

# The Sacred Celtic Horse

by  
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THE HORSE was a very important animal in both Celtic culture and spirituality. In Western Europe, the horse had been domesticated since approximately 3,000 BC. Before domestication, he was hunted primarily as a food source, and the earliest records of such date back to some 25,000 years ago. Perhaps the best preserved archeological record is a bone heap at an old campsite in the Rhone valley of France, which consists of the cracked and dismembered bones of some 100,000 horses!

The European wild horse, sometimes referred to as the European forest type, lived in the forests of what we now know as Germany and Scandinavia until historic times. He was the wild black horse of Flanders. This was a stocky animal, a draft type, that possessed considerably more size and scale than the Asian type or desert horse. The Flanders horse was native to Western Europe at the time of the Roman invasion. He was the

forerunner of the Great Horse or British War Horse of the Middle Ages. The latter, in turn, fathered the modern draft breeds. The Modern Shire horses of England seem to be the purest survival of British War Horse spoken of by medieval writers, whose strength, courage and aptitude for discipline

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are praised by the chroniclers of the Roman legions. They are certainly the direct descendants of the horse which, when Julius Caesar arrived on the shores of Great Britain, attracted his attention for its efficiency in the assistance which it rendered the Celts in the pursuits of war.

The Belgian horse is also considered a pure descendant of this Great Horse; obviously originating in what is now known as Belgium, land of the Belgae tribe. Belgium lies in the very center of that area of western Europe, just west of the original home of the Celts, which gave rise to the large black horses known as Flemish horses.

They were the great black horses that carried armored knights into battle.

The Percheron horse, which originates from La Perche, France, land of the Gauls, for the most part retains the black color of the Flemish horse, although greys are common also. It is believed that the Percheron has a touch of Arabian blood. The Clydesdale is Scotland's Great Horse descendant.

Not all the wild horses of Europe were large, however. Small, shaggy animals were native to northern Europe. They were strong and hardy and required less feed than other types of horses. These animals are thought to be the progenitors of the Shetland pony, and perhaps the Connemara in Ireland. The Connemara pony can certainly be traced to ancient times as a member of that group of equids known as mountain and moorland ponies. It originated in Connaught in western Ireland, and later was used to influence the fine Irish hunter.

We can see that the Celts were certainly no strangers to horses. Indeed, the chroniclers of the Roman Empire wrote with grudging admiration concerning the equestrian skills of the Celtic people they encountered in war. This would demonstrate that the horse was an integral part of Celtic life, for, as any modern equestrian will attest, high skill in horsemanship requires a knowledge of the horse and his psyche on an intimate level.

Horses appear frequently in the tales and myths as animals of special qualities. The Irish deity Manannan mac Lir has a horse called "Splendid Mane," which is swifter than the spring wind and can travel as easily over water as it does on land. The Dagda has a black horse named Ocean, and wears horse-hide boots with the hair on the outside. The Irish hero Cuchulainn had two horses that pulled his war chariot, the Black of Sainglend and the Grey of Macha, which were both foaled at the same time Cuchulainn was born. Before Cuchulainn went on his final foray, the Grey of Macha refused to be bridled and shed tears of blood. During the last

fight, the Grey was mortally wounded, but still managed to kill fifty warriors with his teeth and thirty more with his hooves before he died! Horses of fantastic colors appear from the Otherworld; Cuchulainn witnessed a chariot drawn by a single red horse which had only one leg, and in the chariot was a woman with red skin, obviously a Goddess. Enchanted horses that carry people to the Otherworld are also a frequent motif; Oisín, son of Fionn mac Cumhail, rode off to Tír Tairnigiri (Land of Promise) on a magical horse with Niamh, the daughter



*A German representation of Epona, the horse-goddess.*

of the Manannan mac Lir, and stayed for three-hundred years. When he wanted to go back, Niamh allowed him to use the horse, but warned him not to dismount. He fell from the horse by accident and was changed immediately into a blind, grey-haired, withered old man. In addition, there is the story of the fifteen members of the Fianna taken captive and unwillingly transported to the Otherworld on the ugly and nasty grey horse of Abarta, who was a mischievous member of the Tuatha de Danaan.

