

Cybele and her cult at Rome: National Embarrassment or Benevolent Savior?

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Literary sources regarding the worship of the Goddess Cybele in Rome suggest that her worship was disconcerting, even disgusting to the Romans. It is believed that when the Romans imported her cult in the second century B.C.E. they were unaware of the ecstatic practices of her priests, the Galloi, particularly their custom of auto-castration. Once the Romans discovered their mistake they did everything possible to minimize their contact with the traditional aspects of Cybele's cult by confining her priests to their temple complex, forbidding Roman citizens to join the priesthood, and establishing new Romanized rites to worship her. However, archaeological evidence in the form of temple architecture and votive offerings found at the temple to Cybele on the Palatine and at Ostia suggest that the Romans embraced the worship of Cybele. Roman citizens did not participate in the ecstatic rites of Cybele, but they were comfortable incorporating both her cult and her priests into the urban fabric of their cities.

Introduction

Cybele, Rome's Magna Mater Deum Idaeum, was worshiped with secret mysteries, yet she is an intrinsic figure in Rome's public religion. Her role as a figure of both public and private religion is reflected in her places of worship. The primary temple of the Magna Mater in Rome rests on the Palatine next to the ancient cave that was believed to be Lupericalia and in close proximity to the hut of Romulus, the most precious site in Rome's history.¹ However, the actual traditional worship of the goddess was so distasteful to the Romans that they felt it necessary to separate themselves from her priests and rites, both legally and physically. With all these ambiguities it is difficult to locate the Magna Mater conceptually within Roman religion. However, in spite of textual evidence that suggests that Cybele was treated as a subversive, dangerous presence with the fabric of Roman society, archaeological evidence suggests that the Romans more easily accepted her than current scholarship believes. In this article I will use two temples to Cybele, the temple on the Palatine hill and the temple at Ostia, as case studies to examine how Cybele and her cult fit into Roman society, both physically and ideologically.

Palatine

There is very little evidence available regarding the sanctuary and the associated building of the cult of Cybele on the Palatine. The site has been excavated several times, first by Pietro Rosa in 1862, then later by A. Vaglieri and G. Boni in 1907 and Pietro Romanelli in 1950.² None of the information from these excavations is readily available in English and the vast majority of it has never been published at all, so it is hard to discuss the cult's physical manifestation within the fabric of the Palatine. However, there is some

information available by way of pictorial evidence and the current exposed remains of the sanctuary.

The original temple to the Magna Mater on the Palatine was built shortly after her worship was introduced into Rome. Marcus Junius Brutus, the Praetor at the time, dedicated the temple in the year 191 B.C.E.³ This temple lasted less than a hundred years before it burned down in 111 B.C.E. The next year a second temple was built on the site by Metellus during his consulship.⁴ This temple also fell prey to one of Rome's many fires and Augustus erected the final incarnation of the temple in the 3 C.E.

The Metellan temple was built with a north/south orientation. The entrance faced directly south. Vermaseren describes it as follows. "To this building belonged the podium divided into a cella and a pronaos with antae as well as columns with Corinthian capitals. A flight of stairs leads to the entrance. In front of the temple is at some distance a flight of stairs (the so called *Scalae Caci*) which, during the feast of the *Megalensia*, may have served as a theater."⁵ The pronaos was decorated with an unknown number of columns. Extant representations of the temple suggest that there were 4-6 columns across the front of the temple, but such representations are notoriously unreliable.⁶ The columns that stretched around the front and sides of the porch were made out of peperino tufa with Corinthian capitals. Inside the cella, there were smaller columns with ionic capitals.⁷

Both of the flights of stairs that Vermaseren mentions are also part of the socio-religious fabric of the city. The ten or so stairs leading up the podium to the entrance of the temple most likely served as seating for

the Megalensian⁸ games that took place in front of the temple.⁹ The festival included theatrical contests¹⁰ for which both Plautus and Terence wrote, so it is possible that the steps in front of the temple were curved like those of a Roman theater, or at the very least temporary wooden bleachers were added to the sides of the staircase in order to facilitate the theatrical performance.

