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**KELTISCHE GÖTTERNAMEN ALS
INDIVIDUELLE OPTION?**

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Nadezda GAVRILOVIC

Relief of Epona from Viminacium - Certain Considerations about the Cult of Epona in Central Balkans

A analysis of small marble relief found in Upper Moesia' locality Viminacium, confirmed that Celtic goddess Epona is shown on it. Through its iconographical and stylistic analysis, but also through its comparison with other so far known presentations of Epona of so-called "Imperial type", we imply that the cult of Epona was known in the territory of central Balkans. Additional facts, like silver plate from Branetic hoard near Rudnik with the inscription EPONE and votive monument from Doclea dedicated to Epona, present valuable arguments for our initial hypothesis.

Celtic presence in Central Balkans have been confirmed by historical sources, like Justin and Athenaeus, from IVth century B. C., when different Celtic tribes started to colonize mentioned territory. Archaeological finds, however, show that Celts didn't settle immediately on the territory of Central Balkans, but gradually from III century B. C.¹

At the mouth of the river Sava into the Danube, Celts founded a tribal community called *Scordisci*, who in pre-roman times encompassed the territory of eastern Slavonia, Srem, on the north river Drava made natural border and in the east there were few localities in area of Danube limes. With arrival of Roman army in I century B. C. and Roman defeat of Scordisci, they succeeded to maintain a kind of autonomy through founding of *civitas Scordischorum* in eastern Srem. It is known that during Roman reign, until III century A. D., different Celtic tribes like Tricornenses, Cornacates, Celegeri, Dindari etc. were mentioned.²

On many localities situated in previously mentioned area, archaeological findings belonging to Celtic culture were confirmed, dated into La Tene and Roman period. Majority of the localities even bear Celtic names like Budalia (probably today's village Martinci), Malata (today's Banoštor), Bononia,³ Taliata,⁴ Singidunum, Viminacium etc. Epigraphic monuments bear the proof of Celtic dedicators, either of indigenous origin or Celtic soldiers, veterans and tradesmen, who came to different Central Balkans' centres and stayed permanently (**fig.1**). Thus, for example, we have a monument from northern Central Balkans' locality Smederevo, whose dedicant Strambus was an inhabitant of Celtic *oppidum*

¹ JOVANOVIĆ (1992) 19.

² M. Mirković thinks that Tricornenses were Celtic-Thracian tribe, with its center at Tricornium (*Castra Tricornia*), important locality on western part of Upper Moesian limes, MIRKOVIĆ (1968) 95-96. Cornacates were Celtic-Illyrian tribe, with its center in Cornacum, MIRKOVIĆ (1971) 20.

³ MIRKOVIĆ (1971) 18-19.

⁴ MIRKOVIĆ (1968) 108.

*Tricornium*⁵, while in south, from the locality Scupi, comes a monument whose dedicant came from Lucus Augusti in Gallia Narbonensis.⁶

But, while there are not maybe abundant, but still many inscriptions with dedicants whose names are of Celtic origin, there are only few archaeological monuments with presentations of presumed Celtic deities. Therefore, the value of a small relief with the presentation of Epona from Viminacium is even more significant.⁷ The relief was found in the locality Čair, on the territory of colony Viminacium, former capital of Roman province Moesia Superior. The relief actually presents a small slab of white marble, which is quite damaged in its upper right angle (**fig.2**). Its height is 0, 15m, width 0, 16 m, while its thickness is 0, 02 m. In the middle of the relief, a figure of a woman is presented. The woman, whose head (due to the damage of relief) is missing, is sitting on a throne. She is dressed in a long tunic (chiton) with sleeves, belted just under woman's breasts. Over the tunic, woman wears long himation (palla), which extends to below woman's knees and her legs are visible. On woman's left and right side, horses turned towards her are presented. On her left side there are two horses and on her right side there is one horse. Since part of the relief's right side is missing, it can be presumed that two horses were also presented there analogous to relief's left side, but due to damage, the figure of second horse on relief's right side is missing. It seems that on her knees, Epona holds a basket with fruits (?).

Although the relief can not be traced now and although we only dispose with a sketch of it, without any doubt it is clear that on the relief from Viminacium, the Celtic goddess Epona is presented.⁸ Epona (Επιωνα, Epona), whose name is maybe etymologically connected to a Celtic word for horse,⁹ is one of the most popular Celtic goddesses in general, mostly venerated as patroness of horses, goddess of fertility, possibly as a iatric deity and guardian of the dead.¹⁰ In Roman period, inscriptions show that Epona was mainly honoured as a soldier's goddess, patroness of cavalry men and their horses, who protects them from any harm on the battlefield.¹¹ Her connection with Imperial cult and Roman Emperor mirrors in her epithets *Augusta* and *Regina*, confirmed in Roman provinces Noricum, Pannonia Superior, Pannonia

⁵ MIRKOVIĆ (1976) 37-38.

