

Warriors for the Horse Goddess

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It was Macha who called me back home.

Horses are second only to dogs in the way they have been our companions, have shared our lives, worked with us and shaped who we are. At present, we know that humans and horses have been together for 9,000 years in what is now Saudi Arabia and that at least 5,500 years ago an apparently independent connection developed in the Eurasian Steppes.¹ They have contributed to our survival, have hunted with us, have transported our belongings as well as us, have protected and fed us, have served with us in war; we learned to communicate with each other, to develop a partnership through the ages. Certainly, through our relationship with these creatures we became more than mere humans, they extended our own abilities and deep inside they built our spirits, too. I have always shared my life with these animals, except for a few torturous years, and in doing so have felt a deep connection to a primal pact forged by my ancestors. We have depended on them; today, perhaps more than ever, they depend on us.

I was put on a horse before I could walk. I was fortunate, for while my family was “in the horse business” when I was very young, I was never expected or encouraged to show and I had no interest; I was allowed just to ride. When we moved to the land I now live on again, I explored this little mountain on the back of my father’s horse Sirocco (‘Rocco) and my Pran as a child and teenager and then later as an adult on Midnight or Trouble, horses I had hoped would be mine but were later lost to me. I spent hours riding, every moment I could. I told these horses everything; they consoled and counseled me through the worse of my teenage traumas. I never thought I’d be horseless until the day I was.

The idea of “horse warriors” is provocative; it brings to mind images of Steppe tribes, Amazons, knights, chariot fighters, Plains tribes, the cavalries of a multitude of nations and times. We think of archery, jousting, a thousand charging hooves and rattling spears. But what does this mean for us today in a world where “cavalry” means a tank unit? The time of warfare on horses has gone by, reflected today by the

¹ Laurie Dixon, “Evidence for horse domestication: the picture gets clearer”
<http://horsetalk.co.nz/2011/10/28/evidence-for-horse-domestication-clearer>

ceremonial horse cavalries such as Fort Hood's Horse Cavalry Detachment.² Some city police forces do use mounted officers for crowd control and public relations, as well. Perhaps those doing search and rescue on horseback are an echo as well, saving lives with an equine partner. Every so often, a regular rider and her horse might find themselves needing to reach for an ancient heroic spirit and find it there.³ But for those of us on Pagan warrior paths, is the horse even a part of our way now? What if the War Goddess we serve is also connected to horses?

When I first dedicated to the War Goddesses, Badb, Macha and the Morrígan, it was in many ways Macha I felt closest to due to the perceived connection between Her and horses. But then I was torn over the loss of Midnight and Trouble, who I had hoped to buy, horses I had known all their lives, which the owner sold to a kill-buyer instead of waiting for me to get the money. I tried to find them, but failed. I failed them. I failed Her. Not only am I someone who feels a need to practice my faith in practical ways, that to serve a Horse Goddess means being with horses, I felt I had transgressed by my failure to save these horses. I felt I could not serve a Horse Goddess. I trained and grew on the path in other ways, but a huge piece was missing for someone who grew up on horseback.

There is a modern usage of the term "horse warrior" that has developed, however. Perhaps less romantic to some than the image of jousting knights, it is that of one who fights not on horses but for horses. Fighting politically is part of it, although some are out there trying to stop Mustang round ups with their physical presence while others rescue and care for dumped horses and even go to auctions to snatch as many horses as they can from the kill-buyers. And many of us also fight for our own horses, even in small ways. Sometimes the fight for one broken soul is the battle we'll most remember. Sometimes we are not near physical horses when we fight, but other times we're grooming off hair matted from rain rot off a skeletal rescue as he eats the first food he can really get down through long-neglected teeth or walking him on a -30 (F) degree night because the starvation caused frequent colic.

These horseless years were eventful and ended up a time of great growth in many ways. As I began to deal with my personal pain, I began to

² First Cavalry Division's Horse Cavalry Detachment http://www.first-team.us/assigned/subunits/1cd_hcd/

³ "Gutsy wrangler, huge horse save boy from charging grizzly" <http://m.spokesman.com/stories/2011/sep/18/gutsy-wrangler-huge-horse-save-boy-from-charging/>

reach out and learn more about horse issues especially, not surprisingly, the anti-slaughter movement. My first “contact” with horses was through this activism, attempts to end the slaughter by working for earlier forms of what is currently the Safeguard American Food Exports (SAFE) Act,⁴ although it often overwhelmed me.

Not all modern horse warriors are Pagan, of course; in fact, I know horse advocates who are driven to save horses with Christian zeal. Whatever might drive the passion is valid for the horses. Of course, there have been many times that we Pagans who oppose killing horses have been accused of being “Christian” by other Pagans. There are Heathens and, lately, Celtic Pagans who feel that we must ritually sacrifice or at least buy slaughtered horsemeat for feasts simply because early Christians were so opposed to the idea of eating horsemeat.⁵ Yet, none of the same people seem to be all that keen on bringing back infant sacrifice, which the Christians were likewise horrified by and so must have been an important element of the paganism, just to name one example.⁶ If the argument is that horse sacrifice 1) must have existed to have upset the Christians for they’d not have made something up to make pagans look bad and 2) we must therefore do it to prove ourselves truly Pagan, then shouldn’t we do it with all things? Certainly, we have as much, if not more evidence, of human sacrifice.

I instead ask, why not find passion to save horses in our relationships with the Horse Goddesses? To honor Them, by serving Their children here, so much in need. Ritual and offerings may be an important expression, but many who follow warrior paths know, sometimes serving in this world is the greatest rite we can offer.

My first reconnection with real horses came when I discovered a nearby rescue, Equine Protection Of North America (E.P.O.N.A.),⁷ was looking for volunteers. Seeing the name of a Horse Goddess in such an endeavor seemed an obvious sign, the sort that knocks you over the head. I volunteered; cleaned stalls, groomed horses, put them out to pasture or

⁴ The American Horse Slaughter Prevention of 2015 Act H.R. 1942 was proposed on 4/22/2015, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/hr1942>; SAFE Act S. 1214 was proposed 5/7/2015, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/114/s1214>

⁵ It’s impossible to reference the many online attacks on myself and others as “Christian” that have occurred on Facebook and other fora.

⁶ Edward Gwynn, ed. *The Metrical Dindshenchas* Vol. 4, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1991 (org. 1906) pg. 18-23; James O’Leary, ed. & trans., "Tripartite Life" Part II, *The Most Ancient Lives of St. Patrick*, 1880.

⁷ This horse rescue has since closed down. There do seem to be a number of rescues and action group using Her name, however.

back into barns. This didn't last long for various reason, one being health problems that I was struggling with. But the step was made.

Yet not all Pagans or Heathens, even ones who worship horse-related Deities, make a connection to this activism. Years ago while looking for material regarding the Pregnant Mare Urine (PMU, which is used to make Premarin® and its derivatives), I came across a website where a Pagan woman noted that taking this mare urine made her feel close to Epona. She apparently had no concept of the cruelty involved to the mares or their “by-product” — foals who are sent to feed lots for six or more months before being slaughtered — or she somehow missed that Epona was a protector of horses.⁸ Later, there was conflict in an email list I run called “Sacred Horses,” for Pagans who worship Horse Deities and/or are involved with horses. It seemed some of the horse owners on it did not see a conflict between the concept of “sacred horses” and using slaughter to dispose of “inconvenient horses.” They were in the minority, thankfully, and were not missed after their departure; but it was a shocking revelation to those of us who saw such a disconnection to be unconscionable.

Then, as mentioned above, there has been an increase discussion in Heathen fora that the possible opening of new horse slaughter plants in the US somehow is a method for horse sacrifice. One Heathen magazine even ran an article on horse meat recipes.⁹ Even more recently, some “Celtic” groups have decided to get in on the action and one such group went to Canada in order to “eat horse meat for Macha.”¹⁰ While some of our ancestors may have sacrificed horses and eaten their meat, the term “sacrifice” comes from the idea of “making sacred.”¹¹ There is nothing sacred about the horrors horses go through at the slaughterhouse.¹²

When we consider that sacrifice does mean “making sacred,” how can one make a horse more sacred? They are mystical beings, powerful creatures who carry that power on a single tip-toe on each slender leg

⁸ PMU industry: Saigh Kym Lambert “Born to Die? For what good? --PMU foals”

<http://dunsgathan.net/horses/pmu.htm>; HorseAid's Premarin.org page <http://www.premarin.org/> Epona as protector of Horses: Nantonos and Ceffyl “The Worship of Epona” on Epona.net – A Scholarly Resource <http://www.epona.net/worship.html> The website I speak of appears to be long gone, it was probably about 15 years ago.

⁹ “A Horse is a Bridge Between Land and Sky ~ Seasonal Recipes” *Hex Magazine* issue 4

<http://hexmagazine.com/issue-4-harvest/a-horse-is-a-bridge-between-land-and-sky-seasonal-recipes/>

¹⁰ Morpheus Ravenna, “Of Blood and Battlefields: Sacrifice in Pagan Practice,

<http://bansheeharts.com/2013/07/blood-and-battlefields/>

¹¹ Dictionary.com, “sacrifice,” in *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Source location: Douglas Harper, Historian.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sacrifice>

¹² Jerry Finch, “Horse Slaughter: Revealing the Truth – History” <http://habitatforhorses.org/?p=2564> “Horse Slaughter: Revealing the Truth – Part Two, The Process” <http://habitatforhorses.org/?p=2610> “Horse Slaughter: Revealing the Truth – Part Three, The Problem” <http://habitatforhorses.org/?p=2649> These contain very graphic photos, but if you think that there is anything holy in this you need to see them.

and have throughout history taken on carrying us and our things. They are sensitive flight-creatures who have challenged all their instincts to ride into the din of battle with us; herbivores who have aided us in our hunts. You can't make horses more sacred than they already are.

I felt Macha calling, I felt She was demanding my attention here after these empty years and that I was to serve Her through Her children; that this pain could be used as a lesson about what needed to be done. If I were to care for Her horses, I had to work for the betterment of all Her horses. I had thought I'd never have horses again, that I'd never return to the home where I grew up surrounded by horses. Now I knew that was what I had to do -- return and find the horses that needed me; fortunately, my husband was willing to make this move as well.

Our relationship with horses is far different today: we no longer live side by side in complete interdependency. Even those who live with them no longer are completely reliant; many people never even get particularly close to a horse in their lifetime. Certainly, none of the Heathens and Pagans who seem keen on “reviving” horse sacrifice ever seem to live with horses at all. It is, after all, easier that way. Whether one buys a horse they never met before to kill, illegally, in ritual or conveniently buys slaughtered horsemeat in a country where it is legal or via the black-market. Horse sacrifice was a part of many Indo-European cultures, especially around funeral rites, although how prevalent in the Celtic, especially the insular Celtic, ones is highly debated. What horse remains are found in these areas tend to be of older animals, past their working age.¹³

As few of us are inclined to bring back the rule of kings, many who want to bring back horse sacrifice do seem to be caught up on the idea of sovereignty in the modern, personal sense. There is no place for royal bestial horse sacrifices such as the Vedic *Aśvamedha* and the purported Irish gender-switched ritual reported by Giraldus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales).¹⁴ Giraldus' Norman Christian bias shows throughout his writing. It is not hard to consider that his account of bestiality and horse killing is yet another way to

¹³ A fairly recent finding of an early Christian era site revealed the remains of two horses, along with a multitude of Red Deer bones, while one was relatively young the other was quite advanced in age. B. O'Carra, D.M. Williams, B. Mercer and B. Wood, “Evidence of environmental change since the earliest medieval period from the inter-tidal zone of Galway Bay,” *Ir. Nat. J.* 33, 2014; earlier Bronze Age bones of horses were also often found to belong to animals of advanced age, see Katherine Leonard, “Ritual in Late Bronze Age Ireland: Material Culture, Practices, Landscape Setting and Social Context,” National University of Ireland, Galway dissertation 2014.

¹⁴ Thomas Forester, trans., Thomas Wright, ed., *Giraldus Cambrensis, The Topography of Ireland*, Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses, 2000.

prove the pagan (whether they were or not, in actuality non-Christians) Irish as savages.¹⁵ If it was an actual ritual and it is related to the *Aśvamedha*, then it would have been a long elaborate affair. The *Aśvamedha*, after all, involved rituals over many days, the horse roaming with an armed contingent throughout the land for a year and the sacrifice of a multitude of domestic animals starting with a “four-eyed” dog, the capture and then freeing of wild animals and, of course, the public act of bestiality.¹⁶ Most would not consider the killing of another companion animal, the dog, yet seem obsessed with the eating of companion horses.

A few months after moving back, I was looking for a horse at last. I had gone to see several horses, but not the right one apparently. I had decided to look for a horse that was in need, that would be “meat price” and therefore constituting a “backyard rescue” rather than go through a rescue due to the distance of such facilities. I just felt in my heart that there was a horse nearby that needed me. I was right.

Nagy suggested that horse eating may have been part of the Fenian practice, which is uncomfortable for me given my path. He included a passage from the *The Life of Columba* where the Saint prophesied that a man, Neman, refusing to take penitence would be found in the forest eating a stolen mare with thieves.¹⁷ While we certainly see an association of the *díberga* as unrepentant, there is no indication in the tale that this is an Outlaw waband, but rather, indeed, a bunch of regular thieves.¹⁸ Nagy then dropped the idea of any sort of stolen meat to move on to hunting wild game. While I do not wish to dismiss this simply because of my personal feelings on the subject, overall it was not a convincing or even complete argument.

Other associations of horsemeat with warriors indicate that eating it was not appropriate. After a horse race, Finn Mac Cumhaill and his band accept hospitality. Their host kills their horses and tries to serve the meat to the warriors. Finn responds with, "Thou churl, take off thy food: horse-flesh I have never eaten,

¹⁵ Both David Fickett-Wilbar, in “Ritual Details of the Irish Horse Sacrifice in *Betha Mholaise Daiminse*,” *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 40:3-4 Fall/Winter, 2012 and Charles Doherty, in “Kingship in Early Ireland,” in Edel, Bhreathnach, ed., *The Kingship and Landscape of Tara*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005 each claim there is one other account of this ritual. Fickett-Wilbar says that an account of St. Molaise of Devenish bringing a king’s horses back to life is evidence while Doherty claims that St. Moling turning horsemeat given to his servant and him by a householder into mutton is. I can honestly say that I find neither argument to be convincing in any way.

¹⁶ Fickett-Wilbar, ““Ritual Details...,”” pg. 316-317.

¹⁷ Joseph Falaky Nagy, “Fenian Heroes and Their Rites of Passage,” *Béaloideas* Iml. 54/55, 1986/1987, pg. 166. Source can be found at William Reeves, ed, & trans. *The Life of Columba, written by Adamnán*, Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874, Chapter 15.

¹⁸ Reeves, *The Life of Columba, written by Adamnán*, Chapter 15

and never yet will I eat, for the matter of going foodless for one mealtime." Refusing hospitality was a major issue, even when bad hospitality, and a fight ensued. The following morning the *fénnidi* awoke to realize they had fought phantoms and their horses were whole.¹⁹ In *Tochmarc Emire* (The Wooing of Emer), as Cú Chulainn described the landscape he noted a foal cooked on a hearth and that a warrior could not enter a chariot for three weeks (or 9 nights seems a more literal translation) after eating horseflesh, "For it is the horse that sustains the chariot."²⁰ While the penalty may be rather minor, it at least demonstrates that the horse was more important alive than dead.

My father had known of a local man who had horses he was trying to sell, a man my father didn't feel quite knew what he was doing, so we went to see if he still had them. While there had been a rather sizable herd the year before, now there were just three. Two were beautiful, although neglected, geldings, in good "pasture condition" but with ragged long hooves. The other was a bay gelding with a lot of chrome, therefore red, black and white, colors I for some reason personally associate with the Sovereignty and War Goddesses.²¹ And he was a skeleton. He ignored us, thinking only of his efforts to eat the spring grass, to get something into his belly. What he chewed mostly came back out in "quids."²² It was obvious which horse was coming to live here.

Even from a purely health-related standpoint, horsemeat was suspect in early Ireland. In the *Bretha Crólige*, "regarding sick maintenance"²³ it warns against feeding horsemeat for "does not horseflesh stir up sickness in the stomach of wounded heroes?"²⁴ This is interesting in light of some claims that it is a healthy meat, and it was, after all, long before the modern drugs which, indeed, make horsemeat very dangerous for the eater.

¹⁹ Eóin MacNeill, ed. & trans., "The Headless Phantoms," *Duanaire Finn I: The Book of the Lays of Finn*. Irish Texts Society, No. 7. London: David Nutt, 1908, pg. 129-130.

²⁰ Kuno Meyer, trans. "The Wooing of Emer," *Archaeological Review* 1, 1888, pg. 152, 240.

²¹ This seems to be some Shared Personal Gnosis, as I know several people who feel this yet we can find no real source for this as information.

²² Wads of partially chewed food, indicating dental issues.

²³ The legal requirement for an injurer, in certain cases, to prove care for the injured and how it must be carried out.

²⁴ D. A. Binchy, "Bretha Crólige," *Ériu* 12, 1938, pg. 20-21.

We have few myths regarding Epona, although there is a great material record of Her. We do have a birth tale, which we lack for most other Celtic Goddesses. Her mother was a mare, her father a man who hated women and instead took the mare as his mate.²⁵ From inscriptions, depictions and literary references, we do know that She is a Goddess of Horses and of cavalry.²⁶ There are at least two other Celtic figures in the Insular traditions thought to be Horse Goddesses, or echoes of such, for whom we do have more complete stories. The problem, of course, with all the Irish and Welsh literature is the question of how old the tales might possibly be before being written down by Christian clerics; how much they may or may not reflect hints of pre-Christian legend or belief. While many scholars are comfortable with calling Rhiannon and Macha “Horse Goddesses,”²⁷ evidence for this title might seem sparse when compared to Epona’s connection. The connections with horses are in Their stories, although those stories do not always show the essence of a mighty Goddess of warriors and horses.

At the time I found this shadow of a horse, who would be known from then on as Saoradh (“freedom” and “redemption”), I did not really feel I was still following the warrior path. It was hard for me to face, but my body was too weak, too sick. At Bealtuinn, Saoradh came to live with us, on the very day of our celebration. We blessed him during our ritual. From there he and I began our physical healing together. Slowly. He gained weight, I gained strength as I walked him out to graze (although it was mostly for the sweet taste and to get his saliva flowing -- grass would never be the bulk of his food again), groomed him, cleaned up after him, took care of him. Yes, it was from his emaciated form that I carefully cleaned rain rot.

Rhiannon’s story relates to horses at several points, first when She appeared to Pwyll on a horse he cannot catch up with until he thought to ask her to stop. Then her son was abducted, she was framed by the

²⁵ Paula Power Coe, “Macha and Conall Cernach: A Study of Two Iconographic Patterns in Medieval Irish Narratives and Celtic Art” UCLA dissertation 1995, pg. 155-156.

²⁶ C. Lilley, "Epona in Roman service: Military Worship of Epona," *Ancient Warfare IV* (5), 2010 pg. 22-26; L. S. Oaks, (1987). "Epona in the Aeduan Landscape: Transfunctional Deity Under Changing Rule Regional dynamics," C. L. Crumley and W. H. Marquardt, ed. *Burgundian landscapes in historical perspective*, San Diego: Academic Press, 1987, pg. 295-334; Epona.net <http://www.epona.net/> especially “The Worship of Epona” <http://www.epona.net/worship.html> and “Epona in the Military” <http://www.epona.net/military.html>; also Coe, “Macha and Conall Cernach” primarily pg. 147-162; see also Ceffyl Aedui, “Finding Epona,” *Air n-Aithesc* Volume 1 Issue 1 Imbolc 2014

²⁷ Miranda Green, *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth*, New York: Routledge, 1992, pg. 190, Proinsias Mac Cana. *Celtic Mythology*, NY: Peter Bedrick Books, 1987, pg. 51, 89, Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola 2000, pg. 18.

nurses to appear to have cannibalized him and was punished to act as a horse carrying guests and confessing her alleged crime. At a nearby farm, where each year on the same day a foal was stolen, the creature dropped Her son when it is confronted by the farmer while it tried to take the foal born that night. Eventually, the boy was brought to the Pwyll's castle where he refused to let his mother carry him and they were reunited.²⁸ Juliette Wood argues that rather than being the continuation of a Goddess, despite the name relating to **Rigantona*, Rhiannon is clearly both Supernatural Wife and Calumniated (falsely accused) Wife, a common female theme in folktales. Rhiannon is accused of, framed for and punished for a crime She did not commit, that did not even happen, while being pursued by an Otherworldly past.²⁹ While her story fits this theme well, at least to our modern eyes, Wood also notes that Rhiannon is more active in her story than the typically passive Calumniated Wives of other tales.³⁰ Perhaps it is because She was, after all, a bit marish?

As Saoradh became strong enough for his personality to emerge again, it was obvious that not only had he suffered this neglect, but had probably been abused as well. He hated and distrusted people, he was afraid of virtually everything. His flight instinct was high, even by horse standards. His whole being was about fear and distrust. In his twenty-seven years,³¹ it seemed he had been given no reason to believe that he could ever be safe. With his body stronger, the real healing began. Fortunately, my body was also stronger; it seemed once again we were matched for the journey we needed to take together.

There is no hint in the material we have on Epona that such themes of Persecuted Victim were related to Her. Epona was worshiped by those whose livelihood centered around horses, including the cavalry, connecting Her to warfare although She is shown aside on a calm mount quite unlike the depictions of war horses.³² She is not depicted with a child, although She is with mares with foals, which does indicate

²⁸ Jeffrey Gantz, trans. *The Mabinogion* New York: Penguin Books, 1985 pg. 45-65.

²⁹ Juliette Wood, "The Horse in Welsh Folklore: A Boundary Image in Customs and Narrative," Sioned Davies and Nerys Ann Jones, ed., *The Horse In Celtic Culture: Medieval Welsh Perspectives*, University of Wales Press, 1997 pg. 168-173; Wood, "The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature," Charles William Sullivan, ed., *The Mabinogi: A Book of Essays*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1996, pg. 61-78

³⁰ Wood, "The Calumniated Wife..." pg. 70

³¹ He was freeze marked so I was able to get his registration information. I had found him on by birthday; the next day when I went to make the deal to make him mine was his 27th birthday.

³² Aedui, "Finding Epona," "The Worship of Epona" <http://www.epona.net/worship.html>; "Epona in the Military" <http://www.epona.net/military.html>; Lilley, "Epona in Roman service: Military Worship of Epona".

fertility and mother connections are likely;³³ it is possible that Rhiannon's son's link to a foal is an echo but we cannot be sure. While Epona is sometimes associated with Roman Gods, Mercury in two depictions and others in inscriptions, as well as Goddesses, there is no association indicating a consort.³⁴ There is no husband for her to be Supernatural Wife of.

Using techniques from various Natural Horsemanship trainers we built trust between us. There was some magic too, prayers to Macha, rituals to build a bond between us. I taught him also to trust himself, to face his fears rather than bolting. We did a lot of work with him "chasing" things that had scared him. We both continued to grow, in body and spirit, and we began to ride, although short journeys only. A horse who first seemed to find the trail terrifying became bold out on it; his spirit grew as he found he could trust me and himself outside of the safety of his pasture. It was never far, due to his aging joints, but he took interest in our trips out.

In the Irish Macha, we can see that connection of War Goddess with Horse Goddess, although there is always some question about the relationship of the various figures named "Macha." There are two with different horse associations. One is Macha ingen Sainrith meic Inboith who is also a Supernatural Wife, this time to a farmer named Crunnchu. Crunnchu attended King Conchobhar's assembly and observed the horse races. He bragged that his wife could outrun the king's horses, which was a boast that could not go unanswered. Conchobhar demanded that She be brought to the assembly to race. She ran and won, only to drop down in labor at the finish. She gave birth to twins and either Her curse or Her twins' cries, depending on the version of the tale, cursed the Ulstermen to have labor pains anytime Ulster was in danger.³⁵ Rather than being falsely accused of a horrendous crime, Macha was put in danger by Her

³³ In reviewing this article, Ceffyl Aedui noted: "The depictions of Epona with foal at side seem to occur primarily in the Aedui and Sequanni lands, both known for their horsemanship and horse breeding (Oaks, 1987: 316-317). Foal at side in the depictions would be perfect for an area where horse breeding was a prominent business. The Imperial depictions where She is shown enthroned between horses occur largely in Roman settled areas in other parts of the Roman Empire outside of Celtic areas (Aedui, "Epona in the Military," <http://epona.net/distribution.html>).

³⁴ Wood, "The Horse in Welsh Folklore" pg. 171; "Deities Associated with Epona" <http://www.epona.net/associated.html>

³⁵ She is one of three Machas found in the place name storie along with the Wife of Nemed and the warrior queen Macha Mongruadh. Kuno Meyer, trans. 'The Wooing of Emer' "Tochmarc Emire," *Archaeological Review* 1, 1888, pg 151, 238; Edward Gwynn, ed. *The Metrical Dindshenchas* Vol. 4, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1991 (org. 1906) pg. 308-311; Whitley Stokes, ed. 'The Prose Tales in the Rennes Dindshenchas', *Revue Celtique* 15 (1894), pg 44- 45; Stokes, "The Edinburgh Dinnshenchas" *Folklore* 4 (1893) pg. 480-481; Thomas

worldly husband's boasting about Her, forcing Her to save him when it is a position he puts Her in through his betrayal. She is powerful, yet becomes a victim nonetheless, even in the very act of becoming a mother.

As Saoradh's health increased, so did mine, with fits and starts. I was able to train again, had a much needed surgery which he then nursed me through so we could return to our short rides together. He also nursed me through grief and change that was flooding my life at the time. A horse that likely never trusted before became a steadfast support through so much. We had beautiful summer days of rides and time just together, we also had terrifying and cold winter nights when colic threatened.

The other Macha who relates to horses is far from being Persecuted Victim; Macha ingen Ernmas, the Warrior Goddess who is sister to Badb and the Morrigan.³⁶ It is for Her that one of Cú Chulainn's horses was likely named, Liath Macha (the Gray of Macha).³⁷ This horse arose from the lake Slievh Fuáit, while his other horse, Dubh Sainglend (Black Sainglenn) arose from Lough Dubh Sainglend.³⁸ It is Liath Macha who is best known of the two, for he tries to prevent, and then mourns and seeks vengeance for, Cú Chulainn's death.³⁹ Paula Powers Coe relates Macha to Cú Chulainn's mother, the charioteer Dechtine which would also reflect Rhiannon, for Cú Chulainn and his horses are said to be born simultaneously just as Rhiannon's son Pryderi was with the foal at whose barn he is dropped.⁴⁰

Age catches up eventually, he was old when I found him, in just less than six years his body began to fail and he was gone. As he was passing, he left me with visions that cut through the agony I was going through for

Kinsella, trans. *The Tain: from the Irish epic Tain Bo Cuailnge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, pg. 6-8; Coe, "Macha and Conall Cernach" pg. 50-60.

³⁶ RAS MacAlister, ed. and trans., *Lebor Gabála Érenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland Vol IV*. Dublin: Irish Text Society, 1941; Elizabeth Gray, trans. *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired* Dublin: Irish Text Society, pg. 60-61.

I explored the relationship of these Machas somewhat in my article "Musings on the Irish War Goddesses" Nicole Bonivusto, ed. *By Blood, Bone and Blade: A Tribute to the Morrigan* Asheville, North Carolina: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2014 and will be doing so further in a future project as well.

³⁷ *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, pg. 188-189.

³⁸ George Henderson, ed & tr, *Fled Bricrend The Feast of Bricriu*, Irish Text Society, 1899.

³⁹ Standish Hayes O'Grady, trans., "The Great Defeat on the Plain of Muirthemne before Cuchullin's Death," pg. 239-240, 244, and Whitley Stokes, trans., "The Tragical Death of Cochulainn" pg. 253, 258-261, in Eleanor Hull, ed., *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature: being a collection of stories relating to the Hero Cuchullin*, David Nutt on the Strand, 1898.

⁴⁰ Coe, "Macha and Conall Cernach," pg. 101-119.

losing him; visions of a dun foal. His time here was not the end of my assigned tasks, I was to continue to do what I could for horses, taking what he taught and gave to me to help others.

Warrior to Victim, Giver of Sovereignty to Endangered Supernatural Wife, Giver of Bounty to Grieving Mother. What happened during this time that may have made the Horse Goddess a victim? These tales came about even while horses were still cherished as important to survival, still bravely carrying warriors or pulling their chariots, still a part of everyday life. We may never be able to figure out what created these changes. But some of us know what they mean for us today.

As I had a vision of a foal, it prompted me to look into adopting a Pregnant Mares' Urine (PMU) foal. I had been vocally against the Premarin® industry since I first discovered that production was both cruel to the mares and also discarded foals through the slaughter industry, I had written about it, had written letters, made phone calls, talked to women about not only more humane but also safer alternatives. Now it was time that I took part by giving one of those "by-products" a home. And shortly after this vision came the announcement that a Spring Hill Horse Rescue in Vermont would be going to auction that year to get PMU foals.

When looking to understand literature, of any age, we need to consider many points of view, most of which we can only surmise. What did the story teller mean? What did the various audiences the stories were meant for at the time take away from them? Did this vary between class or gender? What did later audiences of the culture take away? Then we can begin to see what the tales mean for us, both within and outside the original context. The key is, of course, to remember that one audience's view is not always the same as another. We cannot assume that how we read the tale, given our circumstances, was the same as might have been by the earlier Irish or Welsh audiences.⁴¹

I "chose" her sight unseen, despite warnings of "pigs in pokes" from helpful relatives. However, it seemed right to do it this way, to put it to

⁴¹ There are several studies on gender and coding out there, but those reading this might be interested to see how others have applied the theory to Irish literature so I recommend Joanne Findon, *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997 and Diana Dominguez. *Historical Residues in the Old Irish Legends of Queen Medb: An Expanded Interpretation of the Ulster Cycle*, Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010.

fate. I could request certain specifics, so having had the vision of the dun foal, I put that as my first choice in color. I didn't pick a gender and I went for a Quarter Horse as the mother in the vision didn't seem to be a Draft. In October of 2007, we brought her home, undoubtedly terrified and sick from the stress, exposure to tens of thousands of other horses at the auction and her long trip from North Dakota to Vermont. Saorsa, named for Saoradh, came home, wild, confused and unhandled and soon showed herself to be ready for anything.

Did the transcribers of these tales, those they may have learned them (or parts of them)⁴² from or the contemporary audience see any echo of Horse Goddesses in Rhiannon or Macha? Regarding Rhiannon, Wood points out that the Supernatural Wife motif in Medieval times likely related to anxieties about marriages with foreigners and the children which may or may not come of the union.⁴³ This may also be the case for Macha as the wife of Crunnchu. The horse role comes in for Rhiannon primarily as punishment, as Wood notes in “The Horse in Welsh Folklore,”⁴⁴ aside from the initial meeting with Pwyll; for Macha it becomes punishment for Her mere presence in this world. Regarding Rhiannon, Wood contends that it's unlikely that the Medieval Welsh would have seen Her as a continuation of the Horse Goddess. However, she does acknowledge that a connection between Her and Epona have been made by scholars on both linguistic and archeological grounds.⁴⁵ The same might be argued for Macha, although the Daughter of Ernmas does indeed seem to have been seen as a Goddess, related to Warfare and a great warrior's horse.⁴⁶ However, Coe finds further links for a relationship between Epona, Rhiannon and Macha; not only horses, but birds, the role of psychopomp (or some form of transport to another world, at the least), fertility, motherhood and sovereignty.⁴⁷ She is clear that They are not

⁴² How much native material is to be found in any of these stories has long been debated. Ronald Hutton, in *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1995 pg. 154, has gone as far to suggest that the authors knew nothing of the name “Macha” and simply invented the stories out of whole cloth. I suggest that there was likely some native source, influenced by the scribes' Biblical and Classical training in all of these stories. A good look at the nativist/anti-nativist debate see Jonathan M. Wooding's “Reapproaching the Pagan Celtic Past – Anti-Nativism, Asterisk Reality and the Late-Antiquity Paradigm” *Studia Celtica Fennica VI*, Finnish Society for Celtic Studies, 2009 pg. 51-74

⁴³ Wood, “The Calumniated Wife in Medieval Welsh Literature.”

⁴⁴ Wood, “The Horse in Welsh Folklore,” pg. 171.

⁴⁵ Wood, “The Horse in Welsh Folklore,” pg. 169.

⁴⁶ For further argument for Macha, daughter of Ernmas, and Her Sisters as Goddesses, again see my “Musings on the Irish War Goddesses.” See also Angelique Gulerovich Epstein, “War Goddess: the Morrígan and her Germano-Celtic Counterparts” dissertation for UCLA, 1998; Kim Heijda, “War-goddesses, furies and scald crows: The use of the word badb in early Irish literature” thesis, University of Utrecht, Feb. 27, 2007.

⁴⁷ Coe, Coe, “*Macha and Conall Cernach*,” pg. 40-209.

identical, but that there is some relation between their roles. We may simply never know how recognized it was at the time. Or, again, why such a transformation?

Saorsa could have spent the rest of her first year in a feed lot, then have been slaughtered and her meat sent to feed a rich diner in another country. Instead, she found her home here. Instead of a short life in cramped quarters, she became a spoiled "only child." She grew strong, bold and willful. Unlike so many horses, her spirit had never been crushed; sometimes it seemed it might even be too strong. Another, older, mare coming to live with her in her fourth year did help her learn some boundaries with which she had had issues. She's still bold, but she has figured out from Misty far better than she could from a human that she doesn't quite rule the roost.

Whatever might have created the changes in the stories, whatever the people of the time thought of them, for some of us these Horse Goddesses as Persecuted Innocent Victim strike a hard chord. In Their stories we can see the broken trust, the forsakenness, the pain that we see horses going through today. In the stories of Rhiannon losing Her son and being blamed, of Macha forced to run against horses and giving birth at the end, betrayed and angry and cursing, we see the PMU Mares and Nurse Mares whose pregnancies are solely for human profit. In Rhiannon's son, Pryderi (Anxiety),⁴⁸ and Macha's twins, Fír (Truth) and Fíal (Nobility),⁴⁹ we see their foals thrown away to pony-skinners and kill-buyers if not rescued by the modern Horse Warriors. Horses were our partners in building worlds, they were bold warriors, they were faithful helpers. Today they are treated as disposable toys by many, inconveniences by others. Racers are retired, often to slaughter. Show horses are replaced with younger models, again, often going to slaughter or neglect. Even in those lands where these Goddesses reigned, we see horses thrown away, sent to slaughter, neglected, abused. I came to see all endangered horses, and there are so many that are endangered, to be "Macha's Children."

