

The *Mari Lwyd* and the Horse Queen:
Palimpsests of Ancient ideas

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Abstract

The idea of a horse as a deity of the land, sovereignty and fertility can be seen in many cultures with Indo-European roots. The earliest and most complete reference to this deity can be seen in Vedic texts from 1500 BCE. Documentary evidence in rock art, and sixth century BCE Tartessian inscriptions demonstrate that the ancient Celtic world saw this deity of the land as a Horse Queen that ruled the land and granted fertility. Evidence suggests that she could grant sovereignty rights to humans by uniting with them (literally or symbolically), through ingestion, or intercourse. The Horse Queen is represented, or alluded to in such divergent areas as Bronze Age English hill figures, Celtic coinage, Roman horse deities, mediaeval and modern Celtic masked traditions. Even modern Welsh traditions, such as the *Mari Lwyd*, infer her existence and confirm the value of her symbolism in the modern world.

Table of Contents

List of definitions:	8
Introduction	12
Of Kings and Coitus	21
Lifting the Dragon's Vale	29
Of Hill Forts and Horses.....	35
The Free Celts	41
Epona	46
Kings, Celts and Coins.....	54
Masking the Church	60
The Franks Casket and the <i>Mari Lwyd</i>	62
Rhiannon: the Horse Queen Trots into History	67
Galloping from Ancient Fields to Modern Shores.....	71
<i>Mari Lwyd</i> , Modern Palimpsest of Ancient ideas.....	80
Conclusion	91
Bibliography	92

List of definitions:

BCE: Before the Common Era (or, BC on the Christian calendar).

Bronze Age (British): the time period from about 1000- 800 BCE. It is worth noting that these dates are approximate. The age occurred in different regions at different times.

Colluvium: sediment built up at the bottom of a slope.

Geoglyph: a large figure carved in the ground, usually with deity and ritual associations.

Hill fort: a pan-European defensive (often enclosed) earthwork, usually located on top of a hill. Although commonly conceived of as Iron Age in date, invariably further excavation betrays Bronze Age origins. Some hill forts were occupied into early mediaeval times.

Hoard: a collection of artefacts (usually coins) buried together. In general it is believed this was done to secure or hide their contents. Recent documentation theorizes that some hoards have ritual implications.

In-situ: "In place" or undisturbed. The term is employed for artefacts discovered where they were originally lost or placed.

Iron Age (British): the time period from about 800 – 100 BCE. These dates are approximate, and different regions have different dating.

Lifeways: patterns of culture in a society, or put another way, ways of living.

Liminal: a stage between two different states; for example, the period between adulthood and childhood. This usually refers to the rituals around these states (such as rites of passage).

Proto-Indo European (PIE): the ancestral people of the speakers of Indo-European languages. This language group is widely documented in linguistic and mythological studies. Archaeology has however struggled to find any material commonality in the cultures of early Indo-European peoples. The location of their homeland is considered one of the great questions of modern archaeology.

Provenance (or in American usage Provenience): an archaeological term describing the location where an artefact is originally found.

Psychopomp: an anthropological term meaning a being that escorts the newly dead to the afterlife.

Stater: a coin based on a Greek original. Sizes vary, but approximately the size of a 50 pence coin. Another coin called the quarter-stater is about the size of a five pence coin.

Terminus Post Quem (“Date after which”): a term used for to provide a firm earliest possible date. In our examples, a datable coin found in a deposit of artefacts means the deposits can be no earlier than the date the earliest coin was minted.

Tetradrachm: a coin based on a Greek original. Sizes vary considerable, but usually about the size of a 10 pence coin.

Trackway: a path or trail; generally connecting one habitation (such as a town or village) to another.

A note on translations: for the sake of consistency and clarity, spellings and certain terms (especially in relation to etymologies) have been quoted from the same source, rather than the multiple sources used in different languages. PIE etymologies are often different when coming from different source languages. Documentation related to the ancient Gauls (especially in the area of Archaeology, and Numismatics) is mostly in French and rarely translated. When this is the case, the translations used are the author’s. When possible a reference to an English source (sadly usually incomplete) is provided in the footnotes.

A note on cultural transmission: cultural transmission, or the process of enculturation, plays an important role in our thesis. We trace the horse deity from prehistoric time to modern times (about three thousand years or more of history) as well as through a wide swath of the European world. Cultural transmission is a topic widely discussed and incorporating many disciplines. The question of how rituals, some quite graphic, were transferred over time and across continents is one that we are compelled to address. The practice is also

not uniquely human. This is an area greatly studied in many animal species and has been seen in recent studies of species as diverse as chimpanzees,¹ wolves, dolphins,² and even frogs³ and bees.⁴ In these cases culture is transmitted via one generation teaching (usually via demonstration) social practices to a younger generation. What is clear in animal studies is that enculturation is not passed on biologically from parents to offspring, but rather learned through experience and participation. What is believed to make humans different is our ability to give symbolic meaning to events.⁵ Effectively, it is cultural learning that provides the symbolic key that allows individuals to interpret reality and in the process provide regulation and meaning in their lives.

This begs the question, why were these symbolic meanings overlain upon a horse? Any discussion relating to the nature of ancient human thought is of course pure conjecture. But, there are some obvious suggestions. The horse is a powerful, yet domesticated creature. It makes humans mobile, and grants them superiority in war. Its manure is well known as a fertilizer, and its phallic associations are joked about even today. Its liminal associations (witness the word “nightmares”) can even be seen in our own culture.

In the Celtic worlds, we are seeing a symbolic interplay with the horse’s real characteristics, writ large upon a goddess. The horse’s fertility (via manure) is expanded into fertility of the land and its flip side, death. Its strength is abstracted to control over the land and sovereignty. Its sexual associations are expanded to the idea of fecundity, but also to granting the power of sovereignty via union. These abstract ideas and symbols are all linked to a very real and very powerful animal that can be seen each day. This anchoring of a cultural idea in a real animal may be what has allowed the horse deity to survive (albeit

¹ The effects of cultural learning chimpanzees and mimicking high prestige individuals for cultural learning: <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0010625>

² Tool use among Dolphins: <http://www.pnas.org/content/102/25/8939.full>

³ Learned predator recognition among frogs:
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003347208000742>

⁴ Perhaps the most classic case, the dance language of bees: Von Frisch, 1967, *The Dance Language and Orientation of Bees*.

⁵ The transmission of culture is a complex area of study and is not as clear as it initially sounds. The transmission of culture by humans involves a symbolic interpretation (i.e. life events are interpreted to have meaning). This is highly subjective. It is fair to say that how exactly you define culture, how symbols are interpreted (linguistically or otherwise) and where those symbols come from are all areas of scientific research and considerable controversy.

in bastardized form) and passed down the generations to the present day. Culture tends to be conservative, and this may be even more so when based on a real animal. Traditions like the *Mari Lwyd* or even Beltane fires may have started as having religious intent, but later evolved to act as an affirming and bonding mechanism for a group.

Some comments on approaches to ritual interpretation: the interpretation of ritual has been both problematic and controversial in contemporary archaeology. The Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology (2003: 361) defines ritual as “A favourite but deplorable term commonly used by archaeologists looking to explain unfamiliar patterns in material culture that seem to have no functional explanation”. The reason for this negativity is that ritual is difficult to determine archaeologically (effectively one sees the end result of how something was deposited, but not how it was deposited, nor why). In this thesis however we are dealing with a specific site (Danebury) that is universally considered to have ritual deposits. Additionally, some of the best archaeological minds in Britain have examined this evidence and have reached that rare area of scholarly agreement.

Introduction

Far back, far back in our dark soul the horse prances. He is a dominant symbol: he gives us lordship: he links us, the first palpable and throbbing link with ruddy-glowing Almighty of potency: he is the beginning even of our godhead in the flesh. As a symbol he roams the dark underworld meadows of the soul. He stamps and threshes in the dark fields of your soul and mine. D.H. Lawrence 1931 (Apocalypse X, Line 25-31)

In the Celtic world, both ancient and modern, we see the use of horses and equine representations in ways that many would consider unusual. There are modern rituals involving horse skulls, mediaeval and classical literary references to mystical horses and fairy goddesses, as well as equine skeletons parcelled out and buried in unusual manners as far back as the Bronze Age. The question can be asked, are these related and how do we interpret what we see in these artefacts? Is it possible that modern Celtic folkloric practices are somehow related to these ancient horse rituals? Can the ancient practices perhaps provide some light on what the modern traditions mean? Where does this idea come from, and how did the Celtic world make these obscure practices their own?

It can be openly admitted that the idea of a singular cultural idea (the Horse Queen) passing down hundreds of generations can only be seen as supposition, supported only by circumstantial evidence. The evidence however is overwhelming with clues provided in etymology, literature, and iconography spanning continents and millennia. In fact, as a manner of proof, by understanding this evidence other similar (and otherwise incomprehensible) modern rituals and mediaeval literary references can be understood. In modern times, these themes are much faded and barely recognizable. Nonetheless, one can see modern echoes of these ancient beliefs.

The ancient use of the horses for ritual purposes is not uniquely Celtic. The horse is a powerful animal imbued with magical properties in many of the cultures that domesticated them. The introduction of mobility and cavalry was

as momentous to ancient warfare as the modern introduction of the cross country train, or tank. The Indo-European world view that spawned Celtic culture had a perception of horses that would transfer in various forms to all of its descendent cultures. However, the Celtic view was unique and long lasting. Mares were seen as sovereignty goddesses of the land, with its resultant implications of fertility, family stability and the flip side of fertility, death. These goddesses were described as “queens” that the king could thereby “marry into” to inherit the right of ruling the people in her country. Although admittedly outside of the scope of this paper to analyse other Indo-European based interpretations, we examine other cultural interpretations where this provides some insight into our topic.

To analyze and prove this supposition it is necessary to employ a cross-discipline approach. We examine such diverse evidence as modern mummification practices, mediaeval literature, ancient artefacts, and the earliest literary evidence from a Celtic world predating Roman interference and influence. Employing a chronological approach to our sources, we go from the most ancient evidence moving forwards. The evidence is written in modern rituals, two thousand years of Celtic writings, and mute but telling testimony of Iron Age remains in Celtic areas.

To many, perhaps to most people outside the small company of the great scholars, past and present, ‘Celtic’ of any sort is . . . a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come . . . Anything is possible in the fabulous Celtic twilight, which is not so much a twilight of the gods as of the reason. J.R.R. Tolkien (1963: 29-30)

This research covers some otherwise controversial topics, as such; there are a few important points to be addressed up front. The first involves the use of the word “Celtic”. Like so many things in the field of Celtic studies, this very word is a controversial subject, and is going through something of a paradigm change. The term “Celtic” has proven to be surprisingly hard to define.

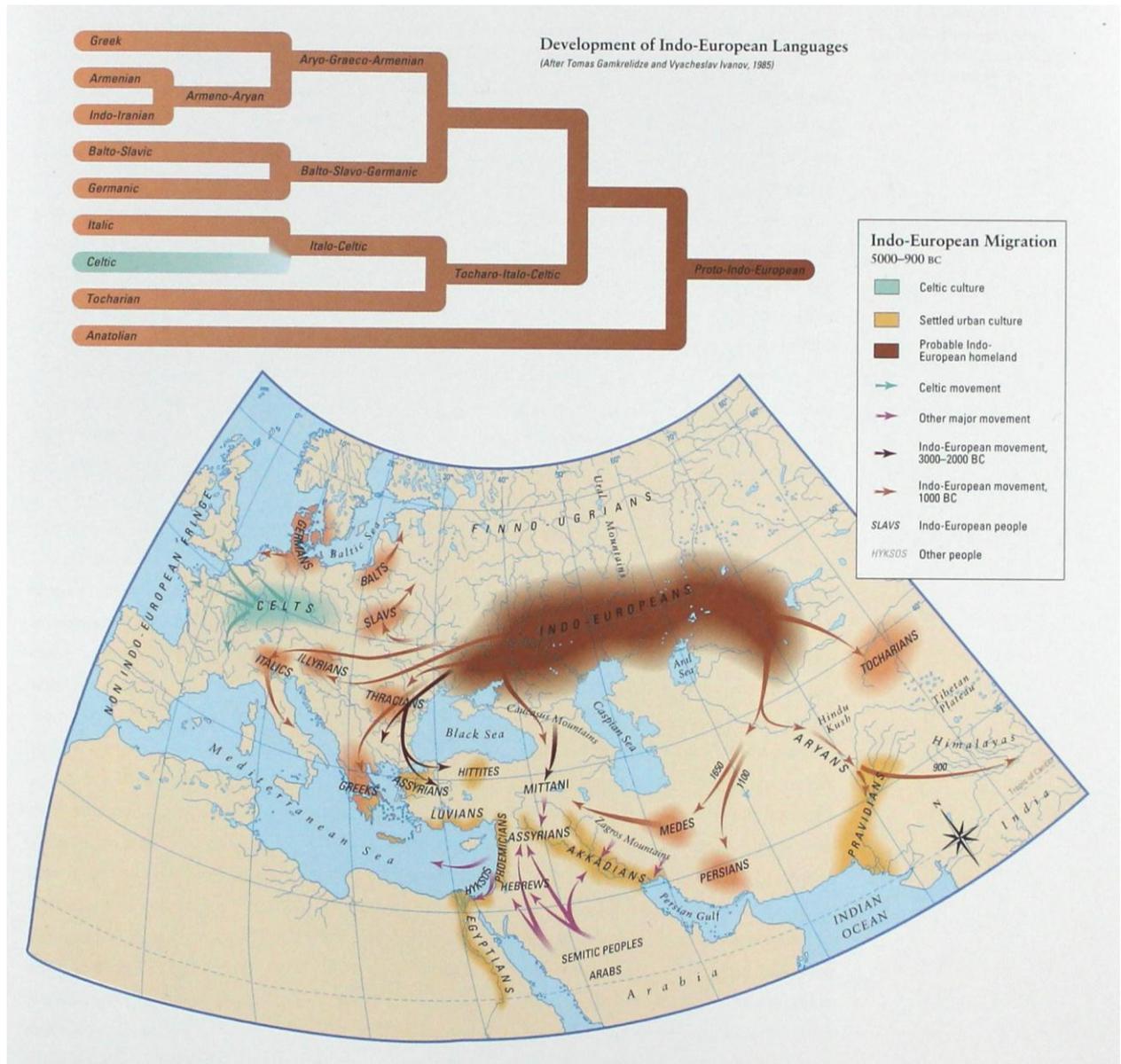


Figure 1. The chart above shows the standard view of the development of Indo-European languages. Importantly for our studies, with the language came some cultural attributes. Source Barnes 2010: 35

The theoretical Celtic mother tongue and its relationship to the Celtic tongues seen today are going through something of a renaissance. Scholarship is new and forthcoming and scholarly agreement has not yet been achieved.⁶ Most recently, the translations of various inscriptions not previously suspected to be Celtic has created doubt that our current suppositions are completely correct. This has been augmented by the discovery of even more and longer texts in known Celtic areas. Long held assumptions (such as the relation of a theoretical

⁶ A discussion of these issues is presented in Evans 1995: 8-20. It is worth mentioning that the translations of texts in France, Spain and Italy (we will examine Koch's work shortly) have created even more evidence in the ensuing twenty years.

mother tongue to continental and insular Celtic languages) are no longer as sacrosanct as they once were (Evans 1995 9-10). Effectively the classification system of ancient Celtic tongues and how they relate to each other must remain open at this point.

The oldest and most commonly used definition⁷ is that the Bronze Age “Urn field” cultures of central and northern Europe evolved into the Iron Age Hallstatt culture. This would then reorganize and shift geography (from central Europe, to the north and west) to become the La Tène artistic tradition. This was appropriated by Rome (Julius Caesar usually being implicated) to create the Romano-Celtic cultural package. Post-Roman (and post-Christian) this seam continues through Ireland and, to a lesser extent, Britain and some peripheral areas. At some point in time, the influence of Germanic peoples is held responsible for destroying the last vestiges of Celtic traditions and hence we enter our modern world. The problem with these well worn suppositions is they are wrong, on all counts.⁸ This is not only simplistic (three thousand years of history across several continents, summed up in one paragraph), it is not supported by archaeology, linguistics, nor even (classical) history. In short, the issue has been the vagueness of the word “Celtic” (Evans, Ellis 1995: 9). Colin Renfrew described the situation best when he stated “It is perhaps fair to say that the enterprise of relating linguistic data to archaeological data is a more difficult one that has hitherto been appreciated”.⁹ Archaeologists are looking for material cultural evidence, and linguists are looking for language evidence (usually epigraphy). It is simply not logical to assume that these are *a priori* are related to each another. Current evidence is exhibiting a rather extreme paradigm change. Ideas that just a decade ago seemed ridiculous (that the Celts may not have been a “folk” that they originated in the Atlantic West, etc.), have been fired in the crucible of an ongoing scholarly reassessment whose extreme shows itself in Celtoskepticism.¹⁰ It is likely that genetic evidence (still

⁷ This version of history can be seen summarized in Green 1995 5-7

⁸ The most recent summary of the direction these studies are heading is Karl 2010: 39-79. It is worth applying caution to these new ideas. However, it can be stated that the older ones listed above have shown themselves to be, in the main, inaccurate.