⁶ DRAGOJEVIĆ (1982) 95-96, n. 74.

⁷ ВУЛИЋ (1905), 88-89, н. 36.

⁸ At the beginning of the 20th century, professor of ancient history in Belgrade University, Nikola Vulić, collected many antic monuments from the territory of former Yugoslavia. Although he only sketched the relief with Epona presentation from Viminacium, we know that the relief was kept in National Museum of Pozarevac, from where it dissapeared maybe during the World War II.

⁹ BOUCHER (1990) 985. Also, for etymology of her name DELAMARRE (2003) 163.

¹⁰ Epona was patroness of mares and foals, travelers on horseback, goddess of fertility (which was confirmed by her attributes like corn, bread, fruit, patera, cornucopia and presence of foals), but also chthonic deity, THEVENOT (1968) 185-191. Epigraphic and archaeological confirmations of Epona's cult were found on the territory of Gallia, Britain, Rhine and Danube limes, Macedonia, Italy, Spain and Portugal, BOUCHER (1990) 996.

¹¹ BOUCHER (1990) 997. Inscriptions to goddess Epona are confirmed on the territory of Italy (Rome), the Rhineland, Gaul, Britain, Spain, Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania and Dalmatia. M. P. Speidel discusses the inscription from Sarmizegethusa in Dacia, from dedicant Marcus Calventius Viator, to deities Eponae and Campestris, who „were worshipped together by the horse guard in Rome, since they stood for care and skill for horsemanship“. M. P. Speidel also states that Epona was one of the most worshipped goddesses of the *equites singulares Augusti* in Rome, SPEIDEL (1997) 48, 74.

Inferior, Dacia, Moesia Inferior, including one inscription from central Balkans' locality - Doclea.¹²

Iconographically, in majority of monuments, Epona is depicted riding a horse or standing beside one or standing flanked by two horses.¹³ Relief from Viminacium belongs to a more rare type of iconographic presentations of Epona, where the goddess is depicted on throne, surrounded by two or more horses.¹⁴ This type of iconographic presentations of Epona emerged by II century A. D. and spread all over *imperium romanum*.¹⁵ It is very interesting, however, that the closest iconographic and stylistic analogies to relief of Epona from Viminacium are also territorially closest ones – two reliefs from locality Tibiscum in Dacia (**fig. 3**). Both reliefs from Dacia have similar dimensions as the relief from Viminacium and in both reliefs the goddess is presented between two horses, that is beside one horse.¹⁶ There is also considerable similarity with a relief from Poetovio, on which the goddess is presented sitting on the throne and holding a basket with fruits on her lap, while two horses (one on each side), are turned towards her.¹⁷ Almost identical representation is known from votive monument from Aptaat (Varna district, Bulgaria), where the goddess is also sitting on the throne flanked by two horses eating from her lap.¹⁸

We should also mention relief from the locality Koprno in Dalmatia, for which we could say that it is maybe the most similar to the relief from Viminacium – goddess Epona is presented in the middle of the relief, sitting on the throne (**fig. 4**).¹⁹ On her left side, a male figure is presented, identified as goddess' dedicant, on her right side is represented a horse turned towards the goddess, while under it an animal (dog?) is presented. After this brief

¹² Epona bears the epithet *Augusta* on votive monuments from localities in Noricum – Virinum CIL III 4776, Celeia CIL III 5176 and Marburg CIL III 5312; on votive monument from Alba Iulia in Dacia AE 1983, 815; on votive monument from Carnuntum in Pannonia Superior AE 1992 1417; on votive monument from Waitzen (40 km northern from Budapest), CIL III 3420 Under epithet *Regina*, the goddess appears in monuments from localities in Dacia – Alba Iulia CIL III 7750 and Caseiu, in votive monument from locality Razgrad in Moesia Inferior AE 1993 1370, in votive monument from locality Ulcisia in Pannonia Inferior and in votive monument from locality Doclea AE 1933 76.

