The first shrine to Epona found in Britain – Meonstoke hexagonal building excavations 2018

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The third season of excavations of the Meonstoke hexagonal building (King 2018) have yielded spectacular findings that now allow us to say with some certainty that the building is a shrine, and a strong indication of its dedication.

The earliest features under the hexagon date to the late Iron Age. Two ditches terminate within the area of the later stone building, one coming in from the south-east, and the other from the south-west, approximately at right angles. This first of these had been located in the 2017 season (King 2018, fig. 7), and contained quantities of pottery and animal bone that point to debris from meals, or perhaps, feasting and offerings. Parallels for the pottery can be found in the immediately pre-Roman phases at Silchester, and include imported fine wares, such as probable *terra rubra* and *terra nigra*. The pottery, together with coins of Epaticcus and a potin, from elsewhere in the excavation, suggest relatively high-status activity.

The other ditch was a new discovery for 2018, found when the interior of the hexagon was excavated c. 40 cm below the putative floor level of the later stone structure. This ditch was shallower, but contained a spectacular find in its terminal, which was located almost exactly in the middle of the hexagon (Fig. 1). A female horse skeleton had been laid into the ditch, with its head to the south-west. It had been squashed in, to a certain extent, with the cranium pushed up and bent downwards (Fig. 2), and the front and rear limbs lying at unnatural angles in relation to the body of the horse. In all probability, the head and limbs of the corpse of the horse had been twisted to fit the ditch, but it had not been dismembered. It was a small individual, of pony size.

Alongside the adult female horse was a foal skeleton, with its head to the north-east, apparently laid out in a crouching position (Fig 3). The foal was very young, with all sutures being open in the cranium, and all teeth apparently unerupted. It seems fairly certain the foal had been born (i.e. it was not a foetus), but the exact age at which it died remains to be established with detailed osteological analysis. The bones of the foal were very fragile and it proved impossible to lift intact, and the same problem applied to a lesser extent to the adult as well. However, it should be possible to obtain measurements of stature from the long bones, and to carry out scientific tests (DNA, isotopes, etc.) to answer questions of the relation between the adult and the foal (presumably, but not certainly closely related), and any factors such as origin of the adult from outside the local region.

The implications of this find are exciting, because the immediately relevant association is with the goddess Epona, assuming of course that the deposition was a result of an offering of some sort, not a simple veterinary tragedy. The goddess is usually shown on sculpture and figurines as being seated on a female horse, sometimes with a foal (Oaks 1987, Table 1, type 1a; Fig. 1). She is often side-saddle, and carrying a cornucopia. As such, she is a fertility deity, closely related in function to the mother goddesses (Green 1986, 91-4). Epona is always associated with horses, and by extension, was a patron of horsemen. The dedicators of Epona inscriptions include many cavalrymen and other military officials (Green 1995, 184-7; Oaks 1987, 299; Magnen & Thevenot 1953). There is also a link, via the foal, to kingship and princely succession, as dramatically brought out in the story of Rhiannon in the Mabinogion (Gantz 1976, 45-65; Oaks 1987, 308; Green 1992, 187-90). The position of the foal at Meonstoke, with its head towards the rear end of the mare, may indicate suckling, and thus fertility, nursing and the rearing of young. This is also seen in imagery from Gaul (Green 1992, 22) and on coins, such as one of the Aulerci Cenomani (inf. D. Nash-Briggs).

Evidence for Epona in Britain is limited, as worship of the goddess was essentially focussed on central and eastern Gaul and the Rhineland. Green has a bronze figurine from Wiltshire as the main surviving evidence (1983, 54-6). The Meonstoke find adds considerably to this, and suggests that the hexagonal shrine, built over the horse burial some 150 years later, and conserving the position and memory of late Iron Age ritual activity, may be the first known cult building of Epona in Britain.

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Fig. 1 Vertical photo of the hexagonal building, showing the position of the horse and foal skeletons in the centre. North is to the left of the photo. Photo I Harris.

Fig. 2 The skull and upper spinal column of the horse skeleton. Photo A C King.

Fig. 3 The horse and foal skeletons. The top of the foal’s skull can be seen just below the shorter, 20 cm scale. North is to the left of the photo. Photo I Harris.