story was revealing, and worth telling at some length. But “Alex” (who works with Julia), and “Malak” (who works with Yana), both had stories that were similar to David's - and also different in some significant

ways. Perhaps the most important difference was that neither Alex nor Malak got caught up in the emotional dependency David struggled with for so long. Their submission was stronger and more balanced from the very beginning. Both men were motivated by love - and desire - for the woman who had chosen them. They both deferred instinctively to the leadership of women, and saw no threat to their virility in doing so. According to Alex, a man cannot know his own manhood fully until he sees it reflected in the eyes of the woman he loves, and Malak summed up masculinity by saying that manhood is not complete until it is measured and defined by a woman.

## ALEX

Alex talked about how Julia had taught him to listen, and to put the needs and desires of others before his own - not just in daily life, but also in a woman's bed. With poetic eloquence he described the way she introduced him to the mysteries of a woman's sexuality. In the beginning, he said, this included the scourge and cane and he was happy to give her "whatever she wanted". Later she taught him how to give her "long pleasure" in other ways, and on "many different levels". He was intensely enthusiastic about how much deeper and more satisfying sex had become as a result. But both in and out of the bedroom, he said he came to see his service as an act of worship dedicated to the goddess whose name, for him, is "Julia".

## MALAK

Unlike David the philosopher-priest or Alex the poet-lover, Malak sees himself as a "man of action" - a warrior. When Yana first introduced him to "the whip" he went along with it like Alex, simply to make her happy. "Pain is nothing for a warrior", he explained, and Yana made it erotic and sensual "like a woman's teeth or nails in the passion of deep sexual connection". But he soon saw that it was more than this: it heightened his awareness by making him focus his entire being and all his senses - not just on himself or on Yana, but on every nuance of their experience together. A man's mind becomes crystal clear, he explained, and each thought or feeling stands out: time seems to stop, consciousness expands and he can see himself from outside his body as though it belongs to someone else. He compared this heightening and expansion of awareness to that of a warrior in battle (or in a street fight), and said he has often experienced himself "through the eyes" of Yana and the other women in her circle as though he were part of them, experiencing their thoughts and feelings - their pleasure.

David and Alex both said they had experienced all that Malak described, and each agreed that it must be very similar to what a rejoneador experiences when he faces the bull in the ring. All three men also said that after many

repetitions they no longer experienced the world around them in quite the same way - not so caught-up in their own personal perspective and feelings. [\[1214\]](#)

The real difficulty for Malak however, lay in his protectiveness of women. If he saw a man disrespecting or threatening a woman in any way, his instinct was to jump in with both fists flying. He says it took a long time for Yana to make him see that his intervention was also disrespectful if the woman could handle the situation herself. It took even longer for him to learn when it was appropriate to intervene, and how to do it in the right way. For quite a while, Yana forbade him to intervene at all. She made him sit and watch unless she gave him permission.

Malak laughed ruefully and shook his head when he admitted that she punished him without mercy if he disobeyed her. But not with the cane or scourge, which had “happy associations”. Instead, she used cold silence and disapproval - a punishment more painful than he could endure. Eventually, he learned obedience (it was in a good cause, he says) and he began to feel - “not just see” - when his intervention was truly needed. More importantly, Malak said this discipline taught him to tune-in to women with his whole attention, and this became a skill he found he could use in many other ways - not least of which was in the bedroom. Perhaps most important of all, although Malak agreed that there is a potential for these ideas and methods to be misused (by men as much as by women), he pointed out that they also have the potential to shake a man awake: to make him feel “right with himself and the world”, maybe for the first time in his life.

## SUMMARY TALKS

In summary talks with all three men, each expressed how profoundly his life had been changed for the better by a priestess of Epona. Yet all three felt that it was the women themselves who had brought about these changes: that something had been triggered in the women by reading or hearing about Epona, and that this had allowed them to draw on their own inner resources. Malak and Alex both said it is enough for them that Epona is important to the women they love. But David reflected that what the women have been drawing on is Epona: that she is in every fibre of their being, and that this is what it means to “embody” her. He said that working with men like himself, Alex and Malak, gives women a way to discover and explore the goddess in themselves - a way to embody her more consciously by coming to know, integrate and surrender to all that they are in themselves.

David's observation was compelling. It meant that in some deeply significant way, what is hidden about Epona is inextricably entwined with what is hidden in women themselves. It suggested that Epona's advent in the

modern world is completed through embodiment in the physical warmth, instinctive longings, and deep inner knowings of living women. Although triggered, guided and deepened by reading about Epona, David was implying that this journey of discovery must come from within: from women themselves in their interaction with men who love, admire and desire them enough to listen - as Rodolfo rides, and Malak expressed it - with their “whole attention”.

In a final discussion with all six women and the three men, this point was raised again in the context of a remark made by a woman who supports men's rights.: that “submission is not the same as subjugation”.[\[1215\]](#) In the light of David's observation, everyone agreed that a woman's surrender to herself is as much a form of submission to the goddess within her as a man's submission to the Feminine in himself, in Nature and in women.[\[1216\]](#) All agreed that this is fundamentally different from the often brutal types of dominance and submission so often played out in patriarchal political, military, social and spiritual hierarchies. Julia pointed to the balance the Celts had achieved - one in which the goddess was sovereign and dominant, but lent her power and authority to the king she chose.

Julia also emphasized that the inherent sovereignty of the Feminine does not mean women are “better” than men. On the contrary, both are vitally necessary. She said what she likes about the old ways of Epona is that they cultivate strong women and strong, heroic men with integrity - and create a relationship of deep mutual trust and respect in the process. Everyone agreed with her wholeheartedly and David summed it up by saying that in surrendering to the Feminine, men and women both find a unity of being beyond gender. He called it “a true equality in the depths of the 'I Am' - the well-spring of all fertility, fruitfulness, wisdom and well-being”.

He was referring to the greatest of all mysteries - hidden, as at ancient Eleusis, in the goddess herself.[\[1217\]](#) But, like the Maiden of Eleusis, a true mystery can never be completely known or described. Epona's story has been told here more fully than ever before, but there is much about her that will always remain hidden or only partially known. Yet the seeds of her renewal are blossoming, and her advent is “in the wind”. The stories of the equestrians and other women and men told here are only a small sampling, and there may be many other quite different ways of approaching Epona in a personal way. But that her presence is sensed or felt now, even by those who have never been introduced to her directly, can be seen in the words of another young priestess - good words that reflect the essence of Epona's message, hanging like a fragrance in the air:

***'To Stand Amongst You'***

*She is dying to be seen,*

*scorched earth and heavy lids.*

*She is the first rainfall,*

*dripping on the cracked lips of a stranded crew.*

*Open to Her,*

*taste her,*

*let her quench your thirst.*

*Show her your hidden parts,*

*to be nourished, nurtured, healed,*

*in the purifying fire of erotic desire.*

*She is here.*

*Do you see her? Do you see her?*

*She holds out her hand, for eternity,*

*palm up to receive,*

*reborn with your love, in each immortal moment,*

*the phoenix rising from her ashes,*

*knowing no truth but the here and now.*

*She will show you Heaven, if you can meet amongst the stars.*

*Sitting on a chair, reading in a store,*

*floating on the air,*

*waiting to embrace the possibility of salvation.*

*Our heroes always have a love story".[\[1218\]](#)*

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# [1] Endnotes

Miranda Green, citing Piggott, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 7.

[2] Ibid.

[3] A very engaging and historically accurate portrayal of the sounds, colours and perceptions of pagan antiquity can be seen in Bruno Heller, John Milius and William J. MacDonald's 2005 HBO television series *Rome*, set in the 1st century BC just after Julius Caesar conquered the Gauls.

[4] For a useful review of the relevant literature on this point, see Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess*, pp.1-25; for an in-depth look at the religious and philosophical thought of the ancient world, see Fredrick Copleston (1963), *A History of Philosophy*, vol. I.

[5] A view first proposed by the Swiss anthropologist Johann Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht*. Note however, that many scholars continue to dispute this interpretation of the archaeological evidence.

[6] The first use of the term “divine feminine” may have been by Bertha Eckstein-Diener, writing as Helen Diner, in *Mothers and Amazons*.

[7] See e.g., Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*.

[8] See e.g., Norman F. Cantor, *Antiquity*, *ibid*; p.3.

[9] The word territory comes from the Latin *territorium*, combining *terra* (“earth” or “land”) and *-orium* (“place”). See *Online Etymological Dictionary*.

[10] A view that also goes back to Bachofen, see note 2 above.

[11] The term was probably first used in 1996 by Sue Monk Kidd in the title of her book, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*.

[12] A late written account of selective breeding was given in Genesis 30:25 – 43, in which Jacob mated his black sheep with Laban's white sheep to produce mixed colouring. The account was probably written during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, but drew on a practice that had already been familiar for millennia.

[13] See e.g., Norman F. Cantor, *Antiquity*, *ibid*; p.4. Note however that Cantor's time estimate (100,000 years) was in error.

[14] See e.g., Kagan, Ozment & Turner, *The Western Heritage*, p. 5.

[15] Note that “civilization” used to be thought of as agriculture, political structure, organization of labour, legal systems, standards of measurement, currency, transportation and trade, writing and art, mathematics, astronomy, metallurgy and monumental architecture. However, the discovery of the 11,000-year-old temple at Göbekli Tepe in south eastern Turkey has dramatically changed beliefs about the earliest beginnings of civilization. The people who built it were semi-nomadic Stone Age hunter-gatherers, yet the temple required a political structure and organized labour-force far beyond what archaeologists had previously believed people were capable of at the time.

[16] This observation comes both from personal experience in childhood, and from personal studies of history, anthropology and the Western Mystery Tradition over many years.

[17] There are a number of theories about where and when horses were first domesticated, but the most recent evidence points to Kazakhstan, see Alan K. Outram, *et al.*, *The Earliest Horse Harnessing and Milking*, pp. 1332–1335.

[18] Note that this is a minority viewpoint among “matristic historians”: see Max Dashu, *'Deconstructing Matriarchal Myth', Knocking Down Straw Dolls*.

[19] See *'The Hulpu Tree'*, in Diane Wolkstein & Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna Queen of Heaven & Earth*.

[20] Wolkstein & Kramer, *ibid*.

[21] See e.g., *'The Bull of Heaven'*, in N. K Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet VI.



- [22] See e.g., 'Shamhat', *ibid.*, Tablet I.
- [23] For context see e.g., Gustavus A. Eisen, '*Ancient Oriental Cylinder and Other Seals*'.
- [24] Wiggermann, F.A.M. 1998 - 2001c. '*Nammu*' in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie*, pp. 135-140.
- [25] See '*Enûma Elish*', originally published in George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*.
- [26] Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p. 329.; and see L. W. King, *Enûma Eliš: The Seven Tablets of Creation*.
- [27] For an overview see e.g., Kagan, Ozment & Turner, *ibid.*, pp. 6-28.
- [28] Mario Liverani, *Akkad: The First World Empire*, *passim*.
- [29] Two exceptions to the polytheism of the ancient world were the brief period under Akhenaten in Egypt during the 14<sup>th</sup> century BC, and the monotheism that developed among the Jews after their captivity in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.
- [30] A theme explored in detail by Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis & Persepolis*. The Hebrew myths of the garden, the Tree of Life and the flood were good examples: they first appeared in Sumerian texts, were preserved by the Assyrians and adopted by the Jews during their captivity in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.
- [31] This civilization was named "Minoan" by Arthur Evans, the British archaeologist who first unearthed the palace at Knosos in 1900. Apparently its one thousand interlocking rooms reminded him of the labyrinth of King Minos in Greek mythology. See John Bennet, '*Minoan civilization*', p. 985.
- [32] For a more detailed description of Minoan civilization and culture, see Riane Eisler, *The Chalice & the Blade*, pp. 29-41.
- [33] See e.g., Nicolas Platen, *Crete*, pp. 147, 167, 148.
- [34] See e.g., Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, ch. 1.
- [35] Riane Eisler, *The Chalice & the Blade*, p. 35. For photo, see Tom Dempsey (bibliography).
- [36] For illustrations and descriptions, see e.g., Nanno Marinatos, *Minoan religion*, pp. 151 and 155.
- [37] See Jane Ellen Harrison, '*The Kouretes and Zeus Kouros*', pp. 308-338.
- [38] N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet VI.
- [39] Strabo, bk vii, quoted in Jane Harrison, *ibid.*
- [40] For illustrations of both the Neolithic goddess and the classical Kybele, see Chapter Two.
- [41] "The Phrygians in general ... hold [Kybele-] Rhea in honour and worship her with orgia, calling her Meter Theon [Mother of the Gods] and Agdistis the Great Goddess" - Strabo, *Geography* 10. 3. 12.
- [42] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *Pausanias, Description of Greece*, 7. 17. 8.
- [43] After 204 BC, the practice was prohibited to Roman citizens and Cybelian priests had to be imported from Phrygia: see Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, p.96.
- [44] Patera di Parabiago, Milan Museum of Archaeology.
- [45] Kagan, Ozment and Turner, *ibid.*, p. 39. For a useful review, see e.g., Anthony M. Snodgrass, *The Dark Age of Greece*.
- [46] See the 'Palatine Anthology', in A. F. Didot, *Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum*, pp. 506. Brackets added.
- [47] See 'Symposium', Scott Buchanan, *The Portable Plato*, pp. 159-172.
- [48] See e.g., Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess*, p. 2, Introduction: 'Time, Space, Source Material and Methods'.
- [49] See Timaeus in R. G. Bury, *Plato: Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*.
- [50] Benjamin Jowett, *Cratylus*. Italics added for emphasis.

