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The Metroac Cult: Foreign or Roman?

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The Metroac Cult: Foreign or Roman?

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Abstract:

Previous scholarship on the Roman Magna Mater concentrated on how the foreign aspects of the Metroac cult, especially the dedicated priests, the *galli*, were not fluid with Roman standards of culture and religion.¹ This resulted from the critical nature of the surviving literary evidence that comments on Attis, Cybele’s consort, and the *galli*, Cybele’s priests.² While critical attitudes about the Metroac cult and its rituals are certainly evidenced; literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence illustrate the Magna Mater as a celebrated Roman goddess with Attis and the *galli* functioning as prominent figures by her side.³ Magna Mater and her inclusion in the Roman pantheon provide an example of the paramount strategy employed during Roman expansion: Romanization.

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Introduction:

Magna Mater, alternatively known as Cybele, became a part of the Roman pantheon in 204 BCE when Rome acquired the goddess and her rituals from Pessinus. The foreign rituals that accompanied the goddess, particularly the rite of self-castration, did not blend with traditional Roman mores.¹ The foreign goddess was celebrated in Rome with elaborate ceremonies by every citizen class throughout the fourth century CE. Latham, Cumont, and Vermaseren are among scholars that propose Rome was unaware of the wild nature of the foreign rituals before the goddess’ arrival.² However, I contend that Rome intentionally incorporated the goddess within Roman society.³ Magna Mater represents one instance of many strategic additions of foreign deities to the Roman pantheon. The incorporation of foreign deities, such as Magna Mater and Isis, occurred at a time when Roman identity was transforming.⁴ The lines between Roman and foreign began to blur in the second century BCE when Rome expanded its domain.⁵

In the first chapter I provide an overview of the Lydian and Phrygian origins and myths related to Cybele and Attis. Although cult worship changed when Cybele arrived in Rome, the history of the goddess informs the rituals that took place in Rome. The second chapter provides a brief history of Cybele’s advent at Ostia and an introduction to the cultic activities of the Metroac cult. I then proceed to evaluate the critical nature of the surviving literary evidence

² Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap: Roman Masculinity,” 84-122; Cumont, The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism, 53; Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 96.
³ Erich S. Gruen, Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 4-33.
relevant to Magna Mater with particular emphasis on Catullus’ poem 63, which demonstrates Roman attitudes towards the foreign aspects of the cult worship. I argue that Magna Mater is a firm part of the Roman pantheon and an inescapable part of Roman society contrary to scholarship that assumes the foreign elements of the Metroac cult were ostracized from Roman society. The third chapter concentrates on the political motives that prompted the advent of Cybele into Roman society, further illustrating the importance of the Metroac cult to Rome. I argue that the Romans employed foreign religion, in this case Magna Mater, to form positive relationships with foreign entities and to create amicable relationships with the colonized people. I assert that the Romans engrained Cybele into Roman society by associating her with Trojan origins and Augustan propaganda.

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7 Orlin, Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire, 3-30.

Chapter 1: Myths and Origins

The worship of the Roman goddess Cybele (or, Magna Mater) originated in the Near East, although a specific location and time period is not able to be determined on the basis of the available textual (and other) evidence. The earliest definitive evidence for myth involving Cybele comes from two separate, albeit not entirely different, cultures: the Phrygians and the Lydians.9 In some ways the goddess is the same in both contexts, yet by the same token it is important to acknowledge that neither she nor her associated rituals remain identical in any two cultures.10 Multiple versions of myth must be related, as each offers perspective to Magna Mater’s Roman identity. The myths of Cybele, although they serve to explain the identity and worship of the goddess herself, revolve around the character of Attis, who assumes different forms and roles in varying cultures, just as Cybele does. Attis, as equally significant as Cybele, serves as a means to examine this mysterious cult. Many scholars assume that the Roman goddess Magna Mater was primarily inspired by the Phrygian myth. This assumption is not false, especially when we consider that the Romans brought the goddess over from Phrygian Pessinus in recorded Roman history.11 Although there is an obvious connection with Phrygia, the link to Lydian myth must not be overlooked as both cultures became intertwined beginning in the seventh century BCE.12

The Lydian myth about Cybele, recorded by Herodotus, tells of Atys, son of the Lydian King Croesus. The Lydian myth about Cybele, recorded by Herodotus, tells of Atys, son of the Lydian King Croesus. Croesus discovers a terrible prophecy that his favorite of two sons would die by an iron spike, due to the gods’ discontent with Croesus’ reputation as the happiest man on earth. He tries to forestall Fate by removing any and all weapons within reach of Atys. At this time, a man named Adrastus arrives, begging forgiveness from Croesus as his father, Phrygian king Midas, exiled him for accidentally murdering his own brother. Croesus accepts Adrastus into his service following traditions of hospitality and believing that he outwitted the fate of his son. Around the same time a message from Mysia arrives to inform Croesus of an unstoppable wild boar devastating the region, and aid is requested. He sends some men but denies them the service of his favorite son and heir on the pretext that Atys is occupied with his wedding. Croesus specifically organized this wedding as a mechanism to prevent Atys’ involvement in battle and death. Atys hears of his father’s decision and protests for his masculine right to hunt and engage in warfare. At this time Croesus reveals the prophecy to Atys, yet Atys does not believe this particular situation could be applicable to the prophecy. Croesus granted his son this wish to fight because kings and princes held the duty to protect and serve their people, and Atys needed to maintain a positive reputation. Croesus then asked Adrastus to protect his son in the hunt. This is the greatest mistake Croesus made, for Adrastus threw his spear at the wild boar and mortally impaled Atys instead. Croesus forgave Adrastus, but Adrastus proceeded to sacrifice himself to Atys funeral pyre out of guilt.

The Greek historian Pausanias and the early Christian apologist Arnobius provide valuable information about the Phrygian myth on Cybele, which Lancellotti analyzes in depth.

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13 Herodotus Book I: 34-45.
14 Note the Lydian connection to Phrygia.
The accounts are similar enough that scholars have referenced them as one, and the ancient authors in question possibly relied on the same original source, a certain Timotheus.\(^\text{16}\) If Pausanias and Arnobius do rely on the same source, their accounts point to an older source; however, Pausanias cites Greek poet Hermesianax, not Timotheus, as one of his sources.\(^\text{17}\) As Lancellotti has illustrated, the mythical accounts of Cybele from Pausanias and Arnobius need to be evaluated separately, not least because Pausanias wrote in the second century CE, and Arnobius wrote in the fourth century CE.\(^\text{18}\) Pausanias recounts the facts on the Phrygian Attis myth that he quotes from his source Hermesianax along with another unidentified source, while Arnobius’ account is longer and contains different details which are reported from a Christian perspective. Although these accounts were recorded long after the worship of Cybele and Attis in Phrygia, they both offer insight into the goddess’ Phrygian origins and Roman conception of her.

Pausanias begins his account by stating that he could not uncover any secrets regarding Attis, which reflects the private nature of the Metroac cult activity.\(^\text{19}\) He proceeds to relate the Phrygian myth of Attis that he learned from a poem by Hermesianax: Attis was a eunuch son of a Phrygian named Calaüs. Attis moved to Lydia and learned the mysteries of the Great Mother, as he simultaneously grew close to the goddess. Their intimate relationship angered Zeus, causing the powerful god to send a wild boar to destroy the Lydian’s crops. Some of the Lydians were killed along with Attis. This version of the myth is brief, but has interesting connections to the other versions. It is reflective of the Lydian version with Atys and Croesus, and additionally mentions Lydia itself. Although subtle, this suggests that an interaction between Lydia and Phrygia shaped the myth and worship of Cybele.

