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THE SEA VOYAGE OF MAGNA MATER TO ROME

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The official introduction of *Magna Deorum Mater Idaei*, into the Roman pantheon in 204 B.C. followed a certain tradition of acceptance of other foreign deities. According to the prophecies of the Sibylline books, the powers of these new gods could have influenced the unfavorable events which Rome suffered from.¹ Nonetheless, the sea voyage of *Magna Mater* and her welcoming to Rome were truly legendary ones, leaving a certain mark in the Roman history and art, and a significant change in the Roman culture. Showers of stones falling from the sky brought more fear, after a series of losses against the Carthaginians. The great Phrygian goddess came to Rome as a saviour, to bring an end to the great struggle in the Punic wars², on a ship symbolically called *Navis Salvia*, made out of pine wood and painted in fiery colours, as fabled by Ovid (4.273-74). *Navis Salvia* arrived at the port of Ostia on the fourth of April 204 B.C. where Cybele was greeted as a Roman national goddess, accompanied by a fitting ceremony. The sacred stone, the idol of the Goddess was temporarily placed in the temple of *Victoria* on the Palatine. This symbolic act must have led the people of Rome to believe even more in the victory of *Scipio* in Africa. Two years after the arrival of the Goddess, at the battle of *Zamma*, the second Punic War was brought to an end.

Key words: *Magna Mater*, Punic Wars, *Navis Salvia*, *Scipioni*, *Claudii*, terracotta antefixa.

Behind the solemn event of dignifying an oriental deity by welcoming it into the Roman pantheon, many aspects of the Roman mentality and of their political and religious views are revealed. The coming of *Cybele* to Rome is connected to some very important historical episodes of the third century B.C., the time of the Second Punic war and the First Macedonian. The war losses after the second invasion of Carthage were greater than expected, while the city itself was facing the greatest danger of the time – *Hannibal*. After the defeat at the *Trasimene Lake* at 217 B.C. the Sibylline

books were consulted, predicting victory if a foreign deity was introduced. This time, it was *Venus Erycina* from Sicily³ which contained both Punic and Greek elements, a step which helped the Romans in seducing the sympathies of the Greeks.⁴ The introduction of this cult is somehow also interwoven with the mythological interpretation of the Roman roots,⁵ and in accordance to the legend of their Trojan origin. During the course of the third and the second century, the Romans greatly accepted the legend of their eastern origin, which is in fact a product of Greek mythology.⁶ All the same,

¹ In 293 B.C., after a horrible epidemic, *Asclepius* was accepted among the Roman gods (Livy, 10.47, 6-7), while in the middle of the same century, after the defeat at *Trapan*, *Pluto* and *Persephone* were also introduced (Livy, Per. 49). These prophecies helped the process of Roman penetration into the Hellenic world, and most certainly lead towards redefining the old Roman religion of the Republic. Also see Gruen 1990, 8.

² This is the traditional opinion set by *Graillot* 1909, 30-32.

³ Ovid. (*Fast.* 4.863-76); *Miličević* 1990, 122-123.

⁴ Gruen 1990, 9.

⁵ *Diodorus Siculus* (4.83.4-7) mentions that *Aeneas* visited the temple of his mother *Aphrodite* on the mountain *Eryx*.

⁶ The myth was known already in the fifth century B.C. and it is attributed to *Hellanicus of Lesbos*. For the companionship of *Aeneas* with *Odysseus* See *Solmsen* 1986; Also *Horsfall* 1987 and *Gruen* 1990, 11-12.

this particular myth strengthened the current Roman national awareness, which was especially needed in this particular time, and additionally defined their identity by separating it from the Hellenic world. One of the main arguments according to what Rome believed to have a right to claim its eastern heritage in the form of the cult of Great Cybele was the Trojan origin, often used in the political and diplomatic relations with the East.