- [51] Note that the Medes and Persians embraced Zoroastrianism, a dualism of good and evil in which the supreme deity was male. See e.g., Richard Foltz, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble*, pp. 4-16.
- [52] The proto-Celtic Urnfield culture cremated their dead and placed the ashes in urns before burying them in grave-fields.
- [53] See, e.g., Barry Cunliffe (1997), *The Ancient Celts*, pp. 39–67; and Nora Chadwick, *The Celts*, pp. 28–33. But c.v. Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 1.
- [54] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 2.
- [55] Miranda Green, *ibid*, p. 2.
- [56] *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- [57] Note that it was Common Brittonic that was the “earliest recorded language of western Europe” - not its Gaulish derivative: see 'Galáthach hAthevíu', Modern (Revived) Gaulish.
- [58] For a useful overview see e.g., Martin J. Ball and James Fife, *The Celtic Languages*. Note that the newer terms “P-Celtic” and “Q-Celtic” are also used.
- [59] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [60] *Ibid*, p. 22, and *passim*; and *Celtic Goddesses*, p.70 ff.
- [61] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 4.
- [62] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p.73.
- [63] *Ibid*.
- [64] *Ibid*.
- [65] *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- [66] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 73; and *Celtic Goddesses*, pp.15-27.
- [67] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 17.
- [68] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 73 and 76.
- [69] See e.g., Tacitus, *Life of Agricola* and *Annals*; and Cassius Dio, *Roman History*; cited in Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 76.
- [70] H. G. Bohn, *The Roman History of Ammianus Marcellinus*, p. 80. Brackets added.
- [71] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 73.
- [72] Peter Beresford Ellis, *The Celts: A History*, p. 81.
- [73] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- [74] See 'ban' and 'druí' ('draoi') *Irish Language Dictionary*
- [75] See e.g., *Dreco and Dub* in Edward Gwynn, 'The Metrical Dindshenchas'; and see Sharon Paice MacLeod, *The Divine Feminine in Ancient Europe*, p. 147.
- [76] Sharon Paice MacLeod citing Vopiscus, in *Celtic Myth and Religion*; p. 27.
- [77] See the Irish legal text, the '*Seanchas Mor*' (“Great Lore”), written sometime after after 600 AD.
- [78] Richard Irvine Best, Osborn Bergin, M.A. O'Brien and Anne O'Sullivan, *The Book of Leinster*.
- [79] See 'Tochmarc Étaíne' (“Wooing of Étaín”) and '*Togail Bruidne Dá Derga* (“Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel”), in e.g., Jeffrey Gantz (ed. & trans.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, Penguin Classics, 1981, pp. 37-59 and pp. 61-63 respectively.
- [80] See the 9<sup>th</sup> century poem, '*Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin*' (“Story of Cano, son of Gartnán”): “...he will not be a king over Ireland unless he gets the ale of Cualu”.
- [81] See the '*Táin Bó Cúailnge*', in English: Ciaran Carson, *The Tain*.
- [82] Earnest Carry, *Dio Cassius, Roman History*, Vol. IX, Bks. 71-80.
- [83] Alfred Nutt, *Studies in the Legend of the Holy Grail*, pp.231-233. Brackets added.
- [84] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 4.

- [85] Kagan, Ozment & Turner, *The Western Heritage*, p.117.
- [86] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- [87] *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- [88] *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19; and see 'plebian' and 'pleio-', *Online Etymological Dictionary*.
- [89] Livy, 'Ab Urbe Condita Libri', 1: 36; see Aubrey de Sélincourt, *Livy: The History of Early Rome*.
- [90] Note that a recent review of the evidence suggests that the *equites* may never have been exclusively patrician. See Tim Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome*, pp. 245-50.
- [91] W.R. Paton, *Polybius: The Histories*, VI.19
- [92] Phillip Snidell, *Warhorse: Cavalry in Ancient Warfare*, p. 208.
- [93] Adrian Goldsworthy, *Roman Warfare*, p. 126.
- [94] Adrian Keith Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, p. 60.
- [95] *Ibid.*, pp. 64-5.
- [96] See 'Who Worshipped Epona', Nantonos & Ceffyl, *Epona.net*.
- [97] *Ibid.*
- [98] A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, pp. 284-602.
- [99] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 173.
- [100] See e.g., Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One*: "...an essential characteristic of religious symbolism is its *multivalence*, i.e. its capacity to express simultaneously several meanings...the examination of symbolic structures is a work not of reduction, but of integration".
- [101] Miranda Green, *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- [102] An example was Homer's phrase "wine-dark sea", which could evoke any one of dozens of passages in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, depending on the context in which it was re-used.
- [103] See e.g., Joan Breton Connelly, 'Reading the Language of Images' in *Portrait of a Priestess*, pp. 20-1.
- [104] See e.g., J.C. Cooper (1978), *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*; Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*; and Boris Mathews, *The Herder Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [105] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 81, 86 and 92.
- [106] See e.g., Heather Smith, 'Celtic Clothing During the Iron Age', pp. 6 - 8.
- [107] Beth Cohen, 'Divesting the Female Breast of Clothes in Classical Sculpture', pp.66-91.
- [108] See e.g., Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 65.
- [109] L. Bonfante, 'Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art', pp. 558-62.
- [110] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 219-20.
- [111] *Ibid.*, p. 114-15.
- [112] *Ibid.*
- [113] See Rebecca English, *Mail Online*, Sunday, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014.
- [114] See the fragment of the late 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Attic red-figure drinking cup portrayal of Rhea, in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. See also the white-figure drinking cup of Aphrodite by Pistoxenos from Kameiros (Rhodes) in the British Museum.
- [115] A Greek terracotta figurine of Kybele aside her lion dating from c. 400 BC can be seen in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
- [116] Alexander S. Murray, *Manual of Mythology*, p. 49. Photo now in the public domain.
- [117] See Ivan Varbanov, *Greek Imperial Coins and their Values*, vol. I.
- [118] See e.g., Winkler & Zeitlin, *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?*, p.66.



- [119] See e.g., Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 178-9.
- [120] *Homeric Hymn* 14, quoted in Walter Burkert, *ibid.*, p. 178.
- [121] Photo by “Fab5669”, 2012. Used under Creative Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 License.
- [122] See e.g. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 149.
- [123] Photo by Stanislaw Nowak, 2006; cropped & used with permission. The figurine is now in the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara, Turkey.
- [124] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 149.
- [125] *Ibid.*
- [126] Note the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Greek colonization of southern France where contact with the Gauls was inevitable; the Gauls’ early migration into Thrace; their invasion of Macedonia and in 281 BC; and their penetration into Attica in Greece thereafter.
- [127] Lynn Emrich Roller (1999), *In Search of God the Mother*, p. 249.
- [128] Drawing and photo by Ava Crabbe (2016) based on an illustration in Claude Augé (ed.), *Nouveau Larousse Illustré*, Librairie Larousse, 1894-1907. Original sculpture now in Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples.
- [129] Following the classification adopted in Benoît, F. (1950), '*Les mythes de l'outre-tombe. Le cavalier à l'anquipède et l'écuyère Épona*'.
- [130] Drawing and photo by Ava Crabbe (2016) based on the bronze figurine found in Wiltshire in England (Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 184) and now in the British Museum.
- [131] John Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*, p. 308.
- [132] See e.g., D. W. Harding, *The Archaeology of Celtic Art*, p. 215.
- [133] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 108.
- [134] *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- [135] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 43 citing D.F. Allen, *The Coins of the Ancient Celts*.
- [136] Illustration and photo by Tara Wolfe (2015), based on a photo of unknown source supplied by Bob Reis.
- [137] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 208 ff.
- [138] *Ibid.*, p. 35, 40, & 187.
- [139] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- [140] Illustration and photo by Tara Wolfe, 2015. Based on Eugène Hucher, *L'art gaulois ou les Gaulois d'après leurs médailles*, pl. 53.
- [141] This was also in complete accord with the well-attested sexual freedom of Celtic women generally. See, e.g., Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 22.
- [142] Photo by Owen Cook, 2007. Used with permission under the GNU Free Documentation License. The relief comes from the Contern Commune in Luxembourg.
- [143] Photo by Siannan, 2013. Used under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 License. The relief is now in the Archeological Museum at Dijon, France.
- [144] L. Bonfante; see p.37, note 109, above.
- [145] See e.g., Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 152.
- [146] Wall-mural from the “Villa of Venus” in Pompeii. Photo by Stephen Haynes, now in the public domain.
- [147] W. H. D. Rouse, *Nonnus, Dionysiaca*, 5. 611 ff.
- [148] See, e.g., Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena*, pp. 152-3.
- [149] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 92. Brackets added for clarification.
- [150] For the symbolism discussed in this and the next paragraph, see under 'Ass' in J.C. Cooper, *An*

*Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols.*

- [151] Often translated as “dear little Epona”: see G.S. Olmstead, 'Gaulish and Celt-Iberian poetic inscriptions', pp. 339–387.
- [152] Robert Graves, *The Golden Ass*, pp. 51 & 184.
- [153] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 172.
- [154] See e.g., *ibid*, p. 101.
- [155] J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, p.137.
- [156] For Apollo, see 'Raven' in Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*; for Celtic mythology see Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 188.
- [157] See 'Snake', Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [158] J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [159] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 185-6.
- [160] J. C. Cooper, *ibid*.
- [161] See 'Serpent' in J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [162] See 'Dog' in Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [163] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 175.
- [164] See 'Dog' in J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [165] Adkins, L. and R. Adkins (1996). *Dictionary of Roman Religion*, p. 21.
- [166] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, *ibid*.
- [167] J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [168] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 85 and *passim*.
- [169] Quoted under 'Dog' in J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [170] See 'Corn', *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [171] Hippolytus of Rome, see Marcovich, *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*.
- [172] See 'Corn', J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*. Brackets added for clarification.
- [173] See 'Fruit', *ibid*.
- [174] *Ibid*.
- [175] See 'Fruit', *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [176] Compare Mag Mell, Tír na nÓg and the Sumer Isles, for example, with the Greek Elysium.
- [177] See 'Apple', J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [178] *Ibid*.
- [179] Eleanor Hull, *The Silver Bough in Irish Legend*, xii.
- [180] See 'Rose' in J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [181] In Roman myth, Cupid (Eros) stopped rumours about the infidelities of Venus by bribing the god of silence with a rose.
- [182] See 'Rose', *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*. Italics added for emphasis.
- [183] Robert Graves, Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, pp.51 & 184.
- [184] See 'Pine' in J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [185] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 56.
- [186] J. C. Cooper, *ibid*.
- [187] Drawing and photo by Ava Crabbe, 2016.
- [188] See e.g., Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 70-3.

- [189] Modern writers have suggested kykeon was alcoholic, an opiate or hallucinogenic: Kerényi, *Eleusis*, xx & p. 40. See also Kerényi, *Dionysos*, p. 24; and R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hoffman, Carl Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis*.
- [190] See e.g., Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p.73; see also 'Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin' "...he will not be a king over Ireland, unless he gets the ale of Cualu".
- [191] See Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *The Theogony of Hesiod*, p. 176 ff; & compare with the Derveni Papyrus, quoted in Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis*, pp. 90-3
- [192] See e.g., Callimachus, *Hymn to Apollo*, 110; Scholiast to Theocritus, xv. 94; and Scholiast to Euripides, *Hippolytus*, 72. Noted in Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p.442.
- [193] W. H. S. Jones & H. A. Omerod, *Pausanias, Description of Greece*.
- [194] H R. Fairclough, Virgil. Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid: Georgics 4. 1 ff.
- [195] Fragment 43, 'The Priestesses'; see B. B. Rogers, *Aristophanes, the Frogs*, 1274 [Brackets added for clarification].
- [196] It was Iphigeneia who was said to have brought the cult of the Tauric Artemis to Attica.
- [197] See 'Orb' in J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [198] Albert Van Helden, *Measuring the Universe*, pp. 4–5.
- [199] J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [200] See 'Orb', Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [201] Photo from W. Dorow, *Opferstätten und Grabhügel der Germanen und Römer am Rhein*, p. 28, plate xiv. Public domain.
- [202] For a description, see Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 174.
- [203] See e.g., '1 Kings' 12:4 and '2 Chronicles' 10:11, *NRSV Bible*.
- [204] See 'Lamentations' 3:27 and 'Mathew' 11:29, *NRSV Bible*. Italics added for emphasis.
- [205] See p.49, note 151, above.
- [206] See 'Basket' in J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [207] Clement of Alexandria, 'Exhortation to the Greeks', in Marvin W. Meyer, *The Ancient Mysteries, a Sourcebook*.
- [208] Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos, Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, p. 387.
- [209] Cv. 'cunabula' in Hugh Rawson (1981), *A Dictionary of Euphemisms & other Doubletalk*, p. 296.
- [210] Diane Wolkstein & Samuel Noah Kramer (1983), *Inanna, Queen of Heaven & Earth*, p. 146.
- [211] See *Online Etymological Dictionary*.
- [212] See e.g., Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, p. 28.
- [213] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 70-1.
- [214] *Ibid.*, p. 72. This was in contrast to the food, which was eaten after the offering was made.
- [215] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- [216] *Ibid.*, pp.81-97
- [217] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 92.
- [218] See 'Key' in J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [219] For discussion, see Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 211 ff.
- [220] *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- [221] See 'Key', J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [222] See 'Key', Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [223] J. C. Cooper, *ibid.*