⁹ Markey and Greppin 1990: 24.

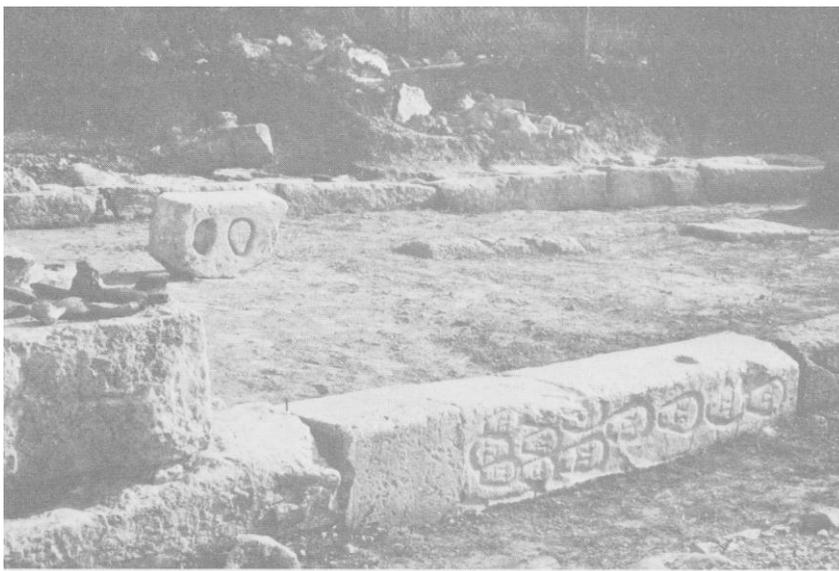
¹⁰ Effectively, a doubt that the word “Celtic” has any meaning.

somewhat inconclusive) will ultimately define what it means (or meant) to be “Celtic”.¹¹

The second (somewhat less controversial) point is similar to the first, and regards Celtic belief systems. There is no current reason to believe that there was a unified “Celtic” belief system. By this we mean that one cultic practice was practiced in the same way in different places. By way of analogy we can compare this to Catholicism. A Catholic mass would be the same in Paraguay, as it would be in the United States or Rome for that matter. There is no evidence of this in the time frames we are studying. In fact the opposite appears to be the case. There are a number of archaeological examples of very divergent practices that appear to contradict any idea of unified religious practices.

The following are examples of this divergence:

The cultic practices regarding the display of human skulls in specialized altars as seen in southern France (Entremont and Roquepertuse being the best known) are unique to France (Webster 1995: 452).



¹¹ A great deal of work has been done in this direction. Although genetics journals are only comprehensible to a small cadre of professionals, a good summary in English is available at Sykes 2006: 120-240

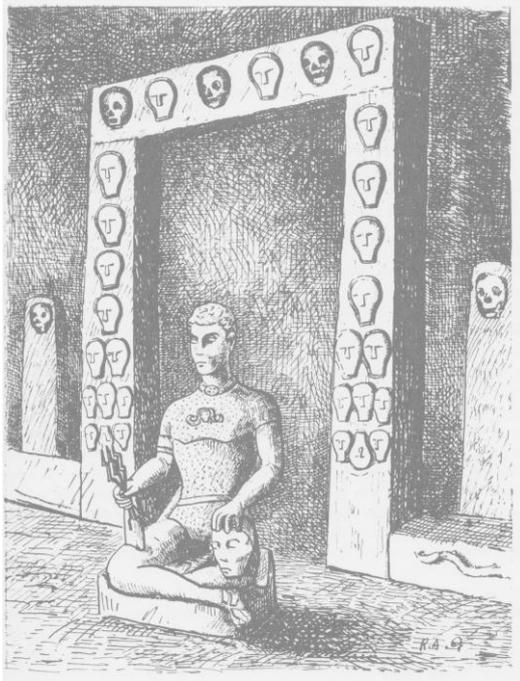


Figure 2. A photo of the “Sanctuary of the Skulls” *in-situ* at Entremont, and a reconstruction of its original appearance. The doorway contained niches for real human heads (some were found in place); others are carved on the doorway. While headhunting is well documented with the Celtic peoples, these ritualized altars filled with human heads are unique. Photo source by Benoît 1975: 257)

The third century BCE “Bone-house” shrine of Ribemont-sur-Ancre (France) is unique in the Celtic world (Green 1992: 14).



Figure 3. Photo courtesy of the J.L. Cadoux Centre Archéologique Département de Ribemont-sur-Ancre. <http://www.ribemontsurancre.cg80.fr/> [Accessed Jul 12, 2011]. ¹² This was a ritual structure composed of about 2000 human leg bones, and the bones of about 30 horses. The bones were interlaced to form a structure open on one side, with a central post holding up a roof.

¹² The Celtic peoples of Gaul can never be accused of being boring, or lacking drama. However this topic although extensively covered in French, is barely mentioned in English. The best English source, a brief introduction, is Brunaux 2001: 54-57. He covers these sites extensively in various volumes in French.

The ancient English hill figures (the ancient provenance of the White Horse, the Cerne Abbas Giant and the Long Man of Wilmington has been established by archaeology) have no equivalents in other Celtic countries, even in places with similar geology.

The La Tène artistry so often used as a trademark of Celtic consciousness is in fact rare in Ireland. Interestingly, horse bits are the largest category of La Tène objects found there (Koch 2007: 130)

Many more prototypically Celtic examples could easily be provided. The simple fact is that there does not appear to be physical evidence of a shared religious culture or a unified religion in Celtic areas. One is hindered by the human tendency to find similarities if you look long and hard enough.

Having stated this, there is some evidence that there was movement or transference of religious ideas, although their expression would be altered by location and time. Caesar says:

“The Druidic doctrine is believed to have been found existing in Britain and thence imported into Gaul; even today those who want to make a profound study of it generally go to Britain for the purpose.”

Caesar; *The Conquest of Gaul* (VI.13, translation by Hanford 1982: 140).

This suggests that religious education (at least according to Caesar’s information, as well as in Caesar’s time) utilized the same schools. Continuing our analogy, a modern Masters Degree in Divinity can be used as an entry point into the priesthood of various traditions of Christianity. It seems likely this is what Caesar was speaking of.

The theme of the Horse Queen appears to have a certain universality. It is almost certain that the general idea of a sacred horse deity is a result of a shared Indo-European heritage. This same connection of horses with

sovereignty exists in ancient and historic India. It is mentioned in the most ancient texts in a Sanskrit that far predates the earliest Celtic inscriptions.¹³

In the Celtic world we see many different ways in which the Horse Queen is manifested, but a number of obvious similarities appear in different Celtic regions. Carrying forward our Christian analogy, rather than seeing an identical Catholic mass in different countries, it appears as something more akin to say Anglicism, or Protestantism and Catholicism. Although the rituals of these religions are different, closer examination demonstrates that they share common focal points of belief. These include a reverence for the same founder as well as various shared holy days. Much the same can be seen in Celtic religious beliefs. In effect, the horse goddess can be seen in such diverse sources as Bronze Age imagery, ancient Spanish inscriptions and possibly even the Mediaeval Welsh Rhiannon. There is no direct line of succession here (Tartessian texts did not influence Rhiannon); they are separated by almost two thousand years. Yet similarities beyond apparent coincidence are present nonetheless.

Throughout this thesis you will see ideas transferred back and forth through the Celtic world. Ideas that were seen in the sixth century AD disappear from all records, only to show up again, in the same form in the 18th century. This is remarkable and attests to the importance of these seemingly archetypal ideas to the Celtic world. It is tempting to argue that these seemingly “folk” ideas remained underground, or dormant, simply to re-emerge when ritual, social, or political need required it. However the truth is undoubtedly more prosaic. Each area likely maintained its own beliefs and taught them as a cultural package down the generations. Through borrowing, travel, and an oral-based traditional narrative, these ideas remained alive. What we are seeing in the archaeological and literary record are simply the scattered remains of what were once general beliefs. What remains in the archaeological record, and even modern rituals, is simply a patchwork of what was once a running cultural commentary.

¹³ The earliest known Celtic inscriptions (detailed later, see Koch (2009, 2009a) date to between the seventh to the ninth century BCE. The earliest Sanskrit (from the Vedic period dates from about 1700 to 1100 BCE (Oberlies 1998: 158)

The Horse Queen cannot be understood without explaining the concept of liminality. This concept helps explain both the universal appeal of the Horse Queen, as well as some of the otherwise contradictory aspects of her. Liminality was initially recognized by Arnold van Gennep in the early 1900s, and reiterated and expanded by Victor Turner in the 1960s. Since then this has become a pivotal theme in anthropology, psychology and sociology. The Horse Queen provides the perfect embodiment of this concept. Liminality is a subjective state between two realms of “reality”. This could be any dichotomy; consciousness and sub-consciousness, childhood and adulthood, or even life and death. The liminal state is effectively the middle state between two opposite states. It is often the place of ritual, or where “rites of passage” occur. It is the area where hierarchies dissolve, social classes invert or disappear, and political order is replaced with chaos. This is all done with the goal of solving a particular (personal, political or social) issue. The Horse Queen is a folkloric exemplar of this. She is strongly associated with death (she is often found depicted on grave markers and her modern and ancient depiction is often a horse skull). She is a female queen, as opposed to the kings who are male (hence the importance of sharing her with the king’s body, either through intercourse, or eating horse flesh). She is a god versus a human. She is often depicted with a bird (a horse “flies” on the ground, a bird “gallops” in the air).¹⁴ Perhaps the energy of a galloping horse is even contrasted with the absence of energy in death (and hence the source of her associations with death itself, or the psychopomp who carries souls to the afterlife). Effectively, liminality is reflected in the Horse Queen’s entire image.

In concluding this introduction, this thesis demonstrates how the horse was perceived by the ancient Celts. The domestic animal was ritualized into a horse goddess with power over fertility, sovereignty and death. By examining cross-disciplinary evidence in art, archaeology, and literature these defining characteristics can be demonstrated from ancient to modern times.

¹⁴ The Rig Veda calls the horse the “bird flying below the sky” (Rig Veda, 1.163:6, translation by O’Flaherty 1981: 87).

Of Kings and Coitus

It may initially seem strange to begin a study of Celtic horse rituals in India. Scholars generally agree that there is strong evidence for horse rituals across the Indo-European world (Mallory 2006: 437). Unrecorded rituals and lifeways have left their mark in linguistic remnants and archaeology in the Celtic world. India however, preserves the detail of the actual ritual in contemporaneous literary sources. The evidence strongly suggests similarities in these 1500 BCE Vedic rituals, and their Celtic equivalents.

It is telling that the world's oldest book, the Rig Veda, records this ancient ritual of horse sacrifice. It was composed in the northwest of India during the Vedic period. The most recent scholarly analysis (Oberlies 1998: 158) places its composition between 1700 to 1100 BCE). In this book, a number of poems are devoted to this late Bronze Age ritual. The descriptions of the ritual, as well as the incantations associated with it are remarkably complete. Since this ritual is so relevant to this thesis, it is quoted in full.

1. Mitra, Varuna, Aryaman the Active, Indra the ruler of the Rbhus, and the Maruts –let them not fail to heed us when we proclaim in the assembly the heroic deeds of the racehorse that was born of the gods.
2. When they lead the firmly grasped offering in front of the horse that is covered with cloths and heirlooms, the dappled goat goes bleating straight to the dear dwelling of Indra and Pūsan.
3. This goat for all the gods is led forward with the racehorse as the share for Pūsan. When they lead forth the welcome offering with the charger, Tvastr urges him on to great fame.
4. When, as the ritual law ordains the men circle three times, leading the horse that is to be the oblation on the path to the gods, the [sacrificial] goat who is the share of Pūsan goes first announcing the sacrifice to the gods.
5. The Invoker, the officiating priest, the atoner, the fire-kindler, the holder of the pressing stones, the reciter, the priest who prays – fill your bellies with this well-prepared, well-sacrificed sacrifice.
6. The hewers of the sacrificial stake and those who carry it, and those who carve the knob for the horse's sacrificial stake, and those who gather together the things to cook the charger, -let their approval encourage us.
7. The horse with its smooth back went forth into the field of the gods, just when I made my prayer. The inspired sages exult in him. We have made him a welcome companion at the banquet of the gods.

8. The chargers rope and halter, the reins and bridle on his head, and even the grass that has been brought up to his mount, let all of that stay with you even among the gods.
9. Whatever of the horses flesh the fly has eaten or whatever stays stuck to the stake or the axe, or to the hands or nails of the slaughter, -let all of that stay with you,- even among the gods.
10. Whatever food remains in his stomach, sending forth gas, or whatever smell there is from his raw flesh –let the slaughterers make them well done; let them cook the sacrificial animal until he is perfectly cooked. Whatever runs off of your body when it has been placed on the spit and roasted by the fire, let it not lie there in the earth or on the grass, but let it be given to the gods who long for it.
11. Those who see the racehorse is cooked and say ‘it smells good! Take it away!, and who wait for the dolling out of the flesh of the charger, -let their approval encourage us.
12. The testing fork for the cauldron that cooks the flesh, the pots for pouring the broth, the cover of the bowls to keep it warm, the hooks, the dished, - all these attend the horse.
13. The place where he walks, where he rests, where he rolls, and the fetters on the horses feet, and what he has drunk and the fodder he has eaten, - let all of that stay with you even among the gods.
14. Let not the fire that reeks of smoke darken you, nor the red hot cauldron split into pieces. The gods received the horse who has been sacrificed, worshipped, consecrated, and sanctified with the cry of “Vasat!”
15. The cloth that they spread beneath the horse, the upper covering, the golden trappings on him, the halter and the fetters on his feet –let these things that are his own bind the horse among the gods.
16. If someone riding you has struck you too hard with heel or whip when you shied, I make all these things well again for you with prayer, as they [the priests] do with the oblation’s ladle in sacrificed.
17. The axe cuts through the thirty-four ribs of the racehorse who is the companion of the gods. Keep the limbs undamaged and place them in the proper pattern. Cut them apart, calling it out piece by piece.
18. One is the slaughterer of the horse of Tvaster; two restrain him. This is the rule. As many of your limbs as I set out, according to the rules, so many balls [of rice] I offer into the fire.
19. Let not your dear soul burn you as you go away. Let not the axe do lasting harm to your body. Let no greedy, clumsy slaughterer hack in the wrong place and damage your limbs with his knife.
20. You do not really die through this, nor are you harmed. You go to the gods on paths pleasant to go on. The two bay stallions, the two roan mares are now your chariot mates. The racehorse has been set in the donkeys yoke.

21. Let this racehorse bring us good cattle and good horses, male children and all nourishing wealth. Let Aditi make us free from sin. Let the horse with our offerings achieve sovereign power for us.

Source: The Rig Veda Hymn 1.162. Translation by O'Flaherty 1981: 89-92. Notes in brackets from this author.

This ritual practice is called *Aśvamedha*. The horse (in the Vedic version a racehorse) must be in the prime of youth and stands for virility (Fuchs 1996: 19). It was a practice that could only be performed by anointed kings who ruled over a country (Fuchs 1996: 18). The horse is identified with the universe and the creator and ruler of the world (Fuchs 1996: 18). Interestingly, this ritual is still performed in modern times.