\(^\text{16}\) Lancellotti, *Attis: Between Myth and History: King, Priest, and God*, 2. 
Immediately after summarizing the content of Hermesianax’s poem, Pausanias reveals another account on the Phrygian Cybele and Attis myth that he considers the current, local version: Zeus scattered his seed upon the ground\(^{20}\) as he slept producing a *daimon* by the name of Agdistis.\(^{21}\) Agdistis possessed both male and female organs. The gods feared Agdistis and cut off his male organ, which yielded an almond tree. The daughter of the river King Sangarius placed the fruit of the tree in her lap, it vanished and impregnated the girl. The child born was Attis, exposed to die by King Sangarius, but saved by a goat. Attis possessed great beauty that infatuated Agdistis. Once grown up and reunited with his relatives Attis was sent to marry a king’s daughter, but Agdistis arrived during the wedding song driving Attis into frenzy. The wedding concluded with Attis’ self-castration and death. Agdistis begged Zeus for forgiveness, but he only granted that the body would never decompose. This version of myth is most comparable to Arnobius’ account, and consists of the attributes representative of the Phrygian version of the myth on Cybele and Attis.

Arnobius’ rendition of the myth is full of opposition towards the Metroac cult; however, we can discern evidence depicting the Phrygian myth of Cybele and Attis.\(^{22}\) Zeus attempted to seduce Cybele on her mountain as she slept, but he failed to succeed. In his frustration, he ejaculated onto one of the mountain rocks, a part of Cybele herself, resulting in the birth of an androgynous *daimon* named Agdistis. Agdistis possessed unstoppable power and violence that he employed to devastate the lands. The gods employed Liber to trick Agdistis into a drunken sleep and tie his manhood to his feet, so that when he woke he tore his manhood from his body. As his blood drained into the earth a pomegranate tree sprung up, and it’s fruit impregnated the

\(^{20}\) The ground is a symbolic representation of Cybele.


\(^{22}\) Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes V*, 9-17.
river king Sangarius’ daughter Nana. The king considered Nana’s pregnancy illegitimate and imprisoned her, but Cybele continued to sustain her. Nana delivered Attis the beloved of Agdistis and Cybele. The king ruled that illegitimate Attis be exposed; however, Attis survived nurtured by goat’s milk and by fate. He matured into a handsome youth, admired by his hunting companion Agdistis. Arnobius hints at inappropriate sexual behavior that prompted Phrygian King Midas to marry Attis to a princess. On the day of the wedding Cybele lifted the walls of the city with Agdistis, who caused madness among the wedding guests. The inflicted frenzy caused Attis to castrate himself and perish. The mortal wound bled out as Attis lay beneath a pine tree. Cybele gathered his severed parts, anointed them with fragrances, wrapped them in his clothing, and then buried them in the earth. Violets grew from the buried parts. Agdistis begged for Attis’ life, but Zeus only granted continued hair growth, movement in his small finger, and that his body never putrefied.

These myths differ from one another in many fundamental ways, yet they describe the same goddess and her same consort. Lancellotti suggests that Cybele and the structure of her cult may not be evaluated uniformly within all cultural contexts. As the cult expands among different peoples and cultures, it morphs to represent something different than it did previously. Lancellotti argues, “…from a religio-historical point of view, it is important to establish, in the study of possible parallels, whether the similarities of mythical motifs or ritual elements found in different cultures, correspond to similar meanings and functions.” Thus, even when the same symbol is present in a ritual practiced by two different cultures, it is not fair to deduce that the symbol held an identical significance. When celebrating or incorporating a new religion or ritual,

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23 Arnobius claims the fruit that impregnated Nana was an apple but that eliminated the significant connection to Agdistis; Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes V*, 9-17.
every culture takes into account what purpose that religion or ritual serves for the people living in that specific location and time period. This does not have to be performed on a conscious level. Often it is subconscious and based on the capacity to survive and prosper. Tradition and ritual are often living; they change throughout time so that they may continue to serve those they benefit. If a certain tradition or ritual does not change as needed to serve those of a specific location and time period, it will expire and new traditions and rituals will be born.

This is the case with Cybele; her mythology and associated worship practices were a living tradition for the Lydians, Phrygians, Greeks, and Romans. We are able to observe her transformation as she existed in various cultures, locations, and time periods through the available literary and archaeological evidence. Cybele also offers perspective on what happens when a tradition or ritual is no longer living, and vanishes into a new important tradition or ritual. The Roman cult of Magna Mater was one of the last pagan religions to flourish prior to the widespread profusion of Christianity. Magna Mater, or Cybele, reveals much about the societies in which she was venerated and worshipped. Particularly for this thesis, Magna Mater serves as evidence for the ways in which Rome operated socially and politically from the second century BCE to the fourth century CE. Her cult arrived in Rome nearing a time of civil strife and war with external states, and it left Rome as the empire approached a new system of rule governed by Christianity.

The myths and rituals associated with Cybele strongly depend on the mythical character Attis. It is impossible to evaluate Cybele without also affording substantial attention to her

beloved consort. A young and attractive youth with many identities, Attis is known to be human, demi-god, immortal, resurrected, mortal, lover, son, friend, royal, and a shepherd in myth. Each of these identities combines differently in separate contexts, yet all are visible among the vast remainder of mythical evidence on the Metroac cult. Attis possesses a strong connection with Cybele throughout these myths, as his fate is dependent on her.

Phrygia and Lydia were both powerful states in Western Anatolia that ruled the majority of their surrounding territory for a time. [Figure 1] Phrygia ultimately fell under Lydian hegemony during the late seventh century BCE or early sixth century BCE, although it retained a certain level of autonomy beneath Lydian rule.\(^{28}\) These states undoubtedly influenced each other culturally, and both worshiped Cybele. Phrygia contains the most archaeological evidence pertaining to Cybele, who is also known as the Phrygian Matar, such as large reliefs carved into natural rock that marked borders between territories.\(^{29}\) [Figure 2] Since the Magna Mater and her myth were transported from Phrygia to Rome, Phrygia is indisputably a primary source from which we should evaluate the Roman cult of Magna Mater. However, I suggest that Lydia also played an important part in the formation of the Metroac cult because of the strong relationship shared with Phrygia, and the Lydian version of myth with names that link to Lydian dynasts consistent in Phrygian and Roman myth versions.

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\(^{29}\) Lynn E. Roller, “Phrygian and The Phrygians,” 572.
Lancellotti cites persuasive evidence that Attis had deep royal and political roots in Lydia and Phrygia. Herodotus and other ancient historians relate royal genealogies that include the
names “Lydus, son of Atys” and “Croesus” similar to those found in the Lydian Cybele myth.\textsuperscript{30} These two names have great importance and symbolize power in Lydian history as Lydus is responsible for their namesake, and Croesus was the dynast that subjected Phrygia to Lydia’s rule according to Herodotus.\textsuperscript{31} Further, Croesus is credited as the first to come into contact with the Greeks in Asia Minor.\textsuperscript{32} Both Phrygia and Lydia experienced early contact with the Greeks in Asia Minor facilitating cultural influence between Western Anatolia and Greece. This particular relationship to powerful rulers may have appealed to the Romans when they acquired Magna Mater, for Rome often identified with Greek history and practices. The power linked to the names within the Lydian and Phrygian myths symbolizes the great importance the Lydians and the Phrygians associated with Cybele. This further indicates that Cybele was a suitable and significant goddess for Rome to acquire in the second century BCE.

After Phrygia had been taken over by Lydia, Phrygia’s monarchy morphed into a theocracy visible in the third century BCE.\textsuperscript{33} Phrygia became a temple-state governed by a high priest chosen by competence rather than birthright. This transformation eliminated the transfer of power to biological heirs and established the transfer of power to a man who was most qualified. This new form of government revolved around Cybele, whom the monarchs previously worshiped. The high priest in Phrygia was named Attis after the Cybele myth, but as I pointed out earlier, the name may be rooted in ancient genealogical tradition through the connection to

\textsuperscript{31} McMahon, “The Land and Peoples of Anatolia,” eds. Sharon R. Steadman and Gregory McMahon, 27.
\textsuperscript{32} McMahon, “The Land and Peoples of Anatolia,” eds. Sharon R. Steadman and Gregory McMahon, 27.
\textsuperscript{33} Lancellotti, \textit{Attis: Between Myth and History: King, Priest, and God}, 40-52.
the dy
ast “Atys.”