- [224]Ibid.
- [225]See 'Thyrsos', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- [226]T. A. Buckley (transl.), '*Bacchae*'; see also Pseudo-Apollodorus, 'Bibliotheca' in Keith Aldrich, *Library of Greek Mythology*, 2. 29.
- [227]Hesiod, *Theogony*, 507-16; quoted in Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, p. 53.
- [228]Homeric Hymn to Demeter, 235-45: see Aldrich, *ibid.*, 3. 117. Note that Thetis used the same technique on Achilles
- [229]Henry Hart Milman, *Euripides, Bacchae*, pp. 5, 13 & 43 respectively.
- [230]Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 9-14. Note that despite its short-comings in other ways, the entire book was dedicated to an in-depth discussion of poetry as an ancient magical language.
- [231]See 'Whip', J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*.
- [232]See 'Whip', Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [233]Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 8-14. Note that Green was cited as one of the top 100 scholars whose “discoveries, developments and inventions” have transformed the world in the last 50 years: *The Guardian*, 5 July 2006.
- [234]Ibid., p. 167.
- [235]Ibid., p. 1.
- [236]Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 36. Italics added for emphasis.
- [237]Ibid., p. 3.
- [238]Ibid., p. 171.
- [239]Ibid., p. 35.
- [240]Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Celts, A History*, p. 18 ff.
- [241]Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p. 206; and *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 174.
- [242]I.e., whether they were placed before or after the noun: see 'Adjectives', *ibid.*
- [243]Often given as 'epo-', but see Modern (Revived) Gaulish, *ibid.*
- [244]See e.g., Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 72-8.
- [245]Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 14.
- [246]See 'Danube', *Online Etymology Dictionary*; and see John Koch, *Celtic Culture: a Historical Encyclopedia*, p. 569.
- [247]Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, *ibid.*
- [248]Drawing by Friedrich Drexel. 1887. Public domain.
- [249]Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p.73.
- [250]See Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 184.
- [251]See '-on', X. Delamarre, *Dictionnaire de la Langue Gauloise: une approche linguistique du vieux-celtique continental*.
- [252]The English word “Lady” comes from Old English *hlæfdige*, meaning "mistress of the household” or, literally, "one who makes the bread” - a term evoking the ancient conception of the Earth Mother bringing forth grain from her womb. See 'Lady', *Online Etymological Dictionary*.
- [253]K. Linduff (1979), *Epona: A Celt among the Romans*, Collection Latomus, Vol. 38 (4), 817–37.
- [254]Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, Routledge; p.206. Italics added for emphasis.
- [255]Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 187.
- [256]Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 3.
- [257]Miranda Green, *ibid*, p.166; italics in the original, brackets added. Note that Green was comparing Epona and Artio, the Gallic goddess identified with the bear.

- [258] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p.170. In this connection, Green notes that Celtic goddesses were more often associated – and more intimately identified – with animals than Celtic gods.
- [259] The principle of *pars pro toto* (a part representing the whole) in Romano-Celtic art is discussed in another context in Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 216 ff.
- [260] Carey A. Williams, 'The Basics of Equine Behavior': section on social structure.
- [261] K. Krueger, B. Flauger, K. Farmer and C. Hemelrijk, 'Movement initiation in groups of feral horses', 103, 91–101.
- [262] See e.g., T.G.E. Powell, *The Celts*, p.123.
- [263] Miranda Green, *ibid.* See also 'shape-shifting' in Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*.
- [264] Fragment XXII, 9. 4, quoted in Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 35.
- [265] See Chapter Two, p.44, text to note 136.
- [266] See Chapter Two, p.49, note 151.
- [267] Carey A. Williams, *ibid.*
- [268] See Chapter One, p.20, text to note 24.
- [269] Leonhard V. Schmitz, 'Agdistis' in Smith, William, Sir, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*.
- [270] See e.g., Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 36.
- [271] See Chapter One, p.30, text to note 77.
- [272] See, e.g., James MacKillop (1998), *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, pp.10, 16, 128.
- [273] Carey A. Williams, *ibid.* Note that in order to preserve the survival and strength of the herd, she will also defer to him in times of scarcity or extreme hardship.
- [274] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 171.
- [275] *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- [276] *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- [277] *Ibid.*
- [278] Note that in addition to the sources cited individually, the following paragraphs integrate material from J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*; Boris Mathews, *The Herder Dictionary of Symbols*; and Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [279] Karen Armstrong (2006), *The Great Transformation*, pp. 3 & 7.
- [280] See, e.g., the film 'Hidalgo', 2004; and stories published by The Long Rider's Guild.
- [281] Michael Wood, *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*.
- [282] See 'Chthonic' in *Online Etymology Dictionary*.
- [283] The Greek myth of Pegasus forming the Hippocrene ("Horse's Fountain") is a prime example. See also Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic*, esp. pp. 83-5 and 133-41.
- [284] Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 241.
- [285] *Ibid.*
- [286] Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*, *ibid.*
- [287] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, p. 51; and cv. Parmenides, 'Proem' in Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 26-7.
- [288] Kingsley associates the separation of celestial and sublunar realms with Aristotle (*Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic*, pp., 50-51). But, while Aristotle certainly played an influential part in this separation, its roots were much older.
- [289] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 174.

- [290] On the “aggressive individuality of Celtic society” see Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Dieux et Héros des Celts*. See also John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopaedia*, p.708; and Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 32, 92, 173.
- [291] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 171. If the story was true, he must have kept at least one horse since he apparently rode out of Alesia to attack the Romans (*Gallic Wars VII*). Similarly, according to Plutarch he also rode round the Roman encampment before his surrender; see J. M. Dent, *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. ii, p. 551.
- [292] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 5.
- [293] Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*, *ibid.*
- [294] H. J. Edwards, *Caesar, the Gallic War*, VI.
- [295] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 39-40.
- [296] As a symbol, the wheel combined the idea of movement through the sky with the analogies of hub as sun, spokes as solar rays and rim as halo of light. Although the wheel was the most common pre-Celtic and Celtic solar symbol however, they also used discs, concentric circles, rosettes and swastikas to represent the sun. See Miranda Green, *ibid.*, and pp. 43-5.
- [297] *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- [298] *Ibid.*, p.43.
- [299] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- [300] *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- [301] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- [302] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- [303] *Ibid.*, pp. 39, and 74-8.
- [304] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 69-70.
- [305] *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- [306] *Ibid.*
- [307] *Ibid.*, p. 41-42.
- [308] *Ibid.*, p. 153, 164.
- [309] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 114-15.
- [310] Photo by Rosemania, 2009. Cropped and used with permission under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license. Cauldron now in the Historic Museum of Bern.
- [311] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 59.
- [312] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- [313] Photo anonymous, 2006. Cropped and used under GNU Free Documentation License, 1.2
- [314] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 95-7.
- [315] There is a hint here that the “indomitable” Celts were looking toward their eventual freedom from the yoke of Roman rule. The so-called “Gallic Empire” rebellion in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century shows how strong - and persistent - these feelings were.
- [316] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 164.
- [317] *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- [318] *Ibid.*
- [319] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- [320] *Ibid.*, p.172.
- [321] See 'Liminal', *Online Etymology Dictionary*.
- [322] Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*.



- [323] Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, 'Introduction: Liminality and Cultures of Change'.
- [324] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 172.
- [325] See 'Health', *Online Etymology Dictionary*.
- [326] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, e.g., p. 92.
- [327] See 'Roses', Chapter Two, text to note 84.
- [328] See, e.g., the 12<sup>th</sup> century Irish *Scél na fír flatha* ("Tale of the Sovereign's Truth").
- [329] Robert Graves, *Lucius Apuleius, The Golden Ass*, p. 51.
- [330] See 'The Worship of Epona', Nantonos and Ceffyl, *Epona.net*.
- [331] *Ibid.*
- [332] *Ibid.*
- [333] See e.g., Conaire Mór, in Eleanor Knott (ed.), *Togail bruidne Da Derga*.
- [334] Kuno Meyer, The Death-Tales of the Ulster heroes. See also "Filidh", in Edward Dwelly, *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*.
- [335] See text to note 813, p.193.
- [336] See text to note 79, page 30.
- [337] Magnen & Thevenot (1953) *Epona*, cited in Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 92.
- [338] Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, p.205-206.
- [339] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p.102.
- [340] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- [341] Miranda Green, *ibid.*, p. 72; and *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 40.
- [342] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 72.
- [343] *Ibid.*
- [344] First pointed out by Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 72.
- [345] Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*, cited in Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 74; see also pp. 75-78.
- [346] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p.72
- [347] *Ibid.*
- [348] *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- [349] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- [350] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- [351] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- [352] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- [353] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- [354] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- [355] See e.g., *ibid.*, p. 72-3.
- [356] *Ibid.*, p. 78-9.
- [357] *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- [358] *Ibid.*, p. 72-3.
- [359] *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 185, & 188.
- [360] John 12:24, *New Revised Standard Edition Bible*. Italics added for emphasis. Note that this ancient observation of Nature reflects a universal biological fact: e.g., the death of sperm in its fusion with the ovum.

- [361] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 85 and 95-7.
- [362] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 107.
- [363] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 78-85.
- [364] See 'A Better Interpretation', in Robert von Rudloff, *Hekate in Early Greek Religion*, p. 22.
- [365] See 'Triplism' in James MacKillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*.
- [366] Photo by K. Welch, published in Charles Squire *Celtic Myth and Legend*. Original cropped. Public domain.
- [367] See page 30, text and note 79.
- [368] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 91.
- [369] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 106.
- [370] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 83.
- [371] *Ibid.*, and see *Celtic Goddesses*, p.111.
- [372] Photo by Urban, 2006. Public domain. The relief is now in the Musée de la Civilisation Celtique, Bibracte, France.
- [373] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, pp.107-8.
- [374] “For two divisions were formerly on the year, viz., summer from Beltaine (the first of May), and winter from Samuin to Beltaine”, see Kuno Meyer, *The Wooing of Emer*, p.232; see also Miranda Green, *The Celtic World*, p. 434.
- [375] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 74.
- [376] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, pp.107-8.
- [377] See 'Maiden' in Jean L. McKechnie, *Webster's Dictionary*; & in *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Note that “unmarried” implied that a (morally upright) woman had never had sex.
- [378] See 'Nymph', *ibid.*
- [379] See 'Virgin' in Jean L. McKechnie, *Webster's Dictionary*; & *Online Etymology Dictionary*.
- [380] See *Preiddeu Annwn* ("The Spoils of Annwn") cited in Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 63.
- [381] M. Esther Harding, *Woman's Mysteries*, p.103. Brackets added.
- [382] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 81.
- [383] In Ireland, Samhain (October-November) was seen as the end of summer (the beginning of winter): see, e.g., Kuno Meyers, *The Wooing of Emer*, *ibid.*
- [384] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 74.
- [385] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 108.
- [386] See Parmenides, 'Proem', Peter Kingsley translation in *Reality*, pp. 26-7.
- [387] 'Année épigraphique', #235, see 'Inscriptions', Nantonos & Ceffyl, *Epona.net*
- [388] Lawrence Keppie, *Roman Inscribed and Sculptured Stones*. Catalogue # 36.
- [389] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 92-3.
- [390] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- [391] See e.g., 'Inscriptions', Nantonos and Ceffyl, *Epona.net*.
- [392] The marriage of Bres to Brìghde, and Aillil's marriage to “Queen” Medb are both examples: see e.g., Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 73.
- [393] Miranda Green, *ibid.*, p. 95.
- [394] Photo by Siannan13, *ibid.*, note 46, Chapter Two.
- [395] Miranda Green, *ibid.*, p. 164.
- [396] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 99.



- [397] Woodcut of an inscribed relief-carving published in Robert Charles Hope, *The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells Of England*. Now in the public domain.
- [398] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, *ibid.*
- [399] *Ibid.*
- [400] Salomon Reinach, *Épona*, part 1, pp. 113, 309.
- [401] See 'Timeline', Nantonos and Ceffyl, *Epona.net*, note 1.
- [402] Illustration and photo by Ava Crabbe, 2016. From a photo of the original, now located in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, in Naples Italy.
- [403] Jennifer Larson, *Greek Nymphs*, citing Thompson's 'Motif Index of Folk Literature', p.64.
- [404] *Ibid.* p.65.
- [405] *Ibid.*
- [406] See page 31, text to note 83.
- [407] Todd Brisbane, 'Childbirth in ancient Rome: from traditional folklore to obstetrics', pp. 82–85. Note that the author's figures were given as 25 per 1000, but have been multiplied by 100 here in accord with the practice of estimating over 100,000 live births (see note 72, below).
- [408] World Health Organization, 'Trends in Maternal Mortality: 1990 to 2013'. Note that maternal deaths in the U.S. were almost double those in Canada and the U.K.
- [409] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- [410] For Rhiannon's pregnancy in Welsh myth see Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 47; for Macha's pregnancy in Irish myth see Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 101.
- [411] Both the search for academic literature and the survey of imagery were conducted by the author using online sources and the relevant literature on Celtic studies (see Bibliography), 2014-15.
- [412] Photo by Urban, 2006. Public domain. The relief is now in the Musée de la Civilisation Celtique, Bibracte, France.
- [413] "The child is the father of the man": William Wordsworth, 'My Heart Leaps Up', see Richard Spears, *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of American Idioms and Phrasal Verbs*.
- [414] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 159.
- [415] See page 48, text to note 148; Raymond Chevallier, *Voyages*, p.35; and Magnen & Thévenot, *Épona*, plate 62.
- [416] Nazia Husain, April 2015. Personal communication.
- [417] Miranda Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 17.
- [418] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p.164.
- [419] See 'Epona' in Michael Jordan, *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses*, pp. 91-2: italics added for emphasis. Jordan's phrase has also been taken-up and repeated (without attribution) by others on the internet.
- [420] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 150.
- [421] See 'Union of Earth & Sky', Chapter Nine.
- [422] Linda Crotta Brennan, *Geothermal Power*, p. 10.
- [423] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 152.
- [424] Patricia Garfield, *Women's Bodies, Women's Dreams*.
- [425] From the Latin *incubare*, "to lie in or upon", "to brood", or "to watch jealously": see 'Incubation', Jean L. McKechnie, *Webster's Dictionary*; & *Online Etymology Dictionary*.
- [426] Jean L. McKechnie, *Webster's Dictionary*, *ibid.*
- [427] Juliette Harrison, *The Classical Greek Practice of Incubation*, p. 5.
- [428] *Ibid.*

