

THE HORSE DEITY OF ROMAN CANTERBURY

By FRANK JENKINS, F.S.A.

A RECENT acquisition at the Royal Museum, Canterbury, is part of a clay statuette (Pl. I, 2) found during the excavations on a site to the west of Iron Bar Lane and just south of Burgate Street.¹ The object is made in white clay in a two-piece clay mould, and all that remains is the right side of the body of a horse, probably a mare, now lacking the head and the legs. In its complete state it stood on a small flat rectangular base. It is closely paralleled by two examples from the Allier and Seine Inférieure, respectively, published by Tudot in his classic study of the series of clay figurines produced in the Allier district of France in the first and second centuries A.D.² Another example (Pl. I, 1) was found last year by Professor H. Vertet during his work on the site of an *officina* at St. Bonnet, Yzeure, in the same region, and he has kindly allowed the present author to publish it in this journal.³

About 1875-6 numerous clay statuettes of horses of various types including several similar to that found at Canterbury, were unearthed in a field at Assche-Kalkoven in Belgium.⁴ In a critical study of this group, Professor De Laet has identified at least fifty individual statuettes of horses which he considers were neither locally made nor were products of the Cologne figurine industry, but came from the Allier in the period A.D. 90-170.⁵ On the other hand he did not think that the group represented the cache of a trader who never came back to claim his property ; neither did it follow that the horses were merely toys or amulets. The absence of graves in that area precludes any suggestion that they were connected with the local funeral rites, and it would appear therefore, that this assemblage of horse statuettes represents the vestige of a cult of a local deity to whom the animal was sacred, or was its protector. In other words, they were *ex votoes* which had been proffered to a deity of that kind whose shrine still awaits discovery somewhere in the vicinity of Assche-Kalkoven.

¹ Royal Museum, Canterbury Accession No. 7854. The excavations were carried out under the aegis of the Canterbury Excavation Committee, by Mr. Sheppard Frere, M.A., F.S.A. (final report pending).

² E. Tudot, *Collection de figurines en argile, œuvres premières de l'art gaulois* (Paris, 1860), pl. 59.

³ The author is indebted to Professor Vertet for the photograph and details of this statuette.

⁴ The group is now in the Crick Collection, in the Musée archéologique, Alost.

⁵ S. J. De Laet, "Figurines en terre-cuite de l'époque romaine trouvées à Assche-Kalkoven" in *l'Antiquité classique*, XI (Brussels, 1942), 41 ff.

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If we now turn to the Canterbury statuette it is immediately apparent that the close similarity to the Continental examples is so striking that we can only conclude that it found its way to Britain from the Allier, either as an object of trade or as a personal possession of a Gaulish immigrant. It is also of interest that it is the third example of its type to have been found in Britain. One from the site of the church of All Hallows-by-the-Tower, London, came apparently from the same place as two fragments of the so-called "pseudo-Venus" type, which may be of some significance.¹ Another example of a clay horse from Wroxeter (Pl. I, 3) was found near a temple of Mediterranean type, in an area which also yielded fragments of other figurines in the form of the *dea nutrix* and the "pseudo-Venus". Amongst the sculptural fragments from the temple are pieces of life-sized statues of a god or gods connected with horses, as also a small scale bas-relief depicting an emblem of fertility (a winged phallus), driving a *quadriga*.² From this assemblage of cult objects one can only conclude that the cult was of a complex kind which included fertility and horses.

The Wroxeter evidence for the cult associations of the clay statuette of a horse is fairly certain, and although the discovery of the London example is insufficiently documented, it is possible that it, and the associated fragments of the "pseudo-Venus" figurines may have come from a pagan shrine or temple somewhere on Tower Hill. This, of course, is pure conjecture, but it is curious that the statuette of the horse at Canterbury came from the close vicinity of a small building which may have been a temple, and that fragments of two other figurines, one of the "pseudo-Venus" and the other of a *dea nutrix* came from the same area.³ Now it is a well known fact that these goddesses were certainly connected with the fertility cults and their significance has already been dealt with by the present author in previous essays,⁴ hence there seems some reason for thinking that at Canterbury, where the mother-goddess cult was popular, there was a cult in which fertility and horses were included. If this is true, then once again we have evidence of the votive use of statuettes of horses as part of the ritual connected with the cult of a deity of that kind. From this it follows that the deity was concerned with the protection and

¹ The figurines are now in the collection of Roman objects in the crypt of the church.

² Society of Antiquaries of London Research Committee Reports Nos. I, II and IV (1912-14 inclusive), *Wroxeter*, I, II and III. The small scale relief is unpublished and is now in the Wroxeter Museum. The clay statuette of the horse is now in Shrewsbury Museum to the authorities of which, the author extends his thanks for permission to publish, and also to Dr. Graham Webster, F.S.A., who kindly sent photographs.

³ *Arch. Cantiana*, LX (1947), 68 ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, LXXI (1957), 38 ff; *ibid.*, LXII (1958), 60 ff.

