

*Rigantona: A Case Study

When we come to consider Rhiannon, the character at the centre of the First and Third Branches, there are signs of a similarly archaic ritual background. As has been demonstrated by the ‘literary archaeology’ of W. J. Gruffydd (aspects of which have been discussed on pp. 18-19 above), the legend of Rhiannon bears the stamp of two important Gaulish cults: that of the Horse Goddess *Epona* on one hand; and *Matrona*, the Great Mother, on the other. **Rigantona* ‘Great Queen’, as Rhiannon would have been known in Romano-British times, is best considered a local variant of this composite figure. What then might we say about the cult of **Rigantona*? When and in what manner would she have been worshipped? How did she fit into the wider landscape of native pagan belief? What, if anything, can the Mabinogi tell us about her original magico-religious aura?

The cult of the horse, as we have seen (re: pp. 191 ff.), had deep roots in the Indo-European world, and there is no reason why a form of it might not have persisted in South Wales in the Late Iron Age or even the Romano-British period. Comparative evidence would suggest that in its most traditional manifestation this had involved a tribal ceremony with distinctly totemistic overtones: in which a royal figure symbolically copulates with an equine; which is then sacrificed, dismembered and devoured by the ritual celebrants. The medieval testimony of Gerald of Wales (p. 193 above) suggests that at least the memory of such customs persisted in a certain district in Ulster well into the late twelfth-century.

There is no need to emphasise the primitive nature of this gruesome ritual complex. Its probable origins are to be located amongst the early horse-riding warrior-pastoralists of the Pontic Steppe region who evidently played an important part in the spread of Indo-European culture during the third and second millennia BC. However, it is likely that by the end of the pagan period – in the Romano-Celtic world at least – the cult had evolved some way beyond these savage roots. K. M. Lindoff offers a compelling body of evidence to suggest that the cult of *Epona* was popularised by Gallo-Brittonic cavalry units on the Roman frontier (in North-East Gaul and the Rhineland in particular). It was probably in this form that it was imported (or perhaps re-introduced) into Britain, where it seems to have become a popular alternative amongst the Romano-British military conscripts to eastern mystery religions such as Mithraism and Christianity. But as with these oriental mysteries (notably Christianity), it would appear that the more archaic, bloodthirsty elements remained latent within the cult-legend of *Epona*. The bizarre horse-mutilations and hippomorphic penances in the First and Second Branches hint at the primitive literalism of the sacrificial horse-cult described on p. 193 above. But of equal importance is the strange sense of redemption and transcendence surrounding the ordeals of Branwen and Rhiannon (e.g. p. 247-248 above). If the crucifixion and the Last Supper might be regarded as a sublimation of a sacrificial or even a cannibalistic attitude towards the deity-proxy (c.f. p. 611); it seems quite possible that there was once a *mysterium* representing *Epona* as a saviour-victim of a similar type.

Such associations go some way to explaining the development of the medieval legends discussed on pp. 195 ff. above, which were typically centred on a faerie bride scenario of the ‘calumniated wife’ type. The persecution of the *Étain Echrade* ‘Étain Horse-Rider’ echoes this basic theme, as well as illustrating the blurring of the boundaries between the human and animal worlds so typical of these euhemerised pagan mystery traditions. The story of Rhiannon in the First Branch in particular might be seen as being closest to the original cult-legend: combining as it does all of these motifs within a relatively congruent framework. Here, the equine transformation or regression of the abused goddess

coincides with an episode of intense emotional stress, i.e. the disappearance of her infant son. In this way, a connection is made with the mythology of the *Matrona* ‘The Great Mother’, whose cult legend seems to have represented the obverse of the widespread infant disappearance and return motif we discussed in Chapter 2 (see pp. 213-219). It is of course this material that forms the original core of the **Maponakiji* tradition.

This naturalistic dovetailing of the legends of *Epona* and *Matrona* suggests that the fusion might have taken place at an early, pre-Christian stage – if indeed these figures had ever been truly distinct in the first place. Perhaps, as Gruffydd implies at one point, the two goddesses had been one and the same from the outset, **Rigantona* merely being one of many titles for this powerful and multifaceted Gallo-Brittonic goddess. More to the point, perhaps, is the fluid nature of all divine identities within the Celtic-speaking world. There is a tendency, clearly apparent within the iconography, epigraphic records and the medieval literature alike, for such figures to coalesce within the aura of a single meta-divinity (as seems to have been the case with *Epona* and *Matrona*); but also, in other contexts, to refract into multiple identities. We have noted that the Gallo-Brittonic god *Lugus* was evidently sometimes invoked in the plural, i.e. *Lugovibus* ‘(from/by means of) the Lugoves’. The same is also true of *Epona* and *Matrona*: the latter commonly appearing in the Romano-Celtic epigraphic tradition as *Dea Matronae* ‘The Mothers’ – represented iconographically by a triad of fruit-bearing goddesses. The Second Branch at one point refers to the *Tri Rieni*, translated here as the ‘Three Matriarchs’, a trio whom we might tentatively identify as *Rhiannon*, *Branwen* and *Aranrhod*. Each of these might be regarded as an echo of the original ‘Great Mother’ *Matrona*. Likewise, the offspring of each of these mothers, *Pryderi*, *Gwern* and *Lleu Llaw Gyffes* respectively, might themselves be regarded as avatars of the original *Maponus*. In this way, we can see within the *Mabinogi* the same dual tendencies of duplication and synthesis that would seem to characterise the druidic tradition as a whole.

1123 This trio of Gaulish gods received undue prominence due to their claim by the Roman writer *Lucan* that they represented the familiar trio of *Jupiter*, *Mars* and *Mercury* respectively. There is no evidence, however, that these theonyms were any more than occasional titles given to a number of different local tribal gods. Furthermore, there were numerous other Gaulish and British divinities elsewhere that were identified with these same classical deities. As we have suggested elsewhere, this *Interpreta Romana* rarely resulted in a precise equivalence. Most Celtic gods were not universal, function-specific entities but rather polyvalent, tribal figures who would have combined the roles of lightning god/progenitor, warrior and trickster/magician.