The surviving Phrygian version of the Cybele myth exhibits this new
government structure through the act of self-castration, which symbolizes the elimination of
producing an heir further maintaining the integrity of the theocracy.

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Chapter 2: Attis and the Galli

Attis and the galli, the priests of Magna Mater, provide an instructive starting-point for our investigation because many ancient sources relate their cultic activities negatively, but evidence reveals that the Metroac cult and the galli were of high importance to Roman society.\(^{36}\) The galli were foreign, self-castrated men. Roman citizens were not allowed to participate in the gallis’ cultic activities, though it has been speculated that an Archigallus, who probably was not castrated, and the taurobolium were added so that Roman citizens could participate in the private cult rituals.\(^{37}\) Based on the evidence of Attis worship discovered between the second century BCE and the fourth century CE, it is clear that Attis and predictably the galli attained an important place in Roman society, and so it seems that the cult served to inform Rome’s social and political identity from the second century BCE onwards. [Figure 3, Figure 4] In view of the fact that Attis and the galli were vital to the Magna Mater cult, it is rather surprising that neither Attis nor the galli appear in Ovid and Livy’s accounts of Cybele’s advent to Rome.\(^{38}\)

(Figure 3: Sarcophagus lid discovered in the cemetery of Ostia that depicts a Roman Archigallus.)


\(^{38}\) Lancellotti, *Attis: Between Myth and History: King, Priest, and God*, 76.
The Magna Mater cult arrived in Rome in the year 204 BCE. Rome subdued Hannibal in the Second Punic War at this time, but the Carthaginian general still seemed a threat. In order to diminish this threat Rome consulted the Sibylline books which instructed them to bring Cybele from Pessinus to Rome. They sent a delegation of magistrates to retrieve her from King Attalus in Pergamum, with whom they previously were allied in opposition to Philip of Macedonia. The legation brought the goddess over by ship and welcomed her with an elaborate reception at the port of Ostia. Two youths from politically important families, P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica and Claudia Quinta, initially received Magna Mater on the shores before her stone effigy was passed hand by hand up to the Palatine hill. The two were specifically chosen in order to comply with the Sibylline books, which suggested that the goddess must be initially

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40 Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, 46.
received by the most pure and noble hands of a man and then a woman. After this process was completed, Rome ultimately defeated Hannibal.

Ovid provides a detailed description of Cybele’s advent at Ostia in *Fasti IV* that reports those that attended and facilitated the historical event in 204 BCE:

> Omnis eques mixtaque gravis cum plebe senatus
> Obvius ad Tusci fluminis ora venit.
> Procedunt pariter matres nataeque nurusque
> Quaequeae colunt sanctos virginitate focos.

All the knights, the grave senate, mingling with the *plebs*,
Meet her at the mouth of the Tuscan stream.
With them parade mothers, daughters and wives, and those
Whose virginity serves the sacred hearth.

These lines display the variety of Roman citizens that participated in the advent of Cybele, while it hints at which Romans might have worshipped Magna Mater after her arrival. The goddess was available to all social classes of Roman citizens, and politically significant patrician families in particular play a “central role” in Magna Mater’s advent to Rome. Those that were a part of the highly esteemed senate, the elites, welcomed the goddess alongside the plebeians, or the common citizens. It is notable that women were included in the advent since certain activities in Rome were often exclusive to men. It is significant that the vestal virgins, those that Ovid references in the last line, were present since they upheld ideals of Romanitas and they served central roles indispensable to Roman religion. All social classes, except for slaves, united together to accept this foreign goddess into the Roman pantheon. The presence of so many social

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44 Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, 47.
45 Ovid, *Fasti IV*, 293-296.
classes, especially the patricians, implies that the advent of Cybele was an anticipated event for the Romans and that they took her incorporation into the Roman pantheon seriously.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus provides evidence that Roman citizens honored Magna Mater with sacrifices and games, or *ludi*, during the Megalensia:

“For the *praetors* perform sacrifices and celebrate games in her honour every year according to Roman customs, but the priest and priestess of the goddess are Phrygians, and it is they who carry her image in procession through the city, begging alms in her name according to their custom, and wearing figures upon their breasts and striking their timbrels while their followers play tunes upon their flutes in honour of the Mother of the Gods.”

Roman aristocrats, patricians, customarily sponsored *ludi* for the entertainment and pleasure of the citizens. The Megalensia already appears in the first century BCE based on Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ account. The Megalensia did not accompany the goddess from Pessinus; it was one of the Roman instituted customs allowing citizens to maintain proper Roman worship to Magna Mater alongside the traditional Phrygian worship. According to Vermaseren’s description of the Megalensia Magna Mater was well celebrated in Rome. Two specific dates were honored in her favor: April 4th was the anniversary of the goddess’ arrival and April 10th was the anniversary of the dedication of her temple. National feasts were held on and in between these days; they incorporated sacrifices, banquets, games, plays, theater, circus, and a procession through the city in the festivities. Patricians sponsored games and theatrical

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49 Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, 52.
performances, and carried the goddess’ chariot in the procession. Patricians further celebrated the goddess by offering “moretum”, a mixture of cheese and spices, in order to honor her for the survival of man during private feasts. This reflects Cybele’s association with the elites. Slaves were not permitted to take part in the Ludi Megalenses, the Megalensian Games, which further suggests Magna Mater was regarded highly among Roman citizens. This elaborate celebration honoring Magna Mater alone shows that she was not a minor goddess; rather her presence was distinctly visible in Rome by the first century BCE. A festival of this magnitude and class proves that she was sacred and important to the Roman people.

Rome often incorporated foreign priests in the transfer of foreign deities considering them essential to proper worship by the 3rd century BCE. The galli were visible to Roman citizens, and they served important, irreplaceable roles in worshipping Magna Mater. Ovid documents that the galli performed ritual dances and sang in the Megalensian procession; while Lucretius reports that the galli begged for alms and carried the goddess’ image in the festival procession. Roman citizens were not yet permitted to worship Magna Mater through sacred ritual as the galli in the first century CE, yet they were able to honor her in Roman fashion alongside her Phrygian priests. The coexistence of restrictions against traditional Phrygian worship with the practice of Romanized worship depicts the intricate relationship that Roman society had with Cybele.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus informs us that castration was restricted to the Phrygians, thus priesthood was restricted to Phrygian men and the galli were confined to the Palatine temple.

54 Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 124-125.
56 Orlin, Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire, 27.
57 Ovid, Fasti IV, 179-246; Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, 2.615.
for a period of time. However, legal changes and developments gradually occurred so that Roman citizens could intimately participate in Magna Mater’s cult worship. The Metroac cult became more visible and viable to citizens beginning with Augustus’ rebuilding of Magna Mater’s temple. Claudius (41-54 CE) made it legal for Roman citizens to become priests to Magna Mater and take part in voluntary castration; however, the act of personal castration was never fully accepted by Roman society. It created legal issues for the galli; there are records indicating that galli were unable to retrieve their inheritance because they represented an unknown gender. Domitian (81-96 CE) and Hadrian (117-138 CE) later made castration illegal during their respective reigns. These new laws created a situation in which the cult became less Phrygian and more Roman.

As time progressed, Rome accepted more official feasts and festivals for Cybele’s honor. Although Roman rituals were devised for more appropriate worship of Magna Mater, such as the Megalensia, they existed simultaneously with Phrygian rituals. The galli practiced the Phrygian rite of self-castration on the Dies Sanguinis, the day of blood; on this occasion they cut and beat themselves for the purpose of drawing blood which they sprinkled on Attis’ effigy and the sacred altars. Claudius added the Dies Sanguinis on March 24th and Arbor Intrat, entry

58 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities II, 19.2-4; Cumont, The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism, 52-56.
59 Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap: Roman Masculinity,” 103-104.
60 Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 97; Lancellotti, Attis: Between Myth and History: King, Priest, and God, 81.
62 Beard, “The Roman and the Foreign,” eds. Nicholas Thomas and Caroline Humphrey, 176; Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 97; This may or may not have prevented Roman citizens from becoming galli; there is not strong evidence to determine this detail.
63 Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 123.
64 Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 115.
of the tree, on March 22nd to the Magna Mater’s festival celebration. Antoninus Pius (138-161 CE) followed Claudius’ lead in the second century CE by adding the Canna Intrat, the entry of the reed, on March 15th and the Hilaria, the day of joy, on March 25th. A festival for Attis was formed in the 1st century CE that honored both the goddess and her companion.