The *Scalae Caci*, on the other hand, was tied to Rome's mythological founder Romulus. Romulus' hut was reportedly located at the top of this staircase. *Scalae Caci* connected the Palatine with the Forum Boarium, and as such was a major thoroughfare during the Republican period. The name *Cacus* comes from the mythical giant that Hercules defeated on the site while returning to Greece after completing his tenth labor.¹¹ The "Ladder of *Cacus*" is connected to this mythical pre-foundation of Rome. The temple to Cybele was built at the heart of Rome's mythical foundations. Her temple is in an area that defines the nature of Roman society, placing her at the center of Roman religious life and social character.¹²

Augustus's reconstruction in 3 C.E. did little to alter the basic plan of the temple. He raised the temple platform, and refurbished both the interior and the exterior. On the exterior Augustus stuccoed and decorated the columns and rebuilt the outer walls in quasi-reticulate tufa and concrete. He replaced the interior colonnade with marble Corinthian columns and paved the floor with colored marbles and slate.¹³ The courtyard was extended and embellished.

The general message of this incarnation of the temple to the *Magna Mater* is that she continued to hold an important place in Roman religious life. Augustus was known both for the propaganda of his building program¹⁴ and his concern for morality among his citizens, so his lavish rebuild of the temple suggests that he did not feel particularly concerned about the exotic ways of her priesthood. Also, his work on the area in front of the temple implies that the *Megalensia* enjoyed an increase in popularity during the late Republic/early Empire.

A number of statues were recovered in the Palatine excavations. The most well known of them is a larger-than-life image of the *Magna Mater* seated on a throne. The statue has lost its head and both arms. It was recovered from the area of the front steps of the Palatine temple by Pietro Rosa's 1872 excavation, so it is unlikely to be related to the cult image in any way.¹⁵ There were images of *Attis*, *Cybele's* mythic priest/lover and also a number of other images of divinities recovered at the site, including an image of *Venus Genetrix*.¹⁶

Venus is not a goddess typically associated with *Cybele* outside of the Roman world; she seems to be present at the temple for purely Roman reasons. *Cybele* was originally a Phrygian goddess, so the Romans naturally chose to connect her with their legendary Trojan roots. Augustus was particularly interested in the Romans as Trojans, which is why he promoted his supposed descent from the Goddess *Venus* via the Trojan hero *Aeneas*. The presence of *Venus Genetrix* at the temple of the *Magna Mater* was a deliberate attempt to recast the Phrygian Goddess as a Trojan goddess, and thus an integral part of Rome's mythic foundation.

A large collection of terracotta votive figurines were found buried within the Metellan Temple's podium. The figures include images of the goddess herself, figures of *Attis* in various poses, heads of *Bacchus*, and several other unidentifiable human figures, most notable several dancing women wearing theater masks. There are also a number of body parts, such as breasts, torsos, fragments of hands and feet, and several representations of the glans penis. Other types of figurines are animals, such as lions, roosters, dogs, rams, goats, pigs, and horses, as well as plant material such as pinecones¹⁷ and baskets of fruit.¹⁸

Figures of *Attis* are the most common by a large margin. The mythology surrounding *Attis* and rituals he inspired, the auto-castration of initiates into the goddess's priesthood in order to insure the priest's total devotion to the *Magna Mater*, were the most problematic aspects of the cult for Roman citizens to accept.¹⁹ However, Romanelli's excavation yielded some 94 *Attis* figurines altogether.