- [429] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, pp. 225 (note 28) & 284-8. For a more developed discussion, see Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, pp. 84, 101-4, & *passim*.
- [430] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p.162-3.
- [431] *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- [432] *Ibid.*, p.161-2.
- [433] *Ibid.*, p.172.
- [434] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 134.
- [435] See note 430, above.
- [436] Miranda Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 170.
- [437] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 165; and *Celtic Goddesses*, pp. 102-4.
- [438] S. Deyts and L. Roussel (1994), 'Mâlain, fouilles de Mediolanum', pp.503–509.
- [439] Miranda Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 17.
- [440] Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, p. 36.
- [441] W. A. McDevitte and W. S. Bohn, *Julius Caesar. Caesar's Gallic War*, Bk I, Section 33.
- [442] Xavier De Planhol and Paul Claval, *An Historical Geography of France*, p. 47.
- [443] See page 50, text to note 156.
- [444] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 179.
- [445] Juliette Harrison, *The Classical Greek Practice of Incubation*, p. 3-5.
- [446] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, pp. 74 note 19; 76 note 21; 85.
- [447] *Ibid.*, pp. 356-7.
- [448] See page 86, text to note 355.
- [449] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 93.
- [450] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 72-3 and *passim*.
- [451] This is a wide-spread theme in ancient and modern literature, but see e.g., Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 73.
- [452] Again, this explanation is fairly common. See e.g., *ibid.*
- [453] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- [454] See 'Dog', Chapter Two.
- [455] See 'Territory', *Online Etymological Dictionary*.
- [456] In response to a Roman breach of a sacred trust, See Peter Beresford Ellis, *The Celts: A History*, p. 62.
- [457] See e.g., Stephen Allen, *Celtic Warrior: 300 BC-AD 100*; for mercenary activities, see especially p. 14.
- [458] Máire Herbert, 'Transmutations of an Irish Goddess', in Sandra Billington and Miranda Green, *The Concept of the Goddess*, pp. 141-52.
- [459] See Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge*.
- [460] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 72
- [461] Kuno Meyer, *The Wooing of Emer*.
- [462] See 'Fir Flatha' in *Dictionary of the Irish Language*.
- [463] Whitley Stokes, 'The Irish Ordeals', pp. 1-24.
- [464] Catona, from the Gallish *catu-* "battle", see 'Cath' in Alexander MacBain, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*. For the inscription see G.S. Olmstead, 'Gaulish and Celt-Iberian poetic inscriptions', pp. 339–387.

- [465] A photo of the Garnet cylinder seal can be seen on the British Museum website: see bibliography.
- [466] For an extensive discussion, see Nanno Marinatos, *The Goddess and the Warrior*.
- [467] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 187. Italics added for emphasis.
- [468] See 'Sovereignty' and 'Sovereign' in Jean L. McKechnie, *Webster's Dictionary*.
- [469] Dan Philpott, 'Sovereignty', in Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- [470] Miranda Green, *ibid.*
- [471] Dan Philpott, *ibid.*
- [472] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 73.
- [473] M. Herbert, 'Goddess and King: *The Sacred Marriage in Early Ireland*', in L.O. Fradenburg, *Women and Sovereignty*, pp. 264-75.
- [474] Miranda Green, *ibid.*
- [475] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 73.
- [476] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- [477] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 70. Italics added for emphasis.
- [478] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- [479] See page 29, text to notes 69, 70 and 71.
- [480] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, pp. 15-27.
- [481] A fact seen in Irish myth, but also historically: e.g., in the Caledonian queen's retort to the Roman empress Julia Augusta about fulfilling "the demands of nature" by consorting "with the best men". See page 31, text to note 82.
- [482] See 'Power' in Jean L. McKechnie, *Webster's*.
- [483] Dan Philpott, *ibid.*, quoting R.P. Wolff (1990), *The Conflict Between Authority and Autonomy*, p. 20. Italics added for emphasis.
- [484] See 'Submission', in Jean L. McKechnie, *ibid.*
- [485] See, e.g., Bruno Heller, John Milius and William J. MacDonald, *Rome*, Episode 1. Note that the directors took great pains to make the series historically accurate.
- [486] Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 194.
- [487] Sir Iain Moncreiffe, *The Highland Clans*, pp. 24-5. Note that at the time he wrote, Sir Iain was Albany Herald in the court of the Lord Lyon, King of Arms (the official heraldry office for Scotland).
- [488] Moncreiffe, *ibid.*, p. 26.
- [489] Noted by Kristal Garcia, author of the forthcoming book *Loving and Celebrating Men*. Personal communication, 2015.
- [490] See e.g., John Haywood, *Atlas of the Celtic World*. Note that classical writers believed the Belgae of northern Gaul and south-western Britain were not Celtic, but modern scholars now disagree: see, e.g., Miranda Green, *The Celtic World*, p. 607.
- [491] Moncreiffe, *ibid.*, p. 25. Brackets added for clarification.
- [492] See 'Túatha Dé Dannan', R.A.S. Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*.
- [493] Dan Philpott, *ibid.* Brackets added for clarification and italics for emphasis.
- [494] See e.g., Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 170.
- [495] In this respect Celtic views of sovereignty differed radically from the non-essentialist position in modern feminism. See, e.g., 'Essentialism', in Letty M. Russell & J. Shannon Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*.
- [496] See e.g., Marion Euskirchen, 'Epona', pp. 607-838.
- [497] Photo by QuartierLatin 1968, used with permission under GNU FDL, version 1.2.

- [498] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 15. This description of Medb may be excessively harsh, but there is no question that she was strong, self-confident, unabashedly dominating, and had a prodigious sexual appetite.
- [499] For the epithet “August” in reference to Epona, see *Année Epigraphique* 1897, #14, 0015; and *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 13, 2903. See 'Inscriptions', in Nantonos & Ceffyl, *Epona.net*.
- [500] The inscription comes from Ulcisia Castra, the modern town of Szentendre in Pest County, Hungary. See Nantonos & Ceffyl, *ibid*.
- [501] Thomas Kinsella, *The Tain*, pp. 132-133, Brackets added.
- [502] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 92; *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 185.
- [503] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 36.
- [504] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 88.
- [505] See 'Epona and the cult of the Danubian Horsemen', Adam Standring, *The Atlantic Religion*.
- [506] Map based on the 'Europe countries map en.png' by San Jose, re-touched by Hayden120. Adapted and used here by permission under the GNU FDL version I.2.
- [507] See 'Distribution', Nantonos & Ceffyl, *Epona.net*.
- [508] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, pp. 50-1.
- [509] See Nantonos & Ceffyl, *ibid*.
- [510] See page 62, text to note 236.
- [511] *Commentarii de bello Gallico* (Commentary on the Gallic War); see passim H. J. Edwards, Caesar, the Gallic War.
- [512] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 173.
- [513] See e.g., Salomon Reinach, *Épona*, 1895, #05.
- [514] Simone Deyts, 'La statue de la déesse Epona', pp. 437 - 441.
- [515] René Magnen & Emile Thévenot, *Épona*, plate 12.
- [516] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, pp. 195-8. Note her marriage to Bres was sovereignty-based.
- [517] See 'Timeline, Conclusions', Nantonos & Ceffyl, *Epona.net*.
- [518] For the Aquitaine inscription, see G.S. Olmstead, 'Gaulish and Celt-Iberian Poetic Inscriptions'; for the Pompeii fresco, see H. Jordan, '*De genii et Eponae picturis pompeianis nuper detectis*'.
- [519] F. Benoît, *Les mythes de l'outre-tombe. Le cavalier à l'anguipède et l'écuyère Épona*.
- [520] Nantonos & Ceffyl, *ibid*.
- [521] Blank map by Rosss, 2012. Adapted and used with permission under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 license.
- [522] J.F. Drinkwater, *The Gallic Empire*, pp. 24-27.
- [523] See page 45, photo and text to note 142.
- [524] The remark may have come from Cassius Dio's *Historia Romana*.
- [525] See 'Apotheosis', see H.J. Thomson, *Prudentius, Volume I*.
- [526] G. Cattaneo, 'Equejade', Fig. 3. Public domain.
- [527] See 'Introduction', H. J. Thomson, *Prudentius*.
- [528] “...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms...” See Bible, Ephesians 2:6.
- [529] See. e.g., under “Heaven”, *Online Etymological Dictionary*.
- [530] Ephrem the Syrian referred to Mary as “Queen” in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. See 'Mary', in Averil Cameron & Amélie Kuhrt, *Images of Women in Antiquity*.
- [531] J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion*, pp. 82–85.

- [532] Garrett Olmsted, *The Gaulish Calendar*. It is worth noting that the calendar was found near Lyon, in Aedui territory, and has been dated to the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD - i.e., well within Epona's "popular period".
- [533] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 39.
- [534] Photo by Malene Thyssen 2004, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Malene>
- [535] Miranda Green, *ibid.*, p. 40.
- [536] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- [537] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- [538] *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- [539] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- [540] *Ibid.*, p. 41, 46, 59, & 69-70.
- [541] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 39.
- [542] See e.g., *Metrical Dindsenchas IV*, Ard Macha, 127, lines 45-48; and O’Rahilly 1946, 293; & Mac Cana, 1955; cited in Kevin Jones, Dissertation.
- [543] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 39-40.
- [544] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- [545] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- [546] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- [547] *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- [548] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- [549] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- [550] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 65.
- [551] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 158.
- [552] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, *ibid.*; and see Water Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 145.
- [553] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 95.
- [554] *Ibid.*
- [555] *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- [556] *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- [557] *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 59 & 95.
- [558] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- [559] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- [560] *L'Année Epigraphique*, 1939, #235; and René Magnen and Emile Thévenot, *Épona*, #48, plate 12. Photo now in the public domain.
- [561] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 58.
- [562] See e.g., 'Other Deities - Associated', Nantonos & Ceffyl, *Epona.net*
- [563] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 95.
- [564] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, e.g., p. 97 & 162.
- [565] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- [566] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 36. Italics added for emphasis.
- [567] *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- [568] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 37.
- [569] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 55.

- [570] Miranda Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 124.
- [571] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, e.g., p. 63
- [572] Ibid.
- [573] Adrian Sabin, 'Funerary Practices in Europe before and after the Roman Conquest'.
- [574] Photo by Janmad, 2007, used with permission under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.
- [575] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 58.
- [576] Photo by Sorita d'Este, 2015. Used with permission and thanks.
- [577] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, *ibid.*
- [578] See photo associated with note 497, page 114.
- [579] The gender of the horses was confirmed on-site by Sorita d'Este at *the National Archaeological Museum, Sofia, Bulgaria*.
- [580] Nikolay Ovcharov, *Perperikon*.
- [581] Ibid.
- [582] Ibid.
- [583] Photo by Jastrow, 2007. Used under Creative Commons License, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>.
- [584] Miranda J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 142.
- [585] See, e.g., Manfred Lurker, *Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses, Devils and Demons*, p. 151; & Benjamin H. Isaac, *The Greek Settlements in Thrace Until the Macedonian Conquest*, p. 257.
- [586] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 159.
- [587] Ibid., p. 158.
- [588] Robert A. Kaster, *Macrobius, Saturnalia* 1.19.
- [589] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 158.
- [590] Kurt A. Raaflaub, *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, p. 15.
- [591] Stephen A. Barney, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, p. 128.
- [592] Robert Schilling, 'Venus', p. 147.
- [593] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 153.
- [594] For photo and quote see Alex Bivol, 'Archaeology: Summer dig at Perperikon yields new finds'.
- [595] Miranda Green, *ibid.*, p. 172.
- [596] Miranda Green, *ibid.*, pp. 152 and 172.
- [597] Ibid., p. 161.
- [598] See text to note 652, page 153, and Miranda Green, *ibid.*, p. 162.
- [599] See 'Apollodorus' in Sir William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*.
- [600] See text to notes 435 and 444, page 101.
- [601] See 'Aethusa' in Sir William Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*. See also Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb, *Homer*, p. 59.
- [602] E.g., Acantha, Aganippe, Bolina, Castalia, Daphne, Dryope, Korykia and Kyrene, to name just a few. For ancient sources, see Theoi Project.
- [603] Elizabeth Kosmetatou, citing Aristophanes ('Birds' and 'Wasps') in 'Cistophori and Cysta Mystica', p. 13.
- [604] E.N. Lane, *Corpus Cultus Iovis Sabazii III*, p. 11.

[605] Photo by Bob Reis, *Celtic Coins*. Used with permission and thanks.

[606] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 67.

[607] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[608] *Ibid.*, p. 67; 111.