¹³ BOUCHER (1990), 986-991. The so-called equestrian type of Epona's representations (the goddess is sitting side-saddle on a horse) are more common in Gaul and Germanies, while so-called Imperial type of Epona's representations (the goddess is sitting on a throne flanked by two or more horses or foals) is more frequent in Danubian provinces.

¹⁴ BOUCHER (1990) 993 etc.

¹⁵ SPEIDEL (1997) 141.

¹⁶ First marble relief from Tibiscum is high 0, 20m and width 0, 23 m. The goddess Epona is represented in the middle of the relief, sitting on the throne, dressed in chiton with himation over it. Both horses, represented each on goddess' left and right side, are turned towards her. There is a branchy tree behind Epona, on her right side. Second marble relief from Dacia is in very fragmented state – a whole left side is missing. Nevertheless, its reconstruction shows that in the middle of it goddess Epona was presented with one horse on her right side, turned towards her. Both reliefs are dated in III century A. D., TIMOC (1997) 115-117, fig. 1, 2.

¹⁷ BOUCHER (1990) 994, n. 202.

¹⁸ The votive monument from Aptaat is one of the few monuments dedicated to Epona, which beside the presentation of goddess surrounded with horses, contains the inscription in Greek language . The dedicant is Aelius Paulinus, most likely the soldier from cohort II Gallorum, which was stationed in Moesia at the beginning of the second century A. D., TUDOR (1976) 143.

¹⁹ Marble relief from Koprno is 0, 25m high, 0, 27m width and 0, 03 m thick. A. Ratković, first author who published the relief, thought that the upper half of goddess' body was nude, but N. Cambi's careful analysis confirmed that the goddess was dressed in chiton, with himation over it, RATKOVIĆ (1959), 134, CAMBI (2002) 206.

description of relief from Koprno, it can be concluded that iconographically it represents a solid analogy to relief with Epona from Viminacium, but stylistically it is much worse work, with very primitive and crude modelled figures. The closest iconographical analogy beside parallels from Dacia and Dalmatia, is to be found in painting from Circus of Maxentius in Rome, where goddess is depicted seated on the throne with two horses on each side, surrounding her.²⁰ As for other analogies, close iconographical parallels can be also found in statue from Worms (**fig. 5**), as in high quality relief from Thessaloniki (**fig. 6**).²¹ There is also a strong similarity with bas-relief from Oschringen (ancient Vicus Aurelius), where goddess is presented on the throne flanked with two horses turned towards her, but also with bronze tablet from locality Ofen (Hungary), on which goddess seats on throne surrounded by two horses.²²

While certain details from the relief of Epona from Koprno point to its dating into the end of III or beginning of IV century A. D.,²³ there are no details in relief of Epona from Viminacium, which would imply possible date when it was made. We can only presume that the relief was probably made in II or III century A. D. The relief certainly had some religious function, maybe it was an *ex voto* relief which its owner put in some cultic place (aedicula, lararium), where goddess Epona was venerated.²⁴ It can also be presumed that its owner was maybe a soldier or cavalry man, but not necessarily of Celtic origin.

The fact that the relief of Epona was found in the territory of Viminacium is no surprise, since by ancient historian Strabo, Viminacium was in pre-roman times inhabited by Celtic tribe "Little Scordisci".²⁵ Although they were mixed with Illyrian and Thracian tribes who also inhabited wider territory of Viminacium, Celts represented old autochthonous people who had their opidums in this part of Central Balkans, upon arrival of Romans. Although it has not been yet confirmed by archaeological excavations that an older Celtic opidum existed in the place of later Roman centre in Viminacium, it has been presumed that Roman castrum and settlement in Viminacium were founded on Celtic opidum.²⁶ The facts that several Celtic necropolis were found on the territory of Viminacium and that on the locality Čair (where the relief of Epona was found) many Celtic finds were excavated (such as Celtic fibulae, jewellery, weapons, ceramics etc.), confirm the continuity of Celtic material and spiritual culture in the period of Roman reign.²⁷ Epigraphic monuments with Celtic names of dedicants who were indigenous inhabitants of Viminacium and examples such is funerary monument of Titus Baebius and his wife Baebia Marcela on which Baebia wears a torque around her neck and "omega" type bracelet, along with fresco from one of Viminacium's necropolis on which

²⁰ LAFAYE (1899) 734, fig. 2705. J. H. Humphrey mentions that the painting of goddess Epona „was seen and drawn by G. Bianconi, but by 1804 it was largely destroyed“, HUMPHREY (1986) 687, f. 15.

²¹ BOUCHER (1990) 993, n. 189 and 994, n. 206.