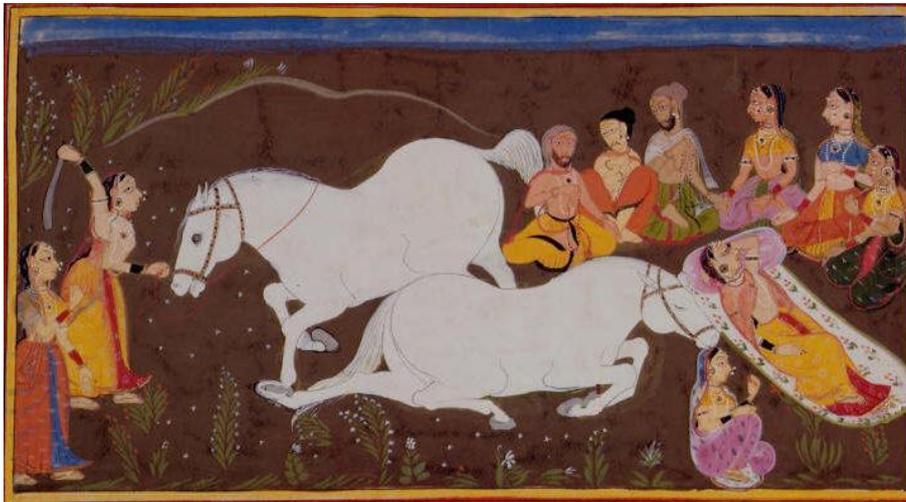


Figure 4. This is an illustration of an *Aśvamedha* from a series of illustrations of the Ramayana (1652) by Sahib Din. This painting shows the horse being sacrificed on the left, and the right hand side is post execution. This illustration is currently located in the British Museum. Source: The British Library © Trustees of the British Museum.

In summarizing the significant points of the horse ritual in Vedic tradition, (Fuchs 1996: 34-35) lists the following points, here abridged for space:

1. The horse is identified with the creator, at times the sun, sometimes with death.
2. The sacrifice is addressed to a deity.
3. The sacrifice was reserved for kings.
4. The purpose of the sacrifice was fertility, the acquisition of sovereignty (conferring kingship) over neighbouring areas, the wellbeing of the people.

5. The sacrifice happens in the spring.
6. Victim was a white or black horse without blemish.
7. The patron of the sacrifice did not perform the sacrifice himself.
8. The place of sacrifice was outside the town.
9. The sacrifice was preceded by the sacrifices of minor victims, often in considerable numbers.
10. Intoxicants play an important role.
11. The horse is dressed up in ornamental gear.
12. The wife of the patron has coitus, or simulated coitus with the horse.
13. When the victim is cut up, care is taken to avoid breaking any bones.
14. A feast is prepared of the flesh of the horse.

This tradition is extensively documented in numerous important ancient works from the Vedic period (about 1000 BCE, perhaps earlier). Confirming the ancient pedigree and the importance of this ritual are mentions in:

- The Ramayana (1.10-15)
- The Mahabharata (14).
- Taittiriya Samhita recension (section 7.1 – 5). Part of this (the Taittiriya-Brahmana section 3.8.4) documents that the horse sacrifice is opened by the sacrifice of a dog.
- The Vajasaneyi Madhyandina recension (section 22-25).
- Both versions of the Vajasaneyi Samhita record the tradition as well as the ritual incantations.
- The earliest Upanishad, the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, identifies the horse with the sun (1.2.7). The horse's sacrificed head is seen as the sun and its body (continuing the solar reference) symbolizes the year. "*Mrtyu*" or Death appears in the shape of a horse.

Effectively this myth involves the coupling of kingship with a divine horse symbolic of sovereignty and fertility over the land. The importance of this ritual in ancient India is unquestioned. That this was used often (and in a non-

destructive way, even today)¹⁵ as an act to confer kingship is well documented. However, this tradition, or something very like it, can be demonstrated to have been used in the Celtic areas as well.



Figure 5. Stylistically this rock art is dated to circa 1000 BCE or possibly earlier.¹⁶ It would be roughly contemporaneous with the Rig Veda description quoted above. Although this imagery is likely very early, horse sacrifice is generally considered an Iron Age phenomenon (Green 1997 3-6) Photo source: Anati 1961: 128.

The photo above is from the Camonica Valley in the Italian Alps. This area is well known for its early rock art. Based on the presence of Urnfield burials, this area is considered to have had an early Celtic presence. There are a number of important things to note about this image. First, whatever was being portrayed here was important enough to be shown in rock art. It shows a male mating with a female horse. Once the initial shock of the image wears off, there are some important details to notice. The individual has a plant held (blooming?) in his hand. The lack of flexion in the horse's legs suggests that the horse is lying down (possibly dead). The imagery of the mare as related to fertility (apparently

¹⁵ Most recently by one million adherents on April 16-20th, 1994 in Chitrakoot, Madhya Pradesh. A statue acted as a stand in for the horse. Source: <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/print.php?itemid=3293> [accessed Jul 13 2011].

¹⁶ Rock art is notoriously difficult to date precisely.

in this case of vegetable as well as human fertility) is a pattern seen continually through Celtic cultures.

Compare the ancient rituals and rock art above to this mediaeval example:

There is in the northern and farther part of Ulster, namely in Kenelcunill, a certain people which is accustomed to appoint its king with a rite altogether outlandish and abominable. When the whole people of that land has been gathered together in one place, a white mare is brought forward into the middle of the assembly. He who is to be inaugurated, not as a chief, but as a beast, not as a king, but as an outlaw, has bestial intercourse with her before all, professing himself to be a beast also. The mare is then killed immediately, cut up in pieces, and boiled in water. A bath is prepared for the man afterwards in the same water. He sits in the bath surrounded by all his people, and all, he and they, eat of the meat of the mare which is brought to them. He quaffs and drinks of the broth in which he is bathed, not in any cup, or using his hand, but just dipping his mouth into it round about him. When this unrighteous rite has been carried out, his kingship and dominion have been conferred.

Giraldus Cambrensis [Gerald of Wales, 1146-1223], *Topographia Hiberniae*, section 102 (translation by O'Meara 1982: 110).

This account describes a similar ritual performed by an Irish king in the twelfth century. The theory of a Horse Queen of sovereignty helps explain these otherwise incomprehensible actions. The horse (always a mare in the Celtic examples) is considered the "goddess" or "queen" of the land and the bestower of kingship. She is a living symbol of the land. By uniting with the horse either through eating it, bathing in its entrails, real or simulated sexual union; the potential king becomes part of the land. The

control and power over the land are transferred from the goddess, to the king. In fact, the oldest Celtic royal names often contained the term "horse" in them, such as the Old Irish *ech* in *Eochaid* and *march* in Old Welsh *Loumarch* (Koch 2006d :1490).

India is far from Ireland, and these rituals occur 2500 years apart, yet their similarity is obvious. One could analyze this, and posit an early connection between Indian culture (specifically Vedic) and early Irish culture. In fact many of the most prominent Celtic scholars have suspected a connection between the Vedic world of India and the early Celtic world.¹⁷ The argument is that besides the inheritance of language from a shared historical background, there was also a transmission of cultural ideas.¹⁸ However, on closer examination this Indo-Celtic¹⁹ theory disintegrates. In short, the changes seen in Celtic languages and Vedic India, besides being separated by half a millennia of time, are separated by thousands of miles. All of the cultural and linguistic affinities seen are better explained by a shared linguistic history.²⁰

Obviously, given the long period that this ritual was used (it is still used in India, and we will argue that the *Mari Lwyd* is an imperfect vestige of it) demonstrates the importance of this ritual to both cultures. But, the shared linguistic, and perhaps cultural history, allow us to use parts of one, to interpret the other. To be clear here, we are not referring to cultural diffusion from India into the Celtic world, we are referring strictly to a shared Indo-European cultural heritage.

The ritual importance of the horse was interpreted differently in different Celtic lands and differently through time. This theme shows itself through imagery, artefacts and literary references. The farther one moves forward in time from when these ideas were openly practiced in a pagan world-view; the more these ideas become diluted with other theologies and motivations. Effectively the original practices become buried under a layer of mediaeval Christian beliefs. It is highly unlikely that those today practising various modern rituals and public displays like the *Mari Lwyd* know the ancient source of what they are doing. Nevertheless, these ideas are buried in tradition and proudly passed through the generations. When examining the modern rites with the knowledge of the

¹⁷ A veritable Who's Who in Celtic Studies: Dillon 1947 and 1973, Binchy 1970, Mac Cana 1972, Richter 1988, Koch 2006d: 1489.

¹⁸ McCone 1991 3. Dumézil in numerous works uses the Indo-European heritage to attach meaning to various mythological themes. The best, and most influential, critique of this approach in regard to specifically Celtic (Irish) theme is McCone 1991.

¹⁹ The term is McCone's, it appears in McCone 1991: 14.

²⁰ McCone, Kim 1986 222-266.

meaning of the ancient rites their connection becomes obvious.²¹ Modern rites are but a pale shadow of their progenitors, but their influence is powerful and very obvious once you have the key to understanding them.

²¹ There are many examples of this in the modern world. We use 60 seconds in time, and 360 degrees in compass points because of the sciences of ancient Babylon. It is a fair assumption that very few who read their watch daily, have any idea of the ancient provenance of their time keeping methodologies.

Lifting the Dragon's Vale

For the White Horse knew England
When there was none to know;
G.K. Chesterton 1911



Figure 6. Photo source: http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-chl/w-countryside_environment/w-archaeology/w-archaeology-places_to_visit/w-archaeology-uffington_white_horse.htm [Accessed Jul 4 2011]

We begin our study with the oldest hill figure in Celtic lands. That is the Uffington White Horse. It lays, one could say prances, two miles south of the town of Uffington (Oxfordshire). It is located on the highest point of the Berkshire Downs, White Horse Hill. This area is rich in Bronze Age remains. Along the tops of the Downs runs the ancient trackway called Ridgeway which converges at Uffington with another ancient trackway, the Icknield Way. A number of earthworks and hill forts are located near the ancient down land tracks. The long barrow of Wayland Smithy and the sarcens at Ashdown House lie nearby. The Bronze Age cemetery of the Lambourn barrows is just south. This area contains remains that demonstrate a continuous occupation since the Bronze Age.

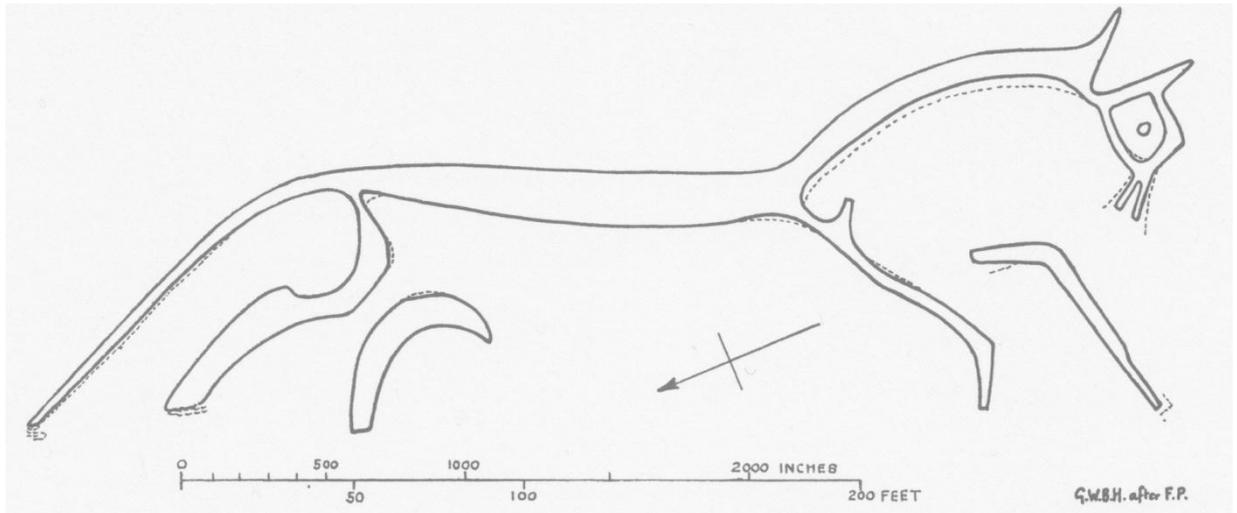


Figure 7. This is redrawn by Huntingford (1957: 107) from Petrie (1928: Plate VI).

This figure is 364 feet 7 inches tall. It lies on a slope that ranges between 35.5 and 24 degrees and is too steep for cultivation (Petrie 1926: 12). Interestingly, a flat hilltop is just above the horse (and there are flat areas all around it). A flat area would have been much easier to maintain. It has the feel of being a display item intentionally placed to face the lands around it. The horse is a carved trench that is filled with chalk. The figure has to be regularly serviced: grass removed, edges trimmed and the trench refilled with chalk which is then compressed.

The horse image is running, not standing. The movement is shown in the legs of the carving and this seems to have been important to the carver (in that a standing horse would have been easier to carve). Showing the legs extended is in line with the later imagery that we see on coinage and is demonstrated in various portable artefacts. In fact, the earliest imagery of horse deities (such as the Gaulish Epona) is always displayed moving. The horse is not shown in a standing pose until Roman times.

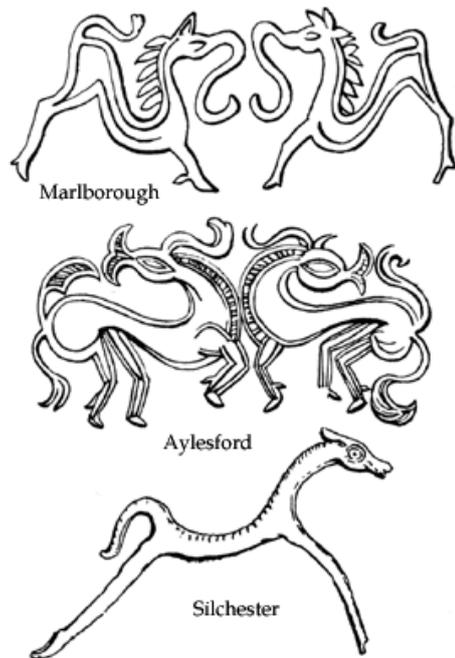


Figure 8. Horse symbols on Iron Age buckets (Marlborough and Aylesford) and a bronze figurine noted by Stuart Piggot (1931).

Photo Source:http://www.berkshirehistory.com/archaeology/white_horse4.html).

Dating the White Horse has until recent times been problematic. The similarity of the White Horse to ancient symbology had long been noted. In 1931 Stuart Piggot compared the structure of the horse to symbols located on various Iron Age buckets and bronze figurines (see Figure 6 above). As we will examine in far greater detail later, coin evidence shows horses depicted in this symbolic style are very common on early Celtic coinage.



Figure 9. Sample Celtic coins demonstrating similarities to the artistry of the horse. Note the sun wheel, stylized horse, and extended legs in these coins. Photo source: <http://earthworks-m.blogspot.com/> [accessed May 29, 2011].

Others (Petrie himself in 1926: 16 being the earliest) however assumed a Bronze Age date by comparing the carving style to that seen in the Bronze Age rock art in other parts of Europe.

Ultimately the hill figure has been successfully dated by dating the colluvium found between two of the layers of the horse's body. This process is called Optical Stimulated Luminescence (OSL). This is a dating technique that allows you to measure when the layer of silt last saw exposure to light. Three dates were produced: the earliest at 1240 plus or minus 360 (BCE), and the latest at 900 plus or minus 340 BCE (Miles and Palmer 1996: 372-378). This placed the horse squarely in the Bronze Age and contemporaneous with our horse rituals.

The most fascinating fact of these studies is this. The Uffington horse was continuously scoured from the Bronze Age forward. Through successive waves of conquerors and immigrants; Celts, Romans, and Saxons, all alike scoured this horse. That both begs the question, and points out the oddity; did all of these peoples have similar belief systems regarding horses? Why a horse? And, at least as far as can be determined, this horse is a mare. The slightly later Rude Man of Cern hill figure demonstrates no cultural biases against displaying male genitalia. Also, this image is not the top of the plateau (facing upward) it is on the side of the hill (facing outwards). It faces the people, not the gods.



Figure 10. Geoglyph from the plains of Nazca, Peru. These are large images created on flat ground facing upward. They are visible only from the air. They are associated with deities (who can view them from the sky, the abode of the gods). These images can be found around the world but are best known from Nazca and the North American Southwest. The most important point of these images (and perhaps their *raison d'être*) is that they are invisible or unrecognizable from the ground. Photo source: <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/nazca/nazca-lines.htm> [accessed May 29, 2011]

It has long been suspected (since Crawford 1929) that the horse symbol acted as a totem animal for those that lived in this area. The horse, being on the side of a hill, would be visible from quite a distance away. The archaeological evidence in fact shows that this figure has drifted over time and would have been more visible in ancient times (Green 1992: 154). This supports the idea of a totemic equine sovereignty goddess protecting the fertility of the people.