It has been suggested that Romans added religious positions and rituals, such as the Archigallus and the taurobolium, to provide citizens a closer interaction with the Metroac cult and the galli since they were restricted from performing the self-castration rite. The Roman Metroac priests may not have participated in the self-castration rite. This is difficult to determine because the imagery of the galli does not reveal their physical manhood. The Archigallus became the head priest for the Metroac cult in Rome. The galli and the Archigallus could be full Roman citizens as evidenced by the tombstone of Marcus Modius Maxximus.

[Figure 5] Lancellotti states that the Archigallus is “Roman, has a wife, sacrifices for the emperor (pro-state, pro-cosmos, pro-creation) and belongs fully in Roman society”. The Archigallus supervised and participated in the taurobolium ritual; often sacrifices were

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66 The Hilaria is considered to be a joyful celebration but scholars are unsure of its purpose; Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 119-123; Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap: Roman Masculinity,” 108.
73 Lancellotti, Attis: Between Myth and History: King, Priest, and God, 104-105.
performed for the health of the Roman emperor as recorded by the commemorative altars discovered.\textsuperscript{74}

(Figure 5: Funeral urn of Archigallus M. Modius Maxximus.)

Altars have been found that document the occurrence of a taurobolium or a criobolium.\textsuperscript{75} Considering that 133 commemorative altars have been discovered mentioning either a taurobolium or criobolium, and all but five refer to Cybele, these rituals are certainly connected to the goddess’ worship.\textsuperscript{76} The taurobolium was a ritual in which a bull was sacrificed and its’ testicles removed, while a criobolium used a ram in place of a bull. [Figure 6] This could have been done for meaningful religious purposes, or as a cheaper form of sacrifice. Based on the Christian apologist Prudentius’ account, it is thought that the Archigallus went down into a pit covered by a board with holes, and an assistant above sacrificed the victim with a spear.\textsuperscript{77} The victim’s blood poured down onto the priest below and he emerged from the pit. The term “cernus” appears in the epigraphic evidence on the altars but scholars have not found solid

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{75} Duthoy, \textit{The Taurobolium: Its Evolution and Terminology}, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Duthoy, \textit{The Taurobolium: Its Evolution and Terminology}, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Prudentius, \textit{Peristephanon X}, 1006-50.
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\end{footnotesize}
evidence to determine its significance or function.\(^7^8\) [Figure 7] Alternative evidence indicates that it was an object intended to hold the “vires” of the sacrificial victim; however, there is argument among scholars as to whether “vires” implies the blood or testicles of the sacrificial victim.\(^7^9\) These rituals have created conversation among scholars since the evidence for this particular ritual is limited and obscure.

Since the *galli* traditionally self-castrated there has been speculation that the taurobolium was performed in place of physical castration. Lancellotti suggests that the taurobolium replaces the self-castration rite for Romans and allows for the inclusion of women.\(^8^0\) However, the changes that the cult experienced evidenced by the legal proceedings and vocabulary present in the altars, and the occasional participation of women in these rituals leads to another

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\(^7^8\) Duthoy, *The Taurobolium: Its Evolution and Terminology*, 75.


\(^8^0\) Lancellotti, *Attis: Between Myth and History: King, Priest, and God*, 112-115.
conclusion. It is possible that the taurobolium or criobolium was intended to replace the brutal rite of self-castration, but this seems too speculative considering that there were galli who continued to practice this rite. As evidenced by the calendar of April 354 CE, eunuch-priests of Magna Mater continued to exist into the fourth century CE. I further suspect that the taurobolium does not replace self-castration since the involved women would not have castrated otherwise. The taurobolium may signify a change or an addition of a ritual, rather than a total replacement. Magna Mater became more prevalent in Rome through adjustments made to the Metroac cult allowing Romans to participate in the galli’s religious rituals.

Magna Mater was a foreign goddess who came to Rome with unique traditions and ceremonies, which the Romans were obligated to uphold to a certain extent in order to honor her. Certain Phrygian traditions and ceremonies that accompanied Magna Mater, particularly the priests’ practice of self-castration, were viewed as barbaric in Roman eyes. In order to explain such barbaric rituals some scholars have suggested that the Romans were unaware of the type of cult worship the goddess brought with her, yet when considering Rome’s widespread trade connections, experience with external warfare, and remarkable accomplishments as an ancient society this seems to be an oversight of the rich culture exhibited in ancient Rome.

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It is far more likely that Rome knew exactly who Cybele was to the Phrygians and intentionally incorporated her into the official list of Roman deities to serve social and political purposes. According to Roscoe, the Romans encountered the Phrygian *galli* during campaigns in Asia Minor in 190 and 189 BCE.\(^{86}\) Furthermore, when the goddess arrived in Rome she was given a home in a historically and politically significant place in the city—on the Palatine hill between the Temple of Victory and the house of Romulus.\(^{87}\) The Romans certainly intended to honor her, not least because she brought victory to them against Hannibal; however, negative attitudes towards the Metroac cult discernable in ancient literary sources continued to persist into the first and second centuries CE.

Although Rome began institutionalizing the worship of the goddess in the second century BCE, the Pontifex Maximus placed restrictions on the practices of Magna Mater’s worship.\(^{88}\) Dionysius of Halicarnassus provides literary evidence for the restrictions placed upon Magna Mater’s cult and the attitudes towards her worship in the first century BCE. The historian states:

> “But by a law and decree of the senate no native Roman walks in procession through the city arrayed in a parti-coloured robe, begging alms or escorted by flute-players, or worships the goddess with the Phrygian ceremonies. So cautious are the [Romans] about admitting any foreign religious customs and so great is their aversion to all pompous display that is wanting in decorum.”\(^{89}\)

The Romans found the Phrygian cult practices associated with the goddess so distasteful that the Senate issued laws in order to contain them. Dionysius indicates the negative image and opinions generated in response to Cybele’s traditional form of worship during the first century BCE that continued through the empire. Rome attempted to reform the foreign acts of worship and the

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\(^{88}\) Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult*, 96.

\(^{89}\) Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 2.19.4.
priests observing them in order to encourage appropriate and Roman celebrations of the
goddess. Simultaneously, the Magna Mater and her priests were promoting a redefined and
powerful Roman identity in the greater Mediterranean world.

The criticism associated with Magna Mater’s cult was largely due to the practices of her
priests, the galli, who self-castrated in order to be initiated. Ovid demonstrates in his description
that the initiation ceremony for the galli imitated the life and death of Attis, the handsome
shepherd boy whom Cybele fell in love with. Ovid recounts the myth of Cybele and Attis
influenced by Phrygian tradition, which seems to have informed the rituals that were performed
for Magna Mater. In this version, Attis is a beautiful Phrygian youth that Cybele fell in love
with. He then committed his life-long love and service to the goddess. The nymph Sagaritis
tempted Attis, thus he broke his promise to Cybele. The goddess struck down the nymph in a fit
of anger. This incident put Attis into a frenzy that caused him to wander while harming and
cursing himself. Attis ultimately castrated himself with a sharp rock out of guilt towards the
goddess.