²² REINACH (1895) 38-39, n. 66 and 40, n. 68.

²³ CAMBI (2002) 211-212.

²⁴ N. Cambi presumes that relief from Koprno was an *ex voto*, which was standing in maybe *aedicula* or *sacrarium* dedicated to goddess Epona, CAMBI (2002) 210.

²⁵ Strab. Geogr. VII. 318.

²⁶ It has been also presumed that the name *Viminacium* is derived from Celtic word, which has typical Celtic ending – *acium*, MIRKOVIC (1968) 57.

²⁷ The oldest necropolis found in the territory of Viminacium belongs to Celtic inhabitants and it is dated to the end of IVth or the beginning of IIIrd century B. C., ЈОВАНОВИЋ (1985) 13-18. For more detailed description of so far excavated necropolis on the territory of Viminacium see Зотовић, ЈОРДОВИЋ (1990) СПАСИЋ (1997) Golubović (2008).

a servant wears also a torque around his neck, additionally confirm that even up to IV century A. D. Celtic inhabitants from Viminacium managed to preserve their material culture.²⁸ On the other side, the existence of well graves in Viminacium and other centres inhabited by Scordisci, like Sirmium and Singidunum and their analysis, showed that this burial *ritus* was brought by soldiers recruited in Gallia and that it was accepted in Viminacium by indigenous Celtic inhabitants.²⁹

Two more findings related to Epona's cult in Central Balkans should be also mentioned – silver plate with inscription *EPONE* and votive monument dedicated to *Epona Regina* from locality Doclea. We already discussed silver plate with inscription *EPONE* from Branetić hoard dated into the end of II century A. D., whose dedicant may have been a miner, blacksmith or private lease-holder of shafts (**fig. 7**).³⁰ In connection to plate dedicated to Epona is also a patera from Branetić hoard, with a representation of a female deity on the handle.³¹ Probably due to the fact that it was found together with the plate bearing inscription *EPONE*, the deity presented in the handle of the patera was identified as Epona.³² But, it seems more likely that we are dealing with goddess who assimilated attributes of several goddesses connected to Celtic dedicants in Central Balkans who worked in mining areas in Moesia Superior – Dea Orcia, Epona and Terra Mater.³³

As for votive monument dedicated to *Epona Regina*, it presents the only so far known epigraphic confirmation of Epona's cult in the area of Central Balkans.³⁴ Votive monument found in antic locality Doclea is dedicated by C. Ocratius Lacon to Iupiter Optimus Maximus, Epona and Genius loci.³⁵ We already mentioned that with the epithet *Regina*, Epona is confirmed on votive monuments from Moesia Inferior, Dacia and Pannonia Inferior.³⁶ Since the dedicant is a beneficiarius consularis from Legio I Adiutrix, it can be presumed that he is honouring Epona as the protectress of soldiers, but also, since the dedication is made to Genius loci too, as a protectress of a place where he is stationed. In our knowledge, this is the only inscription dedicated to Iupiter, Epona and Genius loci together – however, inscriptions

²⁸ СПАСИЋ (1997) 41; KORAĆ (1993) fig. 7.

²⁹ GOLUBOVIĆ (2008) 117.

³⁰ For more details about silver plate with inscription *EPONE* and Branetić hoard see GAVRILOVIĆ (2007) 139 ff.

³¹ The handle of the patera depicts the goddess in a long-sleeved gown and with a pair of brooches on her shoulders. In her left hand she holds an animal (small horse?), in her right, hanging next to her body, is a twig. Swan heads are set on the left and right of her head. At the level of her legs is a he-goat, in motion, turned to the right side. At the foot of the goat's legs is a double axe on the left and a sacrificial altar on the right side.

³² ПОПОВИЋ (1994) 153.

³³ Presence of the Epona's cult in mining areas in Moesia Superior is explained by epigraphic monuments whose dedicants were immigrants from Gallia, who worked in silver and lead mines in Moesia Superior or in metallurgic centers in the vicinity of mines, ПОПОВИЋ (1995) 153. As for certain assimilation between the cults of Dea Orcia and Terra Mater in Moesia Superior and their Celtic dedicants see GAVRILOVIĆ (2007) 135-142.

³⁴ A votive monument on which Epona bears epithets *Regina* and *Sancta*, found in the locality Alba Iulia in Transilvania, should also be mentioned, CIL XII 679.