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welfare of horses, and our next step is obviously to examine the evidence which might shed light on the identity of the deity.

It is clear that the horse had a prominent place in Gaulish and British symbolism for it is featured many times on the coinage, and the pre-Roman coinage of Kent reveals its popularity as a coin type. At present its true significance is not fully understood. Perhaps it had a totemic origin, or was regarded as a divine creature by the British Belgae who had such close cultural and religious ties with Gaul where several native deities were worshipped who were concerned with the protection of certain animals, including the horse. The origins of these cults are obscure and are still debated. Reinach held the view that a cult of a divine animal preceded the worship of a divinity in human form, because certain Celtic deities seem to have had zoomorphic origins.¹ Of these, two may be cited here, namely, Cernunnus the stag-god,² and Artio who was a bear-goddess.³ In our view this is still an open question; perhaps what really happened was that the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic ideas became confused in the minds of generations of worshippers, to coalesce and finally find an expression in an art-type which portrayed the deity in human form with the attributes of the sacred animal, or was accompanied by the actual animal as the main symbol by which the godhead was recognized.

Among the animal deities of the Gauls were a few who were connected with horses, for example, Rudiobus of Neuvy-en-Sullias, and perhaps Segomo and Mullo, although the latter two seem to have concerned themselves with mules. The most well known was Epona, the goddess of horses, who belongs to one of the most widespread of Celtic myths.⁴ Her cult was extremely popular and widespread being firmly attested by many of her monuments⁵ and also several references to her in Classical literature.⁶ The possibility of her cult having its origin in primitive totemism, with a divine horse, or more probably a mare, as the central figure, is not the view of all scholars. Recently, in dealing with the problem, Thevenot rejected this theory on the grounds that Epona is a specialized form of the universal mother-goddess whose anthropomorphic form was firmly established as an idol of fecundity (e.g. the steatopygous figures of the so-called Venuses), and from that all the art-types of the mother-goddesses are derived. As Epona seems

¹ S. Reinach, "les survivances du totemisme chez les Celtes" in *Oultes, mythes et religions* I, 30.

² Olwen Brogan, *Roman Gaul* (Bell, London, 1953), fig. 47a.

³ F. Stahelin, *Die Schweiz in Römischer Zeit* (Basel, 1931), Abb. 126.

⁴ *Oxford Classical Dictionary* "Epona". The root *epo* is Celtic="Horse", c.f. the Latin form *equus*.

⁵ R. Magnen and E. Thevenot, *Epona* (Bordeaux, 1953), in which all the known monuments of Epona are published.

⁶ Juvenal, 8, 157; Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (Penguin Classics, 1950) translated by Robert Graves, 92.



CLAY STATUETTES OF HORSES

- Top* 1. St. Bonnet, Yzeure, France, length of body 3·5 in.
Centre 2. Canterbury, Kent, England, length of body 3·75 in.
Bottom 3. Wroxeter, Salop, England, length of body 3·7 in.

to belong to that circle of female deities he therefore concluded that she was neither a divine mare originally, nor was she that animal in human guise but was a mother-goddess who was concerned with the care and protection of horses.¹ In other words, the horse was the symbol of her sphere of influence, and did not become sacred by virtue of its own divine origin, but because of the divine being who rode it.

It is well known that Epona is frequently represented in Romano-Gaulish sculptural art holding the attributes shared in common by the whole series of mother-goddesses, e.g. the fruits, cornucopiæ, etc. hence we cannot fail to recognize in her another form of the divine earth-mother who was so popular in the religions of many primitive peoples. It therefore may not be mere coincidence that one of the features common to early Greek and Italian conceptions of the great earth-mother, was her appearance in the form of a horse, the goddesses Demeter and Ceres being excellent examples.² This idea seems to have been inherited from the Indo-European cultural complex, for it was prevalent in India where the deified earth was regarded as Manu's Mare in the rituals of kingship.³ We encounter it again in Irish and Welsh mythology, where horse symbolism is closely attached to the goddesses comparable to Epona, namely, Etaine Echraide and Mebd of Tara; Macha of Ulster whose lover Fergus, whose name means "virility", was also called Ro-ech (Great Horse); and Welsh Rhiannon (Great Queen) who has been recognized as a mare-goddess.⁴

In Britain, the cult of Epona is attested by dedicated altars which bear her name at Carvoran and Auchindavy.⁵ A small uninscribed altar which has a horse carved on the face, found at Lanchester may also belong to her.⁶ A bronze group said to have been found in Wiltshire, portrays a goddess, almost certainly Epona, as a matron holding a cornucopia, seated between two cob-like horses.⁷ There is also part of a clay statuette from Caerwent which evidently belongs to a type of Epona produced in the Allier workshops seated side-saddle and holding a cornucopia or more probably a patera in her hand.⁸ Lastly a fragment of sculpture found at Colchester merits notice for it seems to have once formed part of an equestrian female figure of the Epona type.⁹

¹ E. Thevenot, "Le cheval sacré dans la Gaule de l'Est", in *Revue archéologique de l'Est*, II (1951), 140.