In this version of myth Ovid denounces Attis as a man similarly to Catullus as I will
show in the next section of this chapter. Ovid recounts the symbolic death of a man by
castration, rather than an actual death differing from the majority of myth accounts. The priests
of Magna Mater mimicked this and other Phrygian versions of the myth by castrating themselves

91 Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap: Roman Masculinity,” 84-86; Wallace-Hadrill, *Rome’s Cultural
Revolution*, 3-37; Beard, “The Roman and the Foreign,” eds. Nicholas Thomas and Caroline
Tougher, 87-99.
94 Ovid, *Fasti IV*, 221-246; Catullus, *Carmen 63*. 
during their initiation ceremony, and, in their later years of worship, striking themselves to the
point of drawing blood on the Dies Sanguinis during the festival of Attis. The Romans viewed
these particular cult practices as savage, hence the restrictions revealed by Dionysius of
Halicarnassus placed upon the cult during the Republic when it first arrived; the Romans could
not understand why a man would willingly castrate himself. The priests dressed like women,
another aspect of the cult poets made jests at, not helping the public reputation of the cult;
nevertheless this cult and its’ priests persevered until Christianity took the reigns of rule. Rome
had to keep this new goddess because she aided them in victory among other matters, however
they were unsure of how to handle the elements of her cult that were extremely different from
Roman standards.

Originally the galli were exclusively Phrygian and restricted to worship in the goddess’
Palatine temple with the exception of festival days. Roman citizens were forbidden from the
active worship of the cult until the empire under Claudius in the first century BCE, leaving
foreigners in charge of maintaining the new goddess in her temple. The cult of Magna Mater
shifted from foreign and limited in the Republic to Roman and popularly worshipped throughout
the provinces during the empire; this shift can be viewed within primary literary sources such as
in Catullus 63. Rome legally incorporated Magna Mater into its’ society for political reasons;
however, both law and literary statements spurned the Phrygian cult worship associated with this
foreign deity. Although certain Romans associated Magna Mater and her original worship
practices with negativity, the goddess and her cult could not be entirely rejected not least because

95 Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 96.
96 Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 96.
97 Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 96-97.
98 Cumont, The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism, 53.
99 Vermaseren, Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult, 96.
100 Cumont, The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism, 51-57.
Rome owed her for its’ victory against Hannibal; therefore, it was necessary for Rome to formulate a way in which Magna Mater could be worshiped while maintaining Roman customs and standards. Moreover, I believe that the incorporation of Magna Mater and her priests occurred in a precise manner for the benefit of Roman expansion and identity recognized by Roman politicians in the second century BCE.

According to Latham and other scholars, the Romans accepted the Phrygian mother but rejected her priests, the galli. Rome willingly gave Magna Mater an extravagant welcoming ceremony, a temple on the Palatine, and elaborate festival celebrations yearly. However, according to Beard, the Romans confined her priests and active worshippers to the Palatine keeping public rituals to a minimum. The priests were eunuchs, wore feminine clothing and jewelry as well as cosmetics, and had long hair styled in women’s fashion. Latham suggests that the effeminate priests threatened the traditional Roman standard of masculinity, but I argue that the priests actually reinforced this standard. While Latham and a wide array of scholars are correct that Rome held much contempt for the galli and may have ventured to stifle their ritual practices, I believe that it is an underestimation of the rich culture present in ancient Roman society to deduce that the goddess was welcomed with Roman rituals while her eccentric

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Phrygian priests were hidden from public view.\textsuperscript{105} The *galli* became a part of Roman society simultaneously with Magna Mater in the second century BCE and they remained a part of that society until the fourth century CE. If the *galli* were truly as despised by the Romans as many scholars have claimed, then we must search for an explanation for why they were not eradicated from Rome. I contend that this explanation arises from evidence that the *galli* served an important and recognized purpose in Roman society, despite the fact that the Romans held negative attitudes against their Phrygian ritual practices.

**Catullus’ Attis:**

Catullus illustrates the story of Attis in poem 63, which coincides with the initiation practices of the *galli*. Poem 63 makes it clear that self-castration among the *galli* was a contemporary and widely known practice when Catullus was writing. This poem serves as direct evidence for the critical Roman attitudes towards the traditional Phrygian ceremonies of cult worship, but also provides evidence that the *galli* served an important role in Roman society.

Catullus writes poem 63 from the perspective of Attis, and ultimately portrays the shepherd as regretting his self-mutilation. This manifestation of regret breaks away from the traditional popular myth of Cybele and Attis in which the shepherd regrets his infidelity, but not self-mutilation; it is also infidelity, rather than inflicted frenzy, that causes him to castrate himself. Another difference in Catullus 63 divergent from the traditional myth is Cybele’s regret

of inflicting the frenzy upon Attis that caused his personal mutilation. Alternatively, Cybele acts as an encourager of self-mutilation in Catullus’ version of the myth; she does not experience any remorse from her actions. The goddess plays a villainous role. Attis’ regret and Cybele’s vengeance in poem 63 is indicative of the negative opinion that Catullus and many of his contemporaries held against the galli and their extreme religious practices. The portrayal of Magna Mater in poem 63 emphasizes the strangeness of her cult and the reception of its’ Phrygian rituals within Roman culture.

While we can conclude from Catullus 63 that at least some Romans received the Metroac cult warily, the poem also indicates a plausible level of ambiguity through word structure and content that surrounded the galli in the typical Roman mind. This ambiguity functioned as a mechanism that reinforced the galli as members of Roman society. A section of Catullus 63 begins to illustrate this matter:

egone a mea remota haec ferar in nemora domo? 
patria, bonis, amicis, genitoribus abero? 
aberro foro, palaestra, stadio ey gymnasiis? 
miser a miser, querendum est etiam atque etiam, anime. 
quod enim genus figuraest ego non quod obierim?

Shall I rush to these forests far distant from my home? Be absent from my country, possessions, parents, friends? Absent from forum, palaestra, stadium and gymnasia? Ah wretched, wretched spirit, you must forever grieve. What kind of human figure have I not undergone?

In order to demonstrate the ambiguity associated with the galli, Catullus utilizes words that are either feminine or unclear in gender. For example, in line 31 of poem 63 “furibunda” is in the

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feminine gender, but “anhelans” and “agens” are in either the masculine, feminine, or neuter
gender. His employment of unclear gendered words whenever possible suggests that the *galli*
were often thought of in this questionable manner: not quite a man, but not quite a woman.

Further, the use of feminine words indicates that Romans perceived the *galli* as more female than
male. This signifies that the *galli* were not allowed the same, or similar, privileges as Roman
citizen men or typical foreign men, which also explains why the priests were exclusively foreign
until the second century CE. Evidence suggests Claudius authorized Roman citizens to serve as
*galli* in the second century CE. Further, Hales offers evidence that Roman male citizens
became *galli* in Ostia. If the *galli* never occupied an important place in Roman society, Roman
citizens themselves would have never become *galli*. Additionally, although women were
subjugated they certainly occupied indispensable roles in Roman society. Thus, since the *galli*
held status in-between men and women, they must have filled fundamental roles as well.

At this moment in the poem Attis declares himself a woman, although he is not perceived
as a genuine woman from a Roman perspective. This is the moment Attis realizes the gravity of
his actions, although Catullus previously illuminated Attis’ gender transformation immediately
after Attis’ self-castration. Catullus displays Attis’ realization of his actions as an identity
struggle; Attis wonders, “Am I to be a Maenad, half-me, a male unmanned?” A male identity
in Roman society was an important social privilege, it provided extensive legal rights, and it
permitted one to make important decisions regarding society. The forum was a place mainly

111 furibunda simul anhelans vaga vadit animam agens; Catullus, *Carmen* 63, 31.
112 Nauta, “Catullus 63 in a Roman Context,” eds. Ruurd R. Nauta and Annette Harder, 92-93.
113 Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, 55; Lancellotti, *Attis: Between Myth
and History: King, Priest, and God*, 81; Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult*, 97.
115 ego Maenas, ego mei pars, ego vir sterilis ero?; Catullus; *Carmen* 63; 69.
occupied by men, with the exception of the vestal virgins, to conduct law and business; this was the central zone for Roman society and culture. Now that Attis has an unknown gender he becomes an exile to society, and can no longer participate in the masculine ways of life once available to him; however, there seems a place for this particular exile in Roman society considering the galli’s continued existence into the fourth century CE. Attis and the galli occupied a zone in-between male and female. The ambiguity of Attis and the galli’s gender served to reinforce typical gender roles in Roman society – they represented the foreign and what a Roman person should not be.\textsuperscript{116} If the galli were freely accepted into society and given the same privileges as male citizens in Rome, the standards and definitions of what it meant to be a man in Rome would have been forced to change; therefore, the galli continued to be considered with disdain on the surface of remaining ancient sources throughout Magna Mater’s existence in Rome.\textsuperscript{117} By the same token, it may be said that at the time of advent of Magna Mater the definition of what it meant to be “Roman” was changing and the galli in fact represent and define Romanitas accurately.\textsuperscript{118} The second century BCE marks the beginning of political expansion outside of Italy, and foreign was becoming increasingly intertwined with Roman.

