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PhD THESIS

Cybele in the Roman province of Lower Moesia.
The interaction of the Great Mother with the native deities
Abstract

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INTRODUCTION

The cult of the goddess Cybele, surnamed the Great Mother of the Gods, was one of the most popular cults practiced in the Roman province of Lower Moesia, during the I-III centuries AD, a fact attested by numerous archaeological and epigraphic evidence.

However, in order to have a complete picture, and to understand the impact on the multi-ethnic population in this territory, it is necessary to study how this cult appeared and evolved, starting from the base provided by the beliefs in the Mothers of the Neolithic era, continuing with the research of micro-asian deities such as Kubaba and others like her, of the popular Cybele in Greek times, and finally reaching Cybele, the Great Mother of the Gods, from the Roman period.

A general analysis of the cult is very important before making any particular study, because it helps to understand Cybele, as she was perceived and worshiped in the province of Lower Moesia. Taking into account these general lines, we can examine the phenomenon, in an organized and systematic manner, within the context of the above-mentioned centuries and on a well-defined territory.

In order to understand the manifestation of this cult in the Lower Moesia province, it is necessary to analyze both its general features and those specific to the area, the unique and characteristic elements of this administrative region which today, in general, includes the current Romanian Dobrogea, as well as South Dobrogea, located in the Northeast of Bulgaria. In this academic approach, the specifics of the province itself, its social, ethnic, linguistic, economic, military, (etc.) elements must be taken into account.

The native thracians and getae had already mingled here with the greek milesian or dorian settlers, and to all of them was added, during the reference period, a motley Roman populace of soldiers, veterans, settlers, civil servants, sailors, merchants, craftsmen, and slaves. These romans, so named and united by the power of the right of citizenship, had, however, come from all corners and provinces of the empire, and they brought to Lower Moesia their ancestral beliefs from their countries of origin. The religious universe of the province is dominated by the gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon, which coexist in this territory alongside the local deities. These different gods interact, are worshiped together, and sometimes change each other, lending each other different characteristics

and attributes. In addition to the traditional Greco-Roman and indigenous deities, the religious universe is enriched with some cults dedicated to oriental deities, originating in North Africa or Asia Minor, picturesque deities with unusual rituals bringing mysteries and ceremonies of great spiritual charge, little felt before those times. The cult of Cybele was also originally an oriental one, but now it becomes much stronger, once it acquires the status of official religion of the Empire by transforming the goddess, from a Phrygian deity to the Ancestor of Rome and Great Mother of all gods. Thus we reach this situation where Cybele is adored both by the orientals of Asia Minor and by all other romans. Arriving in provinces such as Moesia, she interacts with the image of the Great Mothers of Nature, already adored by the natives.

Moesia Inferior was a good place for this cult to develop and become very popular. The west coast of the region had already been occupied for centuries by greek settlers who had established the cult of a hellenized Cybele. Magna Mater from the Roman period therefore finds a very good ground for development and evolution, all the more as she is a Cybele improved with new elements and attributes.

In Lower Moesia the deity interacts with the deities worshiped by the pre-existing population of Greeks and Thracians. She develops on top of the image of the Greek Demetra or Rhea, but also adapts over the image of the already adored Bendis, deity of the Thracian religious pantheon. It is also interesting to analyze how it comes to interact with male deities, and in this study we want to highlight the unique features and aspects of this phenomenon. It is specific to Moesia in general (both in the Lower and Upper) that the Great Mother interacts with deities and heroes such as the Thracian Knight, the Danube Knights, Dionysus or Sabazios.

Her lover Attis, who introduces to the cult the mysteries and characteristics of the bloody sacrificial ceremony, is depicted next to Dionysus or Sabazios, or is mistaken for them. Through the ancient vestiges that we will present, we can see how Cybele comes, iconographically, in contact with the local deities mentioned above, and hence a series of questions about how it happened and the causes that led to such a situation.

Taking into account all these elements, I considered it imperative to carry out a study that presents, in detail, both the cult of the Mother in the province, during the I-III centuries

AD, and how she interacted with the deities already adored here.

The main objective of this paper is to highlight all these elements taking into account, especially, the multitude of archaeological and epigraphic evidence, and only in certain cases referring to some numismatic evidence. This presentation is supported by hundreds of inscriptions, monuments and statues, in which the Great Mother (and often the gods with whom she interacts) actually appears or is mentioned. The large number of these evidences demonstrates and underlines the importance that this cult had.

From our point of view, the analysis involves investigating the problem on two levels. Thus, on the one hand, we first investigated the evidence of the presence of the Great Mother in the western Pontic cities, colonies founded by the Greeks, where the cult of the Hellenized Cybele had been known for hundreds of years. By default, in these policies, the faith has certain characteristics.

On the other hand, it was necessary to study the way of appearance, evolution and propagation of the cult in the newly created roman cities, which appeared with the imposition of the new domination. These are economic, strategic centers, on

the Danube Limes or inland, and some of them are the bases of strong military units, legions that bring together in their numbers recruited soldiers from all provinces of the empire.

Regarding the novelty of this thesis, we consider that so far no exhaustive study has been carried out to present and combine all these elements. Also, so far, no emphasis has been placed on the unique elements related to the interaction of the Mother with the local deities, at least not in the pages of an extensive work. We are confident that this study, which can of course be perfected, can make an important contribution to achieving these goals.

We must mention the fact that, throughout the work, beyond the notes and citations of bibliographic sources, we wanted to make some personal comments, to suggest certain theories and to advance our own hypotheses, related to the particularities that the cult had in the province. However, without exceeding the academic norms, and taking into account the evidence from Rome and other imperial provinces, we outlined the image of a cult, with elements that could give more substance. In this regard, we proposed the idea that itinerant Galli priests were a logical presence in the province, in the context in which we know that they are attested and

mentioned in other regions. Another proposed hypothesis, pertinent but not yet fully accepted from a scientific point of view, is that, in at least some of the cities in the region, in Tomis, Histria and Callatis, there were temples and shrines dedicated to the Mother, similar to the one identified in Balchik. -Dionysopolis.

Another personal theory, advanced in this thesis, is related to the development of *taurobolium* and *cryobolium* ceremonies in the provincial cities. There is no definite archaeological evidence or source for such ceremonies in the province, but their existence cannot be questioned once we consider what was happening throughout the rest of the empire.

We already have the certainty that the Mother's public ceremonies took place in the cities of the province, since we know of the existence of high priestesses of Cybela (Aba of Hekataios, Sossia Africana, etc.) or of the associations of *dendrophori* and *cannophori* (the college led by *Mater romanorum*, etc.), which dealt with the organization of public events dedicated to the Goddess.

Throughout the thesis, I emphasized the way in which the Great Mother is presented together with the local deities.

Relevant in this sense are the monuments that showcase her alongside the Thracian Horseman or the Danube Riders. Attis is, in turn, presented and compared with deities such as Sabazios or Dionysos, gods with whom he shares common elements, with whom he interacts or is sometimes even mistaken for.

The Great Mother - Ancestor of Rome is much stronger than the ancient Cybele worshiped by greek settlers in earlier times, classical and hellenistic. Compared to the old model, she has many more attributes and is no longer a deity like the others, but is the Mother of All Gods, to whom the whole religious universe is subordinated. This explains the fact that the monuments and inscriptions present her as a central deity, always enthroned and to whom everyone else pays due respect. Thus, the Danube Riders guard and complete her, the Thracian Horseman always gallops towards her, in a mission whose purpose is never clearly explained, but can be intuited and interpreted.

All the other deities surround her and serve her, and mortals, always undersized, bring her offerings or tacitly support her, always near her throne. The acolytes represented next to her are characters who traditionally belong to other

cults. This is the case of Silenus, specific to the Dionysian mysteries, but whom we find in Mother's iconography. In fact, the connection between the Roman Cybele and Dionysos is extremely close. We must not forget that her lover Attis has many elements in common with Dionysos or Sabazios, as we have shown in the pages of this thesis.

The territory of Lower Moesia is cosmopolitan, a place where various beliefs meet and change each other. But it is the Mother of Gods who controls this process. She is no longer a goddess of any ethnic group, no longer a deity of the phrygians or greek settlers. She manages to unite the entire population of the province by faith, and her worshipers are both asians and romans, greeks and thracians. The inscriptions discovered in the last century, on the territory of the former roman province, prove this.

The social status of worshipers is also diverse. The goddess is worshiped by both the upper class (as in the case of the governor of Tomis, Firminianus), and ordinary civilians living in the istro-pontic region, or soldiers and veterans of the various units stationed in the area. They are joined by the poor, slaves, freedmen and members of rural communities.

The religion of the Great Mother is one of all and is in a permanent metamorphosis. She accepts the local beliefs, incorporates them and subordinates their Thracian gods, as she did to those of the Greco-Roman pantheon.

She is a goddess who protects the entire population and can be worshiped by anyone, regardless of ethnicity, social status or gender. This is why women are often her most faithful worshipers. The high priesthood of the Mother is a much-desired public role, a desideratum to which many representatives of the female world aspire. Examples such as the priestesses Sossia Africana, Marcia Bassilisa and Aba of Hekataios are more than eloquent in this regard. Her cult is also kept alive thanks to the associations of worshipers, whether they come from urban settlements or from rural areas. Respectable people honor her through their activities, gathered in groups of dendrophors, canophori, attiaistai, neomenistai, etc.

The period of the I-III centuries AD. it is one of highest religious tolerance, an age in which the common man is allowed to worship the Mother of Gods, the deities inherited from his ancestors, but also the emperor of Rome (also considered divine) who accepts and facilitates this great

freedom. The main and secondary roads of the province were most often trodden by itinerant missionaries, Galli priests who sang and danced frantically, made prophecies, and begged for alms. These roaming Galli often settled in important cities, where there were certainly temples and shrines dedicated to the goddess. The inscriptions about the high priestesses are indirect evidence of the existence of these temples and shrines in cities such as Histria, Tomis or Callatis. In fact, it is hard to believe that these cities did not have such places of worship, since in Odessos (a member city of the Pentapolis Confederation), there was one.

The epigraphic evidence very clearly indicates the celebration of Megalensia at Histria, as well as the numerous actions taken by the high priestesses.

Last but not least, some recent archeological discoveries entitle us to say that in the towns and villages of Lower Moesia there were ceremonies specific to the cult of the Mother, *crybolium* and *taurobolium*. In fact, there is such epigraphic evidence in most European provinces of the Roman Empire, and the fact that no such inscriptions have yet been discovered in Lower Moesia is just a coincidence. The present thesis tried to highlight all these elements that add color to an extremely

popular cult from over 1700 years ago, in the roman province of Lower Moesia.

Chapter I. Cybele. Origin, main features. Diffusion, syncretism and the evolution of the cult

This first chapter contains elements and details, we say, indispensable in the mission of understanding the religious phenomenon. The origin of the Metroac cult, its myths - as they were presented in ancient sources -, the common elements they had with other Great Mothers from various cultures of human civilization, all of these are just some of the paths followed which are likely to result in explanations and clarifications.

An ancient deity of phrygian origin, Cybele bore various names throughout the centuries during which she was worshiped, names given by place of worship or by her complementary attributes, but most often she is known as the Great Mother of the Gods. Named by the Romans *Magna Mater Deorum*, Cybele is an all-encompassing deity, having many attributes from the beginning and accumulating others throughout her history. From the very beginning, she is

considered the personification of the forces of nature, goddess of fertility, of mountains, of wild animals, and from the Hellenistic era she also became the protector of agriculture and the civic community.

CHAPTER II. The historical and social context of the adoption of the cult in the Greco-Roman world. Rites, rituals and traditions specific to the cult

Particular attention is paid to the causes and motives that made possible the adoption of the Goddess in the universe of the two great civilizations of antiquity. Thus, aspects related to the Hellenization of the cult are studied and analyzed, as well as the transformations that the image of the goddess went through. It is also very important to study how the cult came to Rome, where it was adopted and transformed, and then spread everywhere in the empire and implicitly in Lower Moesia. The historical context and aspects related to tradition are presented, defining elements helping to understand the adoption of Cybela in the Roman pantheon. For this reason, we have paid special attention to the way in which the religion of the Great Mother has become a national cult, and the ancient phrygian

goddess has metamorphosed into a true Ancestor of Rome. In the same chapter are presented the forms of worship of the goddess, as well as the main celebrations, specific rites and rituals, emphasizing those documented for the I-III centuries AD.

The institution of the Galli priests - the main ministers of the Great Mother, that of the archigall, the ceremonies of the *taurobolium* and the *criobolium* are presented, as well as details related to the great feast of Megalensia or the mysteries of Attis.

CHAPTER III. Cybele in the art of antiquity

Cybele was first worshiped in ad hoc shrines created in the mountains, in caves transformed into temples, where she was represented long before the Hellenistic era. Her adoption and graecization led to the extension and propagation of her image, to increasingly better sculptural representations from an artistic point of view, worthy of highlighting her powers, dignity and attributes. In Athens, the great Phidias himself allegedly made an extraordinary statue of her, which, unfortunately, has not been preserved. Other sources, such as

Arrian, tell us that in Athens, Phidias' so-called creation was actually made by a very talented student of his, named Agoracritus. We also know from Arrian that the Goddess was present on the throne, framed by lions and holding a tambourine in one hand, which was one of her representative instruments. She has been praised and glorified by greek writers, beginning with Herodotus and continuing with those of the Hellenistic age, she has been compared and added alongside the already existing Olympian deities.

Her arrival in Rome gave the cult a new lease of life and allowed it to spread even stronger. At the same time, the Roman world, modeled after the borrowed greek model, included the Mother of Gods in its artistic activity. She has been the subject of extensive works, she has been represented in complex images of astonishing beauty. She was praised and loved, but also attacked and criticized, especially for the excesses characteristic of Attis' mysteries. After almost six centuries of hegemony in Rome, she disappeared along with other Eastern religions, persecuted by the Christianity that became the only religion of the Empire.

She has been missing for over a millennium, but without disappearing completely, surviving and waiting to be praised

and appreciated again, waiting to be reborn like nature in Spring. In the Renaissance, in classicism and in the modern era, Cybele reappeared as a romantic character, with her myths, and the unfortunate love for the phrygian shepherd Attis again becoming the subject of works of art.

Since ancient times, the Great Mother of Gods has been the main and favorite subject of philosophers, writers, and poets, among which greeks, romans, or other nations. She is often glorified (called *augusta*, *alma*, *sancta*), sometimes loathed - for elements of her cult, or directly, her lover Attis. Some authors, positive or negative, are subjective, others objectively present the state of the cult of Cybele, in Greece, in Rome or in the rest of Empire.

The writers analyze the mythological aspects, the ways through which the cult evolved, its symbolism. An interesting subchapter is in the authors' attempts to understand the fascination and temptation of this cult, and of eastern cults in general, on populations.

CHAPTER IV. The Great Mother in the province of Lower Moesia

This fourth chapter, the largest in fact, is structured into two large subchapters, to which are added a few smaller ones.

The first major subchapter is "The Great Mother in the Greek Colonies" and highlights the most important evidence of worship in the cities on the west-Pontic coast. For this, we paid special attention to the archaeological evidence and epigraphic sources from Histria, Callatis and Tomis. Although we strictly covered the evidence from the Roman period, we considered it necessary to make some parallels with the Hellenistic era, in order to better understand the already existing substratum, on which the image of the goddess developed in the imperial era.

We commented on and analyzed the most important pieces belonging to these settlements. In this analysis we have continued to present the interaction of the Mother with the indigenous deities, because sufficient evidence has been found in which Cybele is depicted with the Thracian Horseman or the Danubian Riders. Also in this subchapter we analyzed the

Temple of the Pontic Mother of Dionysopolis, created in the Hellenistic era, but which continued to exist and function in the Roman period. It was imperative to detail the unique elements, as the temple discovered at Balchik is the only one in Lower Moesia where Cybele is mentioned as the Pontic Mother. It is not excluded that, in the future, possible archaeological discoveries will prove the existence of other points on the west-pontic coast, where the Great Mother was worshiped under this name. In this case, we could speak not only of an isolated example, as is the case now, but of a protective goddess of the whole area we are referring to.

Last but not least, we studied the evidence from Odessos, an ancient greek city in which the Mother of Gods enjoyed great prominence. We also presented the hellenistic shrine at Durankulak, very important for understanding the fertile ground on which the cult of Cybela later developed in Roman times.

The second major subchapter, "Cybele in the Roman Cities of Lower Moesia," presents the elements related to the cult of Cybele discovered in various newly founded cities. Archaeological evidence is analyzed, as well as the peculiarities that required the study of these settlements,

different from the old ones, on the west-pontic coast. We also insisted on short presentations of each city, with the presentation of the historical context and taking into account the specific elements of each settlement, whether it is called Marcianopolis, Oescus, Novae, Nicopolis ad Istrum, Abrittus, Carsium, Noviodunum or Troesmis. Cities founded in Roman times in which no evidence of the existence of the cult has been discovered so far have not been included. In the cities where they exist, we also referred to demographic and ethnic details. This is the case of settlements in which micro-asians settled, coming from regions where the cult of the Mother of Gods was extremely popular. In the subchapter "Particular Aspects" we have chosen to describe other special elements, likely to emphasize the relationship between Cybele and local deities.

A final subchapter deals with the ethnicities and social status of the worshipers, present on the monuments and mentioned in the inscriptions. Last but not least, we are concerned about the existence of temples and shrines and we believe that future research will provide evidence in this regard. We conclude this thesis with some "Conclusions" that

can be drawn and with the hope that this thesis manages to compose a clear picture of this cult.

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