³⁵ Votive monument from Doclea is a comparatively well-preserved monument of limestone (55 x 36 x 16 cm), damaged in the upper part. It reads: *I(ovi) o(ptimo) m(aximo) | Eponae re[g(inae)] | Genio loci | C. Ocratius | Lacon b(ene)f(iciarius) co(n)s(ularis) | leg(ionis) I Adiutr(icis) | v.s.l.m. | Crispino et Aeliano | co(n)s(ulibus)*, ВУЛИЋ 1931, 124, n. 302.

³⁶ Votive monument from locality Abrittus (Razgrad) from Moesia Inferior is also dedicated to goddess by beneficiarius consularis, AE 1993, 1370. In Dacia, the great majority of monuments dedicated to Epona stems from Apulum (CIL III, 7750, AE 1983, 815, IDR III-5-1-69, IDR III-5-1-71) and most of the dedicants are soldiers, HUSAR (1995) 89-90.

dedicated to Jupiter and Epona are known from Salona³⁷ and Rome,³⁸ while a dedication to Epona and Genius of the Leuci was found in locality Nasium (Nasium Leucorum, the civitas of the Leuci) in Belgica.³⁹ Votive monument from Doclea is dated to 187. year A. D. by mention of the consuls, Crispinus and Aelianus.

It can be observed, as it was already mentioned, that on the inscriptions confirmed on votive monuments found in various localities on wider territory of central Balkans, goddess Epona mostly bears the epithets *Augusta* and *Regina*. By analyzing so far known inscriptions dedicated to goddess from different Balkans' localities, it is clear that most of the dedicants are soldiers. If we look at the text of votive monuments dedicated to Epona from Pannonia Inferior, we can conclude that the dedicants are mostly either beneficiarii consularii or ordinary soldiers who served in legions.⁴⁰ The same situation repeats on votive monuments from Dacia – several monuments found in Alba Iulia (Apulum) dedicated to goddess with epithets *Augusta* or *Regina*, are built by an equestrian (*vir egregious agens vice praesidis*), centurion etc.⁴¹ A most interesting dedication to *Eponabus et Campestribus* was found on votive monument from Varhely in Transylvania (antic locality Sarmizegethusa, Dacia), made by centurion of IVth legion. As S. Reinach points out it is a rare example where dedication is made to *Eponae*, as it is the case with inscriptions where dedications are made to *Campestres* or *Suleviae*.⁴²

Votive monument from Razgrad (Abrittus) in Moesia Inferior, dedicated to Epona Regina was also raised by Valerius Rufus, beneficiarius consularis.⁴³ We already analyzed votive monument from Doclea, which also has a beneficiarius consularis as Epona's dedicant. Therefore, we can conclude that on so far known votive monuments dedicated to goddess Epona from wider area of Balkans, where the occupation of dedicant is stipulated, dedicants are mostly soldiers. This conclusion coincides with well known and confirmed in other Roman provinces popularity of Epona as protectress of cavalry, especially since her cult was spread by the auxiliary cavalry and alae recruited from Gaul, Lower Germany and Pannonia.

After these brief reflections which are in the lack of any solid arguments only that, we can conclude that so far, on the subject of Celtic cults in Central Balkans, we can only speak with certainty of cult of goddess Epona. Previously mentioned hypothesis about certain Celtic elements in the cults of goddesses Dea Orcia and Terra Mater, but also gods Hercules Naisati and Mercury Naisati, are just guesswork and nothing more. Certainly, archaeological material from localities such are Singidunum, Viminacium, Naissus etc. undoubtedly belonging to Celtic material culture, is the argument that gives us the right to think about other aspects of still not confirmed spiritual culture of Celts which clearly existed. After all, relief of Epona

³⁷ CIL III, 8671.

³⁸ CIL VI, 31140-31145, CIL VI, 31148-31149, CIL VI, 31174-31175.

³⁹ CIL XIII, 4630.

⁴⁰ For instance, votive monument dedicated to Epona Augusta from Aquincum is made by Apulenus Ianuarius who served in legion II Adiutrix Pia Fidelis, CIL III, 3420 or votive monument from Ulcisia Castra dedicated to Epona Regina by Iulius Victor, the cornet of the archery.

⁴¹ Votive monument from Apulum dedicated to Epona Augusta was built by equestrian Aurelius Marcus, AE 1983 815, while second votive monument from Apulum dedicated to Epona Regina was built by a soldier, CIL III 7750.

⁴² The dedication to *Eponabus et Campestribus sacrum* was made by Marcus Calventius Viator, centurion of legion IV Flaviae Felicis, CIL III, 7904. REINACH (1895) 52.