² F. Altheim, *A History of Roman Religion* (Methuen, 1938), 160.

³ T. E. G. Powell, *The Celts* (Thames and Hudson, 1959), 124.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 124; "Pwyll Prince of Dyffed" in *The Mabinogion* (Everyman's Library, 1950), 3 ff, translated by Gwyn and Thomas Jones; J. Gricourt, "Epona-Rhiannon-Macha" in *Ogam*, VI (1954), 25 ff.

⁵ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, VII, 747; *ibid.*, 1114.

⁶ *Archaeologia Aeliana*, XVII, 122; J. Collingwood Bruce, *Lapidarium Septentrionale*, 697.

⁷ R. Magnen and E. Thevenot, *op. cit.*, pl. 11 (British Museum).

⁸ In Newport (Mon.) Museum (unpublished). Cf. E. Tudot, *op. cit.*, pl. 34c.

⁹ *Transactions Essex Archaeological Society*, XIX, 198.

We have remarked that Epona frequently bears the attributes of the mother-goddesses and it is very obvious that if the horse did not appear with her, it would be impossible to distinguish her from that circle of deities, as we have already seen in the case of the goddess Nehalennia and the figurines of the matron who is accompanied by her lap-dog.¹ From this we are forced to conclude that the animal was the main symbol by which she was recognized. Furthermore, as Lambrechts has so convincingly argued,² the presence of the fruit cornucopiæ, etc. must identify her as another form of the mother-goddess, hence we may not be far from the truth if we place the deity of the horse at Canterbury in this context.

It is now time to summarize the results of our inquiry into the significance of this clay statuette which takes the form of a horse. We have shown that some general characteristics are discernible which tend to link the horse with the fertility cults, especially those attributable to the universal mother-goddess. If this interpretation is tenable, it follows that we are dealing with a cult of a highly complex kind in which the central figure is that deity who was so widely venerated by the Celtic peoples. Unlike the deities of the official Roman pantheon her activities would have been comprehensive and undifferentiated and she would have been worshipped under many names and titles. In other words she was an all-purpose deity who personified the forces of nature and as such her sphere of influence was unbounded.

The presence of the mother-goddess cults connected with human welfare in Britain is well attested by the numerous clay images which portray her in various guises, such as the "pseudo-Venus", the *dea nutrix*, and the matron with dog, found in this country, the soil of Kent having provided its quota.³ It is therefore not unreasonable to think that at times her patronage was extended to other forms of animal life. If a votary sought divine aid to benefit his horse it is natural that he would have chosen as an appropriate *ex voto* an image of his animal, and being in humble circumstances this would have taken the form of an inexpensive clay statuette. It is unfortunate that the name of the deity thus invoked is in no case revealed by these clay models of horses, but we may console ourselves with the thought that in these objects we can discern a connection with pagan cultus. Perhaps it was Epona's, or at any rate that of a local presentation of the universal mother-goddess, who at times assumed the role of the divine protectress of horses. In conclusion then, as it is clear that the cult of the mother-

¹ F. Jenkins, "The Role of the Dog in Romano-Gaulish Religion" in *Latomus*, XVI (Brussels, 1957), 60 ff; *Arch. Cantiana*, LXX (1956), 193.

² P. Lambrechts, "Epona et les Matres" in *l'Antiquité classique* (1950), 103-12.

³ *Loc. cit.*

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goddess was very popular in Kent, the curious little clay model of a horse found at Canterbury may be another indication of her worship.

POSTSCRIPT

When writing this essay the author visited the excavations being carried out by Dr. A. Nyses for the Landesmuseum, Trier, on the site of a Romano-Celtic temple situated not far to the south-east of the modern village of Newel (Lkr. Trier) in Germany. The temple was associated with a walled cemetery and what appears to have been a massive grave-monument, standing by the side of the Roman road which links the main Roman Trier-Bitburg highway with the left bank of the Mosel near Biewer.

Some years ago the late Dr. Josef Steinhausen expressed the opinion that in Roman times the chief occupation in that region was horse breeding.¹ In view of that it is of some interest that the site yielded sculptural fragments in local sandstone representing a free-standing statue of a horse. At present its true function is unknown, but it is quite possible that it was the cult-statue. If this is true, then it is not unreasonable to think that a cult statue of a horse would have been the natural choice for the devotees, who believed in a divinity who presided over the welfare of the animals upon which their livelihood depended. We may therefore have in this statue, another piece of evidence relating to a local divinity of horses, but in view of the presence of the monument at the same site it is equally possible that the statue adorned the latter, which may have been set up in memory of a local horse breeder.

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¹ J. Steinhausen, *Trierer Zeitschrift*, 6, 1931, 41-79.