The tribe who cut the Uffington horse is not known. Evidence of later nearby Celtic tribes though is known. The Belgae frequented this area, and a coin of the Dobunni was discovered in Uffington Castle. It should be noted that the Bronze Age date of the Uffington horse more or less corresponds with the earliest archaeological discoveries of equestrian gear. Perhaps supporting this is that some early images of the horse show what appears to be a saddle.

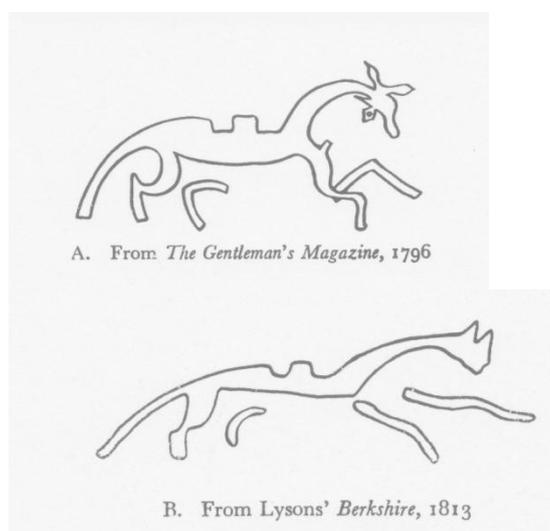


Figure 11. Both images source from Huntington 1957: 107²²

The symbolic association of the horse with the sun (see from the Bronze Age forward Green 1997: 6-7) is not demonstrated directly by these horse images. Later festivities recorded here however involved a number of activities with obvious solar symbology. These are recorded as late as the 19th century and were well known.²³ Thomas Hughes (1857) wrote a novel called “The Scouring of the White Horse”. In it he records the fair atmosphere of the scouring, as well as chasing cheese wheels downhill, and chasing a straw packed wheel that had been lit on fire. These symbols have long association as solar representations

²² The originals are Stone 1796: 105 and Lysons 1813.

²³ A summary of the cheese rolling other ritual evidence is provided by Huntingford 1957: 109-111.

and appear to have been done at Michaelmas.²⁴ Cows, reminiscent of Beltane rituals, are also recorded as being paraded through fires for fertility (Newman 1997: 28-29). As mentioned, the area around the horse has numerous Bronze Age sites that are in fact believed to be related to solar worship.

Interpretation:

There are a number of definitive statements that can be made about the horse.

1. The amount of work to create an image this size demonstrates the importance that a horse had as a symbolic image.
2. The image does not face upward to the sky. This image was created to be viewed by humans, and possibly by deities, from a great distance.
3. Three millennia of scouring of this horse (to prevent it from being overgrown and disappearing) show that this symbol had importance to all the generations that viewed it to the present day.

It cannot be demonstrated that this image related to horse sacrifice. But, the very existence of the horse figure at this early age authenticates the horse as an important image and likely cultic object in this area at the dawn of history.

²⁴ A good source of more up-to-date information is located at:
http://www.berkshirehistory.com/archaeology/white_horse3.html [accessed May 29, 2011]

Of Hill Forts and Horses

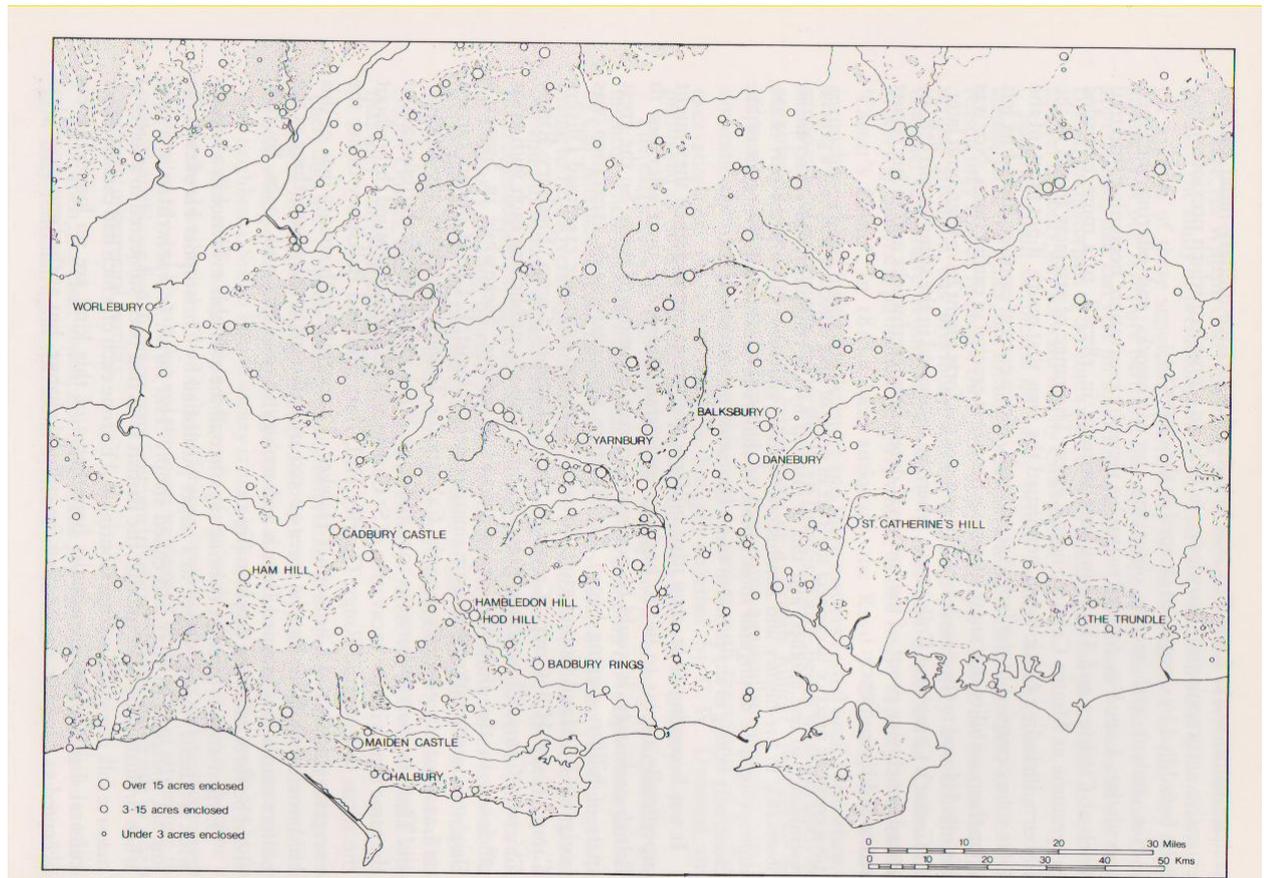


Figure 12. Map redrawn by Cunliffe 1983: 14. Based on the Ordnance Survey (1962) Map: *Southern Britain of the Iron Age*.

This map shows the numerous hill forts in the south of England. Some of these are quite large; covering over 15 acres. As a generalization, wherever a hill fort is found, enigmatic animal burials will be found also (Green 1992: 100-104).

If the Indian ritual mentioned above has a Celtic or proto-Celtic equivalent, there is value in asking what would it look like archaeologically? There should be the remains of horses buried with obvious evidence of being treated ritualistically. There would also be remains documenting feasting, likely in the form of extensive cattle and sheep bones. This is precisely what is found in Iron Age excavations.

Hill forts are Iron Age occupation sites. Until the 1930s, these forts were somewhat mysterious in that so few had been properly and extensively excavated. This changed in recent times. Perhaps the most famous excavation

of a hill fort was Mortimer Wheeler's work on Maiden Castle (Wheeler 1943). However, since then a number of hill forts have been excavated.

We concentrate on one particular hill fort, Danebury. It is extensively excavated and the encircling land geophysically surveyed. Also, some of the best known archaeologists have examined this site and agree on the ritual nature of the material.²⁵ There were numerous "special deposits" (the term used in archaeology for enigmatic animal burials). Although we will examine this fort in detail, the evidence for ritualized horse burials and its accoutrements are not unique.²⁶ What demarcates this particular site is that it is so well documented that conclusions can be drawn regarding the types of rituals practised there.

A sampling of well known sites in Britain with documented horse burials:

<u>Site Location</u>	<u>Nature of the finds</u>
Danebury (Hamp)	Bodies and Skulls
Tollard Royal (Wilts)	Body
Newstead (Scotland)	Skulls only
Blewburton Hill (Blewbury)	Bodies and Skulls
South Cadbury (Som)	Skulls only
Camulodunum (Essex)	Jawbones



Figure 13. This goat, located next to a horse burial, has been ritually sacrificed. (Danebury, photo source: Cunliffe 1983: 158). ".... The [sacrificial] goat who is the share of Pūsan goes first announcing the sacrifice to the Gods" (Rig Veda, 1.162, section 4).

²⁵ Such as Cunliffe (1983, 1992: 69-83), Grant (1984: 221-227, 1989: 79-86, 1991 109-114) Poole 1995: 249-247.

The association of ritual deposits and hill forts in Britain is extensively documented.²⁷ It has also been noted that horse skeletons have been found in various contexts across Europe as well as the ones in the UK.²⁸ Although the extent of early Celtic geography is somewhat debatable, it can be said that horse burials are found throughout the earliest known Celtic areas.

Single horse burials

“The axe cuts through the thirty four ribs of the racehorse who is the companion of the gods [i.e. sacrificed]. Keep the limbs undamaged and place them in the proper pattern.” (Rig Veda, Hymn 1.162, section 18).

Perhaps the first question to ask is how a ritual horse burial can be demarcated from other types of horse burials. The burial of a single horse in a trash pit is not uncommon.²⁹ Burials of chariots (with and without horses) and individuals with horses and riding gear are also extensively documented. The burial pits of these individuals often have evidence of feasting in the remains of cattle and pigs in obvious trash heaps bearing cut marks related to butchery.

The enigmatic horse burials are very different however. The horse skeletons are found buried individually. The remains are not in groups or in trash pits with other animals. They do not have riding gear associated with them. To all appearances, they were not treated or buried in a trash pit as the animals for feasting purposes were. Unlike the bones of pigs and cattle, where the preserved remains reflect the body parts used for feasting, the entire horse, in one piece, is often present. The skeleton is manipulated after death. Meaning the horse was defleshed, the “meat” removed and the bones reconstructed. This is fairly easy to ascertain in that a horse naturally decomposing has its bones fall apart in the ground giving it a scattered appearance. These remains are often put together back in their anatomically proper order. Occasionally other animal bones are placed with it. For example a dog’s skull, placed on a

²⁷ Wait 1985 presents an extensive bibliography.

²⁸ Well known examples from the Continent include: (France): Saintes; Gournay-sur-Aronde; and the previously mentioned Ribemont-sur-Ancre. Even the far edges of the Celtic world are represented, Lipstovska Mara in Slovakia being a particularly well known example.

²⁹ A general analysis of Iron age sacrifices and what is known of them in relation to cross cultural research can be found in Wilson 1999: 297-305

horse's body. This points rather dramatically to some form of ritual being carried on in these areas.

Often a horse's skull is found alone, buried in a pit. As we will demonstrate later, this type of burial has magical associations even in modern times.



Figure 14. The finds of single horse skulls in burial mounds infers an obvious ritual significance of the lone horse skull. This individual horse's head was found buried at the bottom of a pit in Danbury (photo source: Cunliffe 1983: 159).

For comparison purposes, this is a "normal" horse burial



Figure 15. This is an Iron Age horse burial from Carshalton (photo courtesy of Wessex Archaeology: http://www.wessexarch.co.uk/blogs/news/2010/09/23/animal-burials-carshalton?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+wessexarchaeology+%28Wessex+Archaeology%29 [accessed Jul 13 2011])

It should be noted that animal burials were normal in this time frame. It is believed that these were related to fertility, and were placed at the bottom of old and unused (usually grain) storage pits. This is theorized to be a way to give back to the underworld gods. Note the legs are placed in against the body. The head is connected to the neck.



Figure 16. The photo above shows a ritualized horse burial in a grain storage pit. The horse is buried with a dog (on the middle top of this picture). The horse's head was removed and placed above the body (the upper left hand of this picture). The horse has been laid out extended. One front and one rear leg had also been removed and placed back into position after death (compare this to the previous figure). Cunliffe (1983: 157) theorizes that the position of the skull and leg bones may have had ritual significance. Importantly for our studies, this position of the extended leg will be seen in all of our examples of later horse deities.

Another area that impacts this particular study is specialized burials of birds. The bird most commonly buried is the raven (Cunliffe 1983: 158-159). This is particularly important because it is never used as a food source. It is over represented in the archaeological record given its general rarity in the bird population (Green 1992: 126). Birds are also mentioned in the Rig Veda in association with the horse (Rig Veda, 1.163:6, translation by O'Flaherty 1981:

87) and are seen in association with later horse deity imagery and mediaeval literature.

Interpretation:

It cannot be said conclusively that the “special deposits” in these burial pits are associated with a “Celtic” or proto-Celtic *Aśvamedha* type of kingship ritual. This remains unproven and circumstantial at this point. What can be stated is that the finds in these burials strongly resemble what was detailed in the Vedic traditions and described in Ireland. The remains recovered (dogs, goats, ritually butchered horses reassembled after the fact, feasting remains) are all recorded in the same fashion as is described in those sources.

The Free Celts

The Celtic peoples before the Roman conquest have been called the “Free Celts”.³⁰ The majority of evidence of from this period is iconographic, usually in the form of portable sculptures and jewellery. There is however some fragmentary literary evidence seen in inscriptions that confirm the association of horses with female deities. The Celtic peoples did not at this point have their own alphabet. Without their own script, they used other alphabets (or a mixture of several) to mimic the sounds of their languages. This was difficult because the ancient alphabets available had different sound structures than the Celtic languages. This has made translations of these inscriptions difficult and many are only now being deciphered.

Currently the oldest examples³¹ of this come from ancient Spain and Portugal. These peoples possessed a language variously called South Lusitanian, South-western or Tartessian. This is part of a new language group called “Hispano-Celtic”.³² There are about 75 steles (usually grave markers) virtually all having been found unprovenanced (outside of their original locations). Hence archaeological examination has been difficult and information sparse. Most often these contain short one sentence inscriptions of a funereal nature and date from about the seventh to ninth century BCE. The inscriptions on the steles have been documented and translated (in English) by Koch 2009a. In his listing of inscriptions we have number “Braciate 2”, inscription number J.4.1.

³⁰ The popularization of the term originates with Miranda Green and is now widely used to describe Celtic peoples before Roman rule.

³¹ It is possible that the Botoritta inscriptions are older, but they are in the main untranslated (Koch 2006a 232-234).

³² Cunliffe and Koch 2010: 293-295



Figure 17. This stone (demarcated J.4.1) is called “Benaciate 2”. It comes from San Bartolomeu de Messines in South Portugal. Photo source: Cunliffe and Koch 2010: 216.

← X4E OYA39A4OY4#A Y#Y#E Y
 ←]**A9A39A3#OY Y
 ← #ΔO9#AX**[
 ?

iboo-ijon asune uarbaan ekurine obaar baara**[(or iboonion. . .)
]**taa oretoo
 ?

Source: Koch 2009: 30.

Koch (2009: 30) translates this as:

For the ones whom I (this grave) carry, for Asuna, the supreme one, for Ekurini.... deliverance (literally running under)'

Koch reads the etymology of *Ekurini* as *Ekvorinī* (Horse Queen, combining the Proto-Celtic horse *ek^wo with *rīganī queen). This can be compared to many other Celtic languages. There is the Gaulish Epona (related to Gaulish epos, horse), in its most common form in Latin inscriptions: Eponae Reginae (Horse

Goddess Queen). It can be seen in the Welsh Rhiannon (Proto-Celtic: *rīganī queen)³³,

Another stone associated with Benaciate 2, is Benaciate 1. It is of the same type of stone and the same width. It likely contains an image associated with this inscription. Although the stone is damaged, it appears to show an image of a large hipped woman riding a horse side-saddle. In her arms is a sceptre, or if we can use the later images of Epona as a source, the stylized reins of her horse. She is wearing a helmet on her head. This helmet has been compared to a Corinthian helmet found in the river Guadalete near Cadiz (Cunliffe and Koch 2010: 217). The goddess riding side-saddle is distinctive of Epona (who when riding is always represented this way, Green1986: 92). The sloping back of the horse is similar to the horse representations found at the fifth to fourth century BCE horse cult centre in Marchena (southwest Spain).

