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Finding Epona

by Ceffyl Aedui

Acknowledgement: Many thanks to my mom, without whose love and support for horsey, archaeological, and spiritual endeavors, I never would have found my path. Not to mention the exquisite editorial support. Thanks, Mom.

My life has always revolved around horses. Horses are an extension of the divine present in my everyday life and part of my connection to Epona, the Celtic horse goddess. Touching my mare's neck is like touching a piece of history.

When I was in college and first exploring pagan paths, my grandmother gave me a copy of Moran Llewellyn's The Horse Goddess, which tells the story of a young woman named Epona in 8th century Europe. I was enthralled. Who was Epona? Hodges Library at the University of Knoxville at Tennessee only had one hit for "Epona": a recording by the Tanahill Weavers.¹

Since that time, my quest to learn about Epona has included research and personal gnosis, with the research inspiring everyday practice and intuition leading me to search for information in areas I might have otherwise overlooked. My emphasis has been on understanding Her by understanding Her cultural context.

Epona in Context

She has one of the richest material records of any Celtic deity: over 300 artifacts have been found with dates spanning the first to fourth century CE (Euskirchen).² These

artifacts tell the story of the people who honored Her: where they were, who they were, and how they viewed Epona. To understand Her—and to develop a relationship with any deity—I had to grasp the cultural context in which She originated.

With so many artifacts associated with Her, how do we know that Epona is Celtic in origin and not Roman, Germanic, or a merging of all three? The clue is in Her name. Epona comes from *epos*, the Gaulish word for horse (Magnen and Thevenot 9). The *-on* frequently appears in Gaulish theonyms, like Maonos and Rigantona, and can also be used in personal names (Nantonos and Ceffyl).³ The *-a* is the Gaulish female, singular ending (Lejeune 325). Epona translates to Divine Mare, or the horse goddess (Oaks "Epona in the Aeduan Landscape" 295).

Archaeologists also seek to understand Epona not by evaluating the artifacts by themselves but by looking at these artifacts in their full cultural context (Derks 80-81). In her 1986 article on Epona, Laura Oaks discusses how the horse goddess was important within the cultural landscape of the Aedui Celtic tribe (Oaks "The Goddess Epona: Concepts of Sovereignty in a Changing Landscape"). Their territory was situated between the Loire and Saône Rivers, in Saône-et-Loire, Côte-d'Or, and Nièvre departments in France. Oaks then puts the Aedui regional context in perspective with the larger Roman one.

Epona's Roman context, as defined by the time period and geographical distribution of archaeological finds, spans the Roman Empire. Inscriptions and artifacts have been found in Britannia, Gaul, Germania, Alexandria, Moesia, and even in the city of Rome itself (Mackintosh 29). Objects identified with Epona (see later section for a detailed list) are classified based upon how she is depicted, where the artifact was

found, material used (stone, clay, etc.), and whether or not an inscription was present. Usually she is depicted riding side-saddle upon a mare moving at a steady walk (mounted or side-saddle type, see figure 2), enthroned and surrounded by horses (Imperial type), or standing between two or more horses (Linduff 818). In a few rare instances, she has been shown with a cart or chariot (Oaks "Epona in the Aeduan Landscape" 296).⁴ She sometimes holds symbols of abundance or fertility, like a patera full of fruit or a cornucopia, has one hand on Her horse or holding reins, or is accompanied by a foal (Magnen and Thevenot 13-15). Equids shown with Her may be asses, mules, or horses (mostly mares or with a few artifacts depicting stallions).⁵

Sidebar: Epona Distribution

Epona artifacts are found across the Roman Empire, with a majority of the artifacts in the Western Roman Empire in three clusters (marked in light blue ovals on the map below). From left to right, the first grouping is found near the Saône and Loire rivers, in the Burgundy region in France. The second cluster is in Lorraine, France, and spreads northwest towards Luxemburg and the Rheinland-Pfalz region in Germany (Magnen and Thevenot 64). The third cluster, the oval on the right, is mostly in the Baden-Württemberg state in Germany along the *limes*, a line of military fortifications along the Germania Superior and Ratisia frontiers (Goldsworthy 154-56).⁶

The first cluster is largely in the lands of the Aedui, a Celtic tribe known for their horsemanship and horses. Gallic cavalry, including *equites* (cavalry or “knights”) from the Aedui, were some of the best the Roman Empire had seen (Hyland and Mann 21). The Gallic horse was also prized for use in cavalry, with Gallia Lugdunensis providing

more than twice the number of horses than any other province in 70 CE (Hyland and Mann Fig. 3; Cheesman). It makes sense that the Epona artifacts found within a region famous for both horsemen and horse breeding are frequently shown with a foal at side or suckling (Mackintosh 30; Linduff 823, 33; Oaks "Epona in the Aeduan Landscape" 317).



Figure 1. The three clusters of Epona artifacts are shown in blue ovals. Map originally from S. Reinach *Épona La Déesse Gauloise Des Chevaux* (53).

When Epona is mounted on a horse, She is usually sidesaddle: sitting aside or sideways on the horse, not mounted like a modern sidesaddle rider (see figure 2). The horse is always calm, either standing quietly or moving at a relaxed gait (Linduff 833). Cavalry horses, on the other hand, are depicted in more aggressive stances appropriate to combat (see figure 3). The first century tombstone of Dannicus, an officer from the Ala Gallorum Indiana auxiliary cavalry unit stationed at Corinium, shows the horse trampling an enemy (Connor 82).



Figure 2. Stela representing the Gallic goddess Epona, 3rd c. AD, from Freyming (Moselle), France. Musée Lorrain, Nancy. Photograph by Marsyas, Wikimedia Commons, 2 January 2014, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MULO-Epona_Freyming.jpg.



Figure 3. Tombstone of a Roman cavalry officer from Corinium, Cirencester England. Photograph by Ceffyl, 3 June 2013, Item 6.1 from the exhibit *All of the Queen's Horses*, International Museum of the Horse, Kentucky Horse Park.

Even though no evidence about Epona survives from the Iron Age, it is plausible that a cult dedicated to Epona existed in pre-Roman Gaul (Oaks "Epona in the Aeduan Landscape" 308). One of the earliest artifacts, a simple white pipe clay figurine of Epona found in Baux-Sainte-Croix, France (see figure 4), is dated to between 50-100 CE, well within the Roman period (Magnen and Thevenot #61; Reinach *Épona La Déesse Gauloise Des Chevaux* #10). If this artifact was made from a mold, then it implies that the cult was well enough established at the time to support a local industry producing religious icons (Nantonos and Ceffyl).



Figure 4. A line drawing of the pipe clay Baux-Sainte-Croix artifact showing Epona riding sidesaddle to the right. Drawing from S. Reinach *Épona La Déesse Gauloise Des Chevaux* (9 #10).

Two of the earliest inscriptions bearing Epona’s name are from a temple dedicated to Her at Entrains-sur-Nohain (Nièvre, Bourgogne, France), dated to the late first or early second centuries by stylistic criteria (Magnen and Thevenot 39 #97; Euskirchen 817 #250, 251; Sterckx 12 #15, 16; Boucher).⁷ The earlier of these inscriptions, no. 97 in Magnen and Thevenot’s 1953 catalog of Epona artifacts, is a temple dedication: “Consecrated to the August Goddess Epona, Marcellus, son of Maturus, in this place, freely at his own expense, gladly and deservedly fulfilled his vow” (Nantonos and Ceffyl; Magnen and Thevenot 39 #2).⁸

Romans accepted “barbarian divinities” based upon the notion that these deities were actually Roman deities in disguise. As the Romans brought new areas under their control, local cults were allowed to continue as long as rites were performed in an appropriate manner (Woolf 1-23; Derks 94-118). Kathryn Linduff, in her work “Epona : A Celt Among the Romans,” notes that:

With the advent of the Roman Celtic deities were first presented as sculptured images. The transformation involved a cross-pollination of ideas. The process

was based on Roman assurance that these barbarian divinities were mere members of their pantheon in disguise – *interpretatio romana* – and on the willingness of the indigenous population to accept Roman types whose nature included at least one function which paralleled their own previously aniconic deity – *interpretatio gallica*. The sculpted representations of Epona from an important and select group of monuments which document this process. (Linduff 818)

Linduff also points out that Epona is a Celtic Goddess who is represented in the manner of Greek and Roman goddesses and is found among the Roman legions (817). Epona artifacts found near military posts, like the artifacts found in the third cluster along the *limes*, are usually of the Imperial type, which is in a style consistent with other Roman deity portrayals (Lilley).

The evidence for Epona stops in the early to mid-fourth century (Mackintosh 37). This date range is consistent with the gradual banning of pagan religious practices and the rise of Christianity that began under Constantine (Scarre 216).

Artifact and Inscription Catalogs

The majority of content about Epona is in French and German,⁹ which corresponds to the locales where the majority of Her artifacts were found.¹⁰ Four catalogs of Epona artifacts and inscriptions have been published. Every catalog provides detailed information about known Eponas, including two or more of the following: a physical description, dimensions, provenance, date or date range (if known), and the current location (private collection, museum, etc.). Three of the catalogs are in French

and one is in German. To the best of my knowledge, no English-language catalog has been published.¹¹

Catalog Author	Catalog Title	Language	Year Published	Objects
Salomon Reinach	<i>Épona, La Déesse Gauloise des Chevaux</i>	French	1895 – 1903	119
René Magnen and Emile Thevenot	<i>Épona, Déesse Gauloise des Chevaux Protectrice des Cavaliers</i>	French	1953	281
Claude Sterckx	<i>Eléments de Cosmogonie Celtique</i>	French	1986	343
Marion Euskirchen	Epona	German	1993	302

In 1895, Salomon Reinach published the first catalog of Epona artifacts in *Revue Archéologique* and also as a stand-alone book entitled *Epona, La Déesse Gauloise des Chevaux*. Reinach describes and classifies the Epona artifacts based upon how the goddess is represented and then by country where the artifact was found. Between 1896 and 1912, Reinach continued to publish findings on Epona and other equestrian deities primarily in *Revue Archéologique*, except a 1912 article, “Clelia et Epona,” which was published in *Cultes, Mythes, et Religions*. Even after more than 100 years, Reinach’s work is still some of the most reliable and detailed.

The later catalogs built upon Reinach’s work and expanded it to reflect new findings. Magnen’s and Thevenot’s catalog is probably the best known. Sterckx’s brief work on Epona lists the most artifacts. Euskirchen’s comprehensive 1993 survey has extensive information on the artifacts, new dates with expanded listings, and descriptions. Euskirchen also provides useful cross-reference tables of find spots, stylistic representation, catalog numbers from Reinach, Magnen and Thevenot, and Espérandieu’s (Euskirchen 829-50).¹² While not specifically a catalog of Epona artifacts,

Émile Espérandieu's works provide a catalog of Gaulish artifacts and inscriptions (Espérandieu).

English Language Articles about Epona

While researching this paper, I searched for any new publications about Epona. The English language sources listed below have been published since the late 1970s. The full citations are included in Works Cited.¹³

- Johns, C. M. (1971). "A Roman bronze statuette of Epona."
- Linduff, K. (1979). "Epona: a Celt among the Romans."
- Oaks, L. S. (1986). The Goddess Epona: concepts of sovereignty in a changing landscape.
- Oaks, L. S. (1987). Epona in the Aeduan Landscape.
- Mackintosh, M. (1995). Epona (Chapter 4).
- Nantonos and Ceffyl (2007). "EPONA.net: a scholarly resource."
- Lilley, C. (2010). "Epona in Roman service: Military workshop of Epona."

Finding Resources and Finding Epona

Locating these references evolved my personal practice. My pagan practices started in a Wiccan tradition, where I initially learned about Epona. How I honored Her changed as I learned more about Her history. Research brought me closer to Her, which then changed how I honored Her.

To understand Her—and to develop a relationship with any deity—I had to grasp the cultural context in which She originated. I studied Gaulish, Roman, and Gallo-Roman culture. Historical accounts of and sources on Roman religious rites and practices

inspired my own (Warrior; Scheid and Lloyd). An ancient Gallo-Roman would be more familiar with the items on my altar than a modern Wiccan.

In my personal practices, I feel a kinship with the Aedui and their home areas of Bibracte and Augustdunum near Morvan, Burgundy, France (Guillaumet, Bertin and Melot). This kinship is based, in part, because the artifacts from the Aedui lands frequently include a foal (Thevenot). At Bibracte, the little chapel to Saint Martin stands on the location of the cella, the inner sanctum of the ancient Celtic fanum (see figure 5). On a late afternoon in October 2001, I stood at that spot and called to Epona. Her presence was vibrant—the hoof beats of Her horses echoed in the wind rustling the treetops.



Figure 5. The chapel of Saint Martin at the fanum at Bibracte, Mont Beuvray, Burgundy, France. Photograph by Ceffyl, October 2001, Bibracte Archaeological Park, Mont Beuvray, France.

That same presence was tangible in the museums in Dijon and Nemeurs. Thinking about Her while standing in front of the artifact case at the Musée

Archéologique in Dijon was like striking a tuning fork. I could feel Her presence resonate within the artifacts (see figure 6). I had the same feeling when standing at Bibracte.



Figure 6. The artifact case at the Musée Archéologique in Dijon. The first artifact on the left, middle shelf, is the Epona from Allerey, France, with its distinctive portrayal of a nymph-like Epona laying down upon Her horse's back. Photograph by Ceffyl, October 2001, Musée Archéologique, Dijon, France.

When I am at the barn, part of my connection to my deity is the fact that my horses' breed is one that was around when the Aedui honored Her. I have two Arabian mares, a breed that the Romans and the Celts would have recognized as Numidian or Libyan (Hyland and Mann 25). Touching the side of my mare's neck is like touching a piece of history.

Epona was part of a diverse, changing cultural landscape that has to be understood in context. For me, that meant many years of research to locate articles that provided a glimpse into who She was and who the people who honored Her were. Many

other questions remain to be answered for me. Future research opportunities might seek to answer questions: what was the color of Her horse(s) and was there any relationship between ritual sacrifices and eating of horses and locations where Her artifacts have been found? Without the resources and references, I never would have found my way home to Her.

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¹ As of 28 December 2013, the only entry in Hodge Library's online catalog is still the Tannahill Weaver's recording of their song "Epona."

² Euskirchen's 1993 work is the most recent catalog and contains 311 entries.

³ See the Introduction, <http://www.epona.net/introduction.html>.

⁴ A cart or chariot type was proposed by Oaks and by Nantonos as an additional type of classification for Epona artifacts (Oaks "Epona in the Aeduan Landscape"; Nantonos and Ceffyl).

⁵ In the case of the statuette from Wiltshire, England, Epona is seated with a mare on left and a stallion on her right (Connor 91 #7.1).

⁶ Epona artifacts are only found on the Roman side of the *limes*.

⁷ The descriptions for catalog entries 2 and 3 state that these are two of the earliest inscriptions, with no. 2 likely predating no. 3.

⁸ French translation of the inscription appears in Magnen and Thevenot. English translation from Epona.net Inscriptions page, <http://www.epona.net/inscriptions.html#entrains>

⁹ Of the 60 articles and books that are my main sources about Epona, only 12 are in English. The rest are mostly in French, about 10 in German, and a sprinkling in Latin, Hungarian, and other languages.

¹⁰ See the distribution map on Epona.net, <http://www.epona.net/distribution.html>

¹¹ English language resources are listed in the Works Cited.

¹² Unfortunately, Euskirchen's dissertation is hard to find. The only library whose holdings included *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission Deutsches Archäologisches Institut*. was the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. By contrast, copies of the Magnen and Thevenot as well as Sterckx catalogs are periodically available on Amazon. Reinach's 1895 work can be found online.

¹³ Contact the author for additional sources and related materials at ceffyl@horsegoddess.net.