Most of the figures are exotically dressed in Phrygian caps and a long cloak-like garment that is clasped around the chest under the armpits, then hangs loose down to the thigh, at which point it is split into two strips. Each strip is wrapped vertically around the leg and clasped several times in front of the leg to create a series of openings down the leg. The outfit often leaves the abdomen and genitals of the figure exposed. None of the *Attis* figurines found are preserved enough to tell if he is being depicted before or after his auto-castration, but other later representations of the same type from Rome suggest that he is intact in this iconographic type.²⁰

Attis' numerous representations and his "Phrygian" costume both of which emphasize his act of self-mutilation, suggest that the people of the city of Rome did not find *Cybele's* castrated priests, known as the *Galloi*, and the self-mutilation aspect of her cult as abhorrent as the literary sources suggest. The figurines must be dated to before the building of the second temple. This suggests that long before *Claudius*

integrated the priesthoods of Cybele into the larger Roman social structure. Attis was a major part of cult worship, receiving votive offerings at the temple. These terracottas are arguably the oldest Roman representations of Attis, so he and his associated rituals were most likely embraced with cult when Cybele was first brought to Rome.

Less revealing, but equally helpful, the representations of Cybele do not follow the Greek type of Cybele depictions, but rather the Pergamum type. The mural crown that she wears here and elsewhere in Roman images does not appear in Greek images. It comes from central Anatolia, confirming the Roman claim that they imported the cult directly from the area around Mount Ida.

All together, the material evidence for the cult of the Magna Mater on the Palatine confirms the majority of the literary evidence, but disagrees with some of its accepted prejudices. The Romans might have found Cybele and her traditional rituals distasteful, but they were nonetheless readily accepted when they brought the cult into Rome. Attis was always a part of her worship, as were the Galloi that mirrored his actions. Romans did not necessarily participate in the castrations of Cybele's worship but they acknowledged the importance of the ritual and were willing to participate on the periphery by watching the parade and including images of Attis in their place of worship, if not dedicating them themselves. The custom of celebrating the Megalensia in front of the temple also suggests that the Romans were comfortable with their Anatolian goddess. If the Romans truly wished to separate themselves from the Galloi and their rituals, they would not hold the Megalensian games outside the very site of the Hilaria, the festival at which the Galloi dedicated themselves, a scant week after the Hilaria ended.²¹

Ostia

To understand the temple to the Magna Mater on the Palatine's place in the Roman urban fabric and Roman religious life, it might be helpful to briefly compare it to a temple in a Roman city where the Magna Mater also had Roman religious roots. Cybele arrived at Ostia at the same time, or more accurately a few hours before, she came to Rome. Ostia is the site of her great founding miracle, the place where one chaste matron, Claudia Quinta, was able to pull the ship out of the mud alone using only her girdle, while the combined might of Roman manhood could not budge it. Cybele could easily have been granted the same public prominence in Ostia as she had in Rome. According to legend she arrived in Ostia at the same time and in the same way as she did in Rome and she also performed

divine wonders in Ostia, but her temple at Ostia is very different from her temple in Rome.

The temple at Ostia is much older than the surviving remains of the temple at Rome, perhaps accounting for some of its variations.²² It is located prominently on the south side of the city right next to the porta Laurentina. The temple is actually part of a large complex devoted to the Magna Mater and her associates. The south side of the complex is built into the Sullan city walls and the northeast side runs along the *Cardo Maximus*, one of the town's major thoroughfares. The complex is shaped like a triangle with the door to the complex located in the center on the northeast side. In the southwest corner, directly across from the entrance, is the temple to the Magna Mater.

The temple itself was built along the lines of the temple at Rome, though on a much smaller scale. It was built on top of a podium and has a small cella that can be reached by way a flight of steps and a pronaos. There were most likely four columns across the front of the pronaos and the steps were covered with marble, so the temple must have been richly decorated.