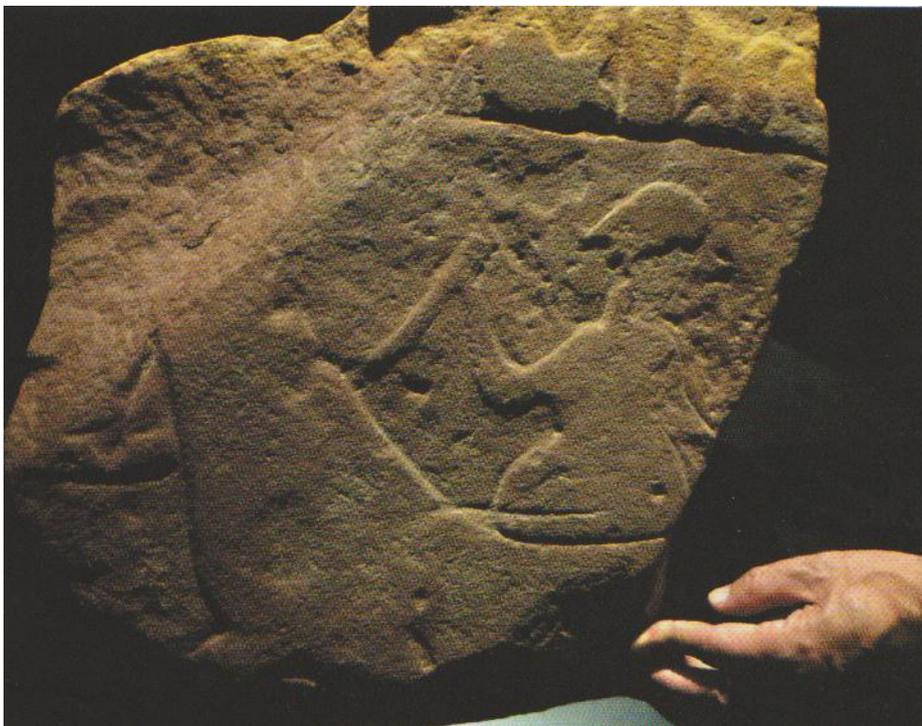


Figure 28. Photo source: Image by Jane Aaron, located in Cunliffe and Koch 2010: 216.

³³ All etymologies from Proto-Celtic source from Matasavić, Ranko, 2009

With an outline of the image provided:

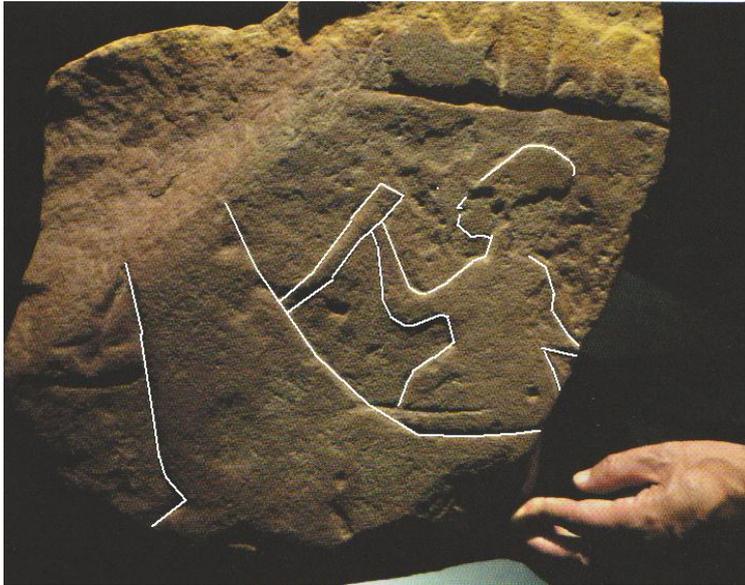


Figure 19. Note the sloping back of the horse, as well as the helmet with apparent nose-guard. In line with Epona imagery, the woman sits side-saddle. The front leg is extended. Outlining by the author.

Koch (Cunliffe and Koch 2010: 217) compares these images to late Bronze Age imagery and suggests that the Ekurini figure must have had widespread popularity throughout the South-western peninsula.

Interpretation:

This evidence demonstrates the earliest version of the pattern that repeats throughout this study. The horse deity is shown to be etymologically associated to a horse “queen”. Her location on grave markers implies associations with death (and therefore liminality). Like later imagery, she rides side-saddle on a horse that is moving (the front leg of the horse is extended). She is also portrayed in local clothing (in this case war gear, specifically a locally sourced helmet).

There is a possibility that this imagery defines an early role associated with the Horse Queen. This is important because in this armour-clad image she is associated not only with death, but perhaps its natural expansion, war. These were warrior-based cultures with their entire lifeways revolving around war

(Almagro-Gorbea and Lorrio, 2004). This idea of a horse associated goddess of war is also implied on some early Celtic coinage:



Figure 20. Photo source: de La Tour and Fischer 2001.

This is a gold quarter stater from around the second or third century BCE, from Armorica (north-west France). The coin sources from the Redones, the Celtic tribe that gave its name to Renne. There are a number of relevant points to note about these so-called “Naked cavalry-women” coins.³⁴ The warrior carries a shield in her right hand. She is obviously female (her breasts are detailed to point out this out). A solar image (the cluster in front of the horse is a sun wheel derivative) implies solar associations, this possibly symbolically showing that the individual portrayed is a deity. The lyre below her may be indicative of stories told about her. Far later Irish legend also associates a war goddess (Macha) with both horses and sovereignty. At this point, this stone carving being both the earliest and our only image from our study area, no definitive conclusions can be drawn. But this image is illustrative of a pattern seen through out the Celtic world.

³⁴ There are no discussions in English regarding this important imagery. It is quite possible this in fact shows a Celtic Goddess of War (she is shown on other Gaulic coins in a chariot clasp a torque). She is generally interpreted (based on Duval, the only study on the matter) as “Naked Cavalry-woman”. The discussion is in Duval 1987: 49-64.

Epona

In the Gallo-Roman provinces there was the goddess Epona. She was a protector of horses and has the distinction of being the only Celtic goddess widely worshipped in Rome. She appears to have initially been a fertility goddess (often shown with sheaves of grain or cornucopias). Her widespread appearance on Roman grave stones suggest that she performed the role of the psychopomp and carried people over to the other side in death. It is perhaps natural that although originally a sovereignty deity, among such a cavalry driven warrior peoples she would later become a horse deity (along with the *Campestres*) for the horse guard in Rome (Speidel 1994: 48).

There is no extent legendary material on Epona. All that has survived are numerous statuary, brief mention in classical references and linguistic information. Her worship was widespread over the Roman Empire with her role being spread by the Roman cavalry. She was widely worshipped between the first and third centuries CE. Her role as the protector of horses is attested in numerous archaeological remains as well as some short classical references. A stone calendar inscription found in Guidizzolo (Lombardy) Italy identifies her feast day as 18 December (Boucher 1999: 15-22).³⁵

Her name is etymologically related to “*epos*” the Gaulish name for horse (best translated as “Great Mare”). Even though the name is obviously Gaulish, the only surviving inscriptions are from Roman contexts (usually in Latin) and call her *Eponae Reginae*, or the Horse Goddess Queen.

She is always represented iconographically riding side-saddle on a mare, or with a group of horses. Although she would evolve into the protectress of cavalry soldiers and their animals, she was more commonly seen as a deity of fertility and the wellbeing of the tribe. Although as far as can be determined, she was not seen by the Romans at this stage as a goddess of the land, her previous nature can be seen in the attributes of Epona.

³⁵ The possibility exists that this was strictly a local celebration and not pan-Roman.

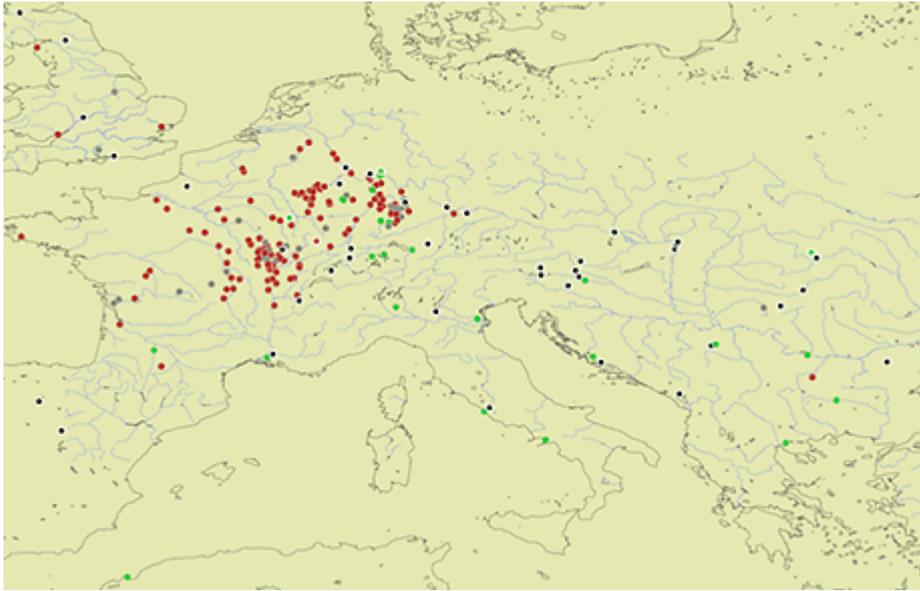


Figure 21. Distribution of Epona inscriptions. Note the concentration in Gaul. Source: <http://www.epona.net/distribution.html> [accessed April 26 2011]

There are some surviving classical references to her that shed light on how she was worshipped.

“...after the manner of King Numa; before the altar of Jupiter he swears an oath to Epona, her icons painted in the smelly stables.”

Satires: Juvenal VIII, line 156-158 (Translation by the author).³⁶

“These thoughts were interrupted by my catching sight of a statue of the goddess Epona seated in a small shrine centrally placed, where a pillar supported the roof beams in the middle of the stable. The statue has been devotedly garlanded with freshly picked roses” Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* Bk 3:27 (Translation by Walsh 2008: 55).

The quotes above demonstrate some elements of Epona worship. Oaths were sworn to her, and her imagery was painted, icon like, on the inside of barn walls.

In what has always struck the author as odd, there is no legendary material that has survived from ancient times regarding Epona. Odd, because she was

³⁶ Latin Source: <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/juvenal/8.shtml> [accessed April 26, 2011]

obviously important given the extensive remains of her cults. The main source of our information is iconic data. This consists of statuary, bas-relief as well as several painted images. It has been estimated that several hundred of these have been recorded.³⁷

Iconography

Side-saddle type:

There are several classifiable themes in the Epona imagery. Benoit (1950) identifies: riding, standing/seated before a horse; seated/standing before two horses; a symbolic tamer of horses; the symbolic mare and foal. However, several of these are very rare. Effectively the most common imagery can be simplified to two general categories, those from outside of Gaul, and those inside. Outside Gaul is often referred to as the Imperial type (sitting on a throne) and from inside Gaul we have the “Equestrian” or Side-saddle type.

Epona is most often displayed seated on a horse, sideways (her legs together facing the viewer, not in the manner of a modern side-saddle). Her left hand is touching the horse and her right hand usually holds an offering (bread, grain, or fruit) or offering dish of some kind. She is usually wearing a long dress (where it can be identified, this appears to be in the local style). The horse is moving. One will note the similarity of this imagery with the imagery half a millennium before in the Tartessian inscriptions (see figure 19).

³⁷Quoted in www.epona.net/depictions.html [accessed February 7, 2011].

Imagery:³⁸



Figure 22. This stature is from Champoulet (Loiret, Centre, France)³⁹ from between the first and second century AD. Once again we see the front leg is extended. Artefact currently located in Musée D'Archéologie Nationale (Saint-Germain-en-Laye). Photo by the author.



Figure 23. Note the extended leg. This artefact is located in the Musée D'Archéologie Nationale (Saint-Germain-en-Laye). Photo by the Author.

³⁸ Iconographic representations of Epona are cataloged in four large catalogs: Magnen and Thevenot (1953), Reinach (1895-1903); Esperandieu (1907) and Euskirchen, M. (1993). It is traditional to refer to Epona images by the catalog they are represented in.

³⁹ Reinach 1989 #2A, Magnon and Thevenot #79.

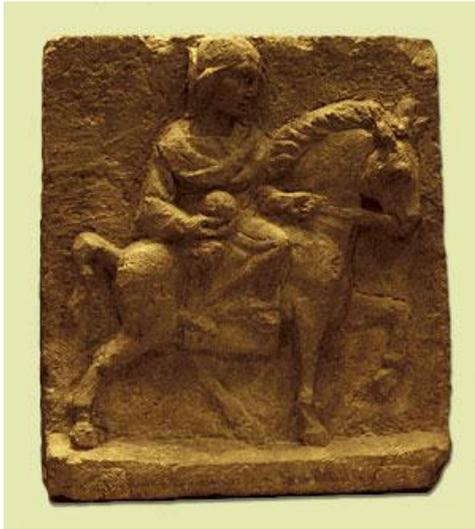


Figure 24. This relief is from Kastel (Hesse, Germany). She is depicted wearing local dress and carries a piece of fruit or a round loaf of bread. Her hands are shown carrying the reins similar to other images of the Horse Queen (See figure 14 in the Tartessian example).⁴⁰ Source: <http://www.epona.net/depictions.html#side> [Accessed 6/15/11].



Figure 25. These are first to second century carvings. Photo Source: Musée Vivant Denon, Chalon-sur-Saône (France). They are copyrighted by the museum. Often in these images, her hair is braided like sheaves of wheat. Her head has a crown upon it.

⁴⁰ Esperandieu #4352, Magnen and Thevenot #188.

She is occasionally seen with a child and also with a dog. This mirrors the finds found in hill fort burials.



Figure 26. Epona and a dog. Stele originates from Ouroux-sur-Saône (Saône-et-Loire). Dated between the first and second century AD. Artefact located in Musée D'Archéologie Nationale (Saint-Germain-En-Laye* confirm name). Photo by the author.

Importantly (given her associations with death), her image is often found on gravestones.

The “imperial” types show her sitting on a throne between two or more horses.



Figure 27. Epona sits between two ponies (one male and one female). This is likely a part of a chariot mount. The goddess carries a yoke in her left hand, and sheaf of grain in her right. (Source: The British Library © Trustees of the British Museum (used with permission).

An important question to our studies is how long did the cult of Epona last? This can be answered in an unusual source. A book was written by Aurelius Celmens Prudentius in northern Spain. He was a Christian apologist born in 348 (death date unknown) writing in the late fourth century to the early fifth century. He wrote a work to explain the concept of the Trinity. It is entitled *Apotheosis*. In it (speaking disparagingly) on line 195-199, he says:

“Nobody gives a throne to the goddesses Cloacina [goddess of the sewers] or Epona above the stars, even though he opens an oiled incense-box and investigates grains of spelt and entrails with

sacrilegious hands.” Prudentius (translation by H. J. Thomson 1949)⁴¹

This demonstrates two important facts. First, that in the fifth century AD the cult of Epona was still known (as was her association with wheat). Second, that the coin evidence seen during this time frame, and even later, is most likely that of Epona.

⁴¹ Full text available at:

http://www.archive.org/stream/prudentiuswithen01pruduoft/prudentiuswithen01pruduoft_djvu.txt

[Accessed Jun 3 2011]

Kings, Celts and Coins

Epona is easily traced up to her adoption by the Romans as a patron deity of the Roman cavalry. As can be seen in Figure 21 (above) she is extensively documented in Gaul. At this point she is seen in the Roman Empire as a protectress of horses. The question must be asked, was there a more Celtic view of a Horse Queen in Britain? If modern rituals are related to a Horse Queen, one would imagery of a horse deity demonstrating fertility and sovereignty aspects in the Britain of this time frame.



Figure 28. Source: Rudd et al 2010: 8. Celtic coinage is only found on the south-eastern part of England.

Coinage is unique in providing both a contemporaneous and iconographic source of information. It is something of an open question why the iconography that almost definitely includes examples of lost Celtic imagery of gods, known and unknown kings and queens as well as demonstrations of ritual and folkloric practices, is virtually unknown and poorly understood (Hobbs 1996: 9). There are some important symbols that can be seen on British coins.⁴² These

⁴² A note on sources: Coins are classified according to catalogs that illustrate them. In most cases below the coins have been copied in a manner that preserves their source. ABC 123 is the catalog Ancient British Coins (Rudd et al, 2010) coin number 123. Coins with no alphabetic reference and just a number are from Allen 1980. Individual coins that are from other references will be quoted directly.

symbols are presented below in order of decreasing frequency.⁴³ It is important to note that similar imagery can be seen on coinage anywhere people speaking a Celtic language dwelled.⁴⁴

Horse:

Stylized horses are the most common image on Celtic⁴⁵ and British coins. They are, almost without exception (when displayed singularly) mares.