- [609] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 111.
- [610] *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- [611] Miranda J. Green, *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, p. 124.
- [612] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 62.
- [613] Miranda Green, *ibid.*
- [614] Photo by René & Peter van der Krogt. Re-sized and used by permission, with grateful thanks - particularly in view of the special effort they made in providing me with high resolution photos taken from different angles.
- [615] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, pp. 61-5; and *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art*, pp.124-29.
- [616] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, *ibid.*
- [617] Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis*, p. 33.
- [618] *Ibid.*
- [619] Miranda Green, *ibid.*, p. 63.
- [620] Miranda Green, *ibid.* *Italics* added for emphasis.
- [621] Photo by René & Peter van der Krogt, *ibid.* Re-sized, cropped and used by permission with thanks.
- [622] Kieth Aldrich, *Apollodorus, Library of Greek Mythology*, 1. 39.
- [623] See, e.g., Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *The Theogony of Hesiod*, p. 306 *ff.*
- [624] Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos*, p. 46.
- [625] Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *ibid.*
- [626] Carl Kerényi, *ibid.*, pp. 47-8.
- [627] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 153.
- [628] See page 31, text to note 82.
- [629] See 'Madb', in Ciaran Carson, *The Tain*; and Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*.
- [630] *Ibid.*, pp. 84-5, 95 & 97.
- [631] Photo by QuartierLatin1968; used under Creative Commons License, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>; cropped, but otherwise unmodified.
- [632] For a useful survey of attributions in ancient literature, see 'Hermes', the Theoi Project.
- [633] See James H. Ward and W. A. Macdevitt, *Caesar's Commentaries*. 6:1.
- [634] E. V. Rieu, Homer, *Iliad*. xx. 35, xxiv. 282, and *Odyssey*. ii. 38.
- [635] Photo by Ricardo André Frantz, 2006; used under Creative Commons License, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>.
- [636] Nicole Jufer & Thierry Luginbühl (2001), *Les dieux gaulois*.
- [637] Ranko Matasovic, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Celtic*, pp. 415-416.
- [638] See 'The Feralia', in James George Frazer, *Ovid: Fasti*.
- [639] See 'Other Deities', Nantonos & Ceffyl, *Epona.net*.
- [640] Georgia L. Irby-Massie, *The Roman Army and the Cult of the Campestris*, pp. 293-300.
- [641] Georgius Thilo, *Commentary on the Aeneid of Vergil*, 7.720.
- [642] John F. Miller, *Roman Festivals*, p. 172.
- [643] See 'Other Deities', Nantonos & Ceffyl, *Epona.net*.
- [644] Photo copyright held by Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. Used under Creative Commons License, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>



- [645] T. P. Wiseman, *Remus: A Roman Myth*, p. 137.
- [646] Barbette Stanley Spaeth quoting Arnobius in *The Roman Goddess Ceres*, pp. 4, 6–13.
- [647] Thomas McGinn, 'Concubinage and the Lex Iulia on Adultery', p. 342.
- [648] John F. Miller, *Roman Festivals*, p. 172.
- [649] Barbette Stanley Spaeth, *ibid.*, p. 8.
- [650] T. P. Wiseman, 'Satyrs in Rome? The Background to Horace's *Ars Poetica*', p. 7.
- [651] Barbette Stanley Spaeth, *ibid.*, p. 131.
- [652] H. Jordan, *'De genii et Eponae picturis pompeianis nuper detectis'*, p. 47 ff. Photo now in the public domain.
- [653] Salomon Reinach, 'Épona', part 1, pp. 113, 309.
- [654] R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, Thames & Hudson, 1971; p. 83.
- [655] Robert Graves, *Lucius Apuleius, The Golden Ass*, pp.50-1, 184.
- [656] *Metamorphoses* 9.727, 733–4, cited by Amy Richlin, 'Sexuality in the Roman Empire', in David S. Potter (ed.), *A Companion to the Roman Empire*, p. 346.
- [657] The rudder and cornucopia held by Isis, for example, were attributes of the Roman goddess Fortuna.
- [658] Henry Hart Milman, *Euripides, Bacchae*, p. 27. Note that “honey-dripping” is the succinct modern form of Milman's 19<sup>th</sup> century verse translation “wands distilled from all their tops rich store of honey”.
- [659] *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 29, 43.
- [660] David J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power, and Identity*, p. 106.
- [661] Aubrey de Selincourt, *Herodotus, The Histories*, p. 145.
- [662] See 'Isis & Osiris', in Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch, Moralia*, Vol. V.
- [663] Henry Hart Milman, *Euripides, Bacchae*, pp. 13 & 16.
- [664] See text to note 652, page 153 above.
- [665] Walter Burkert, *Structure & History in Greek Mythology & Ritual*, p.1 ff.
- [666] See e.g., Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, p. 43.
- [667] *Magia Naturalis*, Book II, ch. 12.
- [668] The 'Banquet of the Seven Sages' was one of 78 essays in Plutarch's *Moralia* (“customs”). See Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch, Moralia*, Vol. II.
- [669] Frank C. Babbitt, *Moralia*, Vol. IV, p. 299; para 29.
- [670] See 'Agesilaus', in Charles Peter Mason, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*.
- [671] The tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides are lost, but see Diane Aronson Svarlien (ed.), *Pindar, Pythian Odes*, II: 21–48.
- [672] Note that Janet Farrar and Virginia Russel give the father's name as “Phoulouios Stellos”: an attempt to render the Latin name in a Greek form (the root “Stella” is Roman not Greek, even if the suffix '-a' is changed to “-os”). It is unfortunate that the authors give no details concerning their source for this version. See 'Epona', *The Magical History of the Horse*.
- [673] Ancient Roman names had three distinct parts: a praenomen, or personal name; a gens nomen, or clan-name; and a cognomen or family name within the clan or gens.
- [674] Benet Salway (1994), 'What's in a name? A survey of Roman onomastic practice from c.700 b.c. to 700 a.d.', pp. 124-145.
- [675] Klaus Bringmann, *A History of the Roman Republic*, Polity, p. 53.

- [676] Lindley Richard Dean, 'A Study of Soldiers in the Roman Legions', pp. 217-219.
- [677] See 'Fulvia' in Sir William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*. Note that while gens Fulvia used eight cognomina, one of these was superseded twice.
- [678] See 'Tusculum', in Hugh Chisholm, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- [679] See, e.g., Paul Plass, *Wit and the Writing of History: The Rhetoric of Historiography in Imperial Rome*, p. 34.
- [680] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, pp. 13, 43 n26, 348-56.
- [681] Ovid, *Fasti* v.379, cited in Ian Ridpath and Wil Tirion (2007), *Stars and Planets Guide*, Princeton University Press.
- [682] Sir William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, *ibid.*
- [683] See, e.g., 'Hymn to Demeter', H. G. Evelyn-White (transl.), *Hesiod, Homeric Hymns*, p. 212 ff.
- [684] Ian Ridpath and Wil Tirion (2001), *Stars and Planets Guide*, Princeton University Press, pp. 108-11.
- [685] One human and one divine parent invariably resulted in a semi-divine child.
- [686] Pausanias, 'Description of Greece', 8.42.1 ff., quoted in L. H. Jeffery (1976), *Archaic Greece*, p. 23.
- [687] Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, *passim*.
- [688] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *Pausanias, Description of Greece*, 8. 25. 5. Note that "Great Mare" was simply an extension of her standard epithets as "Great Goddess" or "Great Mother": see 'Demeter', the Theoi Project.
- [689] *Ibid.*, & Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 32.
- [690] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *ibid.*, 8. 37. 1 - 8. 38. 2. Italics added for emphasis.
- [691] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 138.
- [692] Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita Libri*. See also, Patrick K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, p. 5.
- [693] Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution*, esp. p. 78-9.
- [694] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *ibid.*
- [695] See 'Despot', *Online Etymological Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com>
- [696] Robin Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology*, p. 102.
- [697] Eduard Meyer (1926), 'Lykosoura'.
- [698] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, *ibid.*, p. 161.
- [699] See, e.g., Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 70.
- [700] See 'Poseidon', John Chadwick (1976), *The Mycenaean World*. Note that Chadwick was one of the three scholars who deciphered the Mycenaean Linear B script. See also Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, *ibid.*, p. 137.
- [701] *Ibid.*, p. 352.
- [702] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, especially pp. 348-52.
- [703] N. J. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, pp. 18-19, 179-82, 326-8.
- [704] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 138.
- [705] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 159-60.
- [706] *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- [707] *Ibid.*, pp. 44 & 177.
- [708] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *Pausanias, Description of Greece*, 8. 37. 1 - 8. 38. 2. Note that the details of the sanctuary all come from this source.

- [709]Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 149.
- [710]Ibid.
- [711]W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *Pausanias, Description of Greece*, 8. 37, 1 – 8; 38. 2.
- [712]Joseph B. Scholten, *The Politics of Plunder*, p. 35.
- [713]John Scheid, 'Graeco Ritu: A Typically Roman Way of Honoring the Gods', pp. 15–31.
- [714]See 'Magna Mater', in Merle Peterson, *The Cults of Campania*, pp. 289–91. Note that Peterson also mentions a statue described by Lafaye (276, No. 40) as a representation of Isis identified with Cybele, p. 289.
- [715]Ibid.
- [716]Mary Beard, 'The Roman and the Foreign: The Cult of the 'Great Mother' in Imperial Rome', in Nicholas Thomas and Caroline Humphrey (eds.), *Shamanism, History, and the State*, pp. 164–90.
- [717]See page 156, text to note 664; and see Aubrey de Selincourt transl. (1954), *Herodotus, The Histories*, p. 187.
- [718]Kieth Aldrich, *Apollodorus: Library of Greek Mythology*, 2. 29.
- [719]Horace L. Jones (transl.), *Strabo, Geography*, 10. 3. 12.
- [720]Leonhard Schmitz, 'Agdistis', in Sir William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, p. 67.
- [721]Patricia Turner, 'Agdistis', *Dictionary of Ancient Deities*, p. 24.
- [722]Horace L. Jones, *Strabo, The Geography*, xii. p. 567 cv. 469.
- [723]Richmond Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, Bk. 23, p. 346 ff.
- [724]Barry B. Powell, 'Did Homer Sing at Lefkandi?'.
- [725]The main ancient sources for these well-established historical details are Livy's *History of Rome* and Pliny's *Natural History*.
- [726]John Bostock and Henry Thomas Riley, *The Natural History of Pliny*, 5. 42.
- [727]See page 62, text accompanying note 236.
- [728]Section of an altar-relief of Kybele-Rhea from Pergamum in Aeolia, now in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin. Photo by Claus Ableiter, 2006. Used with permission under GNU Free Documentation License.
- [729]See e.g., page 44, text to note 136 and page 45, text to note 140.
- [730]Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 178.
- [731]Maria Grazia Lancellotti (2002), *Attis, Between Myth and History: King, Priest, and God*, Brill Publishers, pp. 20, 92.
- [732]The sculpture is now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, see: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/zeus-sabazios-151211>
- [733]See e.g., C. H. Oldfather transl., *Diodorus Siculus*, 4. 4. 1. In this context it does not matter if the two gods were actually identified, or if it was only believed that they were - e.g., by the commentators on Demosthenes: see E. N. Lane, *Corpus Cultus Iovis Sabazii*, p. 53 ff.
- [734]See e.g., P. Parkes (2006), 'Celtic Fosterage: Adoptive Kinship and Clientage in Northwest Europe', pp. 359–95.
- [735]It may be that much of the early Gallic aggression toward the indigenous and naturalized inhabitants of Anatolia was directed at incursions of the cult of Sabazios. Their efforts to establish territorial sovereignty in a religious sense would certainly have included a military defence of the goddess' sovereignty.
- [736]Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 178.
- [737]The Greek word ἔ γρήγορος literally meant “moves out swiftly”. Intriguingly, it was translated

in the Book of Enoch as “Watcher”, and referred to angels who came to earth and taught humanity the arts of civilization: see Robert Henry Charles (1912), *The Book of Enoch*.

[738] See, e.g., Introduction to Jane Ellen Harrison, *Myths of the Odyssey in Art & Literature*.

[739] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddess*, p. 51.

[740] Diane Wolkstein & Samuel Noah Kramer (1983), *Inanna Queen of Heaven & Earth*, p. 16-18.

[741] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 152 and 154.

[742] L.R. Lind, H.J. Rose, & W.H.D. Rouse (1956), *Nonnus' Dionysiaca*, 5. 611 ff.

[743] The names Sabazios and Zeus both derive from *Dyēus*, the proto-Indo-European word for “god”. See E. N. Lane, *Corpus Cultus Iovis Sabazii*, *ibid*.

[744] Note that Dionysos' origin was probably also Thracian: see Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Introduction, x.

[745] Thomas Taylor, *The Hymns of Orpheus*, Hymn 30.

[746] Sigfried J. De Laet and Joachim Herrmann, *History of Humanity*, pp.183-4.

[747] *Ibid*.

[748] Diana Gergova, 'Orphic Thrace and Achaemenid Persia', in Jens Nieling and Ellen Rehm (eds.), *Achaemenid Impact in the Black Sea*, pp. p. 67-86.

[749] C. H. Oldfather transl., *Diodorus Siculus, Library of History*, *ibid.*, 4. 4. 5

[750] Euripides, *Bacchae*, Dover Publications, 1997; p. 5.

[751] See e.g., N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, tablet I.

[752] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 150.

[753] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 62.

[754] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 35-36.

[755] 5<sup>th</sup> century kylix (drinking cup) by Makron. Photo by Matthias Kabel, 2008. Cropped and used with permission under the GNU Free Documentation License.

[756] This was the sense of the Latin root-word *humilis*, which literally meant “on the ground” (from *humus*, “earth”). See 'humble', *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

[757] Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia*, Oxford University Press, 1993; p. 121.

[758] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

[759] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 7. For a discussion, see also the Prologue.

[760] Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, pp. 86-7.

[761] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 36.

[762] *Ibid.*, p.179.

[763] Many thanks to Adam Standring at 'The Atlantic Religion' for calling my attention to this cult. Personal communication, 2014. For an academic overview, see Bojana Plemić, 'Contribution to the Study of the Danubian Horseman Cult', pp. 59-72.

[764] See 'Cult' and 'School': *Online Etymology Dictionary*

[765] Plato, 'Symposium', in Scott Buchanan (ed.), *The Portable Plato*, pp. 159-172.