Several figures emerge as horse-goddesses; perhaps the best known of these is the Gaulish Goddess Epona,

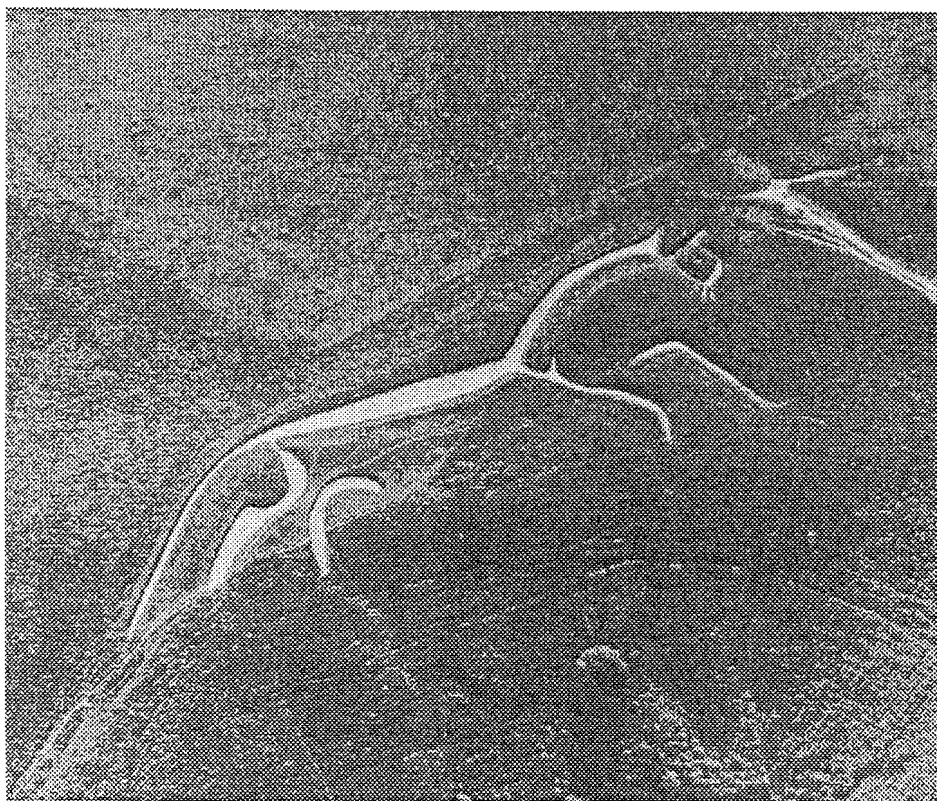
whose name is self-evident. Epona's name occurs in more inscriptions of the Roman period and with a wider distribution than any other Celtic name of god or goddess. She is the only Celtic goddess known to have been honored in Rome, and her name is sometimes styled as Regina. Rees & Rees mention that it has been argued that "her concern was as much with the journey of the soul after death as with the welfare of horses and mules and their attendants."

The wife of the God Mider, Étain Echraide, is also by her very name associated with this animal, for "Echraide" seems to mean "on horseback".

The Welsh Goddess Rhiannon is also associated with horses in a very definite way. Rhiannon was said to be riding a "pure white horse of large size" when Pwyll first spied her, and though she seemed to be riding at a leisurely pace, when he tried to catch up to her it was in vain. It wasn't until he called out to her to stop that she did. They eventually married, and Rhiannon gave birth to a son, who was stolen away in the night in spite of the guard of six women. When these women awoke and the child was gone, they were fearful lest their lives be forfeit for their neglect, and so agreed to swear that Rhiannon ate her child. They killed a litter of puppies and smeared some of the blood on Rhiannon's face and hands, and put some of the bones by her side. Then they awoke her and accused her, and though she swore she didn't do

it, she was condemned and assigned a penance. For seven years, she was to sit by a horse-block outside the gate, and offer to carry visitors into the palace upon her back, like a horse.