The self-castration and feminine appearance of the galli provoked most of the negativity that ancient authors and historians expressed in their descriptions of these priests. This negativity prevalent in ancient sources has led many scholars to believe that Magna Mater’s priests were


\textsuperscript{117} Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap: Roman Masculinity,” 89-91.

\textsuperscript{118} Hales, “Looking for eunuchs: the galli and Attis in Roman Art,” ed. Shaun Tougher, 98.
ostracized from Roman society.\textsuperscript{119} As I have asserted before, the six centuries the \textit{galli} were present in Rome and evidence that Roman citizens eventually became \textit{galli} prevents us from adhering to this conclusion.\textsuperscript{120} Rather I argue that the \textit{galli} held a place in society similar to that which transgender people occupy today; these priests were born male and identified as male, yet dressed as female exhibiting a state of ambiguity between binary genders. Roscoe states, “unlike the modern transvestite, however, \textit{galli} were part of an official Roman state religion and at every level of society”.\textsuperscript{121} Binary genders strongly informed societal structures in Rome; thus, ambiguity expressed by the \textit{galli} may have perplexed the Romans, yet the priests of Magna Mater were an official and inescapable part of Roman society.\textsuperscript{122} In nearly every culture third gendered people have existed, but the way they are accepted within society changes based on time and place. While the \textit{galli} had a legitimate role to occupy in Roman society, their contemporaries also despised and chastised their abnormal behavior.\textsuperscript{123} Men were believed to have a certain amount of power in society by birthright, but the \textit{galli} chose to dispose of such

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\textsuperscript{121} Roscoe, “Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion,” 196.

\textsuperscript{122} Roscoe, “Priests of the Goddess: Gender Transgression in Ancient Religion,” 196.

invaluable privilege. Nonetheless, there was a place for ambiguous gendered people such as the *galli* in the ancient world.

In the last lines of the poem Catullus shows his contempt further for the priestly practices of Magna Mater, while subtly revealing that the *galli* occupy a secure role in Roman society:

Dea, magna Dea, Cybebe, Dea Domina Dindymi,
procul a mea tuos sit furor omnis, Era, domo.
alios age incitatos, alios age rabidos.\(^{126}\)

Goddess, great Goddess, Cybebe\(^{125}\), Goddess
Mistress of Dindymus,
Far from my house be all that frenzy of yours,
O Queen. Drive others to elation, drive others raving mad!\(^{127}\)

In this passage the poet expresses his opinion that castrating oneself, even in the name of a goddess, is an act only an insane person would do; he begs the goddess to refrain from dragging him into her cult worship because he has no desire to participate. By the same token, rather than suggesting that the goddess and her worship be removed from Rome which he could have done, the poet only asks to be excluded from it. This implies that Catullus views Magna Mater as an inescapable component of Roman culture, regardless of his lack of desire to participate. Catullus’ opinion is undoubtedly shared among his Roman contemporaries; hence the laws that prohibited Roman citizens to participate in the practice discussed by Dionysius of Halicarnassus.\(^{128}\)

Although Roman citizens perceived foreigners from a critical perspective, this passage indicates that by the first century BCE Romans were beginning to view foreigners as an inescapable defining factor of Roman identity. Roman influence and power was expanding into the territories surrounding Italy, and simultaneously the definition of Romanitas was modified throughout the


\(^{125}\) Another name for Cybele.

\(^{126}\) Catullus, *Carmen 63*, 91-93.


fourth century BCE.\textsuperscript{129} It is equally important to note that the Megalensia, the Roman Magna Mater festival, was an ongoing and accepted practice at the time of poem 63.\textsuperscript{130} The different attitudes regarding voluntary castration and the Megalensia indicate that the Roman people both accepted and rejected the Metroac cult simultaneously.


Chapter 3: Political Motives

Cybele is a foreign goddess incorporated into the Roman pantheon following her advent in Rome in 204 BCE. The sources reveal Cybele as a celebrated goddess in Rome, however certain sources are overwhelmingly critical in their descriptions of the galli.\textsuperscript{131} The effeminate priests dressed ambiguously, chanted loudly through the streets begging for alms, and were reputed to practice self-castration.\textsuperscript{132} Many scholars believe the Romans were not aware of the goddess and her associative cult worship when they acquired her stone effigy from Pergamum; the cult practices of Cybele do not mesh with Roman mores.\textsuperscript{133} However, after deeper investigation the definition of Roman appears to extend outside of the city’s borders, blending with foreign cultures.\textsuperscript{134} Roman political propaganda containing Cybele as a crucial component during The Hannibalic War and Augustus’ reign proves that the Romans incorporated Cybele into their society diplomatically.

Another portal through which we may evaluate the incorporation of the Metroac cult into the official religions of Rome lies in considering Cybele and the galli as foreign. In the early Republic, avoiding foreigners and labeling them barbaric likely protected the Romans as they were establishing power and territory locally. Rome began to expand beyond the city’s borders with colonies and towns during the fourth century BCE.\textsuperscript{135} If Cybele and her cult arrived in another century in Rome, she may not have survived as a Roman goddess into the fourth century CE, if she even survived through the second century BCE. Fortunately for Cybele, she arrived in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{131} Catullus, \textit{Carmen 63}; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, \textit{Roman Antiquities II}, 19.2-4; Lucretius, \textit{De Rerum Natura}, 2.615.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Vermaseren, \textit{Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult}, 119-124.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Vermaseren, \textit{Cybele and Attis: the Myth and the Cult}, 96; Cumont, \textit{The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism}, 53.
\item \textsuperscript{134} Wallace-Hadrill, \textit{Rome’s Cultural Revolution}, 3-37; Orlin, \textit{Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire}, 3-30.
\item \textsuperscript{135} Orlin, \textit{Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire}, 22.
\end{itemize}
Rome during a period of political transformation and domination. According to Takács, “The human house was in disorder and needed mending. Purification rituals and sacrifices brought the community together while simultaneously reinforcing the bonds between the leaders and the led”.

Rome was beginning to expand its dominion outside Italian territory and into other large Mediterranean powers. It fostered closer relationships with foreigners in order to gain their deference. Incorporating foreign deities such as Cybele, Isis, and Aesculapius into Roman society likely served as a mechanism for managing Rome’s growing power and relations abroad. This strategy merged Roman features with those they conquered, archaeologically visible in the many fora discovered among Roman towns and provinces, and it operated bilaterally visible in the case of Magna Mater and her priests. The Romans did not suppress the native culture of those they subjugated; rather, Rome added another layer of identity to their subjects’ identities. Roman and foreign became increasingly intertwined, and identities became appreciably diverse. The advent of Cybele in Rome provides evidence for a shifting Roman identity that blends the conquered towns and provinces diverse identities with a Roman identity. The increasing amount of political situations involving Rome with foreigners

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137 Orlin, Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire, 27.
138 Orlin, Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire, 20.
139 Alexander the Great applied a similar strategy upon his subjects in order to maintain their loyalty just prior to Rome in the third century BCE. The Alexander mosaic in the House of the Faun at Pompeii provides evidence that Rome was aware of Alexander’s strategy, recognized its’ effectiveness, and utilized it. This particular admiration found in the floor mosaic at Pompeii reveals Rome’s strategy in acquiring territory. The respect for alternative culture and the advantages that Roman towns and provinces received from Rome’s supremacy are primary reasons that the strategy was successful; see Ada Cohen, The Alexander Mosaic: Stories of Victory and Defeat (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1; Wallace-Hadrill, Rome’s Cultural Revolution, 14; Orlin, Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire, 32.
140 Orlin, Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire, 18-19.
beginning in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} century BCE precipitated this shift, and continued until the fall of the empire.\textsuperscript{141}

