

A Critical Analysis of the ‘Celtic’ Deity Epona Considering Iconographic, Epigraphic and Archaeological Evidence from Pre-Roman, Roman and Medieval Sources.

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This essay will attempt a critical analysis of the different types of evidence surrounding the ‘Celtic’ goddess of Epona. Firstly, it will provide a brief overview of the deity in question followed by an exploration of a selection of sources, within the reasonable constraints of an essay of this length, that symbolise the divinity. These will be chosen from the pre-Roman Iron age, the Roman period and finally relevant sources from the more recent medieval period. In all cases evidence of an archaeological, epigraphical and iconographic nature will be considered with examples taken from across the Celtic speaking lands of Gaul and Britain. These will be critically evaluated in a balanced manner to distinguish whether it is possible to generate an accurate representation of the identity, nature and function of this being in pre-Roman times.

The name ‘Epona’ is Celtic in origin and according to J.T Koch it is specifically Gallo-Brittonic in nature.¹ The name derives from the Gaulish word for ‘horse’² or ‘horse goddess.’³ Epona is ‘the most abundantly attested Celtic deity of the Roman empire’⁴ and appears widely across the Celtic speaking world in various inscriptions, sculptures and statues and would also appear to survive into early medieval Celtic literature with the figures of Rhiannon and Macha in Welsh and Irish literature often associated with the deity.⁵ The Goddess is inexorably linked with equine symbolism and is often depicted riding a horse sideways. Epona’s cult appears to be most widely attested in the central and eastern regions of what was Gaul and also the Rhineland and northern Roman Britain.⁶

Evidence for the Goddess from a pre-Roman period is scarce, and although the name is Gaulish in origin there are no inscriptions known that have been found using this language containing Epona material.⁷ Whilst at first glance this may seem surprising given the undeniable fact that the name is Celtic in origin, the reality is that written evidence for Celtic society as a whole is scant from this time. This is alluded to by Caesar in his *de bello Gallico* where he notes the Druid’s unwillingness to commit matters to writing.⁸ Likewise, the archaeological evidence for the Goddess from this period is also sadly lacking. At Uffington⁹ in Britain the white chalk horse figure carved into the hillside may well be a representation of a related cult in pre-Roman Britain¹⁰ though this is impossible to prove with any certainty. Another intriguing example of archaeological horse imagery from a pre-Roman time is the

¹ J. T. Koch ‘Epona’ in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By J. T. Koch, (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) p.707.

² M. Green, *Dictionary Of Celtic Myth And Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd 1992) p.90.

³ Koch, ‘Celtic Culture’ p.707.

⁴ J. T. Koch ‘Epona’ in *The Celts: History, Life And Culture*, ed. By J. T. Koch, (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2012) Vol 1, p.325.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Koch, ‘Epona’, *Celtic Culture* p.707.

⁷ Nantonos & Ceffyl, *Inscriptions*, Epona.net, <<http://www.epona.net/inscriptions.html>> Accessed [11/5/21].

⁸ J.Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 6.14.

⁹ M.Hinterkörner, ‘Uffington, White Horse Of’ in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. By J. T. Koch, (Santa Barbara, Denver and Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2006) pp.1701-1702.

¹⁰ Koch, ‘Epona’ *The Celts*, p.325.

Pegasus or Epona stone recovered from the Iron age hill fort site of Old Oswestry.¹¹ Although these examples and others can show a definite Celtic affinity with the horse, it is tenuous to make a direct link from these to the cult of Epona or to her as an outright Celtic Goddess. Nevertheless, it is equally impossible to prove that this is not the case.

Although the evidence for the deity in pre-Roman times is somewhat lacking or vague in interpretation to Epona, this is certainly not the same as we head into Roman times. Epona appears in classical writings, being named in the works *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, *The Octavius* by Minucius Felix and *Satires* by Juvenal amongst others.¹² All three of these independent sources make mention of Epona by name in relation to horses or stables and show that the cult of Epona was ‘sufficiently well known’¹³ at a ‘second century date.’¹⁴

As well as the classical literature, Epona is also attestable in Roman times through the large amount of sculptures recovered and it would appear that the cult of Epona was ‘richly visual.’¹⁵ Hot spots for this material are seen in ‘the area in and around modern Bourgogne’ which was in the territory of the Aedui, a known Gaulish ally of Rome.¹⁶ ‘The Moselle valley’¹⁷ which was in the land of the Treveri and the ‘easternmost centre encompasses the lime fortifications’¹⁸ on the Rhine and Danube built by Rome. In certain locations the imagery differs to others, for example, in areas of Burgundy a foal of Epona’s horse is often depicted and in evidence from Germany and Britain she is often seen either between horses or amidst a group of horses.¹⁹ The examples of these statues are too numerous to list in an essay of this length but some examples include ‘3rd-century CE stele depicting Epona, from Freyming; Musée Lorraine, Nancy’²⁰, ‘Epona, ‘hovering’ over a horse, with a sleeping foal underneath... an exceptional depiction (from/de/von: Allerey, Musée Dijon’²¹ and ‘the horse-goddess Epona, carrying fruit or bread from Dalheim, Luxembourg.’²²

Some of the imagery of Epona is accompanied by inscriptions that are mostly in Latin but sometimes, to a lesser extent in Greek.²³ Dedications in writing is something that was brought to Gaul from Rome, so this is somewhat unsurprising.²⁴ The inscriptions, many of which appear on Roman or Romano-Celtic altars often see Epona mentioned alongside other Gods such as the Auchendavy inscription²⁵, which is the most northerly found to date. This piece of

¹¹G. Nash, The Pegasus Stone: Oswestry, <<http://oldoswestryhillfort.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-Pegasus-Stone.pdf>> Accessed [10/05/21].