[766] The two notable exceptions were the exclusively male societies in Thracian Orphism, and the much later Mysteries of Mithras.

[767] See e.g., Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, pp. 163, 276, 279.

[768] Robert Graves, *Lucius Apuleius, The Golden Ass*, p.67-99.

[769] The photo is part of a collection compiled by the York Project. The compilation copyright is held by Zenodot Verlagsgesellschaft mbH and licensed under the GNU Free Documentation License.

[770] For the underworld journeys of Enki and Inanna, see Diane Wolkstein & Samuel Noah Kramer,

*Inanna*, pp. 4 and 51-73 respectively.

[771] See e.g., Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 26-7.

[772] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *Pausanias, Description of Greece*, 8. 37. 1 - 8. 38. 2.

[773] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 159.

[774] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *ibid.*; 8.27, 1-6; and 8. 37, 9 (italics added); also quoted in Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, pp. 31 ff.

[775] 'Homeric Hymn 14', quoted in Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 178.

[776] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *ibid.*; 8. 37. 1 to 8. 38. 2.

[777] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 171.

[778] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *ibid.*

[779] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 149.

[780] Jane Ellen Harrison, 'The Kouretes and Zeus Kouros', pp. 308-338.

[781] E.V Rieu, *Homer, The Iliad*, p. 359.

[782] Strabo, X.462, quoted in Harrison, *ibid.*, p. 309 note 4.

[783] Paul Cartledge, *Spartan Reflections*, p. 50.

[784] Stephen Hodkinson, 'Agoge', in Simon Hornblower, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. See also, W.G. Forrest, *A History of Sparta 950-192 BC*, Norton, 1963; p. 51.

[785] *Ibid.*

[786] The Spartan girls' nudity may well have been connected with Artemis, like their peers who ran in foot races celebrating the Tauric Artemis at Brauron dressed in short tunics folded down beneath one bared breast. See the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC bronze figurine in the British Museum, and Beth Cohen, 'Divesting the Female Breast of Clothes in Classical Sculpture', in Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow & Claire L. Lyons, *Naked Truths*, p. 68.

[787] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *ibid.*; 3: 16. 7.

[788] Stephen Hodkinson, *ibid.*

[789] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *ibid.*, 3: 16. 7.

[790] See 'Scourge', Chapter Two.

[791] F.C Conybeare, *Philostratus*, 6. 20.

[792] *Ibid.*

[793] Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, pp. 49-55.

[794] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 150.

[795] The phrase "glistening throne" used here is a variation on "shining throne" understood as a reference to Inanna's "wondrous vulva": see 'The Hulupu Tree' in Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth*, *ibid.*, pp. 5 and 12.

[796] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 154.

[797] N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 85 ff.

[798] See 'Numinous', in Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

[799] F.C Conybeare, *Philostratus*, *ibid.* [brackets added].

[800] The city of Pergamum in Aeolia, for example, was said to have been an Arcadian colony. See Siméon Vaillhé, 'Pergamos' in Herbermann, Charles G. et al., *Catholic Encyclopaedia*.

[801] Salomon Reinach (1902), 'Épona', p.232.

[802] Illustration and photo by Ava Crabbe, 2016. Based on René Magnen and Emile Thévenot (1953), *Épona*, #178.

[803] Simone Deyts, 'La statue de la déesse Epona', in Cyril Driard and Simone Deyts, 'Une statue

d'Epona', pp. 437 - 441.

[804] Miranda Green, *Gods of the Celts*, p. 21.

[805] Simone Deyts, 'La statue de la déesse Epona', *ibid.*, p. 437: “enfin pour le fouet avec lequel le personnage dirigeait sa monture”.

[806] For classical references, see 'Artemis, Cult 4', the Theoi Project.

[807] See “Camma' in 'De Mulierum Virtutibus' ["Women's Excellence"], Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch, Moralia*.

[808] For a very informative recent review of the cult, see Bojana Plemić, 'Contribution to the Study of the Danubian Horsemen Cult', pp. 59-72.

[809] Photo kindness of Brendan MacGonagle at Balkancelts, 2015.

[810] See Bojana Plemić, *ibid.*, p. 60.

[811] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[812] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[813] See, e.g., Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 212; and Karl Kerényi (1959), *The Heroes of the Greeks*, pp. 105–12 and *passim*.

[814] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 180.

[815] The author had first-hand experience of this in a coming-of-age boar hunt as a pre-teen in the Bahamas in 1963.

[816] Bojana Plemić, *ibid.*, p. 62.

[817] *Ibid.*, citing Lj. Zotović, p. 59.

[818] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p.88. Italics added.

[819] Bojana Plemić, *ibid.*, p. 65-8.

[820] Bojana Plemić, *ibid.*, p. 61.

[821] See Chapter Four, text to note 2.

[822] F. Benoit, *Les mythes de l'outre-tombe*.

[823] Whitley Stokes, 'The Training of Cúchulainn', pp. 109–52.

[824] Myles Dillon, 'The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn', pp. 47-88.

[825] See page 105, text to note 463.

[826] Whitley Stokes, 'The Irish Ordeals', pp. 1-24.

[827] Note that boys who made light of the pain when caned at English-style boarding schools gained immense respect from the other boys.

[828] See page 163, text to note 685.

[829] Roger Vaillant, 'Epona-Rigatona', pp 190–205.

[830] Gian Biagio Conte, Joseph B. Solodow, *Latin Literature*.

[831] See page 153, text to note 652.

[832] Barbette Stanley Spaeth, citing Cicero (*Pro Balbus*, 55) in *The Roman Goddess Ceres*, pp. 104-5.

[833] Travel between Italy and Anatolia was frequent throughout much of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC, see e.g., Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, p. 152.

[834] Parmenides, Proem, 'On Nature', translated by Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, p. 26-7.

[835] Parmenides also referred explicitly to “Rightness” (Eunomia) as sending him on this road, and to Justice (Dike) as holding the keys to the gates that reached “right up into the heavens” and opened onto the “gaping chasm” of Hades. See Peter Kingsley, *ibid.*

[836] Peter Kingsley, *ibid.*



- [837] 'Oedipus at Colonus' (1547-55), Robert Fitzgerald (Transl.), *Sophocles I*, p. 214. Brackets added.
- [838] Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 26.
- [839] *Ibid.*
- [840] Karl Kerényi, citing Xenophon, *ibid.*, p. 122.
- [841] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 276.
- [842] 'Triptolemos', quoted in Burkert, *ibid.*, p. 289.
- [843] Peter Kingsley quoting Parmenides, in *Reality*, *ibid.*, pp. 26-7.
- [844] Plato, 'Symposium', in *The Portable Plato*, *ibid.*, p. 169.
- [845] Walter Burkert, *ibid.*
- [846] Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 52.
- [847] Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 53.
- [848] Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, pp. 49-55.
- [849] See e.g., the Lovatelli urn, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome.
- [850] Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, pp. 24-9. See also Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 286.
- [851] *Ibid.*, p. 546-7.
- [852] Purification of Heracles, sarcophagus relief from Torre Nova, Palazzo Spagna, Rome. See also Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 286.
- [853] Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 33.
- [854] From the Yorck Project compilation. Copyright by Zenodot Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, and licensed under the GNU Free Documentation License.
- [855] Karl Kerényi, *Dionysos*, p. 81.
- [856] Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 401. See also Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 57.
- [857] See e.g., Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 57.
- [858] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- [859] *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- [860] H G. Evelyn-White, 'Hymn to Demeter', in *Hesiod*, p. 212 *ff.*
- [861] Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*, p. 230.
- [862] See the terracotta relief, 'Heracles Prepared', Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome; and Kerényi's description in, *Eleusis*, p.58.
- [863] See Kerényi, *ibid.*
- [864] Translations vary slightly, but see e.g., Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 286; and Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 66.
- [865] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 288.
- [866] Hippolytos, *Refutation omnium haeresium* V 8 40; quoted in Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 92.
- [867] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, *ibid.*; see Chapter Four, text and note 78.
- [868] Homeric Hymn to Demeter, cited in Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 34.
- [869] Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, pp. 34-5.
- [870] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- [871] W. H. D. Rouse (Transl.), *Nonnus, Dionysiaca*, p. 562 *ff.* Brackets added for clarification.
- [872] Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, pp. 13-28; for the identification of Zeus and Hades, see p. 17.

- [873]Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 288.
- [874]Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 33.
- [875]Ibid., p. 70.
- [876]See e.g., Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 22.
- [877]Quoted from Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna*, p. 5. For her stories, see *ibid.* For An and Enlil's ultimate submission, see the 'Bull of Heaven' in N. K. Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; and Betty De Shong Meador, *Inanna*, p. 132.
- [878]See page 160, text to note 675.
- [879]Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *ibid.*, p. 5.
- [880]For Inanna, see 'The Descent of Inanna' in Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna*, p. 51 *ff*; for Epona, see the Pompeii fresco, Chapter Six.
- [881]M. Esther Harding, *Women's Mysteries*, pp. 29-30.
- [882]Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *ibid.*, pp. 12-4.
- [883]Ibid., pp. 20-6.
- [884]Ibid., p. 26.
- [885]Gregory Titelman, *Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings*.
- [886]See page 179, text to note 757.
- [887]See Betty De Shong Meador, *Inanna, Lady of Largest Heart*, pp. 123-4. Note that Sumerian literature contained a number of references to these rituals: see e.g., Åke Sjöberg and E. Bergman, *Texts from Cuneiform Sources*, pp. 223-6.
- [888]M. Esther Harding, *ibid* p.11.
- [889]See 'Nammu' in Gwendolyn Leick, *A Dictionary of Ancient Near Eastern Mythology*.
- [890]Illustration and photo by Ava Crabbe 2016. Redrawn from Nanno Marinatos. *Minoan Religion*, p. 151.
- [891]The drawing, now in the public domain, was made from a clay impression of the seal and published by Arthur Evans in the *Annual of the British School at Athens*, p. 29, fig. 9. The reproduction here has been rectified: the original shows the Goddess with only one breast. Since no other Minoan art depicts the Goddess or women as single-breasted, this was probably a result of damage to the seal.
- [892]For a useful survey, see Nanno Marinatos (2000), *The Goddess and the Warrior*.
- [893]Hesiod, Fragment 6, in H. C. Hamilton and W. Falconer, *The Geography of Strabo*, p. 471.
- [894]Jennifer Larson, *Greek Nymphs*, pp. 86-8. Italics added for emphasis.
- [895]Callimachus, *Hymn to Apollo*, 110; Scholiast to Theocritus, xv. 94; Scholiast to Euripides, *Hippolytus*, 72; cited in Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 442.
- [896]See page 202, text to note 852.
- [897]N. K. Sanders (1960), *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet I.
- [898]See page 202, text to note 851.
- [899]M. Esther Harding, *Women's Mysteries*, pp. 29-30.
- [900]Hesiod, Fragment 6.
- [901]Photo by Matthias Kabel, 2008. Used under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License.
- [902]Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 179.
- [903]Karl Kerényi, quoting Hippolytos in *Eleusis*, p. 92.
- [904]See the 'The Kingship in Heaven', and the Derveni Papyrus, both cited and discussed in Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis and Persepolis: Eastern contexts of Greek Culture*.
- [905]Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 161-2, and 165.



- [906] Kieth Aldrich, Apollodorus, *Library of Greek Mythology*, 2. 29.
- [907] W. H. D. Rouse, *Nonnus, Dionysiaca*, 1. 20 ff. and 14. 143 ff.
- [908] For Aeschylus see Winkler & Zeitlin, *Nothing to Do with Dionysos?*, p.66. For Euripides, see Henry Hart Milman, *Bacchae*, p.13.
- [909] W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Omerod, *Pausanias, Description of Greece*, 2. 37. 6
- [910] Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 75.
- [911] *Ibid.*, p. 57. See also Walter Burkert, citing Theophrastus in *Greek Religion*, p. 286.
- [912] Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos*, pp.310-11.
- [913] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 166.
- [914] *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- [915] *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- [916] See e.g., Betty De Shong Meador, *Inanna, Lady of Largest Heart*, pp. 91-101.
- [917] See page 135, text to note 576.
- [918] *Ibid.*, text to notes 578 to 580.
- [919] Sherman E. Johnson, 'A Sabazios Inscription from Sardis', in Jacob Neusner, *Religions in Antiquity*, p. 544.
- [920] *Ibid.* See also J. C. Vermeule, 'An Equestrian Statue of Zeus', pp. 69-76.
- [921] Sherman E. Johnson, 'A Sabazios Inscription from Sardis', *ibid.*
- [922] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 153.
- [923] Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos*, p. 82.
- [924] *Ibid.*, p. 81 and 84-5.
- [925] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- [926] *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- [927] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 162.
- [928] See e.g., Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos*, pp. 110-11.
- [929] See e.g., Geraldine Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology*, p. 79.
- [930] Betty De Shong Meador, *Inanna*, p. 123.
- [931] Diane Wolkstein & Samuel Noah Kramer, *ibid.*, p. 12.
- [932] *Ibid.*, pp. 14-9.
- [933] *Ibid.*, pp. 52-73, and 158.
- [934] Diane Wolkstein & Samuel Noah Kramer, *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- [935] *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- [936] *Ibid.*, pp. 156-7.
- [937] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- [938] H. Jordan, 'De genii et Eponae picturis pompeianis nuper detectis', p. 47 ff. Photo now in the public domain.
- [939] Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p.148, text and note 129; and p. 136.
- [940] *Ibid.*, p. 147 ff; italics in the original.
- [941] For the colours used in the original fresco, see R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, p. 83.
- [942] See 'Rose', Chapter Two.
- [943] Robert Graves, *Lucius Apuleius, The Golden Ass*, pp. 51 & 184.
- [944] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, p. 164.

- [945] For a survey of examples worldwide, see James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Vol. II, pp. 67-89.
- [946] Robert Graves, *ibid.*, pp. 19i-5.
- [947] *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- [948] *Ibid.*, p. 197. Note that although Apuleius did not name Dionysos, the implication is clear when he describes the priest of Osiris as “bearing staffs intertwined with ivy and vine-shoots”.
- [949] M. Esther Harding, *Women's Mysteries*, p. 29-30. Italics added for emphasis.
- [950] See 'Literature', Nantonos & Ceffyl, Epona.net.
- [951] N. Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilization*, p. 614 ff.
- [952] The two temples destroyed were the Musaeum and the Serapium. However, it is unclear exactly how many books remained in the Library at this point. Julius Caesar had already accidentally burned part of it in 48 BC, and Aurelian managed to destroy at least some of the main Library when he took the city in 270 – 275 AD.
- [953] See 'Hypatia', Patricia F. O'Grady, *Meet the Philosophers of Ancient Greece*.
- [954] Ancient writings did survive in the Eastern Empire (ruled from Constantinople, now Istanbul). Many of these were translated into Arabic and preserved in the Arab world. Latin translations of these writings, however, did not start to reappear in Europe until after the Crusades in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- [955] Norman F. Cantor, *Antiquity*; *ibid.*, p. 43.
- [956] For a good general account, see Frederick Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, pp. 463-76.
- [957] John Collis, *The Celts: Origins, Myths and Inventions*, p. 125.
- [958] A. Weir, *Early Ireland, A Field Guide*, p.151.
- [959] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, pp. 11-4.
- [960] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, pp. 76-7.
- [961] See also the *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, which drew from the *Annals of Ulster AD 431 to AD 1540*.
- [962] John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, p.1132
- [963] See 'Mach', Alexander MacBain, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*.
- [964] See page 106, text to note 464.
- [965] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p.76.
- [966] *Ibid.*, pp. 76-7.
- [967] *Ibid.*
- [968] *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- [969] See 'macha', *Dictionary of the Irish Language*.
- [970] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 77.
- [971] *Ibid.*, citing Condren, Hennessy, de Vries, Ross, Killeen, Mac Cana, Clark and Herbert.
- [972] Carl McColman & Kathryn Hinds, *Magic of the Celtic Gods and Goddesses*, p. 68.
- [973] See entries for the separate words, *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, *ibid.*
- [974] See 'Raven', Chapter Two.
- [975] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 76.
- [976] See 'macha', *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, *ibid.*
- [977] W. M. Hennessy, 'The Ancient Irish Goddess of War', pp. 32–37.
- [978] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddess*, p. 43.
- [979] See 'mesrad', *Dictionary of the Irish Language*,

- [980] See R.A.S. Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, Part 1-5; Elizabeth A. Gray, *Cath Maige Tuired*, section 167.
- [981] James MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic mythology*, pp. 335–336.
- [982] *Topographica Hibernica* III, cited in Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 51.
- [983] Jefferey Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, p. 12.
- [984] Chris Lynn (2003), *Navan Fort: Archaeology and Myth*, Wordwell Books.
- [985] In the story, *Áed Rúad* is made a descendant of Míl Espáine...the Gaelic “newcomers” to Ireland from Iberia. However, this was almost certainly an assertion of dynastic dominance after the Connachta had conquered the Ulaid and taken *Emhain Macha*. See Eoin MacNeill, 'Early Irish Population Groups', pp. 59–114
- [986] See 'Fire, Flame', Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*.
- [987] F. Marian McNeill, *The Silver Bough*, Vol. 3, pp.11–46.
- [988] An alternative (and more accurate) interpretation of the phrase used to describe *Fergus Casfiachlach*, one of the three Ulaid princes that defended Tara against *Cormac mac Airt* at the Battle of Crinna: see the Book of Fermoy, Royal Irish Academy; and John Carey, 'Compilations of lore and legend', pp. 17-31.
- [989] “Mabinogi” is the Welsh term used in the original manuscripts. “Mabinogion”, which is not Welsh, was a title popularized by Lady Charlotte Guest in her 1838-49 translation. See Gantz, *ibid.*, p. 31.
- [990] Jefferey Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, p. 21.
- [991] See e.g., Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p.50-1; Patrick K. Ford, *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales*, pp. 4-6; and Will Parker, *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (footnote to text describing the gait of Rhiannon's horse).
- [992] Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain*, p. 366. But see Max Dashu, A Review of Ronald Hutton's 'The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles'.
- [993] Jefferey Gantz, *ibid.*, p. 18.
- [994] W. J. Gruffudd, *Rhiannon*.
- [995] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, *ibid.*
- [996] Sioned Davies, *The Mabinogion*, p. 231.
- [997] Patrick K. Ford, *ibid.*.
- [998] *Ibid.*, pp. 10 and 13-20.
- [999] Jefferey Gantz, p. 52.
- [1000] *Ibid.*, pp. 52-4.
- [1001] Jefferey Gantz, pp. 60-1.
- [1002] Miranda Green, *Celtic Goddesses*, p. 50.
- [1003] Miranda Green, *ibid.*, citing W. J. Gruffudd, *Rhiannon*, and C. Mathews, *Mabon and the Mysteries of Britain*.
- [1004] John Davies (1994), *A History of Wales*, pp. 5-6.
- [1005] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p.174.
- [1006] *Ibid.*
- [1007] John Davies, *A History of Wales*, pp. 17,19, 43.
- [1008] Jefferey Gantz, p. 24.
- [1009] For “exaltation of femininity”, see Roger Boase & Diane Bornstein, 'Courtly Love', in Joseph Strayer *et al*, *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, pp. 667–668. For “homage and deference”, see Amy Kelly, 'Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Courts of Love', *Speculum*, pp. 3-19.

- [1010] Photo by Heidelberg University Library, from the Codex Manesse. Used under creative commons license CC-BY-SA 3.0.
- [1011] For an overview see Roger Boase, *The Origin & Meaning of Courtly Love*. But see also H.A. Kelly's review of this book, *Speculum*, pp. 338-342.
- [1012] J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, *Histoire de la littérature du Midi de l' Europe*, p. 65; quoted in Boase, *The Origin & Meaning of Courtly Love*, p. 20.
- [1013] August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *Observations sur la langue et la littérature provençal*, p.67; quoted in Boase, *ibid.*, p. 20.
- [1014] Etienne-Jean Delécluze, *Dante Alighieri, ou la poésie amoureuse*, p. 66; quoted in Boase, *ibid.*, p. 21.
- [1015] Cornelius Agrippa, *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of Women*.
- [1016] Violet Paget, *Euphorion*, p.128; quoted in Boase, *ibid.*, pp. 24-5. Italics added for emphasis.
- [1017] Myrrha Lot-Borodine, *Sur les origines et les fins du service d'amour*, p. 222-3; quoted in Boase, *ibid.*, p. 28-9.
- [1018] Amy Kelly, 'Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Courts of Love', *ibid.*, pp. 3-19. Kelly was contrasting Ovid with Capellanus' *Tractatus de Amore et de Amoris Remedio*.
- [1019] John F. Benton, *Culture, Power and Personality in Medieval France*, p. 32, note 98.
- [1020] Michael R. Evans, *Inventing Eleanor*, p. 61; quoting June Hall McCash and comparing Kelly's work with Marion Mead's feminist biography of Eleanor.
- [1021] Note however, that feminists have also criticized courtly love as obscuring the patriarchal character of Western culture. See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 37.
- [1022] Thomas Warton, 'On the origin of romantic fiction into Europe' (*History of English Poetry*), pp. 66-7; Boase, *ibid.*, p. 15.
- [1023] *Lancelot du Lac: Le Conte de la Charrette*, 1883, p. 518; quoted in Boase, *ibid.* pp. 23-4.
- [1024] Quoted in Herbert Moller, 'The Meaning of Courtly Love', p. 43, text to note 18. Brackets added for clarification.
- [1025] Francis X. Newman (Ed.) (1968), *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, p. vii.
- [1026] Quoted in Herbert Moller, 'The Meaning of Courtly Love', *ibid.*, p. 42.
- [1027] *Ibid.*, citing A.J. Denomy, p. 40.
- [1028] Gaston Paris, *ibid.*
- [1029] A. N. Spungen, personal communication, 2015.
- [1030] Herbert Moller, 'The Meaning of Courtly Love', *ibid.*, p. 43, text to note 19.
- [1031] Joseph Bedier, *Les Fetes de mai et les commencements de la poésie lyrique au Moyen Age*, p.172 (une école nécessaire d'honneur, qui fait valoir l'amant et transforme les vilains en courtois...un servage volontaire qui recèle un pouvoir ennoblissant, et fait consister dans la souffrance la dignité et la beauté de la passion). Quoted in Boase, *ibid.*, p. 25.
- [1032] Amy Kelly, *ibid.*, pp. 10-12.
- [1033] T. F. Hoad, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, p. 74.
- [1034] Jean Flori, *La Chevalerie*, p. 2.
- [1035] Maurice Keen, *Chivalry*, p.1.
- [1036] See David Crouch. *The Birth of Nobility*, pp. 53-79.
- [1037] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, p. 88.
- [1038] Charles Mills, *The history of chivalry*, p. 237.
- [1039] See Jubb, *A Critical Edition of the Estoires d' Outremer*, p. 110; and K. Busby, *Raoul de Hodec*, p. 86-7. Both cited in Carole Hildenbrand, 'The Evolution of the Saladin Legend in the West',

pp. 1-13.

[1040] Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love*, pp. 62-75.

[1041] Francois Pouillon, *Les deux vies d'Étienne Dinet, peintre en Islam*.

[1042] Roger Boase, *ibid.*, pp. 81-83 and 89-93.

[1043] The original crest shown above the shield is a reconstruction based on this author's own research over many years, as outlined in his privately circulated essay *The MacKenzies: The Womb of the Clan and its Earliest Arms*, 2012.

[1044] Sir Ian Moncreiff, *The Highland Clans*, p. 152.

[1045] Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, 'The Cult of the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages', in Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.

[1046] Roger Boase, *The Origin & Meaning of Courtly Love*, *ibid.*, pp.83-6.

[1047] *Ibid.*

[1048] Photo by Cancre, 2010. Used with permission under the Creative-Commons Attribution-Share Alike License; exposure and contrast increased, border added.

[1049] C. Goudineau and C. Peyre, *Bibracte et les Eduens*, cited under 'Distribution', Nantonos & Ceffyl, Epona.net.

[1050] Linda Seidel, *Legends in limestone: Lazarus, Gislebertus, and the Cathedral of Autun*.

[1051] See Chapter 4, 'The Anubis Caves', in Gloria Farley, *In Plain Sight*.

[1052] The results of this work were published by the Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications. However, while these papers have been cited below and are listed in the bibliography, a formal search for them by professional librarians was unsuccessful: they are simply listed as "unavailable".

[1053] Bart Torbert, President, Gloria Farley Publications Incorporated. Personal communication, May 2015.

[1054] See report in William McGlone and Phillip Leonard, *Ancient Celtic America*; and 'Fell's Ogam Decipherments Proved Correct', p. 9.

[1055] For photos and drawings see Gloria Farley, *In Plain Sight* and the website listed under Farley's name in the bibliography.

[1056] See page 136, text to notes 578 through 580.

[1057] Gillespie, Leonard, McGlone, and Polansky, 'The Archaeoastronomy of the Anubis Caves'.

[1058] See Chapter 4, 'The Observation', in Gloria Farley, *In Plain Sight*. Drawings and photos can be viewed at the web address listed in the Bibliography.

[1059] C. Keeler and G. Farley, 'The Anubis Panel: Mythological Themes & Correlations', p. 23.

[1060] See page 153, text to note 656 *ff.*

[1061] See page 35, text to note 100.

[1062] Barry Fell, '*Parietal Inscriptions of the Anubis Caves*', 16 pp. Italics added for emphasis.

[1063] See Chapter 4, 'The Observation', Gloria Farley, *In Plain Sight*.

[1064] See Chapter 4, 'Epona', *Ibid*; and Barry Fell, '*Parietal Inscriptions of the Anubis Caves*', *ibid.*

[1065] See Gloria Farley, *ibid.*

[1066] See e.g., photo of Celtic "Sol Invictus", page 137, text to note 583.

[1067] See 'Belenus', in John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture*.

[1068] See Chapter 4, 'Decipherments by Fell', Gloria Farley, *ibid.*

[1069] See page 140, text to note 594.

[1070] i.e., the instruction to "enact at sunset the rites of Bel"; *ibid.*

[1071] See H.J.W. Drijvers, 'De Matre Inter Leones Sedentes', in Margreet B. de Boer and T.A. Eldridge, *Hommages a Maarten J. Vermaseren*, p. 351.