Sun disk (sun wheel, sun imagery, etc.):

This is an image associated with the sun. Historically this often betrays a solar divinity. In this time frame, there is some controversy if whether this represents an actual solar deity or acts as a marker meaning “deity” or “divine”. It is noteworthy that on almost all coins with horse imagery, a sun symbol, or the sun itself is shown. As will be seen on our examples, the sun disk has become rather stylized by this timeframe.

Birds:

Birds are often (although not universally) shown with the horse imagery. Often the bird cannot be positively identified. When they can be identified, however, eagles and crows or ravens are common (Allen 1980: 142).

Lyre:

Lyres are also seen on coins. Although rare in coins from Gaul (the author is aware of only a handful of examples from third to first century BCE Gaul), on British coins these are common. Where this symbol is seen, it is always in relation to a horse figure. It is conjecture (although supported by the far later Welsh bardic tales of Rhiannon), but these appear to imply lost tales of the horse deity.

Some samples of specifically British coins from specific regions are below. All of the coins in this section come from the first century BCE to the first century AD.

⁴³ English academia remains fairly silent on this symbology, the best English entrance into Celtic coin symbology is Lilly 2008, and in French Duval (1987) has the most insightful approach.

⁴⁴ A good introduction to this is Allen 1980:1-30.

⁴⁵ Allen 1980: 141



Figure 29. This map presents an attempt to determine the tribes that minted coins, based on tribal references on the coinage, detailed information from coin hoards, as well as classical sources is below. It is believed that between 50 – 40 BCE, thirteen tribal groups produced coinage (Rudd et al 2010: 8).

The Iceni were famed horse breeders, and perhaps for this reason it is not surprising fully 97 percent of the known coin types⁴⁶ display horses. But, true to Celtic form, these horses are surrounded by fertility symbols as well as magical symbols. These horses (female in all cases) appear to represent fertility of the land, in the guise of sun symbols, as well as grain symbols.



Figure 30. This is a gold stater. The obverse has two opposite facing moons. This symbol is common in Iceni coinage. The reverse shows a mare, beneath her is a sun wheel. Above the horse is a sheaf of grain.

⁴⁶ Rudd et al. 2010 : 78

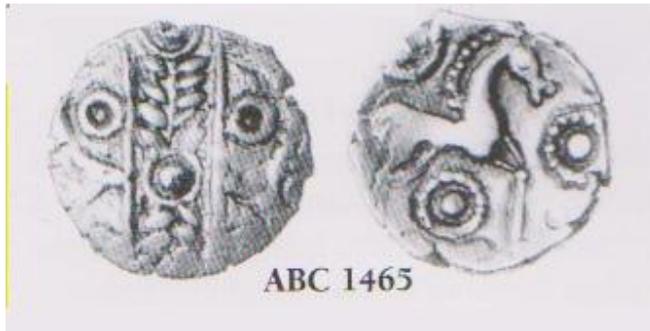


Figure 31. The obverse of this quarter gold stater has the grain sheaf (called in numismatics, the corn-ear motif) often used by the Iceni. There is a horse and sun disk imagery on the reverse. The symbolism of fertility and sun is here as well.



Figure 32. This is a silver unit. It has a stylized head on the obverse, but a horse with a sun symbol, and a sheaf of corn below it.



Figure 33. The coin above is a gold stater believed to have been minted during the time of the Catuvellauni ruler Addedomaros (45-25 BCE) Rudd et al 2010: 126. The Catevullauni ruled a large amount of territory roughly bordered by the rivers: Nen, Thames, and Cherwell. Note the obvious fertility symbols in the wreath of grain on the obverse, as well as the cornucopia under the horse on the reverse.

These coins come from the region identified on our map above called Regini (Figure 29).



Figure 34. This is a silver unit. A Cernunnos figure (an antlered god) is on the obverse. He has a sun between his antlers, as well as various sun symbols around him. The reverse shows the horse with a sheaf of grain for a tail, surrounded by star symbols, as well as a sun disk under her belly.



Figure 35. The obverse of this silver unit is a stylized face (with a moon shaped mouth). The reverse has a horse with a sun disk below, and a sun swirl above with various stars.



Figure 36. This is also from the region of the Regini. This dates to the middle of the First century BCE (Rudd et al 2010: 53). The lyre can be seen underneath the horse with the sun above it.

Conclusions

Due to space limitations, we can only show a very small sampling of British coins. These all demonstrate the existence of the ideals seen in the earlier imagery associated with the Horse Queen. The association of the fertility of

crops, deity (or solar) implications, and even kingship (the obverse of these coins is often a portrait of the king) is here. Even birds are occasionally seen on these coins in association with a horse.

Coinage is our last definitive imagery that can be associated with the Horse Queen. However, just as the dark ages begin to erase all data, something else appears in the Christian world. This scared the church fathers almost as much as the images of the original pagan deities did.

Masking the Church



Figure 37. This fourteenth-century manuscript shows a group of masked dancers (note the horse costume on the right) being reprimanded by a censured Benedictine monk. The end result of this is obvious, in that the monk is carrying an up-raised club. Interestingly, although this manuscript is about Alexander the Great, it includes various images of masked dancers. It is written in Flemish, with an Anglo-Norman painting style.

(MS Bodley 264, Bodleian Library 1933, plate 21).

The Dark Ages are called 'dark' because of the lack of information that has survived history from this time period. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to determine what type of horse rituals were being performed at this point. But there is some extent documentation in an unexpected area. The last obvious examples of the Horse Queen are seen in the area of coinage. But, coexistent with the last of this coinage are suggestions that the idea of the Horse Queen in the British Islands is changing form. From the subtle of imagery on coins, we are beginning to see the Horse Queen becoming typified in life. The first intimations that the horse imagery is altering can be seen in condemnations by the church. If the comments from the Church fathers can be taken at face value, they were at odds with some unusual practices.

"If you ever hear of anyone carrying on that most filthy practice of dressing like a horse or a stag, punish him most severely." St Augustine (385 AD).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ ... sordissiman turpitudinem de hinnicula vel cervula. Augustine, Sermons, 265,5. Although this is the one most often quoted, the topic was also touched on in Sermons: 130,2; 129 (De Calendis Ianuariis 2).

Behold the days come, behold the kalends come, and the whole devilish public procession goes forth. The New Year is consecrated with old blasphemies. Whatever deformities are lacking in nature, which creation does not know, art labours to fashion. Besides, people are dressed as cattle, and men are turned into women. They laugh at honour, they offend justice, they laugh at public disapproval, they mock at the example of our age, and say that they are doing this as a joke. These are no jokes, these are crimes. A man is changed into an idol, and if it is a fault to go to an idol, what can it mean to be one?

Caesarius of Arles (circa 470 to 543) ⁴⁸

Theodore, the Archbishop of Canterbury in his list of (purported) ecclesiastical laws (690, the *pseudo Liber Penitentialis*) describes the practice of those “who on the kalends of January, clothe themselves with the skins of cattle and carry the heads of animals”.

Although evidence is lacking for much of this time, the scant references to masked traditions act as potent clues. It is not beyond reason that the traditions embodied in these masked displays spawned both the later hobby horse and *Mari Lwyd* traditions. Before examining the specific masked traditions, there is evidence that the Horse Queen in her traditional mythological role was still in existence. This evidence is in iconographic form, and in literature.

⁴⁸ Catholic Encyclopedia (1913)/St. Caesarius of Arles, available online at: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_\(1913\)/St._Caesarius_of_Arles](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/St._Caesarius_of_Arles) [accessed 06/27/2011)

The Franks Casket and the *Mari Lwyd*

Our next example, and possibly one of the earliest and most definitive examples of a horse masked ritual, comes from Northumbria. It is called the Franks Casket, and can be dated (via the style of both the Anglo-Saxon runes and similarity of the box to Late Antiquity caskets) arguably to the first half of the ninth century, or possibly as late as 1000 AD.



Figure 38. This is the side panel from the Franks Casket. This is currently located in two pieces, the majority of it is in the British Museum, and the side panel is located in the Bargello Museum in Florence. Photo source: (http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_image.aspx?image=ps200646.jpg&etpage=23002 [© Trustees of the British Museum used with permission])



Figure 39. Photo of the left hand panel. Photo from the British Museum, by the author.

We see a person wearing a horse costume. Note the horse mask over the torso of the left hand figure, as well as the wings on the arm area. There is a bird's neck and head just over the horse's head. The individual is sitting down and appears to be human. It has been theorized that this is a shaman in a costume. Note the plant (symbolizing fertility or the land) in the one hand, and a stick in the other. The warrior that accosts him or her is heavily armed carrying a shield and spear, as well as wearing a helmet.



Figure 40. Photo of the centre image of the casket. Photo from the British Museum, by the author.

In the second panel, we see a horse “floating” in the air (the hoofs are angled as if not on a flat surface). Note it is surrounded by vegetation, as well as some symbols that look suspiciously like Celtic style knot work. Also note the plant growing out of the horse’s posterior (betraying fertility connotations). This reminds one of the blooming plant seen in the rock art of three thousand years previous. A bird appears below the floating horse. The horse bows its head down to the figure in front of it. That figure has a holy chalice in front of him, and has a crucifix behind him. To all appearances this is a horse deity, bowing down before a Christian priest. Hemming (1998: 35), in one of the few attempts to understand this image interprets this as Rhiannon on the mound at the beginning of the Four Branches.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ In point of fact, at least in the story, it is actually Pwyll that sits on the mound.



Figure 41. Photo of the right-hand side of the panel. The central figure being seized appears (due to the face shape and narrow feet) to be female. Photo from the British Museum, by the author.

The final triptych shows a woman (presumably the one wearing the horse costume in the previous screen, being seized by two individuals who appear to be authority figures. Note that she appears to be wearing part of the costume (the legs are clearly visible) which has been pulled down from her head.

This has all the appearances of a *Mari Lwyd* type of ritual, running afoul of the church. Interestingly, the individual accosting the person wearing the costume bears armour. If this ritual had subtle association with sovereignty, it could be seen as a threat to kings, as well as church. The other panels on this casket all represent Christian imagery, so the anti-pagan rhetoric is not without precedence.

An interesting point here refers to the bird image. The first triptych shows the horse costume having wings on it and a birds head over it. The middle image has a bird located under the horse. As we have seen, this linking of horse deity and bird imagery has roots in very ancient times. In the later *Mabinogion*, the

“birds of Rhiannon” appear announce a coming of a liminal stage. They seem to represent the entering of the heroes into a fairy world (associated with a mound) where time passes differently. Perhaps the symbolism on the Franks Casket (as well as its ancient imagery) provides the birds to demonstrate that this goddess is a queen of an otherworld, or a type of fairyland.

The casket has runic inscriptions around the panels. In the other runic panels, the inscription, although cryptic (it combines different rune types and alphabets) has been effectively translated. This particular panel however has been troublesome and interpreted in alternative and contradictory ways. There have been four attempts at translating this text. However it must be said that at best these can only be guesses. Only three words are in fact recognizable and definitive. It appears likely that this inscription is intentionally cryptic. It begs to be read as a cipher. However, the key to that cipher has not yet been discovered and for this reason the runes remain indecipherable. It is an area of future study to ask why every single instance of the Horse Queen is associated with either seemingly lost legends, or in this case apparent secrecy.

Rhiannon: the Horse Queen Trots into History

Perhaps the best known Welsh mediaeval stories are the tales of the *Mabinogion*. The Four Branches form a related round of stories featuring some of the same characters. One of these characters is Rhiannon.

The writer of the *Mabinogi* is unknown, and as far as can be determined was written in the eleventh or twelfth century. There is no scholarly agreement regarding the author or the exact date of writing. Whoever the writer was had a familiarity with Celtic fairy tales, Irish literature and local history. They knit together a series of literary tales (most of which appear to have been read aloud) possibly as a way of both providing entertainment to the court, as well as preserving stories that were then disappearing. Rhiannon features most prominently in the First Branch (Pwyll, prince of Dyfed).⁵⁰ She appears to be a “complex blend of euhemerized Celtic goddess, fairy mistress, folktale heroine, and elegantly imagined literary character” (Hemming 1998: 19).

The connection of Rhiannon with Epona was first recognized by Edward Anwyl in 1896 (277-293). In fact her connection to a horse goddess is one of the few items accepted by most scholars.⁵¹

There are a number of items that point to her being both a euphemized deity and related to a fairy world.⁵² The name Rhiannon is etymologically related to High Queen (Proto-Celtic: **rīganī* queen).⁵³ She enters the first branch wearing a gold outfit, and riding a white horse⁵⁴ that cannot be captured. Her horse which appears to be walking, out runs all horses sent to intercept it. She betrays her devotion to horses with the first words she says. After being asked to stop she declares “‘I wait will, gladly,’ she said, ‘and it would have been better for the horse if you had asked me that a while ago” (Davies, S 2007: 10). Note that she only stopped when asked a question and that by a prince of Dyfed.

⁵⁰ She appears briefly in the third branch as well.

⁵¹ There are exceptions, Jackson 1961: 92 focused more on the Folktale motifs, and Valente 1988: 2-9 downplays the goddess role, stressing instead a strong but mortal female (in a gender switching role), with both fertility connotations with the land and Otherworld magic abilities.

⁵² This summary is sourced from the translation of Davies, S 2007. The First Branch is Davies S. 2007: 3-21.

⁵³ All etymologies from Proto-Celtic source from Matasavić, Ranko, 2009

⁵⁴ It has been suggested that the color of the horse is what cued the mediaeval audience into her Otherworld status. It also links her to Epona (Davies, S 1997: 126).

Pwyll desires her hand in marriage, but Rhiannon has been promised against her will to another man. To reverse this, Pwyll (rather ineptly) has to go to the otherworld and defeat an otherworld king. Rhiannon provides the means of winning the battle (demonstrating her importance), and he is given Rhiannon. One can see in here a pale reflection of a king marrying the goddess of the land.

With the marriage of Pwyll and Rhiannon the land was prosperous. This is also reflected in the Celtic coinage which often demonstrates the Horse Queen as a deity of the land (and grain). However, there was no heir. The men of Dyfed seeing no heir wanted him to take another woman. He refuses, and tells them to wait a year (perhaps proving his devotion to her?).⁵⁵ At that point, Rhiannon bears a child.

The child is stolen by a creature that also steals foals. The maid servants frame Rhiannon saying she killed her own child. She is punished by having to offer to carry strangers and guests upon her back (like a horse) to court. Meanwhile, a man named Teyrnnon has a mare in the house that gives birth on every May eve.⁵⁶ He finds the child when he cuts off the arm of the monster that was stealing the foals of his mare.

Teyrnnon and his wife go to Pwyll once they realize the child is his. Interesting, they rather adamantly refuse to allow Rhiannon to deliver them.

Everyone is united and the true story comes out. Pryderi “was brought up carefully, as was proper, until he was the most handsome lad, and the fairest and most accomplished at every worthy feat in the kingdom (Davies S 2007: 21). Ultimately Pryderi ruled prosperously, and actually expanded the kingdom. To all intents and purposes this is a standard origination myth. In a non-Christian milieu this would be between a king and a sovereignty deity. At this point however that would be unacceptable. Instead we see a divine marriage between a mortal (Pwyll) and Rhiannon, who appears to have association with a representation of a sovereignty deity,

⁵⁵ There are cross cultural, as well as suggestions in other Celtic sources of a king that serves for a year and is sacrificed.

⁵⁶ The Celtic holy day of Beltane, associated with the springtime lighting of bonfires, the beginning of the pastoral summer, and the date of many of our known horse rituals.

Although we do not see Rhiannon playing as large a role in the other branches of the *Mabinogi*, her role in those stories sheds more light on the standard cast of characters seen in other Horse Queen imagery.

In the Second Branch (Davies 2007 22-34) birds announce to the reader that the heroes are in the Otherworld, and therefore time is measured differently. These are referred to as the “birds of Rhiannon”.

Then Bendigeidfran ordered his head to be cut off. “And take my head” he said “and carry it to the Gwynfryn⁵⁷ in London, and bury it with its face towards France. And it will take you a long time; you will feast in Harlech for seven years, with the birds of Rhiannon singing to you. And you will find the head to be as good company as it ever was when it was on me (Davies 2007: 32).

They went to Harlech, and sat down and were regaled with food and drink. As soon as they began to eat and drink, three birds came and began to sing them a song, and all the songs they had heard before were harsh compared to that one. They had to gaze far out over the sea to catch sight of the birds, yet their song was as clear as if the birds were there with them. And they feasted for seven years (Davies 2007 33).

In the Third Branch dogs play a minor role. The only connection directly with Rhiannon is that is it she who asks “Where is your companion and your dogs?” (Davies 2007: 40) And then goes to find them. The stronger connection is yet again with horses. As a punishment, Rhiannon was to wear the collar that an ass wears after they had been carrying hay (Davies 2007: 46). In effect, this turns the wild and fast horse deity into the realm of a domestic servant.

Interpretation:

The Rhiannon of the Welsh mediaeval prose tales does not present an exact equivalent of the Horse Queen precursors. There are definitely differences, as well as themes created more for dramatic license than for recounting stories of the gods. It is likely that what started as mythological stories of a goddess

⁵⁷ Obviously, White Hill.

“devolved” into everyday entertainment. Christianity (and we must remember these tails are recorded and recounted in a Christian tradition) would certainly have altered the tale. However enough of the flavour of the mythological component exists to see its connection. It is an arguable point that similarities of the stories of Rhiannon to the imagery preserved by Epona may suggest parts of the missing mythology associated with the Horse Queen. Certainly, the horses, birds, fertility of the land and connection with kingship support the Epona link. Also the dogs and a child, often seen in Epona imagery are there as well. But, it is a pale reflection of the original imagery.

Galloping from Ancient Fields to Modern Shores.

Before tackling the modern and resurgent ritual of the *Mari Lwyd*, we must recognize the complexity of this area. There are a number of rituals that use horse skulls or horse masks, and we must define these carefully. Their very number and variety attest to the importance of the horse in the ritual life of the individual. Although we will focus on the *Mari Lwyd* of Wales, it is important to see that this is not an isolated theme. Masked horse rituals of various types are seen throughout the UK. In modern times these rituals have often mixed together. It is normal to see mummery performed with morris, and characters in horse masks can be in all of these dances. In mediaeval times and at court later, this appears to have been more distinct.

There are two main sources for information on early masked ritual dance; historical information and folkloric references. They are often diametrically opposed to each other.

Historical records are documentary evidence of items such as: travellers' tales, manuscript illustrations, church receipts of cash transactions for construction and upkeep of horse costumes. These records show ritual dances that are "arranged for the church, for civic leaders, and even for the sovereign" (Cawte: 1978: 208). Effectively these records split into two different types. Receipts recording the maintenance of "tourney" type horse costumes (a horse's body with a human upper body, see figure 42) and hobby horses (a horse's head on a stick that is "ridden"). The second type records the "morris" dance (detailed below). These appear in an identifiable form in the early 17th century (although church sources arguably place these earlier). The descriptions of these dances from that period match what is seen at morris dances today (Cawte 1978: 208).

The other source of information is that recorded by folklorists in the late nineteenth-century. These oral records document a number of traditions that had not been chronicled previously. This explosion of information records numerous local (and not so local) masked events that revolve round horses. While some of these have obvious connections with a long, mainly unrecorded tradition (like the 'obby horse') others do not. In all these cases, it is appropriate

to ask, 'why a horse?' In order to provide some organization to this topic, it is important to specify the different ritual dance types and their historical origins.

Mummers:

This is a comic folk play usually performed around Christmas. This often involves costumed players (mummers), and the modern plays tend to revolve around a character getting killed and then resurrected.⁵⁸ The modern version (sourcing from the 1800s) is different from the way it was historically practiced and has great regional variation (Millington, P, 2002). The original (or at least the name) appears to have been mediaeval.⁵⁹ Mediaeval manuscript illustrations show that this involved a procession of masked characters (see Figure 37). This is likely what the Church fathers were speaking against. Mumming, in the sense of masked performance, was performed throughout Europe and can be seen commonly in Celtic countries.

Morris:



Figure 42.A "Tourney" type horse in a stained glass image from 1550 to 1621. The glass was originally located at Betley Hall in Staffordshire. It currently resides in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Museum catalogue number C.248-1976). Photo source: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O8054/window/> [Accessed Jul 13, 2011].

⁵⁸ This overview is greatly simplified from a complicated field. For a breakdown the cast of characters, as well as an analysis of their origins and methodologies, see Millington 1989: 9-16

⁵⁹ The iconic and manuscript evidence for medieval mummers is nicely summarized in Fuller and Fuller 2001: <http://users.stlcc.edu/mfuller/CLUB/mummer/mummer.html> [accessed Jul 10, 2011].

Morris is a stylized English folk dance with choreographed dancers performing with swords, sticks, handkerchiefs or other implements. This usually involves a group of individuals dancing in public, sometimes for money, and sometimes for what appears to have been seasonal ritual traditions. Each area has its own style, and often its own cast of characters.

A painting from the late 1600s exists that is likely the earliest iconographic representation of a morris dance. The horse costume depicted in this painting is a “tourney” horse. This is a horse that is equine from the waist down and the rider is human from the waist up.



Figure 43. This is a close up of a section of a painting by Vinkenboom Pinx circa 1620. It is usually titled (after an inscription on it) “View of Richmond Palace with some of the buildings towards Petersham. With morris dancers.” The original is currently located in Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Source: www.themorrisring.org/images/forrest.jpg. [Accessed Nov 1, 2010]

Note the horse (on the right side) is a human rider wearing a tourney horse costume around his waist. A dancer carries a ladle for the observers to put money in.

The morris traditions that exist today are all modern creations, fuelled by a mid-twentieth century revival. The earliest records do not go past the fifteenth century (and are usually in a court setting). Perhaps apocryphally, the removal of the Moors in 1492 is associated with the word “morris” (for Moors).

The Hobby Horse:

The “obby orse” as it is usually known, is a stylized horse often hardly identifiable as a horse at all. The hobby horse in Padstow is perhaps the best known and documented of today’s horses. However this tradition has a long and varied background. Its first literary mention is actually in Cornish, in a play called “*Bewnans Meriasek*” written in 1502.⁶⁰ In that play, the following lines (in translation) occur:

Is this all the comfort that I should have from you?

O sirs, it is a sport to you, when it is grief to me.

Well, well, no matter!

By Apollo, my bright god, before separating not a laugh but

I will pay to the hobby-horse [hebyhors], and her comrades.

The hobby horse mentioned is obviously of a similar type to that seen today (versus the horses head on a pole that is often seen as a child’s toy).

Perhaps oddly, given the churches disparaging of costumes in the early mediaeval period, the later church had a positive approach to hobby horses. A number of church records from the 16th and 17th century record the creation and maintaining of hobby horses.⁶¹ Often these were used for raising money.

⁶⁰The full text is available at:

http://www.archive.org/stream/beunansmeriasek01hadtgoog/beunansmeriasek01hadtgoog_djvu.txt p. 61 has the reference. [Accessed Jun 03, 2011]

⁶¹ A listing of these is provided in Cawte 1978: 13-23.



Figure 44. The “Old Oss” in 1975 (Prideaux Place, in Padstow). The horse prances down the road generally acting up and chasing the parade viewers. The horse costume is generally unrecognizable as a horse. This is distinctive of the hobby horse, versus the *Mari Lwyd*, which is always obviously a horse (albeit ia skull). Photo source Rawe 1987.

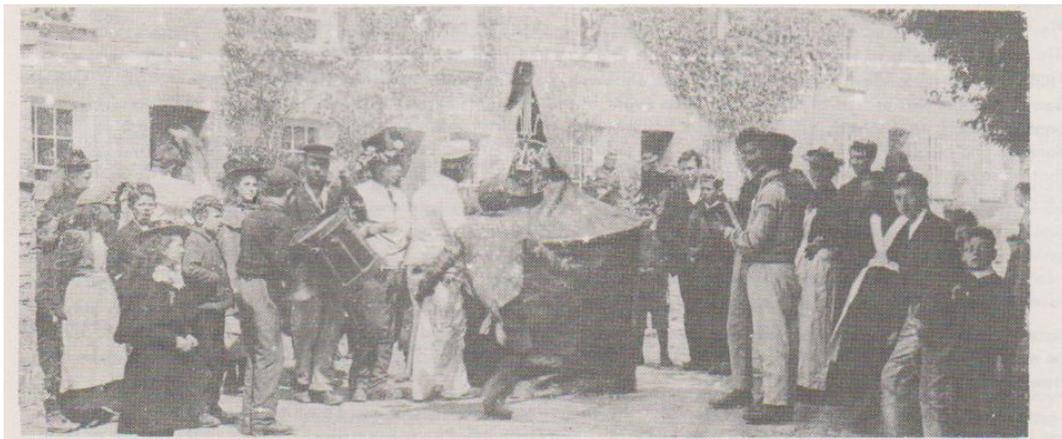
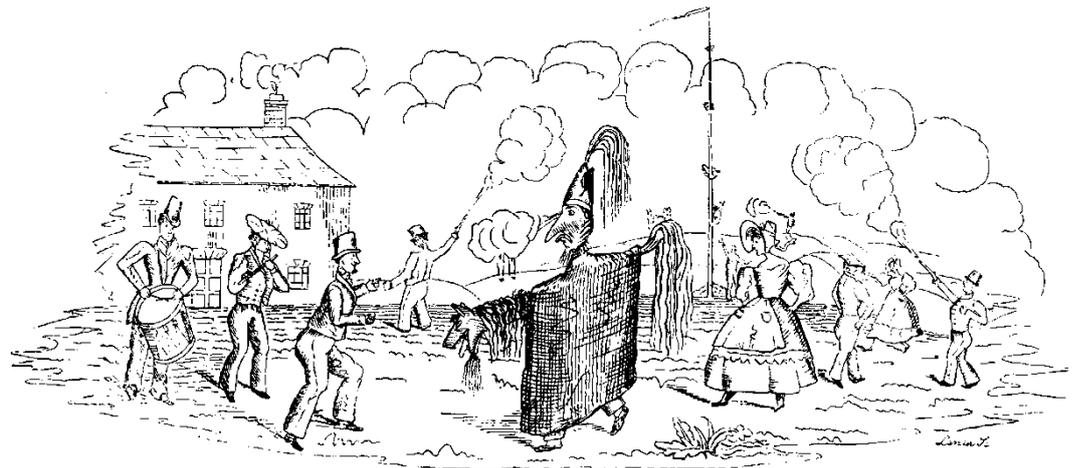


Figure 45. The hobby horse at Treator. This is likely the oldest extant photograph of the horse. It dates to about 1897. The “Oss” is in the centre (Rawe 1987: 15)

As previously noted, the Hobby horse is mentioned as early as 1502, the earliest visual representation of a Hobby horse however is fairly late, in 1835.



Padstow Hobby Horse about 1838

Figure 46. Source (Rawe 1987: 11). This wood cut is the earliest known visual representation of the hobby horse. The provenance of the image is lost, however it exists in several copies. Note the horse's head and tail in the place of arms. The hobby horse is surrounded by a cast of actors and is led by a teaser. These same characters that surround the horse can be seen in performances done today.

The tradition (as with morris dancing) has historically been associated with both Christmas and May (belying its liminal and solar associations). However, it is probably fair to say that this tradition currently occurs at any time of the year.

Historically many areas had hobby horses, or similar traditions. Their appearance of the horses varied considerably.



Figure 47. The Burringham (Lincolnshire) Hobby horse (source: Alford, Violet 1939: 223).

The hobby horse and similar horse masked traditions had many variations and regionalisms. The costume, songs (if any), and cast of actors around it are highly variable. A regional example is hoodening (occasionally spelled houdening). This is a horse costume which covers the body (the individual inside is usually shown bending over), but has a stylized horse's head. This appears to have been locally popular around Kent, although records of this practice (often tied up with hooliganism) stretch back to the late 1700s (Maylam, 2009).⁶²

⁶² This is an historic tradition little studied today. The most complete description is in the reissue and revision of a book from 1909 (Maylam, 2009). The most current data is located at: <http://www.japanesetranslations.co.uk/hooden/hoodening-history1.htm> [accessed Jul 3 2011]



Figure 48. Source: (Maylam: 2009).

One of the more interesting aspects of animal disguise is that this is not a dying tradition. Far from it, in fact it appears to be having something of a modern resurgence. Obviously the image of a horse, even if unrecognizable as such, has importance in the modern world. There are in fact many horse masked traditions throughout the Celtic world that fall into the hobby horse category.

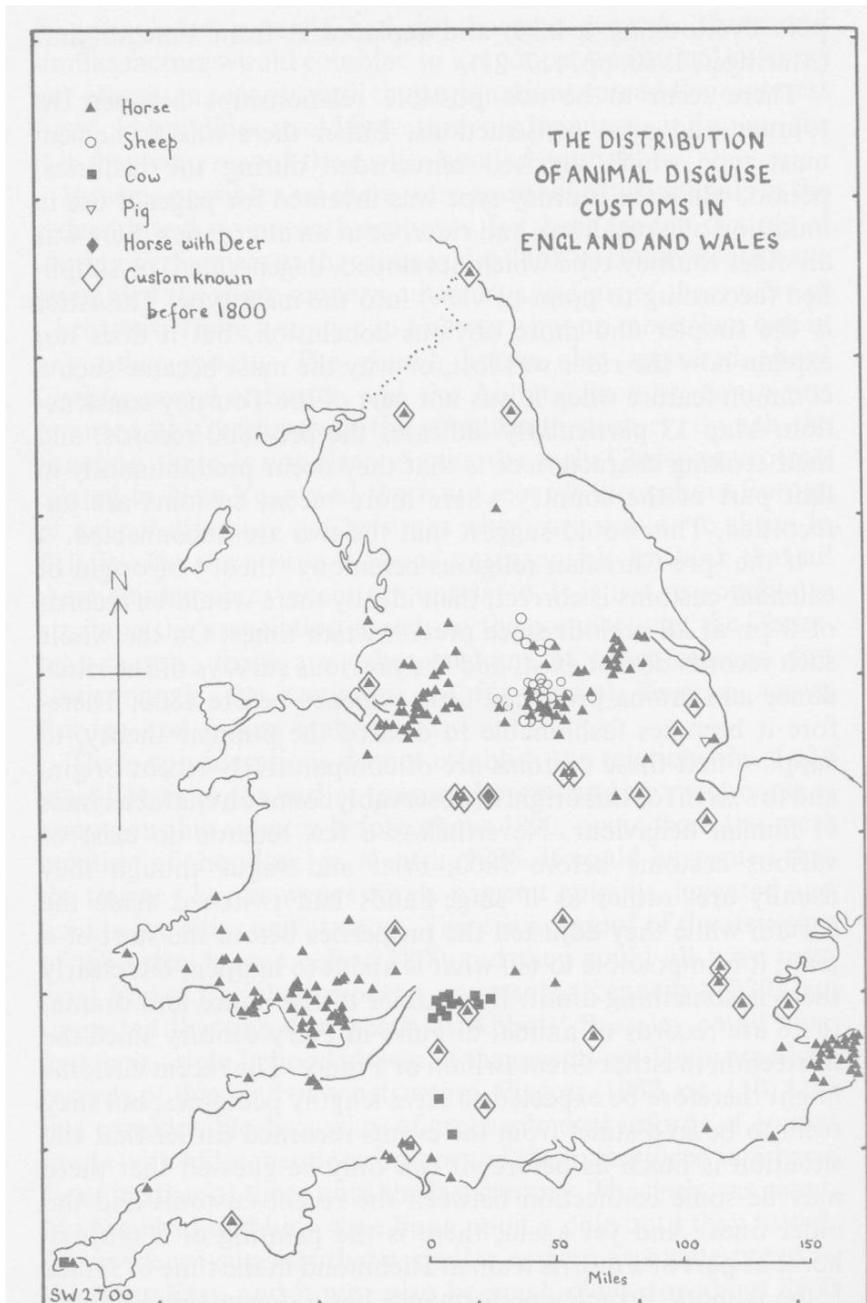


Figure 49. Distribution of historic and modern horse masked rituals in UK. Note that this records not just horse traditions, but sheep, cow and deer. This is reminiscent of the fourteenth-century manuscript picture in Figure 37. Chart source, Cawte 1978: 216.

***Mari Lwyd*, Modern Palimpsest of Ancient ideas**

Before passing to Wales and the *Mari Lwyd*, it is worth examining some literary references from Ireland. It appears that something similar to a *Mari Lwyd* tradition was performed there. The following quote comes from a manuscript called the *Mac na Michomhairle*. It is a romantic tale incorporating folklore motifs. Although this specific manuscript was written as a romantic tale, both the story and its folkloric predecessors can be seen in many other surviving works and versions from the same era (detailed in Watson, S 1990: 37-44).