Across from the temple in the southeast corner is a large building, larger than the temple, dedicated to Attis. Two larger-than-life satyrs flanked the entrance of the building and life-sized statues of Attis were found inside, along with a Venus Genetrix.²³ In the same area as the shrine to Attis a small complex devoted to the divine personification of war, Bellona, including a temple and housing for her college of priests. It is possible that Bellona is included in the larger Cybele complex because she had become associated with an Anatolian goddess often worshiped in conjunction with Cybele.²⁴ There are several small rooms along the interior of the complex which have not been designated with any particular function and an enclosed ditch in the far southeast corner that probably was used for the rite of the taurobolium. The large central courtyard was left open and covered with yellow sand. Although the temple to Cybele is much older, most of the complex, excluding various additions and alterations, can be dated to the reign of Hadrian.²⁵

The point at which this temple complex differs most from that of the Magna Mater on the Palatine is that it is clear that this is a private mystery cult. The complex is located prominently on a major thoroughfare, but it is not part of the central public space of the town and the actual temples are cut off visually from the rest of the city. There is no indication that public festivals like the Megalensia were celebrated within the complex. Instead, epigraphic evidence²⁶ and the room for the taurobolium suggest that the cult at Ostia focused on solely private rituals. Altogether, it seems that the cult

located on the Palatine was unique in its role in Roman public life. Most incarnations of the cult of the Magna Mater were mystery cults centered on secret rites and individual worship.

Conclusion

The cult of Cybele on the Palatine was a mystery cult with secret rites and initiations that promised resurrection by living the life of its resurrected founder Attis, but at the same time played an important role in Roman public religion as the protector of Rome's independence. The cult and its goddess did not originate in Rome, but on the Palatine they were immediately embraced into the heart of Rome as part of Rome's heritage. Unlike other incarnations of the cult, on the Palatine hill Cybele managed to straddle the worlds of public and private, Roman and foreign, Republic and Empire.

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- ¹ Plutarch, the *Life of Romulus* 20.4.
- ² Vermasseren 1977, 3.
- ³ Ibid. 4.
- ⁴ Ov. Fast. IV, 347-348.
- ⁵ Vermasseren 1977, 4.
- ⁶ The most helpful of these is a fragment from the Ara Pietatis Augustae which was preserved in the Villa Medici. Claudius built the Ara Pietatis Augustae in 43CE, so the representation shows the Augustan temple rather than the Metellan temple. However, the Augustan rebuild did not change the basic structure of the temple, so the image is relevant to both incarnations of the temple (Vermasseren 1977, 5).
- ⁷ Claridge 1998, 127-128.
- ⁸ Instead of worshipping the goddess her traditional Pergamum rites, the Romans instituted a four-day festival of games and theater for her at the beginning of April, the *Megalesia* (Roller 1999, 288-289).
- ⁹ Claridge 1998, 126-127; Cicero, *On the Responses of the Haruspices*, 11-12
- ¹⁰ Livy 36.36.
- ¹¹ Ver. *Aeneid* 8.195ff.
- ¹² Roller 1999, 273.
- ¹³ Claridge 1998, 127 also see Coarelli 2007, 136.
- ¹⁴ Zanker 1988.
- ¹⁵ Vermasseren 1977, 4.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. 7-8.
- ¹⁷ These pinecones once again invoke Attis's death under the pine tree and later resurrection.
- ¹⁸ Roller (1999, 275-276) gives a helpful summary of the collection, but the full published catalogue can be found in Vermasseren (1977, 11-36; pl. 12-199).
- ¹⁹ Alvar 2008, 257-261 also see Ov. Fast. IV.191-214 and 350-352; Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 2.19.3-5.
- ²⁰ Vermasseren 1977, 82; pl. 305.
- ²¹ Fishwick 1966, 193-202.
- ²² Meiggs 1973, 355-359; also see Vermasseren (1977, 107-110).
- ²³ Vermasseren 1977, 112-115; figures 365, 367, 373, and 374.
- ²⁴ Meiggs 1973, 360.
- ²⁵ Ibid. 364.
- ²⁶ Supra n. 16.