As Gruen points out, there are many political undertones to the arrival of Cybele. Rome was in the midst of harnessing her power and widespread expansion; this was a time of outward domination as well as civil strife.\textsuperscript{142} Gruen believes that since Rome was on the verge of completely conquering Hannibal, this was not the primary reason for Cybele’s advent to Rome if a reason at all.\textsuperscript{143} The third to second century BCE marked a period of incorporating foreign deities into the official Roman religions, such as the Greek god Aesculapius who arrived on Tiber Island as a remedy to a devastating plague.\textsuperscript{144} It appears that incorporating foreign deities acted as a popular mechanism in solving large-scale problems as well as a way of forming a more personal identity for Rome.\textsuperscript{145} Gruen specifies two events occurring during the advent of Cybele that seem crucial to understanding her purpose as a Roman goddess: the recent conclusion of the First Macedonian War and a debate on whether military forces should invade African territory at a time when Hannibal and Macedonia still posed a threat.\textsuperscript{146} Gruen suggests that Hannibal was not the reason for the advent of Cybele, but as I will demonstrate below, Hannibal is a reoccurring and unavoidable factor in the goddess’ arrival in Rome.\textsuperscript{147}

The Macedonian War left Rome as well as Pergamum with a negative reputation among the Greeks because of their failure to protect and support their allies.\textsuperscript{148} In the First Macedonian War Rome disregarded Macedonian pressure put onto their then allies, the Aetolians, because

\textsuperscript{141} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 7.
\textsuperscript{142} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 8-10.
\textsuperscript{143} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 7.
\textsuperscript{144} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 8.
\textsuperscript{145} Orlin, \textit{Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire}, 27.
\textsuperscript{146} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 21.
\textsuperscript{147} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 7.
\textsuperscript{148} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 27-29.
they were preoccupied with a Carthaginian war on Italian soil led by Hannibal.\textsuperscript{149} This
distraction caused Rome to lose the Aetolians as allies to Philip, the Macedonian king, and
precipitated the end of the war in Macedon’s favor.\textsuperscript{150} Attalus of Pergamum damaged his own
reputation in a similar way. Attalus had amiable connections with Aetolia that caused the
Aetolians to request his protection against the Macedonians.\textsuperscript{151} It took some coercion to receive
Attalus’ aid, and although he sent his fleet in 209 BCE, the king withdrew his aid in 208 BCE
when he learned of Bithynian attacks on Pergamene territory.\textsuperscript{152} The distractions on the home
front for Rome and Attalus were the final catalysts for the loss of the First Macedonian War
unfavorable to Hellas, as well as Rome and Attalus’ political identities.

This was a period of ambition for Rome with politicians full of desire for military
recognition. Macedon and Hannibal were not the only opportunities for such recognition, and
certain generals already displayed, and wished to display, their proficiency abroad. A young
general with recent success in Spain and the same to accept Cybele at Ostia, P. Cornelius Scipio
Nasica, desired to invade Carthaginian land with his newly formed confidence.\textsuperscript{153}
Simultaneously, another impactful politician, Q. Fabius Maximus Cunctator, fought against
Scipio’s plan of invasion concerned that adding another conflict with Hannibal still at bay would
be detrimental to Rome.\textsuperscript{154} His concern rationally arose from the recent failure in the
Macedonian war that ensued from the distraction of Hannibal.\textsuperscript{155} Scipio countered Fabius’
argument by asserting that attacking Carthage would pull Hannibal from Italian soil to fight on

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{149} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 27.
\bibitem{150} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 28.
\bibitem{151} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 29.
\bibitem{152} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 29.
\bibitem{153} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 21.
\bibitem{154} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 21.
\bibitem{155} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 22.
\end{thebibliography}
his own land. These two opinions divided the Senate, and a compromise was arranged. Gruen convincingly suggests that a connection to Cybele lies in this political argument. Based on evidence of the Sibylline Prophecy, scholars widespread agree that Cybele was brought to Rome with the hope of vanquishing Hannibal. We also know that P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica himself was chosen to accept Cybele at the port of Ostia, and further, Scipio would have benefitted enormously from Hannibal’s final defeat. Since Rome possessed a history beginning in the third century BCE of incorporating foreign deities into their society in order to solve conflicts, it seems indisputable that Cybele was brought to Rome with the notion that she would solve prevailing political conflicts of that time, and enhance Roman identity both internally and abroad. Thus, I suggest that Cybele’s arrival in Rome was politically motivated and she likely was incorporated into the Roman pantheon with very specific goals in mind, contrary to what many scholars have claimed.

The advent of Cybele benefitted Rome and Attalus in a variety of ways. Firstly, this event fostered a stronger relationship between Rome and Pergamum. This gave Rome an important eastern ally as well as it provided Attalus protection by Rome, the new rising power in the Mediterranean, against potential enemies. Secondly, Cybele was presumed to eliminate

Hannibal and later credited with the Roman success of defeating the general. Hannibal’s defeat was necessary so that Rome could successfully pursue other exploits abroad and regain a positive reputation with the Greeks. Thirdly, Cybele was believed to originate in Mt. Ida, which resides in the Troad region in Pergamum. The location of Cybele’s shrine from which the Roman’s acquired her was close to the mythical location of Troy, where a historical war vital to the identities of both Greece and Rome took place. Troy was the birthplace of the Italian hero Aeneas, an ancestor to Romulus and Remus the twin founders of Rome. Gruen states, “The fable of Troy served Rome in two fundamental ways: it gave her a place in the milieu of the Greek world—and, by the same token, it announced her distinctiveness in that world.”

In agreement with Gruen, I further assert that Cybele’s advent was a strategy for Rome to improve her identity abroad, while it simultaneously cemented Rome’s origins and strengthened both her internal and external identities.

The emperor Augustus subsequently utilized Cybele for Roman political propaganda that sought to legitimize the emperor’s recently acquired power. Furthermore, this exploit facilitated the Romanization of the foreign goddess and her cult practices. Vergil, whose epic poem *Aeneid* was commissioned by Augustus, purposefully incorporates the goddess in a positive manner in order to endorse Augustan propaganda; this emperor desired to associate his reign with both founders, Aeneas and Romulus, in order to suggest he was the founder of a new Rome and legitimatize his reign. In the *Aeneid*, the Greeks destroyed Troy in battle and flames upon entering the city by means of The Trojan Horse. It was Aeneas’ destiny to lead the surviving

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169 Littlewood, “Poetic Artistry and Dynastic Politics,” 381.
Trojans to discover their new homeland. Aeneas established Italy after years of treacherous and devastating sea travel, and a war with the local people. Vergil portrays The Idaean Mother, Cybele, as a protector and guide to Aeneas.\textsuperscript{170} Cybele is often responsible for Aeneas’ safety on his voyage from Troy to Italy, for she wanted to ensure his arrival in Italy. The most familiar of these instances are the ships divinely crafted out of pines that turn into sea nymphs when set on fire.\textsuperscript{171} The pines were sacred to Cybele but she was willing to sacrifice them for Aeneas since she acted as a mother figure alongside Venus. Without Cybele’s enduring support and assistance, Aeneas would not have reached Italy, and Rome would have never originated according to popular Roman myth. Thus, Cybele becomes inseparable from Aeneas, one of the most important historical figures in Roman society. Through the use of such details, Vergil connects the Phrygian goddess with Trojan, and therefore Roman, origins.\textsuperscript{172} The \textit{Aeneid} played a vital role in defining Roman identity because it situated the nation among the larger Mediterranean world.\textsuperscript{173}

Ovid, also writing for Augustus’ approval, provides a description of the Megalensia, Cybele’s Roman festival, in \textit{Fasti IV}.\textsuperscript{174} The poet incorporates literary details that indicate the vital importance of Magna Mater and her cult worship to Rome. Ovid begins his explanation of Magna Mater with Aeneas in the history of Italy’s origins:

\begin{verbatim}
Dindymon et Cybelen et amoenam fontibus Iden
semper et Iliacas Mater amavit opes:
cum Troiam Aeneas Italos portaret in agros,
est dea sacriferas paene secuta rates,
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{170} Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap: Roman Masculinity,” 104-105; Vergil, \textit{Aeneid} 2.692-704 and 9.77-122.
\textsuperscript{171} Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap: Roman Masculinity,” 104-105; Vergil, \textit{Aeneid} 2.692-704 and 9.77-122.
\textsuperscript{172} Littlewood, “Poetic Artistry and Dynastic Politics,” 381.
\textsuperscript{173} Gruen, \textit{Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy}, 20.
\textsuperscript{174} Ovid, \textit{Fasti}, 4.165-372.
sed nondum, fatis Latio sua numina posci
senserat, adsuetis substiteratque locis.

