

The Horse in Classical Religion

by L.A. Curchin

The horse was prized in ancient times for its speed and its importance in warfare. Horses were symbols of fertility and were associated with the rich, who alone could afford to buy and maintain them. As an elite animal, the horse was also connected with the divine. Zeus, Poseidon and the sun god (variously identified as Helios or Apollo) rode in horse-drawn chariots. Indeed, Poseidon, who was an earth god before he became a sea god, was a tamer of horses. In his Roman guise as Neptune, he was patron of horse races, which is why the Circus Maximus at Rome used images of dolphins (the sea god's pet animal) to count the laps as the chariots made their circuit. A Roman fertility god, Consus, was associated with both grain and horses. The Celtic horse-goddess Epona was widely worshipped in Roman Gaul and Germany; images of her were often set up in stables. Another association of the horse with a goddess is found in the cult of "Black" Demeter. According to myth, Demeter shut herself in a dark cave near Phigalia in Arcadia, partly because she was angry at her brother Poseidon for making love to her in the guise of a horse, and partly because she was in mourning for her lost daughter Persephone. Here she stayed until Zeus sent the Fates to persuade her to moderate her anger and her grief. Inside this cave the people of Phigalia set up a wooden statue of the goddess with the head and hair of a horse, a clear reference to her intimacy with the horse god. In modern times the cave was used as a Christian chapel, and local legend explained that the Virgin Mary had taken refuge in it because she was upset by the incestuous love of a brother and his sister! In another Greek myth, the winged horse Pegasus sprang from the severed neck of Medusa, who had been impregnated by Poseidon.

In addition to these divine horses, real horses were used in religious ceremonies, as in the Parthenon frieze showing Athenian knights riding their steeds in the Panathenaic procession. At Rome, however, the Flamen Dialis (priest of Jupiter) was not allowed to ride a horse because it might contaminate his holy person. He was likewise forbidden to see blood, touch yeast, or watch troops carrying weapons. Horses were also sacrificed to certain gods. Pausanias informs us that the people of Argos sacrificed horses to Poseidon. At Onchestos in Boeotia, a chariot crash was staged as a sacrifice to Poseidon, by letting a team of horses stampede with an unmanned chariot. In the festival of Helios on the island of Rhodes, a chariot and four horses were thrown into the sea every year for the god's use. These were intended to replace his old team, which was assumed to be worn out after pulling the sun for the past year. Since Helios was believed to begin and end his daily flight in the stream of Ocean which surrounds the earth, the sea seemed an appropriate place in which to leave him his new car and horses.

The connection of horses and fertility may lie behind the Roman tradition of the "October horse". Each year on October 15 there was a chariot race in the Campus Martius (Plain of Mars). The right-hand horse of the winning team was then sacrificed to Mars and its severed head was publicly displayed. One ancient source says that this sacrifice ensured the fertility of the crops; another says it was a war ritual marking the end of the campaigning season. Since soldiers were farmers, and the end of fighting meant that they could return to their fields for the autumn ploughing, both explanations are probably correct. Incidentally, the blood of the October horse was saved for use by the Vestal Virgins in the Parilia festival the following April. The horse's blood was

combined with bean husks and the ashes of unborn calves, and the mixture was then burnt near the sheep pens to fumigate and purify the flocks and shepherds. There is one other religious context in which horses appear. The gods under the earth could be called upon to work a curse; the curse was written on a lead tablet and deposited in the ground, where many have since been found. You could curse a rival in love or business, an opponent in a law suit, or the horses you were betting against in the chariot races. One such curse tablet, from Rome, calls upon the gods to destroy “the charioteer Eucherius and all his horses” in the next day’s race: “Let him not leave the starting gate well, let him not be speedy in the race, let him not pass anyone, let him not make turns well, let him not win any prizes... but let him have an accident”. The underground gods could thus help you beat the odds on the racetrack.