In 205 B.C. the population must have been in absolute horror when in South Italy showers of stones were reported and were taken as a very bad omen.⁷ Thus, the Sibylline books were once again consulted, predicting that the end of the war would happen only if the Great Mother from Ida was brought to Rome.⁸ There were news from Delphi as well, also foreseeing a great victory.⁹ Such problems were natural to resolve by the help of a foreign deity, even more if the deity was worshiped through the great stone of Pessinus, the black meteorite that also fell from the sky, according to legend.¹⁰ All sources about the arrival of Cybele to Rome are from latter times than the actual event, mainly connected to the royal Augustan house. Understandably, this episode of the Roman history has been mythologized and used as a tool for propaganda, especially in the Ovid's *Fasti*. He tells us a rather romanticized version of the events of 204 B.C. The great Goddess was ready to depart Troad with Aeneas, but she stayed waiting for the right time of her summoning to Rome (4.251-64). Nevertheless, she protected Aeneas during his journey. In the ninth book of *Aeneid* (9.77-83, 9.107-22) in the war against Turnus the Goddess gives Aeneas peace of mind that his vessels are safe from burning, because they were made from the wood of one of her dwellings. When the time came and the Romans claimed their national heritage, Attalus was not particularly inclined towards this notion. But the Goddess distinctly expressed her wish, considering Rome to be quite fitting for her new dwelling. The earth shook, while the king, in fear, agreed for her departure to the West. (4.265-70) The ship was made out of pine wood that was taken from the same woods Aeneas used for building the ship that led him to Italic shores.

The true motive of the acceptance of Cybele will always be a puzzle to the modern historians. The overtaking of such an important eastern cult in these conditions must have given hope to the common people, while it also reflected the Roman respect and affection toward eastern traditions. However, there are opinions

that Cybele came to Rome when victory was already at hand as opposed to Grailot's traditional opinion. Gruen's¹¹ argument in favor of this position is the fact that in the resolving battle at the river Metaurus at 207 B.C. the Roman army won; Carthaginians were greatly forced out of the Italic land by the time the cult was being considered, bringing a certain relief from the prior tension. These events certainly changed the course of the war. The next step was the attack of Africa that would have driven Hannibal completely out of Italy. In 205 B.C. after the battle in Hispania, young Cornelius Scipio has been appointed governor of Sicily that served as a departure point towards Africa.¹² Burton takes this discussion further, and as he puts it examines whether Gruen's recontextualization, his preference for Ovid's account, and his extension of the episode's significance to the realms of domestic politics and international diplomacy are at all feasible.¹³ He considers the historical facts of Mago's help to Hannibal's army as well as the low population rate in order to suggest that the atmosphere in Rome was still in the spirit of uncertainty and anxiety.¹⁴

Another very important question is where was the black meteorite, the fetish of the Great Phrygian Goddess, taken from. There are discordances in the ancient sources about the exact location in Asia Minor where the cult was officially handed over to the Romans, so we are left with three versions. Livy (29.10.5, 29.11.7) tells us that Attalus gave the idol of Magna Mater from Pessinus, an information given to us by other ancient writers as well such as Cicero (*De Har. Resp.* 27-28); Diodorus Siculus (34/35.33.2); Strabo (12.5.3) and Valerius Maximus (8.15.3). Varo (*De lingua Lat.* 6.15), on the other hand, states that the Goddess was delivered from Pergamum, which could actually be closer to the true event, having in mind that Attalus' power did not reach as far as Pessinus, as Gruen concluded.¹⁵ Gruen considers that the most believable account of the event was given to us by Ovid. According to him, Attalus transferred the black meteorite¹⁶ from the temple on Mount Ida before it was officially given to the Romans. After all she was known in Rome as Magna Deorum Mater Idaei. This way, the legend of the Trojan heritage of the Romans gains greater importance and logic during the negotiations.¹⁷ Naturally, the issue about the exact location continued to be heavily discussed among the contemporary researchers of this subject.¹⁸

The arrival of Cybele was, in either way, a turning point in Roman history that served as a platform for

⁷ Liv. (29.10)

⁸ *Civitatem eo tempore repens religio invaserat invento carmine in libris Sibyllinis propter crebrius eo anno de caelo lapidatum inspectis, quandoque hostis alienigena terrae Italiae bellum intulisset, eum pelli Italia vincique posse, si mater Idaea a Pessinunte Romam advecta foret.* (Liv. 29, 10, 4ff). See also Burton 1996.

⁹ More on this episode and on the connection with the oracle from Delphi see Gruen 1990, 9-10.

¹⁰ About this legend we learn from Herodian (I, 11) and Ammianus Marcellinus (22, 9).

¹¹ 1990, 6-7.

¹² Liv. (28.38.9-10,12).

¹³ 1996, 37.

¹⁴ Burton 1996, 39-41.

¹⁵ 1990, 17.