¹² Nantonos & Ceyffyl, ‘Epona In Classical Literature’ <<http://www.epona.net/literature.html>> [Accessed 11/5/21].

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Koch, ‘Epona’, ‘*Celtic Culture*’ p.708.

¹⁶ C. Bullis, ‘Transcending Borders: An Analysis Of Epona Worship Cross-Culturally And Her Roman Adoption’

<https://www.academia.edu/13499309/Transcending_Borders_An_Analysis_of_Epona_Worship_Cross_Culturally_and_her_Roman_Adoption> [Accessed 11/5/21].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Green, *Dictionary Of Celtic*, p.91.

²⁰ R. Haussler ‘Epona’ <<https://ralphhaussler.weebly.com/epona.html>> [Accessed 12/05/21]

²¹ Ibid.

²² Green dictionary p.93.

²³ Koch, ‘Epona’ *Celtic Culture*, p.707.

²⁴ Epona.net ‘*Inscriptions*’.

²⁵ Ibid.

epigraphic evidence sees Epona mentioned alongside Minerva, Mars and Hercules. Other examples, again too numerous to list in entirety include the Pförring inscription²⁶ and the Szentendre inscription.²⁷ All three of the example inscriptions given have military connotations associated with them, in particular with military cavalry units. This is also linked by the horse imagery and also the classical literature where Epona shrines are mentioned within stables. The view would seem to support R. Haussler's theory:

What seems to have happened is that there was no comparable 'horse deity' in the Graeco-Roman pantheon, and therefore people - perhaps at first soldiers in the Roman legions and auxiliaries as well as merchants and traders - appropriated the Celtic goddess. But they primarily focused on a very pragmatic function: protecting horses and travellers.²⁸

This practise by the Romans of incorporating or cherry-picking elements of a conquered society is not something that is unique to pan-Celtic deities²⁹ and can be seen as a way of pacifying a population as well as fulfilling needs of their own.

Epona also has links to Celtic medieval literatures especially the mythological figure of Rhiannon who predominantly appears in the *Mabinogi* in Welsh literature. Quite obvious similarities exist and there are many parallels³⁰ which have led some to believe that the Rhiannon portrayed in the literature is a left-over relic of Epona passed down through centuries of oral tradition before manifesting in the literatures themselves. While plausible, it is equally if not more likely that certain artifacts of the cult of Epona 'were still visible to wandering monks in the early medieval period, and may have been the inspiration for the story of Rhiannon.'³¹

In conclusion, we have examined an array of sources from the Pre-Roman and Roman era as well as briefly discussing the links to Celtic literature. Whilst there is evidence suggestive that the deity was recognised in the Pre-Roman Celtic world, the majority is linguistic in nature. Therefore, a case for Epona as a figure of worship in pre-Roman times can only be made to a certain point. Though it is highly likely that Epona was indeed a familiar figure to the Ancient Celts, no details of the nature of this relationship, the identity of, or the function that Epona played in daily life can be distinguished.

This is not the case in sources and evidence from the Roman period, where we find an abundance of material with connections to Epona. The earliest of this material dates from 79CE with the latest being 299-303CE.³² This places all of the known physical material in relation to Epona firmly within the period of the Roman empire. While this does not undermine the theory that Epona existed in the pre-Roman world, neither does it help to uphold it.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ R. Haussler 'Epona' <https://ralphhaussler.weebly.com/epona.html>

²⁹ Bullis, 'Transcending Borders' P.10

³⁰ R. Haussler 'Epona' <https://ralphhaussler.weebly.com/epona.html>

³¹ M. Aldhouse-Green, *The Celtic Myths: A Guide To The Ancient Gods And Legends* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd 2015) pp.54-55.

³² Epona.net 'Timeline'.

The following quote taken from R. Haussler would seem to sum up the issues that can arise when trying to link so called 'Celtic' deities to pre-Roman times when the overwhelming amount of evidence for them is dated to the Roman period:

These Celtic theonyms from Roman inscriptions can hardly shed any light on pre-Roman religious beliefs, nor do they indicate the unchanged survival of a pre-Roman cult. They show, above all, the beliefs of 2nd and 3rd century A.D. worshippers in the Roman provinces – the result of a long process of socio-religious change that was instigated and/or catalysed by the Roman conquest.³³

The quote leads us to a theory that is in conflict with the idea that Epona can be thought of as a pre-Roman deity. The idea being that during the period of Roman conquest and occupation complex changes within society were taking place. During these changes, the potential for the mixing of traditions, beliefs and customs between people is obvious and just like they do today fashions and trends come and go. Therefore, 'by the 2nd and 3rd century A.D. religious belief systems might have changed beyond recognition and the memory of pre-Roman mythology might have been lost'.³⁴

To summarise, the available pre-Roman evidence does not allow us to decipher any more than the fact that the name Epona is Gallo-Brittonic in origin. Any further assumptions than that find themselves to different extents in the realms of conjecture. It would seem from the fact that the vast majority of evidence coming from the Roman period that any customs predating this will have been either lost completely, changed over time or just became corrupted into a single mix of cultures and traditions.

³³ R.Haussler, How To Identify Celtic Religion(s) In Roman Britain And Gaul, in, *Divinidades indigenas em analise* ed. by J. d'Encarnacao, (Colmbra: Porto 2008) p.15.

³⁴ Ibid, p.54.

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