The reason the hill was called Binn-each-labhra (hill of the speaking steed) was this: namely, in the days of Samhain, a plump, sleek, terrible steed was wont to emerge as far as his middle from the hill, and speak in human voice to each person; he was accustomed to give intelligent and proper responses, to such as consulted him, concerning all that would befall them until Samhain of the ensuing year. The people used to offer fists and presents to him at the hill and they adored him until the time of Patrick and the holy clergy.

Mac na Michomhairle (Son of the Evil Advice). O’Kearney, 1855: 40-41. The manuscript, tradition and variants are detailed in Watson S. 1979.

Here we see an example of a *Mari Lwyd* type of ritual, with strong liminal imagery. The steed predicts the future on Samhain (both the beginning of a new year, and the end of an old one, as well as associated with death). This becomes even more relevant to our argument when one realizes that the “cave” the animal arises from is most likely a burial chamber and therefore associated with kings and queens.

Charlotte Elizabeth (1842: 96-98) records an event in the early 1800s that occurred in the interior of Ireland (the exact location is not mentioned) on St John’s Eve. St John’s Eve is on the evening of 23 June (the June solstice also known as Midsummer). On this day, in numerous countries, large bonfires are

lit.⁶³ In her description these large fires were burned on everyone's yards. These were attended by townsfolk dressed in their finest clothing. The music began, and everyone starts to dance.

But something was to follow that puzzled me not a little; when the fire had burned for some hours, and got low, an indispensable part of the ceremony commenced. Everyone present of the peasantry, passed through it, and several children were thrown across the sparkling embers; while a wooden frame of some eight feet long, with a horse's head fixed to one end, and a large white sheet thrown over it, concealing the wood and the man on whose head it was carried, made its appearance. This was greeted with loud shouts as the "white horse;" and having been safely carried by the skill of its bearer several times through the fire with a bold leap, it pursued the people, who ran screaming and laughing in every direction. I asked what the horse was meant for, and was told it represented all cattle.

This ritual is especially important to us for two reasons. First it mentions a ritual that is recorded as far back as the writings of Saint Patrick. In Muirchu's seventh-century *Vita Sancti Patricii*. (Section 15-17; Hood 1978: 88-90) a similar fire ritual is a major turning point in the Life of Saint Patrick. In fact, given its notoriety, it is rather surprising this was still being done.

The more relevant point is this: "I asked what the horse was meant for, and was told it represented all cattle." This is oddly reminiscent of the statement by the Vedic priest three millennia before "Let this racehorse bring us good cattle and good horses, male children and all nourishing wealth." (*Rig Veda*, 1.162, quote above, section 22). Surprisingly, even at this late date, the association with this horse and the sun and fertility is still apparent.

⁶³ This ritual is still practiced to this day. The author has witnessed it in Scandinavia, as well as in Ireland.

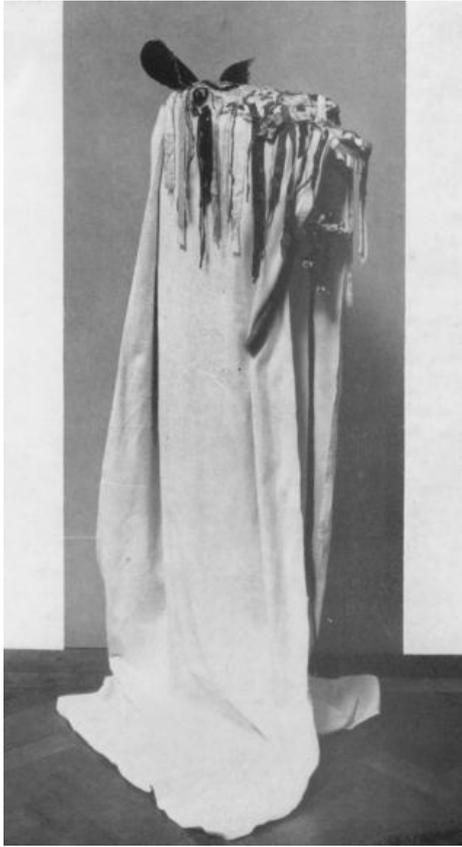


Figure 50. The *Mari Lwyd* (circa 1939). The costume is topped by a horse's skull, with a sheet around it. Often ribbons are tied to it. Photo source: Alford 1939:223

The *Mari Lwyd* is a ritual that is uniquely associated with Wales.⁶⁴ In its usual form the costume involves a person under a cloth that is topped by a horse's skull (traditionally prepared by burying it in the ground in lime, Owen 1968: 50). The skull is usually on a pole and the lower jaw is often fixed with a spring (so the jaw can snap loudly). The jaw is operated by the person in the costume. The cloth is often decorated with colourful ribbons. Visually it is quite different from a hobby horse in that the hobby horse is very stylized and always male, the *Mari Lwyd* is obviously a horse and always a mare. The *Mari Lwyd* is a wassailing custom and usually a party accompanied the horse from house to house.

⁶⁴ An effort to record for posterity the "traditional" version of the *Mari Lwyd* was done by BBC Wales in 1966. They documented the *Mari Lwyd* of the village of Llangynwyd on black and white film in 1966. That footage is available here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_xFo6Hifzk [accessed Sept 23, 2011]

Before going into detail about the *Mari Lwyd* and its traditions, some important caveats about our sources must be mentioned. References to mummary and hobby horses are very old (some are mediaeval) and include iconographic evidence such as paintings and wood cuts. There are also literary references in the form of early Church condemnation and references in sixteenth-century literature. Some of the implements used in various dance traditions have been carbon-dated to the mediaeval period.⁶⁶ There is little controversy in the fact that mummary (in its original form) has an early provenance. That is not to say that the traditions that can be seen today have a lineage going back to mediaeval times, but that mummary (or something very like it) did exist in earlier centuries. The *Mari Lwyd* however is not documented in this manner. Our only source of historic information consists of collections of folklore gathered mainly in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This is not to denigrate the importance of folkloric studies (in fact, this thesis depends on them). However, these are subjective data sources based on oral tales and imperfect memories.

Controversial history

“No one, as far as I am aware, doubts the fact that the *Mari Lwyd* is a pre-Christian horse ceremony.....” Peate 1943: 53

Peate famously tried to connect an ancient fertility ritual (as he envisioned the meaning of the horse costume) with the mediaeval festival of Mary (Peate: 1943). The evidence he utilizes is that both employ wassailing traditions (wassailing songs are associated with the festival of Mary). There are some similarities in the structure of some wassailing songs devoted to Mary and those associated with the *Mari Lwyd*. Lastly the name *Mari Lwyd* (detailed below) can be interpreted to mean ‘Holy Mary’. Effectively this associates the Horse Queen with the Queen of Heaven (Mary).

A circumstantial and tenuous case can be presented that ties the *Mari Lwyd* with the feast of Mary. Both rituals can be interpreted as liminal traditions occurring at the turning of the year. The *Mari Lwyd* is performed before the New Year. The Irish horse masked tradition detailed above was performed at

⁶⁶ The antlers used in the Abbots Bromely Horse dance were carbon dated to the 1065 plus or minus 80 years (Buckland 1980 1-8).

Samhain (another liminal time period). There are however insurmountable objections to associating this with Mary. There is a complete lack of definitive evidence for the *Mari Lwyd* in mediaeval times. The only feast of Mary that occurs near the New Year is in February (Wood 1997: 165-166). All of our evidence for an early *Mari Lwyd* is conjecture.

The *Mari Lwyd* is often⁶⁷ considered to be a more primitive ritual than the tourney or hobby horses. Its very “primitiveness” is defined by its use of a skull and its simple costume. This is seen as implying obvious pagan precursors related to fertility. At one point it was quite *de rigueur*⁶⁸ to consider these masked traditions to be remnants of pagan (usually fertility) festivals taken over by the church.⁶⁹ The problem is that there is no evidence of pagan rituals associated with the *Mari Lwyd*. There is also no evidence of the *Mari Lwyd* being used in any church ritual. The earliest documentation for the *Mari Lwyd* is at the late date of 1798.

Another very singular custom I never could learn the *rationale* of, is that of a man on New Year’s Day, dressing himself in blankets and other trappings, with a factitious head like a horse, and a party attending him, knocking for admittance, this obtained, he runs about the room with an uncommon frightful noise, with the company quit in real or pretended fright; they soon recover and by reciting a verse of some ancient cowydd, or, in default, paying a small gratuity, they gain admission. A similar custom is prevalent in the Highlands; (*vid Johnson*,) and, from Du Cange, we find it was a practice of Heathenism.

(J. Evans 1798: 403-470)

Much of the evidence purporting an ancient provenance is seen in the name itself. It is quite accurate to say that more ink has been spilled on the translation of the name of *Mari Lwyd* than any other aspect of the ritual. The name “*Mari*

⁶⁷ Such as by Alford 1948: 184; Owen 1968: 49.

⁶⁸ A brief of this in regards to the *Mari Lwyd* can be seen in Wood 1997 162-182.

⁶⁹ In fact Wales has a number of rituals that could “appear” pagan, of which the *Mari Lwyd* is only one of. Some examples are: hunting the wren and calennig. Interestingly these all occur at liminal periods of the year.

Lwyd has many possible etymologies and many relate to the image of the Horse Queen. Importantly, all etymologies are grammatically feminine.

The earliest translation of the name (as recorded by the nineteenth-century folklorists) is “Holy Mary”. This translation is the most widely used in the earliest literature. Peate⁷⁰ (associating the *Mari Lwyd* with mediaeval Marion rituals) uses the name as the strongest linguistic evidence for the medieval nature of the *Mari Lwyd*. He argues that the mediaeval use of the term *Lwyd* for Holy is well known (such as *Duw Lwyd*, Holy God). Although it must be added that this term appears only in bardic usage. It is arguable if this would appear in vernacular usage (and no written sources attests to its usage in common speech). Peate also notes that the use of the term *Mari*, for Mary the mother of Jesus exists in a number of unquestioned medieval sources. For example, the Black Book of Carmarthen in the work entitled “Iesu A Mair A’r Cynhaeaf Gwyrthiol (line 81-82) employs the following stanza:

Drwy ei roled meir **mari** oe gybod

guybv duv oheni.

Llyfr du Caerfyrddin (Jarman 1982: 22) [bold added by author]

He continues that the term *Mari* is extensively documented in the mediaeval poetry of the *Gogynfeirdd*. However, in that source document, the name actually appears as the literary term *Mair*⁷¹. No matter how the linguistic argument is viewed it seems unlikely, bordering on inconceivable, that a horse skull in a Christian country would be unquestionably associated with Mary the mother of Jesus.

With a growing understanding of Welsh philology and traditional oral performance, other possible translations came into play. Alternative translations offered have been:

- Merry Lude (seen as a borrowing from English into Welsh (Williams 1939: 96)

⁷⁰ Peate presents the argument in various sources (Peate 1939, 1943). But the argument is best summarized by Cawte 1978 :95.

⁷¹ For example, Line 10 of Gruffydd ab yr Ynad Coch (attributed) Red Book HGC XL “Nawdd y mŷr a **Mair** a’i morynion”

- Grey Mare (Peate 1943: 53)
- Grey Mary (Davies 1911: 61)
- Grey Death (Alford 1939: 222)

Note the associations of a mare with death and a women often referred to as the “Queen of Heaven” (Mary, mother of Jesus). Even the association with birds is present here. A rare name used was “Aderyn Pig Lwyd” or Bird with the Grey Beak (Alford, 1939, 223).



Figure 52. *Llangynwyd Mari Lwyd*. These are the oldest known photographs of the *Mari Lwyd*. They date from between 1904-1910. These images are Copyright the National Museum of Wales. Photo source: <http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/faq/marilwyd/> [Accessed Jan 10, 2010].



Figure 53. The *Mari Lwyd* as recorded in 2000 at Aberystwyth. This was presented as part of the millennium celebrations there. An interesting point that demonstrates both the appeal of this ritual, as well as its' growth, Aberystwyth has no known history of the *Mari Lwyd*. Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales/586708.stm [Accessed Jan 12, 2012]

Demonstrating its continual appeal, and bringing the imagery up to the present day, we have this presentation in print. The first part of the verse relates to a traditional song.



Figure 54. This sources from 2011 Advent calendar image. Source: <http://spitalfieldslife.com/2011/12/22/22nd-december-mari-lwyd/adventcalendar-22dec-lores/> [Accessed Feb 27 2012]

As with many traditions being recreated in modern times, the current version presents something of a skewed version of the original custom. The oldest traditions recorded in the folkloric literature do not present the *Mari Lwyd* as a unified or monolithic tradition. Although always associated with south Wales,

there have been many regional variations and considerably borrowing from area to area. This type of organic growth can be clearly seen in songs from one region being picked up and used on other areas. This can also be seen in the presentation of the *Mari Lwyd*. For example, in Glamorgan the *Mari Lwyd* could be accompanied by a cast of actors (a Leader, Sergeant, Merryman, a Punch and Judy and a fiddler) rather like a hobby horse (Owen 1968: 51).

There was often variety in the costume. St David's (Pembrokeshire) for example used a stuffed head with button eyes.⁷² Even the birds seen so often in Horse Queen imagery make an appearance. It is recorded that during the *Mari Lwyd* customs in Glamorgan an artificial bird (called the *Aderyn Pica Llwyd*) was carried with the horse skull (Williams, Maria Jane 1844: 80). Some practices appear related to the same fertility imagery that can be seen in the Horse Queen. Davies (Jonathan Credit 1911:82) records a May ritual in Pembrokeshire called "Byng". This was done while the grain was being brought in to be milled. It consisted of a dressed up horse's head that was then carried about. Although different in style than Wales, other similar horse rituals do exist in other areas (especially in Celtic countries). Kerry has the *Láir Bhán*, and the Isle of Man has *Laare Vane*. All of these are white or grey mares (Brown 1993:80). A *Mari Lwyd* type Christmas tradition called variously, *gadding* or *vueille* is even widely recorded in Guernsey between 1600 and 1875 (its last public mention) (Ogier 1998: 53-62).

The significance of walking around with a large and heavy horse's skull on your head begs explanation. Why a horse? These are large creatures and generally expensive. The horse would be hard to slaughter, and removing its head would be neither an easy nor pleasant process. The skull would then have to be defleshed, yet this tradition continues to be done, in fact is on the upswing. This belies its importance to those who do this. Given our knowledge of the Horse Queen, what can be said specifically about the about the *Mari Lwyd*? The image is of a horse's skull. The horse's skull moves (acting alive) and the body

⁷² Owen 1968: 50-51. It is worth nothing that some recent research points out that this may be spurious (Saer 1976: 89-98). In fact, this may be a misunderstanding of the "Byng" mentioned above in the same paragraph.

underneath it moves and makes noise. This suggests the liminal image between living and dying seen in the ancient rituals already described. The feasting (or drinking) accompanying the ritual may suggest it's relation to harvest time feasting. In this we again see the association symbolizing fertility (and the rebirth of the land at year end) ensuring fertility of the fields and people, and glad tidings for all.

The hobby horse and *Mari Lwyd* are not the only modern horse rituals. Interestingly, horse skulls are occasionally discovered in historic buildings. Hayhurst (1989 107, footnote 1) provides a list of modern Irish and Welsh discoveries of horse skulls in house foundations. These "foundation burials" take several forms. Sometimes the horse's skull is buried under the threshold or hearthstone, or skulls are buried in the four corners of the building. Occasionally the skull is simply placed in the rafters. Motives are hard to understand now, but it is believed by doing this, evil will be prevented from entering the house. Lest this be thought of only in the light of mediaeval examples, there are English examples of this as late as 1897. A horse's head was placed in the foundation trench in a Methodist chapel in Littleport (Cambridgeshire) by the workmen building it. Tellingly, when the workers were asked why they did this, they replied it was to ward off evil and witchcraft (Porter 1969: 181).

Conclusion

The Horse Queen stubbornly holds her own throughout Celtic history. Modern horse costumes, medieval literature, Bronze Age hill figures, even the earliest Celtic script reference her. In this imagery can be seen a female horse goddess embodying the sovereignty of the land. She has associations with fertility, the sun, as well as connections to royalty. Her affiliation with death is seen in the skull of the *Mari Lwyd* and her presence in Gaulic graveyards and Bronze Age mounds. Modern practices may be only a pale reflection of ancient belief systems, but nonetheless, this symbol still retains its' potency (note the opening quote of this thesis). Even long after the horse goddess has been replaced by other gods and beliefs, she still gallops, sings and haunts, proudly recreated every Christmas and New Years.

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