¹⁶ In Appian (*Hannibal* 7,9,56) we read that the meteorite was actually a very small object, a black sacred stone that had fallen from the sky. It was uniconic, although it was later reused for the head of Magna Mater's statue in the Palatine temple, if we are to believe Arnobius (*Ad. nat.* 7.49). Unfortunately, there isn't a known depiction of this black uniconic monolith, despite the fact that much has been written about it (Liv. 29.11; Ovid. *Fast.* 4.342; Suet. *Tib.* 2) But, again, the testimonies are from latter times, so we do not have a contemporary report to rely on.

¹⁷ Gruen 1990, 18-19.

¹⁸ See Gruen 1990, 15-20; Burton 1996, 43-58.

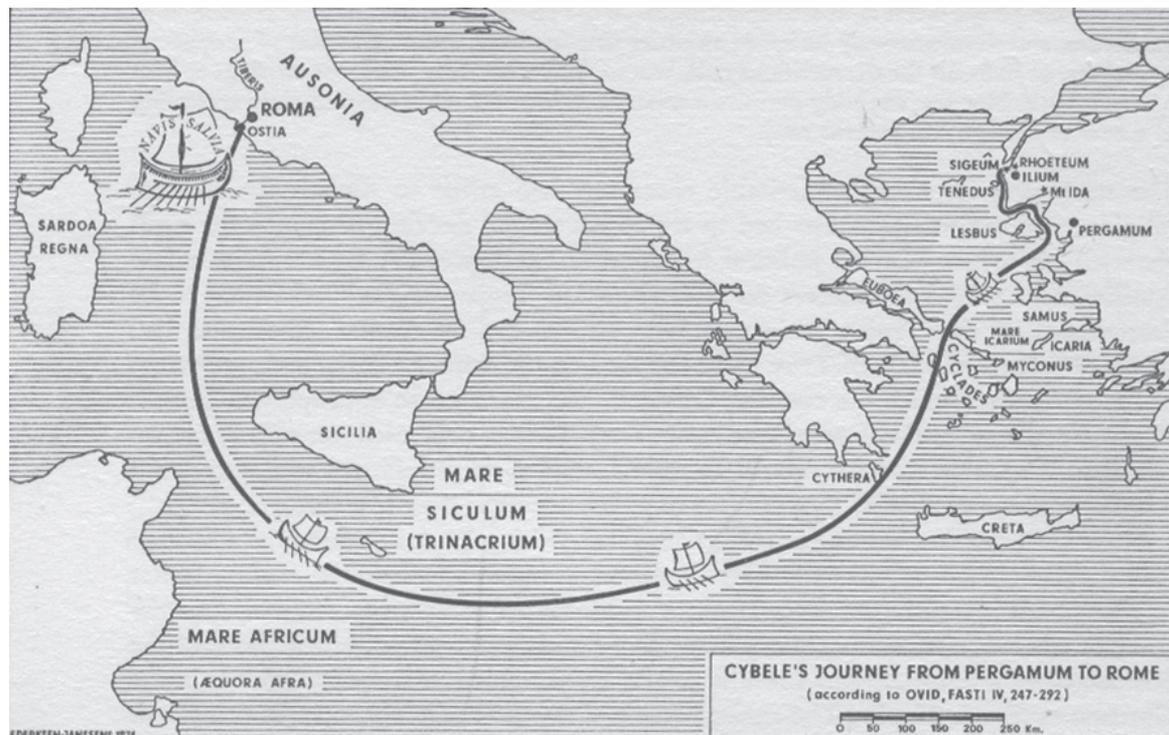


Fig. 1. The journey of Navis Salvia to Rome (after Vermaseren 1977, fig. 13)

political display as well. Among the crew on the ship towards the Goddess, there were honourable representatives of all important Roman families that had powerful political influence of the time.¹⁹ The role of these ambassadors as mediators between the Goddess and the plebs brought them even more favorable positions among the people. On their way towards Atallus, amicus of Rome and the official that delivered the Goddess to the hands of the Romans, the delegation stopped at Delphi and got an advice that the Goddess should be given in the hands of the best man at Rome (*vir optimus Romae*).²⁰ The young Cornelius Publius Scipio, future Nasica, son of Gnaeus Scipio, got this honor out of clear political reasons, but also out of symbolic ones. Although he was not yet a powerful political figure, and did not hold a public office, his ancestors enjoyed quite a respectable reputation.²¹ Scipio was appreciated and suited for this position also for his chastity that a youth of barely twenty would be expected to have. Scipio Africanus, young Nasica's uncle and a man that never brought decisions without consulting the temple of Jupiter on the Palatine first,²² was at this time already preparing for the invasion of Africa, so the election of his nephew would grant even greater favor of the Goddess for the Scipioni and assure better chances for victory. But, Scipioni were not the only ones who got the honors of receiving Cybele. It seems that the Goddess found herself between the struggle of the political opponents; gens Claudii and gens Scipioni. The chaste

Claudia Quinta, descended from Atta Clausus, whose name is linked to Attis, assured this honor for the Claudii as well. The act of agreement of both families, and the equal given honors, was a symbolic one, portraying the roman greatness and solidarity.²³ The legend of the introduction of the cult to Rome was again used in medieval times for political reasons and to glorify a certain family. On the sculptural frieze of Andrea Mantegna, an amateur archaeologist himself, very interested in the Classics, both protagonists of our story are portrayed, kneeling Claudia, and dignified Scipio behind her, as if were made of marble. A scarf curling down from the shoulder of Claudia Quinta is emphasized, possibly in reference to the means by which she drew the ship of the goddess forward. As ordered by Francesco Cornaro, the brother of Cardinal Marco Cornaro, Mantegna painted this picture to celebrate the Cornelian antecedents of the Cornaro family.²⁴

Ovid describes the voyage of Navis Salvia to Rome in detail, which began in perfect safety and was safe until it reached the waters of Tiber. As shown on the map (fig. 1), Navis Salvia passed Troad, and went down along the Sigean shore, then from Lesbos, straight to the Cyclades, all across the Sicilian Sea and arriving at the port of Ostia, where it faced some troubles, and ran aground the shallow waters of Tiber. Bremmer²⁵ compares this legend with the one from Erythrai about the statue of Heracles that sailed from Phoenician Tyre on a wooden raft and was anchored at a cape between Erythrai and

¹⁹ There were five of them: M. Valerius Laevinus (cos. 210, praetor twice), M. Valerius Falto (quaestor), Sergius Sulpicius Galba (aed. cur. 209, pontifex 203), M. Caecilius Metellus (aed. pleb. 209, aed. cur. 208) C. Tremellius Flaccus (quaest. 206, aed. pleb. 203, praet. 202); See Vermaseren 1977, 39; also Thomas 1984, 1505.

²⁰ Liv. (29. 11. 6-8)

²¹ More on Scipio Nasica and the Scipioni see Köves 1963, 322-335; See also Thomas 1984, 1504-1505.

²² Vermaseren 1977, 40-41.

²³ Gruen 1990, 26-7.

²⁴ Braham 1973.

²⁵ Bremmer 1979; Bremmer 1987.

Fig. 2. Relief from Cyzicus (after Vermaseren 1977b, 69)



Figs. 3-6. Terracotta antefixa from Rome, 2, 3 century A.D. (after Vermaseren 1977a, 202, 203, 397, 429)



²⁶ Turcan 1996, 37-38.

²⁷ Vermaseren 1977b, 69.

²⁸ Lucian (*de Dea Syria* 15), Diodorus Siculus (3.55.7-9) and Dionysus of Halicarnassus (*Antiquitates romanae* 1.61.2-4); See also Welch 1996.

²⁹ See Bonnechere 2003, 171.

³⁰ Medini 1985.

Chios. According to him, every major historical event is always bound to have a previous difficulty or a delay of some sort, just because of its greatness and the difference that it brings. Livy (14.5-14) on the other hand accounts us with the atmosphere of her reception at Rome, and does not fail to accentuate the affection that the Goddess received from the aristocracy. It does come to mind that Livy was justifying the reputation of Cybele, as a goddess that brings indecency with her rituality, by justifying the one of Claudia Quinta. However, the Goddess came together with her eunuch priests, the Galli, which brought to Rome the frenzies, unknown to the Roman streets until then.²⁶