⁴³ AE 1993, 1370.

from Viminacium, plate with inscription EPONE and patera from Branetić hoard, as patera from Nova Božurna, prove that religious beliefs of Celtic people were present in the territory of Central Balkans in the period of Roman domination.

Abbreviations of Bibliography

AE	L'anée épigraphique, Paris
CIL	Corpus inscriptionum Latinarum
Гласник САД	Гласник Српског Археолошког Друштва, Београд
IDR	Inscriptiones Daciae Romanae, III/5, Paris 2002
IMS	Inscriptions de la Mésie Supérieure, I, II, III/2, IV, V, VI Beograd 1976-1995
LIMC	Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae, I-VIII, Zürich-Münich, 1981-1997; VIII, Zürich Düsseldorf, 1997
Споменик СКА	Споменик Српске Краљевске Академије, Београд
VAMZ	Vjesnik Arheološkog Muzeja u Zagrebu, Zagreb

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Figures



Figure 1: Territory of central Balkans (after MIRKOVIC 1986)

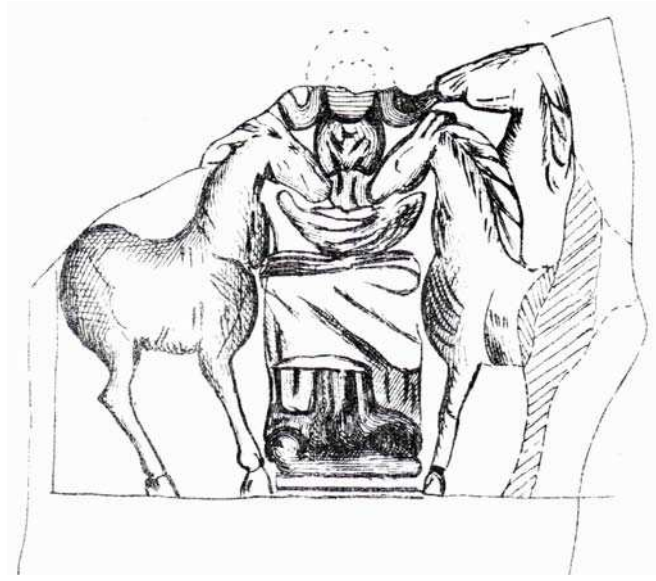


Figure 2: Drawing of the relief of Epona (after ВУЛИЊ 1905)

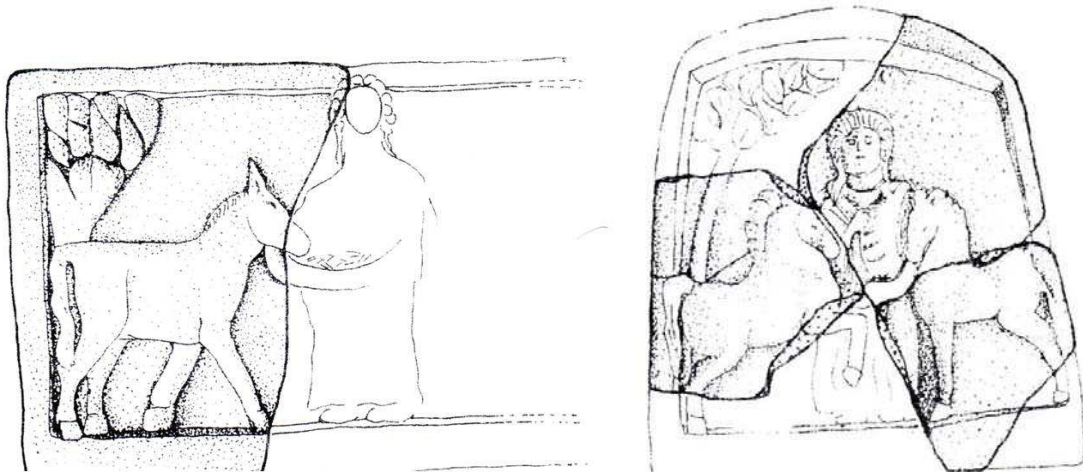


Figure 8: Two reliefs from Tibiscum (after TIMOC 1997)



Figure 4: Relief of Epona from Koprno (after CAMBI 2002)



Figure 5: Statue of Epona from Worms (after BOUCHER 1990)



Figure 9: Relief of Epona from Thessaloniki (after BOUCHER 1990)



Figure 7: Silver plate with inscription EPONE from Branetić hoard (after GAVRILOVIC 2007)

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