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*The Mother Goddess and Her “Metragyrtai”:
Cultural Gender Norms and Eunuch Priests
from Sixth-Century BCE Greece to the Early Roman Empire*

ABSTRACT: This article examines what modern terminology would call “transgender” individuals in ancient Greece and Rome. It explores attitudes about sex and gender through the discourses surrounding the castrated and feminized priests of the Mother Goddess. There is a particular focus on identifying similarities and differences in gender systems through textual, ritual, and archaeological evidence. The author argues, on the one hand, that Greek religion strategically employed sexual ambiguity, and, on the other hand, that transgender priests and eunuchs threatened Roman masculinity ideals associated with male privilege.

KEYWORDS: antiquity; Greece; Rome; sex; gender; transgender; metragyrtai; galli; LGBT; Cybele

Introduction

Οὐκ ἀπει ἐντεῦθεν, οὐδὲ τὰ τῆς γυναικὸς δυναμειός!

“Get away from here, you who cannot play a woman’s part either!”¹

While current political debates over transgenderism are raging, this quote from a Spartan woman recorded by the first-century CE Greek biographer Plutarch is a reminder that contestations over “proper” gender norms and performance are nothing new. In this regard, literary and cultural critic Marjorie Garber has argued that anxiety about the appearance of transvestite figures in larger discourses indicates a *category crisis*, “an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin;” further, Garber states “transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself.”² In other words, debates about those in liminal categories represent concerns about larger issues of categories in general. This article, therefore, sets out to do two things. Firstly, studying the eunuch priests of Cybele to understand how and why Greeks and Romans viewed them differently better enables us to comprehend the relationship between gender, power, and politics. Secondly, some historians point out that early Greek writers, while hostile to Cybele’s eunuch priests, were not critical of

¹ Plutarch, *Moralia*, 240.4. Translation from Plutarch, *Moralia: The Sayings of Spartan Women*, trans. Frank C. Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 240.4. Ancient sources are cited in traditional format (book, chapter, line number). I would like to thank the members of the California State University, Fullerton, Spring 2018 graduate seminar in World History for their insightful input.

² Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 17.

these eunuchs' gender performance.³ However, previous scholars have not offered any explanations for why Greeks, in contrast to Romans, did not find these priests' gender performance distasteful. One explanation for the lack of Greek discomfort over eunuchs' liminal gender status can be found in the Greek religion's frequent acceptance of ritual gender ambiguity. In contrast to the Romans, Greeks celebrated gender-bending. In this way, a clearer line between the differences of Greek and Roman gender norms can be drawn, contributing to our understanding of sex and gender in antiquity.

The Greeks often called her Cybele, while the Romans referred to her as *Magna Mater* (Great Mother). Yet, the Mother Goddess was not indigenous to Greek or Roman religion. Both cultures included her in their pantheons from Phrygia, Anatolia, in what is now Turkey.⁴ One element that accompanied the goddess was the presence of her eunuch priests, called *metragerytai* (plural; or *metragerytes*, singular) in Greek and *galli* (plural; or *gallus*, singular) in Latin.⁵ As Greek colonists settled western Anatolia from the eighth century BCE, they increasingly came into contact with Phrygians. Archaeological and textual evidence demonstrates that worship of the Mother Goddess herself appeared in Greece in the sixth century BCE,⁶ yet explicit references to her eunuch priests did not surface until the fourth century BCE.⁷ In Rome, her cult was accepted around 204 BCE.⁸ Not only was her cult assimilated into the two cultures at different times, but it appears that the element of eunuchism was viewed differently in the two societies.

The primary sources concerning these eunuch priests can be categorized as, firstly, early Greek references in philosophical and medical treatises which are *not* hostile to eunuchism; secondly, a collection of Greek epigrams and a myth that both express aspects of the eunuchs' gender ambiguity; and thirdly, later

³ Lynn E. Roller, "The Ideology of the Eunuch Priest," *Gender & History* 9, no. 3 (November 1997): 542-559, here 546.

⁴ Lynn E. Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵ *Metragerytes* is often translated as "begging priests" or priests who beg for alms for the mother/*metra*. The etymology of *gallus/galli* is uncertain, though some suggest it reflects the belief that Gauls who moved into Anatolia were the bearers of this type of priesthood. Another possible source for the term may be in a similar sexually ambiguous priesthood in Mesopotamia, called *gala* in Sumerian (*kalu* in Akkadian). This priesthood, attested in the third millennium BCE, survived at least into the Seleucid period (fourth to first centuries BCE) and also engaged in ambiguous gender and the ritual beating of drums. The Seleucid empire claimed Babylon in 312 BCE.

⁶ Lynn E. Roller, "The Great Mother at Gordion: The Hellenization of an Anatolian Cult," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 111 (1991): 128-143, here 135-136; see also Roller, "Ideology of the Eunuch Priest," 544.

⁷ Roller, "Ideology of the Eunuch Priest," 544.

⁸ Livy, *History of Rome*, trans. Benjamin O. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 29.10-14.

Roman sources which are mostly hostile to the presence of eunuchs in *Magna Mater's* ritual life. In early Greek philosophical and medical sources, *metragyrtai* are castigated not for their gender status, but rather for their social and religious practices. They are portrayed as conmen and fraudsters.⁹ These same sources do not mention their gender or sexuality as something negative.¹⁰ What is particularly negative in these early sources is the foreign nature of these priests and their “odd” ritual behavior.¹¹ These sources roughly belong to the fourth century BCE.¹² Roman sources, on the other hand, are mostly hostile to these eunuch priests, even when they are enthusiastic about the *Magna Mater* herself.¹³ Most scholars comment on the *metragyrtai* in discussing Cybele in Greece, yet fail to contextualize this “foreign cult” within the larger indigenous religious and gender norms. For this reason, a fourth source type is added here, namely one which has been neglected in previous studies and reveals that Greece had a long history of ritual transvestism and gender-bending.¹⁴ Latin sources from late

⁹ Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, trans. John H. Freese (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 3.2.10; Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, trans. Charles Burton Gulick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 6.9, 12.58, while writing in the second or third century CE, cites lost sources from the fourth or third century BCE; Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, trans. George W. Butterworth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 2.20, citing Herodotus; Hippocrates, *Volume II: Prognostic, Regimen in Acute Diseases, The Sacred Disease, The Art, Breaths, Law, Decorum, Physician (Ch. 1), Dentition*, trans. William H. S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923); Plato, *Republic*, trans. Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.364.

¹⁰ Roller, “Ideology of the Eunuch Priest,” 546.

¹¹ With the exception of the Hippocratic treatise *On the Sacred Disease*, which criticizes *αγορται* for being charlatans, not true physicians.

¹² Plato's *Republic* ca. 380 BCE; Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* ca. 320 BCE. Athenaeus used sources from the fourth century BCE, such as Clearchus of Soli; and Clement of Alexandria cites Herodotus. The Hippocratic text *On the Sacred Disease* appears to be a fifth-century BCE text, see Jacques Jouanna, *Hippocrates*, trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 373-416.

¹³ Livy, *History of Rome* 37.9, 38.18, mentions *galli* priests as respected members of their communities in Asia; see also the parallel account in Polybius, *The Histories: Volume V: Books 16-27*, trans. William R. Paton, revised by Frank W. Walbank and Christian Habicht (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 21.6, 37. Otherwise, the Roman sources are hostile to *galli*: Catullus, *Poems*, trans. Francis W. Cornish (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), 63; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 2.19; Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. William H. D. Rouse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 6.621-643; Ovid, *Fasti*, trans. James G. Frazer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 4.181-190; Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, ed. George P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916). Later Rome also forbade castration, as attested in various laws such as *Codex Iustinianus* 4.42.1, 4.42.2; *Digesta* 48.8.3-4; *Novellae Iustiniani* 9.25.1-2; *Novellae Leonis* 60; Paulus, *Sententiae*, 5.23.13.

¹⁴ Herodotus, *The Histories*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Andrea L. Purvis (New York: Anchor, 2009), 1.105, 4.67; Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, trans. Robert A. Kaster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.8.1-3. Macrobius cites a source from the fourth to third century

antiquity are not considered here since they largely consist of Christians engaging in polemics against paganism and are biased in their portrayal of *galli*.

Scholarly works tend to look at responses to the *metragerytai* as uniformly negative and with little differences between earlier Greek and later Roman views. Yet, Greek and Roman gender norms were different. While most scholars note some of these differences, most do not examine the prevalence of ritual transvestism in early Greek religion, much less in connection with the *metragerytai*.¹⁵ Greek culture adopted the Cybele cult centuries before Rome and already had a long tradition of gender fluidity in religious practice. This fact may explain why early Greek sources are not hostile to the gender performance of *metragerytai*. Few scholars, among them Robert Sturges, have taken up Garber's *category crisis* framework to examine anxieties that may be illuminated by discourse surrounding gender,¹⁶ yet most have not done so regarding ancient Greek and Roman societies.¹⁷ Some scholars have also examined how eunuchs threatened Roman notions of masculinity and political power, while intersex conditions proved to be less problematic for Roman gender ideals.¹⁸ Yet the *Magna Mater* and her *galli* have not been compared with the response to Cybele and her *metragerytai* to clarify gender norms between Greece and Rome.

This article demonstrates that Greek and Roman responses to *metragerytai* and *galli* differed, firstly, because of the prevalence of religious transvestism in Greek religion, which did not feature in Roman religion, and secondly, because Greece and Rome did not view masculinity and gender in the same way. For example, pederasty was, in some cases, acceptable in Greece, yet was unacceptable in Rome. Rather than looking at gender on its own, as if it exists in a vacuum, this article uses Foucauldian discourse analysis, which has "an increased focus on how knowledge is produced and represented, rather than simply whether or not something is 'true'."¹⁹ Discourse itself is defined as "fields of meaning and power

BCE, namely Philochorus's *Atthis* (a history of Athens and Attica); Plutarch, *Moralia*, 304c-e; and Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 15.6-9.

¹⁵ Roller, "Ideology of the Eunuch Priest," 542-559. Roller examines the differences in Greek and Roman attitudes but does not address possible cultural and religious causes for such differences, particularly the presence of ritual transvestism in Greek religion. She also does not address *why* earlier Greek views differ from later Greek views.

¹⁶ Robert S. Sturges, "The Crossdresser and the Juventus: Category Crisis in Silence," *Arthuriana* 12, no. 1 (2002): 37-49. Sturges uses Garber's theoretical framework to discuss crossdressing heroines in medieval romance.

¹⁷ Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), is one exception.

¹⁸ Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*. However, Kuefler's focus is on eunuchs in Rome in general, and little attention is given to *metragerytai* and differences between Greek and Roman gender norms.

¹⁹ Allison Lee and Alan Peterson, "Discourse Analysis," in *Theory and Methods in Social Research*, ed. Bridget Somekh and Cathy Lewin, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 139-146, here 139.

that categorize and regulate social processes and kinds of people” and as “specific forms of meaning-making (*semiosis*).” Discourse analysis is therefore, “concerned with how social phenomena are named and organized.”²⁰ What discourses are in play? Medical? Legal? Religious? Who is writing these discourses, and what classes, ideologies, or interests do these authors represent? What overall patterns of discourse surrounding biological sex and cultural gender appear in the early Greek sources as compared to the later Roman sources? This methodological approach is supplemented with social constructionist theories, such as Butlerian gender performativity and Queer theory.²¹ This theoretical stance “problematizes and historicizes the foundational assumptions of all categories.” These are categories which members of a culture take for granted or consider “natural.” These theories address the processes of normalization, which create cultural categories of “normal and deviant” and of race, class, sex, gender, and “proper or improper” gender performance and sexual desire. In short: how is subjectivity constructed through discourse?²² Queer theory is also acutely interested in how cultures “deal with difference,” or alterity.²³ What kinds of gender norms are performed and in what contexts? How does occasional ritual transvestism performance differ from permanent ritual castration from the Greek perspective? How did Roman culture differentiate between “natural” eunuchs and castrated eunuchs, and why was one a form of alterity while the other was not? Butler’s notion of gender as performance (performativity) informs the analysis of the processes through which various genders—including the neither female nor male *metragyrtai*—are reified and expressed through “proper” cultural performance of the various gender categories in play in Greek and Roman societies.

The sources in this article are treated diachronically (early to late) for change over time. Firstly, early Greek ideals show a hostility to the unorthodox religious practices of the *metragyrtai*. Secondly, examples of ritual gender-bending in Greek religion provide context for wider religio-sexual norms which found the *metragyrtai* consonant with indigenous ritual practices. Thirdly, Roman writers depict the *galli*’s gender performance as hostile to cultural and sexual values. Fourthly, later Greek sources reflect the influence of Roman hegemony, mention *metragyrtai* for the gender performance. This chronological approach facilitates

²⁰ Lee and Peterson, “Discourse Analysis,” 140.

²¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053-1075; Gloria Filax, Dennis Sumara, Brent Davis, and Debra Shogan, “Queer Theory/Lesbian and Gay Approaches,” *Theory and Methods in Social Research*, ed. Bridget Somekh and Cathy Lewin, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 86-93; Riki Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory: An Instant Primer* (Bronx: Magnus Books, 2014).

²² Filax, Sumara, Davis, and Shogan, “Queer Theory,” 86.

²³ Wilchins, *Queer Theory*, 49.

cross-cultural comparison since early sources display Greek views less hostile to gender ambiguity, while later sources view the presence of the *galli* as hostile to narrower Roman views of femininity and masculinity.

I. Classical Greek Sources

The earliest evidence for the Mother Goddess in Greece comes from archaeological and epigraphical data in the Greek colonies of western Anatolia from the sixth century BCE.²⁴ Temples to her appear in Athens, Olympia, and Kolophon, and by the fourth century BCE, “the cult of the Mother Goddess was known in virtually every Greek city,” as attested by inscriptions, references in Greek literature, and hundreds of votive reliefs and statuettes.²⁵ Given the prevalence of the Mother’s eunuch consort Attis and her eunuch priests in her Greek and Roman cultus, it is surprising that there is little evidence of eunuchs in earlier Phrygian material. The Phrygian textual evidence is sparse, lacking any reference to Attis or to eunuchs. Only one site, Bayandir (Elmali in modern Turkey), contains limited iconographic evidence, namely two figurines, one of the Mother with two young beardless males and the other of an image of a lone eunuch priest.²⁶ It must be noted that both examples are from a single site, Bayandir, and while beardlessness was often used to depict eunuchs, the beardless males in this example appear to be children. A single silver figurine may be a eunuch priest, and “if so, [...] is one of the few pieces of evidence within Anatolia for the eunuch priesthood” of the Phrygian Mother.²⁷

Possibly the earliest Greek reference to *metragyrtai* can be found in *The Sacred Disease*, a treatise on epilepsy from the second half of the fifth century BCE in the Hippocratic corpus.²⁸ However, the text does not directly reference *metragyrtai*, though it does mention the Mother Goddess. The Hippocratic author expresses doubt that epilepsy is an affliction caused by the Mother Goddess (or any other gods/goddesses, for that matter). Instead, it is argued, that “men,” possibly *metragyrtai* (though, not explicitly mentioned as such), in “need of a livelihood, contrive and devise many fictions of all sorts, about this disease among other things, putting the blame, for each form of the affection, upon a particular god.”²⁹ Thus, some individuals (possibly *metragyrtai*) were indirectly condemned as fraudulent healers, claiming the Mother Goddess was the source of epilepsy and as her representatives they offer a “cure,” for a price of course.

²⁴ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 119.

²⁵ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 119-120.

²⁶ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 104-105.

²⁷ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 105.

²⁸ Jouanna, *Hippocrates*, 411-421. See also Hippocrates, *Volume II: [...] The Sacred Disease*, 129-132. Its close association with *Airs, Waters, Places* may reflect common authorship, or it may be the work of a student and written soon after *Airs, Waters, Places* had been composed.

²⁹ Hippocrates, *Volume II: [...] The Sacred Disease*, 4.

The next reference, Plato's *Republic*, dates to the early fourth century (between ca. 380 and 378) BCE.³⁰ In a larger discussion on justice, Plato writes:

But the strangest of all these speeches [about justice] are the things they say about the gods and virtue, how so it is that the gods themselves assign to many good men misfortunes and an evil life, but to their opposites a contrary lot; and begging priests and soothsayers go to rich men's doors and make them believe that they by means of sacrifices and incantations have accumulated a treasure of power from the gods that can expiate and cure with pleasurable festivals any misdeed of a man or his ancestors, and that if a man wishes to harm an enemy, at slight cost he will be enabled to injure just and unjust alike, since they are masters of spells and enchantments that constrain the gods to serve their end.³¹

There is no reference to gender performance. Rather, as with the previous Hippocratic source, begging priests are criticized for fraudulently separating rich citizens from their wealth by claiming to have "magical" powers which they are believed to use to manipulate the gods in favor of their clients.

Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, written around 330 BCE,³² contains a reference to *metragyrtai*. Here, as with the previous two sources, Aristotle criticizes the *metragyrtai* for their religious practices, but not for their gender performance:

Thus, to say (for you have two opposites belonging to the same genus) that the man who begs prays, or that the man who prays begs (for both are forms of asking) is an instance of [juxtaposing two contrary items]; as, when Iphicrates called Callias a mendicant priest instead of a torch-bearer, Callias replied that Iphicrates himself could not be initiated, otherwise he would not have called him mendicant priest [*μητραγορται*] but torch-bearer; both titles indeed have to do with a divinity, but the one is honorable, the other dishonorable.³³

Thus, Aristotle places begging priests in a position of less dignity than torch bearers in the mystery cults, yet not explicitly for their gender performance.

Writing in the second to third century CE, Athenaeus, in his *The Deipnosophists*, quotes earlier sources regarding the *metragyrtai* in two instances. Firstly, he quotes from the comic poet Antiphanes's (408 to 334 BCE) *Hater of Wickedness* or *Hater of Vice*. In comparing "the greatest criminals who exist among men," Antiphanes writes:

Are not the Scythians of men the wisest? Who when their children are first born do give them the milk of mares and cows to drink at once, and do not trust them to dishonest nurses, or tutors, who of evils are the worst, except the midwives only. For that class is worst of all, and next to them do come the begging priests [*μητραγορται*] of mighty Cybele; and it is hard to find a baser lot—unless indeed you speak of fishmongers, but they are worse than even money-changers, and are in fact the worst of all mankind.³⁴

³⁰ Plato, *Republic*, vol. 1, trans., Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), xxiv-xxv.