The Mother always loved Dindymus and Cybele,
Ida’s pleasant springs and Ilium’s realm.
When Aeneas ferried Troy to Italy’s fields,
The goddess almost trailed his sacred ship.
But felt that fate did not demand her godhead yet
For Latium, and kept her usual haunts.  

Although Cybele was destined to arrive in Italy, Ovid suggests that the goddess was intended to
arrive at a separate time than Aeneas for the benefit of Rome. This purpose was realized at
Cybele’s advent. I have shown the origins of Cybele and Aeneas vital to Augustan propaganda,
but Cybele’s advent itself was loaded with symbolism connected to Roman political propaganda
beneficial to the Republic and the emperor Augustus. As revealed above, the Sibylline Books
dictated that Rome procure Cybele from Pergamum in order to extinguish a foreign enemy.  

Religion defined Roman government; therefore, an envoy to Attalus in Pergamum fulfilled the
Sibylline Prophecy. Once Attalus released the goddess from Pergamum, Ovid reveals that the
envoy prepared for Cybele’s journey to Rome symbolically:

Protinus innumerae caedunt pineta secures
Illa, quibus fugiens Phryx pius usus erat:
Mille manus coeunt, et picta coloribus ustis
Caelestum matrem concava puppis habet.

At once countless axes cut down the pine groves
Used for the pious Phrygian’s escape.
A thousand hands gather. A hollow ship painted
With burnt colours holds the Mother of gods.  

175 Ovid, Fasti, 4.249-254; This and all subsequent references to this text are from Ovid, Fasti,
176 Gruen, Studies in Greek Culture and Roman Policy, 7-10; Ovid, Fasti IV, 257-292.
177 Aeneas.
178 Ovid, Fasti, 4.273-276.
As indicated by the effort and attention in building the ship, the envoy prepared to transport Cybele with sharp recognition of the goddess’ history and importance of identity to Rome. The ship comprised of the same sacred wood that ultimately carried Aeneas to the shores of Italy, yet unlike Aeneas the goddess’ effigy experienced a safe journey to the port at Ostia. The peaceful journey symbolizes that it was the proper time for Cybele’s addition to Rome’s deities. Cybele’s ship traveled along a similar route to Aeneas further establishing her connection to Roman history.¹⁷⁹ [Figure 8] The symbolic process of Cybele’s journey resembles the elements of Aeneas’ pilgrimage.¹⁸⁰ Rome intended such symbolism to establish the importance of Cybele’s relationship to the founding of Italy, a necessary precursor to the development of Rome.

![Image: Cybele’s Journey from Pergamum to Rome.](image)

Although the goddess was accessible to all social classes, patrician families in particular play a “central role” in Magna Mater’s advent to Rome.¹⁸¹ Two Roman elites from political families that were historically important in the Roman Republic played prominent roles as the *vir*

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¹⁸⁰ Littlewood, “Poetic Artistry and Dynastic Politics,” 392-393.
optimus and castissima femina, the purest man and woman, in the reception of the Phrygian goddess as dictated by the Sibylline Books. P. Scipio Nasica was a young, but accomplished general that descended from an elite Roman family. He was particularly chosen because his youth indicated purity not yet clouded by a political career; purity and chastity were paramount Roman ideals. Claudia Quinta, descendant of Aeneid character Clausus and ancestress to the Julio-Claudian line of emperors, played an essential role in Cybele’s reception. The ship carrying the stone effigy of Cybele became stuck outside the port of Ostia, thus Claudia pleaded with the goddess to allow her to pull the ship into the harbor to prove her chastity. Ovid records Cybele as answering Claudia’s prayer, thus Rome would not have the goddess without her chaste, elite hands. Claudia represented Roman mores surrounding purity especially relevant during Augustus’ reign. The founder of the Julio-Claudian line, Augustus, did not neglect the importance of Claudia Quinta. Her presence in the advent of Cybele is significant to Augustus’ choice to exaggerate his and Rome’s ancestry connected to Cybele and Aeneas.

Rome maintained a tradition of establishing historical connections to deities and influential patricians in order to accredit contemporary political events and leaders in powerful positions. Augustus symbolically established his heritage to Cybele, Aeneas, and Romulus in order to affirm his political power. The association with deities to legitimize power was a reoccurring theme throughout the Empire visible throughout the Imperial Fora in Rome. This use of symbolism occurred earlier in a similar manner during the Republic when Rome intended...
to strengthen her right to power by associating herself with Cybele, the Great Mother Goddess of Trojan origin.\textsuperscript{189} Cybele’s advent and presence in political propaganda signifies that the goddess was an outcome of Rome’s strategy embedded in society throughout the centuries.

The advent of Cybele and her role in political propaganda was loaded with symbolism, as was the case with foreign deities Rome incorporated into its official religions. Deities such as Isis, Aesculapius, and Cybele were included into Roman society for specific motives.\textsuperscript{190} While the ancient Romans may not have realized every instance of symbolism, it seems to be convention that Romans held great meaning and purpose surrounding the incorporation of foreign deities.\textsuperscript{191} It is not coincidence that Cybele serves an important role in the defeat of Hannibal and Augustus’ political propaganda. By the third century BCE the Romans experienced extensive interactions with surrounding societies and established a framework for including foreign deities into their society. While the incorporation of specific deities must be evaluated separately, it is clear that such an act served a specific purpose for Rome.\textsuperscript{192} Incorporating foreign customs into Roman identity promoted the strength that carried Rome throughout the centuries. This practice established historical connections and fostered relationships necessary for Rome’s endurance as an enormous Mediterranean power. In the case of Cybele, Rome used the goddess’ ancestry for propaganda during periods of conflict or civil strife. Cybele serves as a protector of Rome’s future as a leading power in the greater Mediterranean world.

\textsuperscript{190} Orlin, \textit{Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire}, 4.
\textsuperscript{191} Orlin, \textit{Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire}, 12.
\textsuperscript{192} Orlin, \textit{Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire}, 4.
Conclusion:

In conclusion, scholarship relating to Magna Mater must be re-evaluated with caution because too much weight has been given to critical ancient literary evidence. It is true that Catullus and Prudentius both evaluated the Metroac cult with a critical perspective, yet there are other sources such as Ovid and Vergil who reveal Magna Mater as a crucial part of a flourishing society. The various taurobolium altars, temples, and literary evidence of elaborate festivals dedicated to the foreign goddess demonstrate her worship an essential part of Roman society. Cumont and Vermaseren suggested that the Romans were shocked by the foreign elements of the Metroac cult when Cybele arrived on the shores of Ostia, but scholars such as Gruen and Roscoe remind us that Rome had contact with Phrygia long before the advent in 204 BCE making such a claim implausible. It is difficult to paint a picture of the Metroac cult because of the critical evidence in literary sources and the limited amount of surviving evidence due to its nature as a mystery cult; however, scholars must recognize that there was a crucial role for the Magna Mater and her cult to fill in Rome regardless of the varied attitudes.


Bibliography:


