

Review of *Epona: The Hidden Goddess of the Celts*

P.D. MacKenzie Cook, *Epona: The Hidden Goddess of the Celts*, Avalonia: London, UK 2016. ISBN-10: 1905297963; ISBN-16: 978-1905297962

P.D. MacKenzie Cook has compiled an impressive survey of both Epona's historical context and places her in a broader historical landscape. He starts with an overview of the ancient world, discusses symbolism associated with Epona, and the role that she assumes (healer, mother, warrior, maiden, mistress of animals, sovereignty). Later chapters tie Epona to with the Mystery Cults found in Greece and Rome and attempt to create a mythology for her. He then discusses Epona's role in the middle ages, the new world, and modern stories of people who honor Epona.

I was very excited when I first heard about this book. Finally, an English-language book about Epona that was well researched.¹ The book description says the story Cook presents "is at the same time historical, speculative, and deeply personal at once a scholarly survey, intriguing detective story, and spiritual message to be taken to heart." This description both encouraged and concerned me. What I was hoping to see what a meaty discussion of artifacts, imagery, and symbolism based upon solid archaeological evidence without the trappings and bias of most modern pagan authors.²

¹ Full disclosure: I am a dedicant of Epona and have done extensive research in Her artifacts and history. I am also a contributor to Epona.net. Because I've done my own research into Epona, the book that I would want to read probably wouldn't match what other people would want to read.

² For an example of poor pagan writing about Epona, refer to Edain McCoy's entry on Epona in *Celtic Myth & Magick: Harness the Power of the Gods and Goddesses* published in 2002 by Llewellyn.

In the preface, the author states that he is trying to create a coherent story for Epona by drawing on archaeology, mythology, and personal experience/gnosis. He warns the reader that 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.” (page 11) Cook is up-front with the reader and usually points out when he is extrapolating the facts to piece together the puzzle piece of Epona’s story based upon the archaeological and circumstantial evidence. Multiple times the author says that “this story does provide a plausible explanation” for physical and circumstantial³ (sometimes circumspect⁴) evidence. The closing sentence of the Preface states:

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, the storytelling, and poet-seer are each present to some degree in the “construction” presented in the following pages. (page 12)

Construction is an important word to keep in mind. Parts of this work represent the author attempting to piece together (or construct) Epona’s story and mysteries where none has existed or is evident in the archaeological record. He does a fantastic job of linking minute details together in to a coherent story, especially when discussing Epona’s origins in Path III: Her Deeper Secrets.

Cook has indeed done his research. The bibliography is excellent and he has used many of the harder-to-find references.⁵ His writing is accessible. He clearly defines when an assumption is

³ Chapter 7, “Origins, Mythic & Real” retells an entire mythology for Epona based upon circumstantial evidence and extrapolation (see “Phrygian Birth-Right,” pp. 176-178). Cook is careful to point out when there isn’t concrete proof but the suppositions he makes seem to make sense given the story he provides (for example, page 174).

⁴ See especially Chapters 10 and 11. Cook provides an extensive discussion on the Anubis Caves, a set of caves in Oklahoma with enigmatic petroglyphs documented by Gloria Farley (see <http://www.gloriafarley.com/chap4.htm>). The caves allegedly depict Anubis, Bel, and Epona in conjunction with Ogham and Numidian writing.

⁵ Much of the reference material for Epona is in other languages, especially French and German.

being made but cannot be proven, like in Chapter 2, Eloquent Symbolism, when he suggests that early Celtic coins depicting women riding horses depicted Epona. “Although we can’t certain that it [the coin] represented Epona, it is very likely that it did.” (page 44) The coin is repeatedly referenced in the book as a depiction of a wild, ecstatic image of Epona.

Cook sets the stage in Chapter 1 for the cultural context where Epona is first mentioned. He discusses the Greeks, Romans, and others who were contemporary cultural players. This information is well documented and helps the reader have a broad understanding for the material that will be presented in subsequent chapters.

One of the problems I have with the book is the overuse of reasoning that since the larger Celtic culture (from ancient through insular Celtic cultures, like the Irish and Welsh) used a symbol or had a particular belief, then by extrapolation it must also apply to Epona. In the opening of the chapter on symbolism (starting on page 35 through page 60), Cook uses examples of Epona’s symbolism, relates it to later Irish myth, and extrapolates how that example applies to the earlier continental cultures. The main sources for the Irish myths were recorded on the 11th-12th centuries. There is potentially a thousand year difference in the cultural context.

I do agree with Cook that in order to understand Epona, you have to understand the symbols used in her depictions. In the symbolism chapter, Cook discusses the importance of Epona’s position in a depiction, clothing, objects held, and animals associated with her. He seems to give too much weight to some of the symbols like the raven, dog, snake, and scourge. If a raven was as important as he is asserting (page 49), wouldn’t you expect that the bird would be depicted with Epona frequently? Out of the 411 Epona artifacts (depictions and inscriptions), three artifacts have

birds: Luxembourg,⁶ Mont Rudnik (Štajerska, Slovenia),⁷ and Alttrier (Grevenmacher, Luxembourg).⁸ Of these, only the **one** at Alttrier includes a depiction that could be a possible raven or crow. Cook makes the same assertion that serpents and dogs were also important symbols (page 50). Three artifacts depict snakes and 10 depict dogs. In the objects section, the scourge is also highlighted as an important symbol related to sovereignty. Again, there are only five artifacts out of 411 that have whips or scourges and three of these depictions are from Gourzon (Champagne-Ardenne, France).⁹ While the dog, raven, serpent, and scourge might have been important significance to the Celt in general and to the story of Epona that Cook is presenting, the archaeological evidence doesn't support the importance that he is placing on them.

Cook's scholarship and presentation of material are thorough and convincing, especially the first five chapters reviewing the historical context of Epona. Chapter 6, "Liaisons of Love & Power," talks about Epona's relations with other deities. Much of the connections Cook makes between Epona and relations with other deities were new ideas for me and require additional research before I can comment on this chapter.

Cook starts truly constructing his story of Epona in the second half of the book in Parts III and IV. Starting in Chapter 7: Origins, Mythic & Real, the author begins with the meager story that says that Epona was the daughter of a union between a mare and Fulvius Stellus, who hated women (page 161). Cook dissects the name Fulvius Stellus to uncover a possible identity for Epona's father. He also proceeds to try and name who the mare (Epona's dam) would be in the story, reaching into

⁶ Wilhelm, Eugénie, "Pierres Sculptées et Inscriptions de l'Époque Romaine", Musée d'Histoire et d'Art, Luxembourg, 1974. #324.

⁷ Reinach, Salomon. Rev. Arch. 1903, II, p.348; Lambrechts, Divinités équestres ou morts héroïsés. Antiquité classique, 1951, p.126

⁸ Magnen, R. and E. Thévenot (1953). Épona: déesse Gauloise des chevaux protectrice des cavaliers. Bordeaux, Delmas. Catalog #106 and plate 25

⁹ Magnen, R. and E. Thévenot (1953). Épona: déesse Gauloise des chevaux protectrice des cavaliers. Bordeaux, Delmas. Catalog #213, 228, 229

Greek mysteries. This made for a fascinating read. This chapter does step into the realm of complete fiction though, especially when the author supposes how Epona could have been conjured into human form by a druidic rite (page 177). From this point forward in the chapter, I consider it to be more conjecture than a scholarly work.

This chapter and subsequent ones are part of the construction Cook presents. For example: Cook makes statements that are part of his construction: “In her magically-charged new human form Epona would have ‘moved out’ quickly to accomplish her task – much as the young Sumeria goddess Inanna had done over two thousand years earlier after the God of wisdom and magic had invested her with the *me* [‘powers’].” (page 178) These types of statements detract from the scholarly work presented earlier. There is no way that we can know what the Celts of the time would have been thinking or what their actual reaction to events would have been. Instead, we are presented with material like this:

In this context the intoxicating feminine charms of Epona’s new human form gave her all the aphrodisiacal power she would need to complete the 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 the fertile religious conceptuality, they probably visualized her taking the sky god’s spear or thyrsus (his “wand of power”) and mounting his horse – making both her own in the process. (Pages 180-1)

The last pages of this chapter tell the reader that the story of Epona’s emergence in Phrygia was a speculation rather than a reconstruction (page 182). He does state that the story could be disproved by “incontrovertible evidence of her origin elsewhere” (page 183). He states 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” (page 183). Again, this is all part of his construction since there is no evidence for any of these events. He goes on to say that “Epona’s origin myth was very likely to have been a description of the way in which she was actually given human form – on that survived at least in part because it was both shocking and fascinating.” This story would have then spread

through the region and have been remembered and retold. Cook goes on to describe how the origin story he presented could tie in with the spread of her cult and the symbolism used in her depictions (and related cults like the Danubian horsemen) (page 183-184).

Chapters 8 and 9 describe Epona's Mysteries, notably how Epona ties in with the Mystery cults of Demeter, Aphrodite, Persephone, Dionysus, and Kybele. Cook also describes the sexual imagery and power associated with Epona. While I've encountered ties between Epona and other deities like Demeter and Persephone, the sexual topics and Cook's interpretations are not ones that I have encountered prior to reading this book (especially not in a context related to Epona).

Part IV, Seeds of Renewal, presets a lot of problems. Chapter 10, The Middle Ages, discusses Epona in Ireland. There is no archaeological evidence of Epona in Ireland that I am aware of.¹⁰ It is certainly possible that traders and travelers could have carried stories of Epona to Ireland (pages 241-242). However, stating that Macha has any real tie to Epona (outside of similar qualities) cannot be proven. Just because one deity is associated with a horse does not make it automatically synonymous with another horse-related deity (page 243). Macha's stories are recorded in the 9th through 12th century, almost a thousand years after Epona's recorded artifacts. Along a similar vein, the author notes similarities between Epona and Rhiannon because again, similar ideas of horses and sovereignty.¹¹ From this point, he notes that the stories depicted in the Mabiongi, including the tales with Rhiannon, were the literatures "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

¹⁰ None of the four Epona artifact catalogs compiled by Salomon Reinach (1895), Magnen and Thevenot (1953), Euskirchen (1992), and Sterckx (1986) list artifacts from Ireland. The artifact catalog Nantonos and I have compiled does not contain any Irish artifacts. See Aedui, C. "Finding Epona," *Air n'Aithesc*, 1(1) 2014.

¹¹ For an excellent discussion of the role of the horse in the Mabiongi, refer to Davies, S. and N. A. Jones, Eds. (1997). The Horse in Celtic Culture. Cardiff, University of Wales Press.

ground” (page 248). The remainder of the chapter describes how chivalry and courtly love could have been influenced by the idea and mysteries associated with Epona.

Chapter 11, The New World, discussed the mysterious Anubis Caves in Oklahoma documented by Gloria Farley in 1978 (page 260). Petroglyphs in these caves have been interpreted to represent Epona, Anubis, and Bel. There are Ogham and Numidian inscriptions in the petroglyphs as well. The caves and their findings are extremely controversial. In all honestly, I’m not sure why this information is even included in the book. It is so far removed from the context and cultural timeframe for Epona that it seems to have little relevance on her overall story.

The last chapter provides accounts of modern-day businesses and ventures that use Epona’s name, difficulties faced by priestesses of Epona, and stories from modern-day people who honor Epona. The people the author interviewed for the chapter have a unique viewpoint on Epona and how they have been lead down their paths.¹²

Conclusion

The author has a definite vision of how he views Epona and how her story fits together from the ancient past through to the present. It makes for interesting reading. It is well supported and reference with quality citations. Several chapters made me scratch my head. Others, like the chapter on the origins, made me think and re-evaluate.

Would I recommend this book to someone wanting to learn about Epona? Yes, with this warning. The author points out multiple times that he is providing a construction. Much of the work presented is well supported, but a good portion of it is speculation. As with any thing you read, be willing to think critically as you read. That said, it’s probably one of the better English language

¹² In my path, most of other people I’ve met who honor Epona either have horses or closely relate to horses. It’s through this connection that they reach towards deity, and not through the sacred sovereignty-submission aspects described in the personal stories in the last chapter.

overviews available on Epona (just be leery of the chapters on the Middle Ages and the New World).

There are plenty of points where I do not agree with Cook's interpretation.¹³ His approach towards the research is different from the one I used,¹⁴ which would make for a spirited discussion if the author and I were to discuss the book over tea.

¹³ Especially Cook's assertion that Epona was a purely Celtic deity (page 119), almost the entirety of "The Middle Ages" chapter (starting on page 236), and "The 'New Word' chapter (starting on page 260).

¹⁴ Nantonos and I started with the artifacts and began building our theories from that information. Nantonos is the primary author of Epona.net.