The Cult of Cybele in the Roman Republic

Ancient Rome was home to numerous mystery cults, close-knit religious communities that required special initiation, imported from their eastern territories. One of these, which worshiped the Anatolian goddess Cybele, was accompanied by wild, frenzied, and violent rituals that stood in stark contrast to the unemotional, orderly religion that Rome was more familiar with. Many aspects of the Cult of Cybele would have shocked Ancient Romans—not the least of which was priests castrating themselves in an ecstatic trance. So how and why did such a cult become one of the more influential subcultures of Roman religion by the end of the Republic? While the Cult of Cybele may have been introduced and allowed mainly because it benefited the Roman state to incorporate and syncretize aspects of foreign religion, it grew to such prominence by the end of the Republic because it appealed to the individual desire for salvation and emotional connection to the divine, both of which were lacking in traditional Roman religion.

The rituals associated with Cybele’s worship were counter-cultural in Ancient Rome, to say the least. The eunuch priest was considered “both a non-man and a man who broke the rules of proper male behavior” by wearing his hair long and identifying himself as spiritually one with his goddess.¹ These self-harming priests stood in stark contrast to the more austere religious officials in traditional Roman religion, who were mostly members of the ruling elite, and had to be “whole” in body in order to be eligible.² Romans would also have been uncomfortable with the cult’s major festival, the Megalesia, which was marked by “excessive emotionalism,” where initiates were inspired with a “frenzy surpassing that which the followers of Dionysus knew” to

² Ibid., 165.
ritually cut themselves and sprinkle blood on a pine tree that personified Cybele’s consort, Attis.³

Ovid’s *Fasti* explains the origin of these rituals. The mother-goddess Cybele fell in love with Attis, a young shepherd boy, who “broke faith” with her; in the agony of his remorse, he cut off his genitals and died beneath a pine tree.⁴ Therefore, says Ovid, “his madness set an example, and still his unmanly ministers cut their vile members while they toss their hair.”⁵ Through his disapproving language, one can clearly see the scornful attitude many Romans of Ovid’s time had towards the Cult of Cybele. So how did it attract a following by the end of the Republic that was far from negligible?

The worship of the Magna Mater dominated Asia Minor from the sixth century B.C. onwards.⁶ While it is not possible to trace exactly when the cult disseminated through the Mediterranean, it is known that by the Archaic Period, the cult had spread to Greece and even as far as southern Italy, though not yet to the city of Rome itself.⁷ The Greeks often identified Cybele with Rhea, the wife of Kronos and mother of the Olympian gods, which is how Cybele came to be depicted with Rhea’s typical iconography: wearing a turret crown, riding in a chariot drawn by lions. One of the Homeric Hymns is dedicated to the “Mother of all gods and people,” who is worshiped with “the clash of castanets and kettledrums, the trill of reed pipes” but is just as pleased with the “howl of wolves, roar of fierce lions, echoing mountains and wooded valleys.”⁸ In fact, Ovid explains the origins of the “Phrygian music” of her worship by this connection to Rhea. In order to protect the infant Zeus from his murderous father, she muffled the baby’s screams with “long and clangorous music,” which is mimicked by “attendants of the

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⁵ Ibid., 4.221.
goddess thump[ing] the brass and rumbling leather; cymbals they strike instead of helmets, and drums instead of shields; the flute plays, as of yore, the Phrygian airs.” Thus, this goddess of wilderness, celebrated with wild music, must have become at least somewhat absorbed into the Greek pantheon by being syncretized with Rhea. However, the Great Mother’s cult did not quite take hold in Greece because the Bacchic cult was already established there and fulfilled a similar orgiastic role.

Cybele’s introduction to Rome, on the other hand, is much more decisive and well-documented. According to Livy, many foreign religious rituals were imported during the Hannibalic War, in reaction to the uncertainty and insecurity the common people were facing. In 204 BC, the Sibylline Books—a collection of oracles central to Ancient Roman divination—were consulted, and found to contain this prophecy: “[W]hensoever a foreign enemy shall have carried war into the land of Italy, he may be expelled and conquered, if the Idæan Mother be brought from Pessinus to Rome.” Because the Romans had already successfully stopped a plague by importing the medicine god Æsculapius, they sent ambassadors to Phrygia and carried the “sacred stone” that represented Cybele to the Palatine Hill, where she was received by the “best man” in the city. Hannibal was finally defeated in 202 BC, apparently fulfilling the prophecy. It is, of course, important to remember that Livy wrote centuries after the Hannibalic War, with the purpose of imparting moral lessons, and had no scruples about inventing or twisting facts so that virtue was always apparently rewarded—religious piety and obeying the oracles, for example. Whether Livy took liberties with this story or not, it is clear that by his time (the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire), Romans legitimized the import of Cybele by connecting her to the Sibylline Books, a very traditionally Roman aspect of their

9 Ovid, Fasti, 4.191.
11 Ibid., 29.11.
religion. It also helped that Cybele was emphasized in Rome as a “genuine ancestral Roman deity” since she originated in Asia Minor, not far from legendary Troy, which was believed to be “the ultimate origin of the Roman race.”¹² Both of these teachings would have helped ease some of the discomfort they may have felt about her foreignness.