I continue to fight for the horses through activism and through writing. I also take care of the ones I can. Misty is an older mare -- dumped on a former owner who knew she couldn't keep her, we took her. She had gone from a sweet pocket pony to stand-offish and distrustful while with the people who eventually dumped her but is again an open, happy little

⁴⁸ Gantz, *The Mabinogion*, pg. 64.

⁴⁹ Coe, "*Macha and Conall Cernach*" pg. 59.

horse, strongly bonded to Saorsa. We have two elderly Minis, Cimmeron and Iceman, who we inherited from my father along with two that followed him, Topper and Willow. They will live their days together here, their only "job" to take occasional walks, with their goat, to keep their lives a bit more interesting. Someday there will likely be more.

So we may not be able to ride heroically into battle on the backs of horses or in chariots as our ancestors might have done, but those of us who serve the Horse Goddesses can indeed be warriors for the horses. There are many battles to be fought. Though the last US plants have closed, American horses are still shipped to Canada and Mexico for slaughter a practice that will only end when we finally have a federal ban on both slaughter and transportation for slaughter. There have been local fights to stop them as well as continued work towards a total ban against slaughtering horses or shipping horses for the purpose of slaughter. Activists have been fighting the the Bureau of Land Management's Mustang round-ups, using helicopters and often causing horrific deaths, especially of foals, both on the ground and through political pressure.⁵⁰ The production of Premarin® continues despite the fact that it is not only cruel to the mares and foals involved, but that there are also far safer and more effective forms of Hormone Replacement Therapy.⁵¹

Many breed associations promote overbreeding, quantity over quality, as breeders can make a tidy profit on the extra foals through slaughter.⁵² Both the racing industry and many show barns use Nurse Mares, mares bred the same time as "more valuable" mares, whose own foals are discarded, often killed at birth for "pony skin" products so that the "more valuable" foal can nurse on the Nurse Mare.⁵³ Due to the economy, more horse owners, even ones who might have no ill intent, have had to give up their horses and rescues are often overwhelmed. And no, slaughter would not "help" these horses, as it is mostly the young and wild horses; many of these dumped are not in the condition that would be welcome for the

⁵⁰ American Wild Horse Perseveration Campaign <http://www.wildhorsepreservation.org/news/>

⁵¹ Lambert "Born to Die? For what good? --PMU foals" <http://dunsgathan.net/horses/pmu.htm>, HorseAid's Premarin.org page <http://www.premarin.org/>

⁵² American Horse Defense Fund's Hoof Links, "The Truth About the AQHA and Horse Slaughter" <http://hooflinks.blogspot.com/2008/06/truth-about-aqha-and-horse-slaughter.html>

⁵³ Penny Tilton, "The dirty little secret behind the horse racing industry" <http://www.examiner.com/article/the-dirty-little-secret-behind-the-horse-racing-industry>, American Horse Defense Fund "What Are Nurse Mare Foals?" <http://www.ahdf.org/foals.htm>

meat trade - Saoradh was an example, as he had been rejected by kill buyers due to his age and poor condition.⁵⁴ This is happening throughout the world, including the lands where these Goddesses ruled.⁵⁵

At five Saorsa was backed for the first time and began her journey with me as a trail horse, showing a fearlessness from the very start. That boldness is proving a strong asset. She is a thinker, rather than a reactor, she needs to be kept busy or she'll find her own entertainment. In another time she would have made a fearless cavalry mount. Today, well, I am looking into what we might do to get her doing Search and Rescue. Perhaps this horse rescued from death will go on to help others in some way. After all, it's something horses have done for us for thousands of years.

Perhaps someday people will truly have to wonder why the stories of the Horse Goddesses Rhiannon and Macha portray them as victims because there is no connection for them to see for themselves. Perhaps someday the tyranny that horses today face will be the most unbelievable of tales. This I pray to Macha to make so, this I vow to Macha to fight to make so. This is my rite to the Horse Goddess.

⁵⁴ For more on how the slaughter industry is not a replacement for euthanasia and actually contributes to abuse and neglect of horses see Animal Welfare Institute's Horse Slaughter Facts and FAQs

<http://www.awionline.org/content/horse-slaughter-facts-faqs>; John Halland "Relationship Between Abuse to Slaughter" http://www.stophorseslaughter.com/The_Relationship_of_Abuse_to_Slaughter.pdf; Raymond Goydon and Stephen Kindel, "Horse Slaughter, An Unnecessary Evil"

http://www.stophorseslaughter.com/TRF_WhitePaper.pdf, also see again the links in footnote #9.

⁵⁵ Breda Heffernan and Elaine Keogh, "Horses left to die as 'equine crisis' deepens"

<http://www.independent.ie/national-news/horses-left-to-die-as-equine-crisis-deepens-1968118.html>, Rachel Nash, "Foster appeal as record numbers of horses in care" <http://www.northwalespioneer.co.uk/news/113003/foster-appeal-as-record-numbers-of-horses-in-care.aspx>, Jamie Doward, "'Record' number of thoroughbreds being slaughtered for meat" <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/06/racehorse-slaughter-animal-welfare>

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