³¹ Plato, *Republic*, 2.364.

³² Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, xxii.

³³ Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, 3.2.10.

³⁴ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 6.9.

According to this hierarchy, fishmongers are the apex of “evils,” followed only by midwives and *metragyrtai*. Next are nurses and tutors, then money changers. Here Antiphanes does not explain why *metragyrtai* are so “base.” However, clues to their low status are to be found in the surrounding context. This statement of judgment is embedded in a larger (comic?) rant against fishmongers, particularly for their price gouging, both before and after this reference to *metragyrtai*.³⁵ Apparently, fishmongers were the used car salesmen of Antiphanes’s world. While the quote from Antiphanes fails to explain why *metragyrtai* are judged so harshly, Athenaeus likewise fails to include any editorial commentary. This is surprising, given Athenaeus’s proclivity to discuss topics such as sexuality (particularly homosexuality) at length.³⁶ The diatribe against fishmongers for their exorbitant prices, as well as the mention of money-changers, in addition to professionals hired by wealthy patrons (tutors, nurses, and midwives), is reminiscent of the criticism of eunuch priests in the Hippocratic *Sacred Disease* and Plato’s *Republic*. Athenaeus and his source Antiphanes see the *metragyrtai* not as sexual deviants, but rather as belonging to the same class as a variety of swindlers, including fishmongers and money-changers. This may be due to the perception that *metragyrtai* overcharged for their services, or possibly because the authors considered the services themselves to be fraudulent, or both.

Athenaeus’s second reference to *metragyrtai* is found in a quote from the fourth-century BCE philosopher Clearchus of Soli. Here the wife and children of Dionysius, the tyrant of Sicily, are prostituted, tortured, killed, and dismembered by his enemies. Whatever the historicity of this account, the moral of the story is to avoid excessive luxury, something for which several tyrants, including Dionysius, are condemned. The worst element of this story, according to Athenaeus and Clearchus, is that Dionysius ends his life in shame as a *metragyrtes* of Cybele. His previous alleged abuses of luxury as a tyrant are cited as the reason for his disgraced state, yet nothing of castration or *metragyrtai* gender performance is mentioned:

But Dionysius himself, at last going about as a begging priest of Cybele, and beating the drum, ended his life very miserably. We, therefore, ought to guard against what is called luxury, which is the ruin of a man's life; and we ought to think insolence the destruction of everything.³⁷

Both times Athenaeus mentions *metragyrtai*, he uses much older sources, both from the fourth century BCE (Antiphanes and Clearchus). In using these sources, no reference is made to the sex or gender of the *metragyrtai*.

In sum, in all of our early sources, the *metragyrtai*’s sexuality and gender performance are never cause for alarm. Rather, it is the perception that they are either fraudsters (e.g., the Hippocratic *Sacred Disease*, Plato’s *Republic*, and

³⁵ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 6.4-8, 10-12.

³⁶ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 13.601-605.

³⁷ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 12.58.

Athenaeus/Antiphanes in *Deipnosophists*) or they perform “magic” rather than “real religion” (Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*).

II. Ritual Transvestism in Greek Religion

Lynn Roller categorizes Greek distaste for the *metragyrtai* in these sources as xenophobia toward “oriental” aspects of the Mother Goddess cult.³⁸ When placed in the larger religio-sexual context, the adoption of the Mother Goddess can illuminate cultural gender norms, thus further clarifying the differences between Greek and Roman ideals.

The fifth-century BCE historian Herodotus mentions Scythians worshipping the Greek goddess Aphrodite: “That is their ancestral technique [for divination], but the Enarees, the men-women [literally *andro* + *gynes*] say that their own technique was given to them by Aphrodite.”³⁹ Earlier, Herodotus had provided an etiological myth for these Enarees or “men-women” according to which Aphrodite had “inflicted the female disease” on the Scythians for plundering her temple in the Syrian city of Ascalon.⁴⁰ It is therefore difficult to determine, whether Herodotus considered that the Enarees were born male, castrated themselves, and dressed in female clothing like the *metragyrtai*—or if they were intersexed, being physically born with ambiguous sex characteristics. In any case, they appear to have made up a distinct priestly class that transcended binary gender norms. While not Greek, Herodotus syncretized their religion in his own Greek cultural terms, namely the worship of Aphrodite who, as we shall see, was involved in ritual sexual ambiguity in Greek religion.

Closer to Greece, Plutarch attests to ritual transvestism in the Spartan marriage rite. The night of a Spartan wedding, the bride was to have her hair cut in the fashion of men and wear men’s clothing while consummating the marriage:

For their marriages the women were carried off by force, not when they were small and unfit for wedlock, but when they were in full bloom and wholly ripe. After the woman was thus carried off, the brides-maid, so called, took her in charge, cut her hair off close to the head, put a man’s cloak and sandals on her, and laid her down on a pallet, on the floor, alone, in the dark. Then the bride-groom, not flown with wine nor enfeebled by excesses, but composed and sober, after supping at his public mess-table as usual, slipped stealthily into the room where the bride lay, loosed her virgin’s zone, and bore her in his arms to the marriage-bed.⁴¹

Thus, according to Plutarch, ritual cross-dressing was part of every Spartan marriage ceremony. While Sparta differed from other Greek city-states, a similar wedding practice was also found in another Greek society: Cos.

³⁸ Roller, “Ideology of the Eunuch Priest,” 546.

³⁹ Herodotus, *Histories*, 4.67.

⁴⁰ Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.105.

⁴¹ Plutarch, *Life of Lyscurgus*, 15.1-5.

In explaining contemporary (first or second-century CE) rites on the island of Cos, Plutarch recounts the following etiology:

Why is it that among the Coans the priest of Heracles at Antimacheia dons a woman's garb, and fastens upon his head a woman's head-dress before he begins the sacrifice? Heracles, putting out with his six ships from Troy, encountered a storm; and when his other ships had been destroyed, with the only one remaining he was driven by the gale to Cos. He was cast ashore upon the Laceter, as the place is called, with nothing salvaged save his arms and his men. Now he happened upon some sheep and asked for one ram from the shepherd. This man, whose name was Antagoras, was in the prime of bodily strength, and bade Heracles wrestle with him; if Heracles could throw him, he might carry off the ram. And when Heracles grappled with him, the Meropes came to the aid of Antagoras, and the Greeks to help Heracles, and they were soon engaged in a mighty battle. In the struggle it is said that Heracles, being exhausted by the multitude of his adversaries, fled to the house of a Thracian woman; there, disguising himself in feminine garb, he managed to escape detection. But later, when he had overcome the Meropes in another encounter, and had been purified, he married Chalciopé and assumed a gay-coloured raiment. Wherefore the priest sacrifices on the spot where it came about that the battle was fought, and bridegrooms wear feminine raiment when they welcome their brides.⁴²

Here sacrifices are performed by men in drag and, in a mirror image reversal of the Spartan marriage, men at Cos dress as women on their wedding nights.

Macrobius (in the fourth/fifth century CE) notes "there is also a statue of Venus on Cyprus that is bearded, shaped and dressed like a woman, with a scepter and male genitals, and they conceive her as both male and female." He points out that the fifth/fourth-century BCE Greek playwright Aristophanes had called her "Aphroditos," and that the first-century BCE Latin poet Laevius had said "worshipping, then, the nurturing god Venus, whether she is female or male, just as the moon is a nurturing goddess." Macrobius completes his reference to Venus on Cyprus by quoting the third-century BCE Greek historian Philochorus: "in his *Atthis* Philochorus, too, states that she is also the moon and that men sacrifice to her in women's dress, women in men's, because she is held to be both male and female."⁴³ Venus was syncretized by the Romans with the Greek goddess Aphrodite—the same goddess Herodotus conflated with the Scythians and their sexually ambiguous Enarees.

Two additional Greek sources regarding the Mother Goddess's consort Attis must be mentioned. The first-century BCE historian Diodorus Siculus provides two myths for the origin of the Mother Goddess. The first version states that the Mother Goddess was the daughter of Uranus. There is no mention of Attis.⁴⁴ According to the second version, the Mother Goddess was a human born to human parents, a king and a queen, who abandoned her to die of exposure on the mountain of Cybelus (thus her Greek name Cybele). Wild animals nursed

⁴² Plutarch, *Moralia*, 304c-e.

⁴³ Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 3.8.1-3.

⁴⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, trans. Charles H. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 3.56.

Cybele to health and into adulthood. She was renowned for her spells that saved infants' lives. A Phrygian man named Marsyas was her devoted companion. As a sign of his devotion, he voluntarily "lived in abstinence from sexual pleasures until the day of his death."⁴⁵ This is the only reference in this myth to sexuality within Cybele's cult. Attis (also a mortal human) then appeared and became Cybele's lover. Pregnant, Cybele was reunited with her family. Her father was outraged to discover she had lost her chastity and had Attis executed. In grief, she wandered the landscape with her hair unkempt, playing the kettledrum in a frenzy – practices also attributed to her real-life eunuch priests.⁴⁶

The second Greek source also contains two alternate versions of the myth. The second-century CE Greek geographer Pausanias cites Hermesianax as his first source, which reaches back to approximately 300 BCE. In this early version of the Attis myth, Hermesianax claims that Attis was a human who was "a eunuch from birth," in other words, an individual intersex at birth – not someone who self-castrated as an adult. Here Attis is etiologically described as the founder of the rites to the Mother Goddess.⁴⁷

The second version, which Pausanias calls "the current view," begins when Zeus had a nocturnal emission, with his semen falling to the ground. From his seed and the earth sprang the being Agdistis, who was another form of the Mother Goddess in some traditions. Agdistis possessed both female and male genitalia. Because of this, the gods feared Agdistis and cut off her male sexual organ. From this organ an almond tree sprang up. The daughter of the River Sangarius clutched one of the tree's fruits and immediately became pregnant. Her miraculous child was none other than Attis. As Attis grew, he was betrothed to a king's daughter. Agdistis, in love with Attis and madly jealous at his pending nuptials, crashed the wedding party. Her divinely chaotic presence sent Attis into madness, whereupon he castrated himself immediately, and the narrative comes to an abrupt end.⁴⁸ The earlier myth is relatively benign – there is no self-inflicted violence, and Attis was a "eunuch from birth," i.e., intersex. The second myth reflects the increasing influence of Rome over the Greek world in portraying castration as a violent and tragic aspect of Mother Goddess worship.

A similar picture is found in the *Greek Anthology*, a collection of epigrams from several centuries. Several epigrams regarding *galli* appear to date to the first century BCE or CE.⁴⁹ Like Pausanias's second Attis myth, they reflect

⁴⁵ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 3.56.

⁴⁶ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 3.56.

⁴⁷ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. William H. S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 7.17.9.

⁴⁸ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 7.17.10-13.

⁴⁹ *The Greek Anthology*, ed. and trans. William R. Paton, vol. 1 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927), 6.217-220, 234. Rhea was syncretized with Cybele.

contemporary first-century norms and as such mention *metragyrtai* sexuality. Most contain the theme of a *metragyrtai* encountering dangerous wild animals in rural areas and using ritual drums to scare away these predators. While their sexuality is lampooned, the vitriol of later Roman sources is lacking. These epigrams represent a transitional period in Greek writing about *metragyrtai*, which began after the Greek world had come under Roman hegemony after the Battle of Corinth (146 BCE).

To summarize, the ancient Greek world appears to celebrate gender transgression in at least four documented cases: firstly, the Scythian men-women of the goddess Aphrodite;⁵⁰ secondly, the Spartan wedding night ritual;⁵¹ thirdly, male transvestism on Cos during sacrifices in honor of Heracles and the wedding ceremony;⁵² and fourthly, on Cyprus where male and female transvestism was part of the rituals surrounding the dual-sexed god/dess Aphroditos (also known as Aphrodite or Venus).⁵³ Diodorus and Pausanias reflect traditions of etiological myths seeking to explain the origins of Cybele's *metragyrtai* and her ritual practices. Herein we see the possibility that some of her priests may have not been castrated, but rather born intersex. In Pausanias/Hermesianax's early Attis myth, Attis is born intersex and does not engage in castration. Likewise, in Pausanias's second version of the Agdistis/Cybele myth, the goddess herself is intersex, just like Aphroditos. Whether these individuals engaging in Greek rituals (for Cybele, Heracles, Aphroditos, or otherwise) would be characterized as "transgender,"⁵⁴ biologically intersexed, or merely performing occasional cross-dressing for ritual purposes, Greek religion was comfortable with what later Romans would consider "gender transgressions." It is possible that transgender, intersex, and other non-heteronormative individuals in the ancient world may have found a safe place in the cult of the Mother Goddess.

III. Roman Sources

The Mother Goddess was known in Etruria (north-central Italy) as early as the sixth century BCE, as attested by an Etruscan vase depicting her; likewise, she was also known in Sicily by the early third century BCE.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, even though she was well-respected and known in Italy, Roman writers often portrayed her cult as foreign. Yet, her "foreign" traits may not have been so foreign, and she was heartily welcomed into Roman religion. Her temple on the Palatine, originally built in 194 BCE and rebuilt after a fire in 111 BCE, has been

⁵⁰ Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.105, 4.67.

⁵¹ Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus*, 15.1-5.

⁵² Plutarch, *Moralia*, 304c-e.

⁵³ Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 3.8.1-3.

⁵⁴ A historically anachronistic term, since "transgender" is a modern word. Nevertheless, individuals we might refer to as "transgender" in modern parlance may have found a welcome place in Greek culture on the basis of respected and accepted religious practice.

⁵⁵ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 281.

excavated.⁵⁶ Despite the widespread hostility to *galli* and Attis in our Roman sources, Attis figurines outnumber Mother Goddess figurines ten to one, indicating that “Attis was an essential part of the Mother’s cult from its inception at Rome.”⁵⁷ Additionally, several of these figurines draw attention to Attis’s genitals (or lack thereof), something “found only infrequently in Attis figurines from the Greek world.”⁵⁸ In Rome, legends of the Mother Goddess’s arrival in the city were tied to equally legendary myths about Rome’s origins—she was claimed to have hailed from Mount Ida, near Troy, the legendary home of the founders of Rome.⁵⁹ Despite the anxiety over eunuchs, the *Magna Mater* was given a shared Roman origin myth, and the castrated Attis seems to have been central to the Roman version of her cult.

The *Magna Mater*’s celebrations were thoroughly Roman. Her festival, the *Megalesia*, were observed from April 4 to April 10. Plays, the *ludi scaenici*, were composed by various authors, including Plautus and Terence, specifically for performance at the *Megalesia*. “By the first century BCE, chariot races [held in the Circus Maximus] had been added to the *ludi scaenici*.”⁶⁰ These races were accompanied by a ritual procession of the image of the Goddess by *galli*. This type of procession was absent in Phrygia (though it was present in Greece).⁶¹ Wealthy Romans threw grand banquets called *mutitationes* during the first day of the *Megalesia*, even prompting sumptuary legislation to curb displays of conspicuous consumption in 161 BCE. Thus, the *Magna Mater* and her *galli*’s participation were Romanized in her festivals.

While much of the *Magna Mater* cultus was culturally Roman, her *galli* nevertheless created anxiety. The first-century BCE poet Catullus explores questions about Roman masculinity in a poem written from the perspective of Attis: after castrating himself, Attis regrets his decision, loses his country, possessions, friends, and parents and is left wondering if he is a female or a “barren man.”⁶² He is in an uncomfortable liminal position. This crisis over which category Attis belongs to mirrors the anxiety many Roman writers expressed over castration and eunuchs in general. Keufler points out that the presence of people with intersex conditions caused discomfort, yet was more or less easily resolved by arbitrarily assigning femininity or masculinity.⁶³ However, “the amputation of the genitals of eunuchs also questioned the fixed

⁵⁶ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 271-278.

⁵⁷ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 277.

⁵⁸ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 278.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

⁶⁰ See Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 289, for primary sources and discussion.

⁶¹ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 295. The procession of the images of deities is also a common feature of Mesopotamian ritual, reaching back to Sumer.

⁶² Catullus, *Poems*, 63.

⁶³ Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 22-23.

nature of sexual identity in an unsettling way.”⁶⁴ Indeed, “effeminate men” in general (and eunuchs in particular) were denied the usual rights of men.⁶⁵ Since masculinity was equated with virtue in ancient Rome, eunuchs also took on stereotypes common to women: they were believed to lack morals and self-control.⁶⁶ In fact, most of our Latin sources employ these very stereotypes about eunuchs that portray them as immoral and lacking self-control.

While Kuefler focuses on late antiquity,⁶⁷ the horror over castration is visible in earlier sources. For example, in an epitome of a lost portion of Livy, Julius Obsequens mentions that a slave castrated himself for the *Magna Mater* in 101 BCE and was exiled for doing so.⁶⁸ Likewise, Valerius Maximus relates that, in 77 BCE, a foreign-born slave who had apparently already been castrated as a priest to *Magna Mater* was legally barred from receiving an inheritance from a freedman and could not even plead his own case since he was neither a man nor a woman.⁶⁹ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, in describing the rituals and public processions for *Magna Mater* in the first century BCE, notes “but according to law and the Senate’s decree, no native Roman walks in procession through the city” in the apparel of the *galli*, playing ritual instruments, and begging for alms.⁷⁰ Attis was popular, and the *Magna Mater* cult was highly respected, but Roman men were prohibited from castrating themselves for her cult.

General distaste for castration often obscures other glimpses of *galli* that depict them in less scandalous terms. Livy recounts two stories of the Roman army encountering foreign *galli* in 190 and 189 BCE. They acted as envoys and dignitaries for cities in Asia.⁷¹ Cicero denounces Clodius for using the cult of *Magna Mater* to further his own political career. Cicero especially condemns Clodius for his disrespectful treatment of *galli*, inveighing that he dragged a *gallus* “priest from the very altar and cushion of the [Mother] goddess,” as well

⁶⁴ Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 32.

⁶⁵ Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 30. These included the right to witness wills, be a witness in legal trials, bring legal complaints against others to magistrates, plead on behalf of others in court, and other rights.

⁶⁶ Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, 19-21, 35.

⁶⁷ See *Codex Iustinianus* 4.42.1, 4.42.2; *Digesta* 48.8.3-4; *Novellae Iustiniani* 9.25.1-2; *Novellae Leonis* 60; Paulus, *Sententiae*, 5.23.13, for Roman jurisprudence on eunuchs in late antiquity.

⁶⁸ Livy, *History of Rome, Volume XIII*, trans. Alfred C. Schlesinger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), 278-279; Julius Obsequens, *Epitomes*, 44a.

⁶⁹ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings, Volume II*, trans. David R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 7.7.6.

⁷⁰ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 2.19.3-5

⁷¹ Livy, *History of Rome*, 37.9; 38.18; see also Polybius, *Histories*, 21.6, 37.

as for perverting “those omens which all antiquity [...] have always venerated with the greatest piety.”⁷²

Writing in the first century BCE, Lucretius implies that, despite their raucous and disturbing appearances and behavior, the *galli* were the children of the *Magna Mater* and served to remind those who were ungrateful to her and to human parents that they did not deserve children of their own. The Mother Goddess and her retinue were honored for teaching “men to be eager with armed valor to defend their motherland, and ready to stand forth, the guard and glory of their parents’ years.”⁷³ Lucretius also connects the *Magna Mater* with fecundity—both human and agricultural—something lacking in Phrygian and Greek Mother Goddess worship.

Diodorus and Plutarch both tell of a *gallus* who traveled from Phrygia to Rome in 102 BCE to implore the Senate to perform expiation rites to cleanse the temple in Pessinus of ritual impurity which was threatening the entire Roman state (fl. 60-30 BCE).⁷⁴ In this story, some elements of the *gallus* are condemned, yet in the end the *gallus* is respected as a representative of the Mother Goddess herself. As Diodorus describes, “the robe he wore, like the rest of his costume, was outlandish and by Roman standards not to be countenanced, for he had on an immense golden crown and a gaudy cape shot with gold, the marks of royal rank.” Yet, the *gallus* created “in the crowd a mood of religious awe,” and “he was granted lodging and hospitality at the expense of the state, but was forbidden by one of the tribunes, Aulus Pompeius, to wear his crown.” He later returned to consult with the Senate, “when he was thereupon attacked in a partisan spirit by Pompeius and was contemptuously sent back to his lodgings.” After this, the *gallus* “refused to appear again in public, saying that not only he, but the goddess as well, had been impiously treated with disrespect.” Pompeius was then “straightway smitten with a raging fever, then lost his voice and was stricken with quinsy, and on the third day died.” Finally, the *gallus* “was granted a special dispensation in regard to his costume and the sacred robe, was honored with notable gifts, and when he started homeward from Rome was escorted on his way by a large crowd, both men and women.”⁷⁵ While this account displays ambivalence toward *galli* whose appearance “was outlandish by Roman standards,” it also demonstrates that a foreign *gallus* could be granted an audience with the Senate itself and was popular among the crowds. This

⁷² Cicero, *On the Responses of the Haruspices*, 13.28, in Cicero, *Pro Archia, Post Reditum in Senatu, Post Reditum ad Quirites, De Domo Sua, De Haruspicum Responsis, Pro Plancio*, trans. Neville H. Watts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923).

⁷³ Lucretius, *Nature of Things*, 6.621-643.

⁷⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 36.13; Plutarch, *Marius*, 17.5-6, in Plutarch, *Lives, Volume IX: Demetrius and Antony, Pyrrhus and Gaius Marius*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920).

⁷⁵ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 36.13.

particular narrative also seems to imply that *Magna Mater* was more popular among the lower classes than among the ruling elite.

Wealthy families patronized the *Magna Mater* cult, and Augustus claims in his funerary inscription to have renovated her Palatine temple.⁷⁶ Her Roman festivals were an occasion for rich and poor to celebrate her, and “the prominent role of the Roman aristocracy in the *Magna Mater*’s rites was surely a further source of prestige for the cult.”⁷⁷ Thus, the educated literati (Livy, Cicero, and Lucretius) and the political elite (Augustus) were respectful of *Magna Mater* and were generally tolerant of her ritual personnel’s place in Roman religion.

Most sources, however, are not as friendly to the *galli*. As indicated earlier, Catullus (84-54 BCE) portrays Attis’s castration as a bitter crisis of identity, an action to be regretted deeply. Similar sentiments can be found in a fragment of Varro’s *Eumenides* (composed ca. 70-60 BCE). In this satire, the protagonist dresses as a woman, perhaps to avoid detection, and enters *Magna Mater*’s temple. He is mesmerized by the ecstatic drumming and music. Lulled in by the spectacle, he is “impressed by the delicacy and beauty of the *galli*.”⁷⁸ He then “curses the insanity he finds in the cult as the *galli* try to pull him down from the altar, where he has perhaps taken refuge to avoid forcible castration.”⁷⁹ Yet, again, in this terrifying narrative the stamp of official Roman state approval is still visible: an aedile participates in the rituals, placing a crown on the head of the goddess’s statue.

In Virgil’s *Aeneid* (composed ca. 29-19 BCE), the Mother Goddess is depicted as a powerful deity, one originating in Troy, where Roman tradition places the origins of Rome’s legendary founders (Aeneas et al.). On the other hand, her *galli* are held up as examples of unmanly behavior; as Roller states, in the *Aeneid* “her priests, the *galli*, exemplify weakness and effeminacy, values which stand in stark contrast to the stalwart nature and noble virtue of the Italians whom Aeneas will soon lead to form the new Roman state.”⁸⁰ Roller draws attention to both direct and indirect references and comparisons of characters in the *Aeneid* with *galli*. The *galli*’s wild unkempt hair, brightly colored feminine clothing, ecstatic drumming, and castrated state are recurrent themes throughout the *Aeneid*.⁸¹

Dionysius of Halicarnassus has already been mentioned for his etiological myth of Cybele herself. He also mirrors Diodorus and Plutarch in portraying the *galli* in paradoxical terms. Like Virgil, he connects the Mother Goddess directly

⁷⁶ *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 19, in Velleius Paterculus, *Compendium of Roman History*, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, trans. Frederick W. Shipley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924); Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.348.

⁷⁷ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 283.

⁷⁸ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 308.

⁷⁹ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 308.

⁸⁰ Roller, “Ideology of the Eunuch Priest,” 553.