The Roman senate’s decision to import Cybele may have also been more mercenary than pious. As their territory expanded, Rome consistently used religious syncretism—assimilating gods of conquered peoples into their own pantheons, or even combining them with preexisting Roman gods—as “weapons of domination.”¹³ Roman culture absorbed traditions and beliefs from other cultures, so that these conquered peoples would be comfortable identifying as Roman, thus maintaining Rome’s control over them. Since these imported aspects of religion—Cybele, for example—were relegated to periphery cults, as supplements to the traditional, mainstream forms of worship, Roman nationalism was satisfied because its own gods remained superior.

While this explains why the Cult of Cybele was introduced to the city of Rome and allowed to persist despite the shockingly foreign nature of its rituals, the question remains: what made it so popular and influential? What did the Cult of Cybele have to offer its followers? To answer this, one must examine what might have been lacking in traditional Roman state religion.

Mainstream Roman religion operated on the do ut des principle, that is, “I give that you may give.”¹⁴ The relationship between gods and mortals was one of mutually beneficial reciprocity; worship was like a business transaction in which a deity would grant a favor in return for sacrifices or votive offerings. It was a detached, dispassionate relationship based on how one party could materially benefit from another. By contrast, the appeal of the Cult of

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¹³ Ibid., 186.
Cybele was emotional in the extreme, and was addressed specifically to the individual.\(^\text{15}\) For example, the frenzied dance, music and ritual cutting were meant to show Cybele that “they shared with her in her sorrow” over Attis’ death, in order to “imitate Cybele in her grief and call Attis back to life.”\(^\text{16}\) Even the act of self-castration had an emotional and spiritual appeal: it allowed the devotee to become another Attis and attain semi-divine status, by mimicking his sacrifice of his manhood, which allowed him to be reborn as a god, since it showed his pure devotion to Cybele.\(^\text{17}\) Thus, the Cult of Cybele emphasized a cycle of death and resurrection: the change of seasons, the myth of Attis, the elevation of priests through castration. It also taught an optimistic view of the world: suffering is transformative, and allows devotees to experience joy and renewal afterward, since the “resurrection of the god brought with it the assurance of salvation for men, and this chiefly included the promise of a happy immortality.”\(^\text{18}\)

Moreover, the Roman gods were thought to have “little if any concern with the behavior of humans toward other humans,” only presiding over “success, prosperity, [and] health,” which meant that concepts of sin and ethics were not related to the gods at all.\(^\text{19}\) A person who wanted to connect ethical behavior with spirituality might turn to the Cult of Cybele for its *taurbolium* ritual—a sacrifice of a bull that involves getting spattered in the victim’s blood, in contrast to traditional Roman practice of remaining clean and unstained during a sacrifice.\(^\text{20}\) It was a regenerative ritual; the purpose of the “bath of blood” was to “purify [the devotee] from the sins

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\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 125.
\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 126.
\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., 128.
\(^\text{19}\) Warrior, *Roman Religion*, 1.29.
and evils of his old life and make him a new man, or rather a divinized human.”  

21 The promise of spiritual rebirth and cleansing did not exist in mainstream Roman religion.

In fact, Roman religion was curiously focused on the quantifiable, physical gains, rather than spiritual ones. Cicero comments on this materialistic foundation of Roman religion, saying, “Did anyone ever give thanks to the gods because he was a good man? No, he did so because he is rich, honored, and secure.”  

22 It is not a stretch to assume that the reverse would also be true: since the Roman gods were only concerned with this life and material success within it, people without wealth, honor, or security would feel little gratitude or piety, and might turn elsewhere. Thus, mystery cults were particularly attractive in Roman society, because they filled a spiritual void: they offered comfort, emotional connection to the divine, and usually some offer of salvation in another life.

Mystery cults also spoke to the less powerful members of society in ways that traditional state religion did not. The marginalized—women, for example, who lived under the legal authority of a man their entire lives, unless they were one of the Vestal Virgins  

23—often turned to less conventional religion to regain some control over an aspect of their lives. One of the most important aspects of mystery cults, including that of Cybele, was membership was not “prescribed or restricted by family, clan, or class, but…could be chosen at will.”  

24 Initiation was open to anyone, making it attractive to those of lower status, and the emphasis on personal choice made it attractive to those who felt powerless in Roman society. While this makes mystery cults sound dangerously subversive, these aspects were made less controversial by the fact that belonging to a mystery cult did not substitute one’s practice of traditional Roman

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22 Ibid., 1.30.
religion, but was merely a “special form of worship offered in the larger context of religious practice…an optional activity within polytheistic religion.”²⁵ It represented a supplemental form of worship, not a replacement, so it did not represent too great a threat to the established institutions of religion.

Although the Cult of Cybele performed rituals that would have discomfited and even outright scandalized some Romans, the movement was introduced and allowed by the Roman state because incorporating the deities and beliefs of its conquered territories helped cement Rome’s power over them. The cult grew to prominence because its inclusivity and emphasis on an individual relationship with the divine resonated with more marginalized members of Roman society; the Great Mother offered emotional comfort and spiritual renewal in a way that the traditional Roman pantheon could not.

²⁵ Ibid., 10.
Bibliography