Her stolen son (Pryderi) was eventually found again on May Eve (Beltaine), when a monster tried to steal the foal of Teirnon's mare. As a great claw reached in for the foal, Teirnon hacked off the arm and so rescued the foal, but when he went outside he discovered a babe that had been left by the retreating monster. The child was returned to Rhiannon, and the foal born on that May Eve was given to Pryderi. Also, after Rhiannon disappears into



*An aerial view of the White Horse of Uffington; carved into a chalk hillside in Berkshire. It is believed to date from the 1st century and is England's oldest surviving hill figure.*

Llwyd's magic fortress, her punishment is to have the collars of asses, after they had been carrying hay, about her neck.

Another Celtic Goddess associated with horses is the Irish Macha. In one of her personalities, she appears as the mysterious wife of Crunniuc Mac Agnomain of Ulster. Crunniuc's wife had died when, one day, a beautiful woman arrived at his fortress and took on the role of his wife and became pregnant by him. While attending a royal gathering where the king's horses were winning all the races, Crunniuc boasted that his wife, even pregnant, could outrun the king's horses. The outraged king demanded that the boast be fulfilled. Macha was brought before the king and was told that if she refused to race, Crunniuc would be killed. Macha said: 'A long-lasting evil will come out of this on the whole of Ulster.' She raced against the king's horses, and as she reach the end of the field, she gave birth to twins. As she gave birth she screamed, and with her dying breath proclaimed that all who heard the scream would suffer from the

pangs of childbirth for five days and four nights in times of Ulster's greatest difficulty. The curse would last for nine times nine generations. The only people free of the curse were women, boys, and Cuchulainn. Thereafter the place was named Emain Macha (the twins of Macha).

The association of the horse with goddesses is interesting, as the Celtic goddesses were usually associated with the fertility of the land or were in Themselves a representation of the land. For instance, the three goddesses which Amergin met upon reaching Ireland were Banba, Fotla and Éire, who clearly represent the spirit of Ireland. (This is directly opposite the East Indian concept of the horse deities usually being associated with gods.) Among the Celts, the condition of the land was always a reflection of the quality of kingly rule, and the king was considered "married" to the land, and must care for Her as he would a wife. This concept is brought home with one of the more distasteful (to our modern sensibilities) Celtic rituals involving

horses — the reported great marriage" to the land. The king either mimicked or actually had intercourse with a white mare which represented the Goddess Sovereignty. Then the mare was sacrificed and he bathed in her blood and ate her flesh. This kingmaking ritual was still being enacted in 12th century Ulster, and is akin to the Hindu rite of asvamedha, wherein a queen symbolically lies with a dead white stallion. These horse sacrifices were reported to be a common Indo-European practice. However, the horse is tentatively associated with certain Celtic gods as well. It is said that the Irish god Lugh invented horsemanship. The Dagda is sometimes called Eochiad Ollathair, the latter term meaning "all-father," and the former obviously from the root "horse." It is quite possible that these references to a relationship with the horse (and therefore the Goddess Sovereignty) are meant to indicate the right of sacred kingship.

The white horse repeatedly appears in the literature, and we can surmise from the history of the horse that the most common color of the European horse at the time was black. With this in mind, it becomes no surprise that the white horse, both in India and in Celtic lands, was the choice for sacred ritual. It was probably something of a phenomenon to find a white horse, and the color white is also frequently associated with Otherworldly animals. In fact, it is extremely rare even now to find a truly white horse; most that are called "white" are actually grey (their skin is black, as opposed to the pink skin of a pure white animal). The Celtic horse can therefore be considered a representation of fertility, sexuality, sacred kingship, and the journey to and from the Otherworld — intimately tied to the life cycle of death and rebirth, the Land, and the Goddess of Sovereignty. The horse was a significant animal in ancient Celtic spiritual belief and an important animal in the culture. It is not surprising that the Celtic fringe went on to develop some of the finest and most specialized equines that exist in the world today, and continue to improve upon and refine the accomplishments of their ancestors. ☪