⁸¹ Roller, “Ideology of the Eunuch Priest,” 552-554.

to Roman forebears in Troy. He then claims that her rituals follow good and traditional Roman form: “for the praetors perform sacrifices and celebrate games in her honor every year according to the Roman customs.” Yet he distances some aspects of her cult from Roman customs. Among these are the processions of the image of the goddess, carried by “her priest and priestess” who play the drum and beg alms for her. Dionysius then notes that there were Roman laws prohibiting citizens from these particular rituals.⁸² Here again, we have an example of tacit state approval. We have already seen above that Diodorus and Plutarch wrote about a *gallus* meeting with the Senate, Catullus pointed out the participation of an aedile, and Dionysius in turn mentioned the participation of praetors.

Ovid, in his *Fasti* describing the *Megalesia* festival, paints a horrific picture: “eunuchs will march and thump their hollow drums [...] seated on the unmanly necks of Her attendants, the goddess herself will be borne with howls through the streets in the city’s midst.”⁸³ Ovid then concedes that he is terrified by the loud rites—rites that included “unmanly” attendants banging on drums and cymbals and carrying an image of the goddess.

There may already be allusions to *Magna Mater*’s appeal to the lower classes in Diodorus. Juvenal likewise pokes fun at the *galli* in his sixth satire:

And now, behold! in comes the chorus of the frantic Bellona and the mother of the Gods, attended by a giant eunuch to whom his obscene inferiors must do reverence. Before him the howling herd with the timbrels give way; his plebeian cheeks are covered with a Phrygian tiara.⁸⁴

“Inferiors” and plebeians pay reverence to the *gallus*. Thus, these three authors draw our attention to social class, which reminds us that our sources are all elite, literate males. Greek sources condemn *metragyrtai* for violating their upper-class sense of religious propriety, while Roman sources condemn *galli* for violating their upper-class sense of proper gender performance. We must exercise caution, as these sources probably do not reflect the views of the lower classes. Indeed, Mother Goddess worship was widespread in both Greece and Rome—both at the city-state and state level, as well as the private, domestic level.

Nevertheless, elites were also drawn to the Mother Goddess. During the *Megalesia*, aristocrats threw lavish banquets, just as plebeians and lower classes were entertained by the *ludi scaenici* and chariot races. Cicero condemned those who disrespected the sacred office of the *galli*, and Augustus bragged about renovating *Magna Mater*’s temple. Contrary to the impression left by Diodorus and the explicit denunciation of the *galli* as winning approval from the ignorant masses by Juvenal, the Mother enjoyed the patronage of upper and lower classes

⁸² Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 2.19.

⁸³ Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.181-190.

⁸⁴ Juvenal, *Juvenal and Persius*, trans. George G. Ramsay (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928), 6.513. On Diodorus, see above, in part II of this article.

for nearly a millennium, from the sixth century BCE down to the Christian era in the fourth and fifth centuries CE.

A clear paradox emerges: Attis was popular, and the *Magna Mater's galli* were respected as foreign diplomats and as ritual specialists, while at the same time they were threatening the very notions of Roman masculinity.

Conclusion

Eunuch priests were conspicuously absent from Phrygia before Roman hegemony over Asia. In Greece and Rome, however, *metragyrtai* and *galli* are well attested. In *Magna Mater's* temple in Rome on the Palatine, Attis figurines outnumber those of the goddess ten to one. Those found in Rome often explicitly drew attention to Attis's genitalia (or, more accurately, his lack thereof), whereas those in Greece often did not.⁸⁵

In contrast, the element of gender ambiguity was part of a long tradition in Greek religion. Therefore, the gender status of Attis was taken for granted. In Rome, it was emphasized (in negative terms), but in Greece it was simply a given. In Rome, paradoxically, discomfort over Attis's gender was discussed frequently, yet it is apparent that he played an important role in the Roman version of the Mother Goddess's myths and official rituals. For early Greek commentators, *metragyrtai* were castigated not for their gender performance, but rather for their unorthodox practices such as mechanical manipulation of the gods/supernatural and their exploitation of a gullible clientele. In Rome, however, gender performance was central to the negative views of *galli*. Indeed, Rome prohibited its citizens from castrating themselves and from dressing or performing as *galli* in religious rituals—legislation that was lacking in Greece. Similarly, the Roman *Magna Mater* emphasized fecundity—both in matters of human reproduction and in agriculture. However, as Roller points out, “this forms a contrast with both Phrygian Matar and Greek Meter, for whom fertility was rarely an issue.”⁸⁶

It is therefore clear that Greeks and Romans selectively adopted elements of the Phrygian Mother Goddess while including their own Greek or Roman practices and myths. Less important for our purposes here are the etiological myths and the role of fertility (in Rome, or lack thereof in Phrygia or Greece). More important for our purposes, in this syncretism the mythic figure of Attis and the real figures of the *metragyrtai* and *galli* are seemingly new, or at least much more in focus, in Greco-Roman versions but apparently lacking in the pre-Roman Phrygian version.⁸⁷ Utilizing Garber's *category crisis* and Foucauldian Butlerian discourse analysis in this regard can shed light on cultural difference.

⁸⁵ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 278.

⁸⁶ Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 280.

⁸⁷ These figures only appear in Phrygia after the establishment of Roman hegemony over Asia.

Greek discourse found *metragerytai* gender unproblematic as part of a larger tradition of ritual transvestism. The only *category crisis*, to borrow Garber's term, for Greeks was that of "proper" religious practice and "improper magic" performed by the *metragerytai*. The paradoxical appearance of *galli* in Roman discourses, however, seems to have been fixated on their gender performance. It is here that differences in Greek and Roman gender norms are most apparent. The *galli* provoked a *category crisis*, a crisis that exposed the fragility of Roman masculinity, threatened by *galli* who destroyed the neat divide between Roman masculinity and femininity. Previous scholars have ignored the differences in reception of facets of the Mother's cultus, especially the long tradition of gender ambiguity in Greek religion. In doing so, the lines between the two cultures have been blurred. Contrary to early scholarship, which has often conflated the two distinct societies into a homogeneous "Greco-Roman" bloc, Greek masculinity encompassed a wider range of expression, while Romans were fascinated with the *galli* and their perceived threats to Roman gender norms.

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