- [1072] Frank Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, p. 47.
- [1073] George Hart, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, p. 6.
- [1074] See page 140, text to note 594.
- [1075] See Gloria Farley, website
- [1076] George Hart, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, pp. 179–182.
- [1077] Ibid.
- [1078] See the drawing by Gloria Farley, website.
- [1079] Drawing and photo by Jeff Dahl, 2007, based on New Kingdom tomb paintings. Cropped and used with permission under the GNU Free Documentation License, version 1.2.
- [1080] For an account of this change, see Voegelin, Eric (auth.) and Hogan, Maurice P. (ed.), *Order and History*, pp. 127-35.
- [1081] Leprohon, Ronald J., 'The Offering Formula in the First Intermediate period', pp.163–64.
- [1082] See Chapter 4, 'Decipherments by Fell', Gloria Farley, *ibid.*
- [1083] See 'Scourge', Chapter Two; and page 193, text to note 812.
- [1084] Plutarch, 'Isis and Osiris', see Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch, Moralia*, Vol. V.
- [1085] See 'Mercury', Chapter Six.
- [1086] See 'Dog', Chapter Two.
- [1087] George Hart, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*, pp. 179–182
- [1088] See 'Isis and Osiris' in Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch, Moralia*, *ibid.*
- [1089] See Chapter 4, 'Epona', Gloria Farley, *ibid.*
- [1090] A epithet given to her by Marija Gimbutas: see *The Living Goddesses*, p. 29.
- [1091] From Kilpeck Church in Herefordshire, England. Photo by Pryderi, 2006. Cropped and used with permission under the GNU Free Documentation License, version 1.2.
- [1092] Anthony Weir, James Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches*.
- [1093] See 'Origins', J. McMahon and J. Roberts, *The Sheela-na-Gigs of Ireland and Britain*.
- [1094] Marija Gimbutas: see *The Living Goddesses*, pp. 27-30.
- [1095] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- [1096] Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 65.
- [1097] From the Latin *cunabula* (root word “cuni”), see 'Vagina' in Hugh Rawson, *Dictionary of Euphemisms & Other Doubletalk*.
- [1098] Éamonn Kelly, *Sheela Na Gigs. Origins and Function*.
- [1099] See photo and drawing by Gloria Farley, *In Plain Site*, and website excerpt of Chapter 4.
- [1100] See Fell's translation, text to note 1070, above.
- [1101] See page 121, text to note 525.
- [1102] See 'Observe', *Online Etymological Dictionary*.
- [1103] See 'Queen of Heaven', Chapter Five.
- [1104] Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Vol. I, p. 88. Note that Graves is notorious for ungrounded speculation, but in this case was drawing from the myth of Callisto and the constellation of Ursa Major, which contains the North Star around which all other stars seem to revolve.
- [1105] Strictly speaking, Samhain belonged to the Gaelic year (Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Mann). The Gauls' calendar began with the month of *Samonios*, which scholars since the 1920's have identified with June-July: see Eóin MacNeill, 'On the notation and chronology of the Calendar of Coligny', pp.1–67; and Jean-Michel Le Contel and Paul Verdier, *Un calendrier celtique: le calendrier gaulois de Coligny*.



- [1106] See Sir John Rhys, *Lectures*, p. 360; and Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Wordsworth reprint 1993, pp. 633-4.
- [1107] For an informed review, see 'A New Orthodoxy Concerning Samhain', *The Celtic Fire Festivals*, Caer Australis.
- [1108] See 'The Wooing Of Emer' in Steve Eddy & Claire Hamilton, *Timeless Wisdom of the Celts*. Note that Emer explicitly mentions all four of the cross-quarter Fire Festivals. Written between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the story was based on much older material that probably included Iron Age elements: see [Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson](#), 'The Oldest Irish Tradition: a Window on the Iron Age', pp. 1-64.
- [1109] See 'The Charge of the Goddess' in Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*, pp.61-2.
- [1110] Robert Graves, *Lucius Apuleius, The Golden Ass*, p. 183.
- [1111] See page 186, text to note 776 ff.
- [1112] From the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> days of Boedromion, see e.g., Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 8.
- [1113] On the 7<sup>th</sup> of Pyanepsion. See *ibid.*, pp. 149-50.
- [1114] From the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of Pyanepsion. See Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 121 ff.
- [1115] Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena*, *ibid.*
- [1116] Robert Hannah, *Time in Antiquity*, pp. 53 and 132. Brackets added to maintain textual congruity, and for clarity.
- [1117] Robert Powell, 'The Babylonian Zodiac'.
- [1118] *Ibid.*
- [1119] A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 493.
- [1120] See 'The Scorpion', Gavin White, *Babylonian Star-Lore*.
- [1121] See page 20, text to note 27 ff.
- [1122] Alice Beck Kehoe (2003), 'The Fringe of American Archaeology', pp. 19–36.
- [1123] Garrett G. Fagan, *Archaeological Fantasies*, p. 405.
- [1124] See 'The Wiccan Revival', Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, pp. 41-93.
- [1125] Quoted in Margot Adler, *ibid.*, p. 59. Italics added for emphasis.
- [1126] See e.g., 'Principles, Rituals and Beliefs of Modern Witchcraft', in Janet and Stewart Farrar, *A Witches' Bible*, p. 22.
- [1127] Israel Regardie, *What You Should Know About the Golden Dawn*, p. 33.
- [1128] See e.g., W. Wynn Westcott, R. A. Gilbert, *The Complete Golden Dawn Cipher Manuscript*.
- [1129] Pat Zalewski, 'Kabbalah of the Golden Dawn', p.123.
- [1130] See e.g., 'Liber 777' in Aleister Crowley, *777 and other Qabalistic writings of Aleister Crowley*.
- [1131] See e.g., R. A. Gilbert, *Golden Dawn Companion*. Aquarian Press, 1986.
- [1132] See 'Curriculum', Ancient Order of Druids in America website.
- [1133] Arthur Edward Waite, *A New Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry*, Vol. I, p. 165.
- [1134] Hoig, Stan, 'Boomer Movement', in Dianna Everett (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*.
- [1135] Section heading used in fond memory of John Lennon's wry humour in his book by this title.
- [1136] Richard Flint, 'What They Never Told You about the Coronado Expedition', pp. 203-217.
- [1137] Ian Haynes, *Blood of the Provinces*, p. 220.
- [1138] See map in Francisco Marco Simón, *ibid.*, p. 302.

- [1139] Roger Collins, 'Spain: The Northern Kingdoms and the Basques 711-910', in Rosamond McKitterick, *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, p. 289.
- [1140] Aubrey de Selincourt, *Herodotus, The Histories*, pp. 333-4.
- [1141] I have not been able to find the original sources for these comments, but see Michael Brett and Elizabeth Fentress, *The Berbers*.
- [1142] *Libri contra Symmachum* 2: 1005-1011 and *De correctione rusticorum* 8, cited in Francisco Marco Simón, 'Religion and Religious Practices of the Ancient Celts of the Iberian Peninsula', pp. 287-345.
- [1143] J.F.C. Fuller, *Julius Caesar: Man, Soldier, and Tyrant*, p. 28.
- [1144] Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 29.35.8; see B.O. Foster, *The History of Early Rome*.
- [1145] V. É. Espérandieu, *Recueil général des bas-reliefs de la Gaule romaine*, Imprimerie nationale.
- [1146] L.J. Royo *et al*, 'The Origins of Iberian Horses Assessed via Mitochondrial DNA', *Journal of Heredity*, pp. 663–669.
- [1147] See page 254, especially text from note 1048 *ff*.
- [1148] Woodard, John *et al*, 'Medieval Logistics as Applied to the Classes of Quartermaster Supply'.
- [1149] Note that Belenus was also known in Celtic Spain. See e.g., 'Belenus', in John T. Koch, (2006). *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*.
- [1150] G. Leff and J. North, 'The Faculty of Arts', in W. Rugg, *A History of the University in Europe*.
- [1151] If he were a member of the Order of Santiago however, he may have been educated at Salamanca where the Order maintained a college. See e.g., 'Order of Santiago', Charles Herbermann, *Catholic Encyclopaedia*.
- [1152] See e.g., Hoskin and Gingerich, 'Medieval Latin Astronomy', in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Astronomy*, pp. 72 *ff*; or Olaf Pedersen, *Early Physics and Astronomy, A Historical Introduction*, pp. 219 *ff*.
- [1153] See e.g., Patricia Skinner, 'Review of Roger French & Andrew Cunningham', *Medieval History*, pp. 507–509.
- [1154] See Chapter 4, 'Decipherments by Fell', Gloria Farley, *ibid*.
- [1155] Guy de la Bédoyère, *Eagles over Britannia: the Roman Army in Britain*, p. 241.
- [1156] See 'Britonia', in John T. Koch, *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, p. 291.
- [1157] Micheline Walsh, 'The Military Order of St Patrick', in *Seanchas Ardmacha*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (1979), p. 279.
- [1158] See Antonio Ricardo, 'Pragmatica on the ten Days of the Year', John Carter Brown Library, Library of Congress, imprinted in Mexico City in 1584. <http://www.wdl.org/en/item/2837/>
- [1159] An influence that can be seen e.g., in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320); in the design of the *Tarot* (1420-30); and in Agrippa's *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Feminine Gender* (women are preeminent by "...divine right and the laws of nature...").
- [1160] Characterizing Francis Bacon's imagery in 'Novum Organum' (1620), in Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, p. 168.
- [1161] Characterizing Francis Bacon, in Jerome A. Anderson, 'The Arraignment of Philosophy', p. 120.
- [1162] G. Cattaneo, *Equejade, monumento antico de bronzo del Museo nazionale ungherese considerato ne' suoi rapporti coll' antichità figurata*.
- [1163] *Faust* II, chorus at the close of Act V.
- [1164] *Das Mutterrecht: eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Mother Right: an investigation of the religious and juridical character of matriarchy in the Ancient World).



- [1165] See *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family*.
- [1166] See *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.
- [1167] See page 273, text to note 1131.
- [1168] Pat Zalewski (1993), *Kabbalah of the Golden Dawn*, *ibid*.
- [1169] S. Reinach (1895), *Épona la déesse Gauloise des chevaux*, Leroux; and see his series of articles in *Revue archéologique*.
- [1170] Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, *passim*.
- [1171] See *Mütter und Amazone: ein Umriss weiblicher Reiche* (Mothers & Amazons).
- [1172] É. Thévenot, (1949) 'Les monuments et le culte d'Épona chez les éduens', pp. 385-400; & P. Lambrechts (1950) 'Épone et les Matres', pp. 103-112.
- [1173] R. Magnen and E. Thévenot, *Épona: déesse Gauloise des chevaux protectrice des cavaliers*.
- [1174] Marija Gimbutas, *The Prehistory of Eastern Europe*, Part I.
- [1175] Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess*.
- [1176] P. Ucko, *Anthropomorphic figurines of predynastic Egypt and neolithic Crete*.
- [1177] A. Fleming, 'The Myth of the Mother Goddess', *World Archaeology*, pp. 247-261.
- [1178] Michael Balter, *The Goddess and the Bull: Çatalhöyük*.
- [1179] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, p. 34.
- [1180] K. Linduff, 'Epona: a Celt among the Romans', pp. 817-837.
- [1181] L. S. Oaks, 'The Goddess Epona: concepts of sovereignty in a changing landscape', pp. 77-84.
- [1182] Miranda Green, *The Gods of the Celts*, *ibid*.
- [1183] Ralph Stein (1967), *The Automobile Book*, Paul Hamlyn Ltd.
- [1184] The number varies from day to day as websites come and go.
- [1185] Ann Heighington, *personal communication*, December 2014.
- [1186] The official Epona Trust website, <http://www.eponatrust.org>
- [1187] *Ibid*.
- [1188] The Epona Institute website, <http://www.epona-institute.org>
- [1189] Monique Craig, *personal communication*, November 2014.
- [1190] The Epona website, <http://www.epona.hu>
- [1191] Oszkar Rado & Robert Sivo, Kincsem, Aranyos, Imperial és a többiek ... A lovassport krónikája.
- [1192] Béla Borsó, *personal communication*, December 2014.
- [1193] Rodolfo Oliveira, *personal communication*, December 2014.
- [1194] Linda Kohanov, *personal communication*, February 2015.
- [1195] See <http://eponaquest.com/about>.
- [1196] Linda Kohanov, see excerpts from *The Tao of Equus; Riding Between the Worlds; Way of the Horse*; & *The Power of the Herd*, respectively. Brackets added.
- [1197] See <http://eponaquest.com/a-tribute-to-tabula-rasa>. Brackets added.
- [1198] See page 30, text to notes 76 and 77.
- [1199] See page 189, text to notes 792 and 793.
- [1200] E.g., see page 84, text to notes 337 and 338; and page 191, text to notes 808 and 809.
- [1201] See 'Epona as Mother' and 'Epona as Healer', Chapter Four.
- [1202] See page 70, text to note 283.

- [1203] See Chapter Five.
- [1204] See 'Nymph-like Maiden, Chapter Four.
- [1205] See 'Mysteries of the Mistress', Chapter Eight.
- [1206] See page 202, text to note 85.
- [1207] See Chapter Three.
- [1208] The idea that men and women have different core “essences” that cannot be altered by time or environment. For a brief review, see Ellen T. Armour, 'Essentialism', in Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theology*.
- [1209] Janet & Stewart Farrar, 'Principles, Rituals and Beliefs of Modern Witchcraft', *A Witches' Bible*, pp. 58-9 and 263.
- [1210] See page 179, text to note 755; and Chapter Nine, *passim*.
- [1211] The diagram was based on a secret arrangement of the Tarot hinted at (briefly) by A. E. Waite in his 1896 introduction to the English translation of Papus, *Le Tarot des Bohémiens*; and again (in depth) in his own book, *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*.
- [1212] See Alexander Wilder, *Theurgia*, 4: para v.
- [1213] See page 20, text to note 23.
- [1214] Although fundamentally different from BDSM in crucial ways, these observations formed an extremely interesting parallel to the altered states of consciousness described by Brad Sagarin, Ph.D., 'The Surprising Psychology of BDSM'. Many thanks to Andrea Hess for drawing my attention to the article so synchronously.
- [1215] Kristal Garcia, *Loving and Celebrating Men* (forthcoming). Personal communication, March, 2015.
- [1216] See M. Esther Harding, *Women's Mysteries*, p. 29-30; and Chapter Nine, text to note 74.
- [1217] See page 201, text to note 845.
- [1218] Alyssa N. Spungen, 'To Stand Amongst You', Jan. 28, 2015. Used with permission and grateful thanks.