The Great Goddess herself was a protectress of naval travel. We already mentioned that Ovid tells us that Cybele granted the ships of Aeneas safety from burning. She is depicted as a protectress of sea voyaging on the relief in the British Museum (fig. 2), most likely from Cyzicus or Samothrace.²⁷ Cybele is ruling on a throne, in front of her stand the bearded deity and Hermes, accompanied by smaller figures of two warriors. On the opposite corner, right above Cybele, there is a ship and a person sitting on a rock. This is most probably a depiction of the ritual needed to silence the power of nature over which Cybele ruled - the frenetic dance personified through the figures of the Corybantes. The obligation to appease the gods in order to have a safe naval travel, leads us towards Samothrace and the local Theoi Megaloi. The Argonauts, before they continued their journey, were initiated in their mysteries. Enough evidence, both literary and iconographic, was already given that Cybele was equaled with the Goddess of Samothrace.²⁸ This geographic position on the strait from the Aegean into the Sea of Marmara gives us a clear idea of the dangers and the reason why the sailors sacrificed to the Gods and performed the appointed rituals, if they wanted to continue safely towards the Black Sea.²⁹ Cybele, among her other capacities, was connected with thermal springs and holy curative rivers besides which her shrines were usually build. In Dorylaeum in Phrygia the Goddess had an epithet *Θερμηνή* which demonstrates that her iatric capabilities were in connection with thermal waters. The epithet *σωτερία* is also often found with the Goddess's name and additionally speaks in favor of her healing and protective qualities. This is also the case with the cognationes from Dalmatian Salona.³⁰ It can be supposed that the local population was aware of these powers of the Great Mother and that the river Iadro was another reason for gathering the cogna-

tiones and setting shrines devoted to the Goddess in the Salona region. The soteriological aspects of the cult satisfied the needs of communities to protect the prosperity and welfare of its members. One of Cybele's divine duties was deflection of illnesses and misfortunes, while the iatric content of the cult is in complete compliance with the needs of the society, in this case, within a narrow community.

Considering the roman iconographical heritage, the image of Magna Mater on a boat is a known motif; however not a very common one, seen only on monuments from Rome and, of course, from Ostia's Campus Magnae Matris as a location with tradition in the history of the acceptance of the Goddess in Rome. Navis Salvia itself became a sacred ship, worshiped in a shrine at the port of Ostia.³¹ There is a series of terracotta antefixa from the second and third century A. D.³² depicting the arrival of the Goddess (figs. 3-6). The boat is shown with a mast, yards, and also a sail decorated with thyrsi. The statue of Magna Mater is placed on a high-backed throne and flanked by lions. Below the boat, we see antithetical dolphins. On the famous altar from the first century, found at the foot of the Aventine, the legend of Claudia Quinta is illustrated, and the miraculous way of how she pulled the ship along Tiber (fig. 7).³³ The miracle is also shown on one of the three medallions struck during the third consulship of Antoninus Pius, posthumously honoring Faustina the Elder as a diva on their obverse with scenes of Roman history on their reverse. Here, we have additional gallery of women holding torches, among which Claudia Quinta is recognized in the slightly larger figure facing the Goddess and pulling the ship along. These medallions were named "programme type" and because of their smaller circulation, had greater value, especially appreciated among the aristocracy, celebrating their glorious past and the nine-hundredth anniversary of the "birthday" of Rome.³⁴ So, we see that, in a very respectable way, the Great Phrygian Goddess found her way in one of the legendary episodes of the founding of Rome, and was celebrated as such long throughout history.



Fig. 7. Altar from the Aventine (after Roller 1999, fig. 74)

³¹ Vermaseren 1977, 63.

³² Vermaseren 1977a, 11, 202, 203, 265, 340, 346, 350, 351, 353, 354, 397, 427-435.

³³ Vermaseren 1977a, 218.

³⁴ Toynbee 1925.



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SAŽETAK

PUTOVANJE MAGNE MATER MOREM U RIM

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Slavna frigijska božica Magna Mater stigla je u Rim brodom simbolično nazvanim *Navis Salvia*, načinjenim od borovine i obojan vatrenim bojama. Božica je stigla morem iz Male Azije kao spasiteljica, da okonča veliki Punski rat. Posljedično, ona je dobrodošla i slavljena sa svim počastima. Donijela je promjene, premda su iza tih događaja jasne ekspanzionističke tendencije Rima prema Istoku. Dolazak Kibebe bio je, usprkos tomu, preokret u rimskoj povijesti i bio je osnova za političko djelovanje. S posadom broda bili su i predstavnici svih politički utjecajnih rimskih obitelji toga vremena. Ovo putovanje broda bilo je slavljeno u četvrtoj Ovidijevoj knjizi *Fasti*, gdje imamo potvrdu cjelovite plovidbe. *Navis Salvia* sama za sebe postala je sveto plovilo, štovano u svetištu u luci Ostiji. Prikaz Magne Mater na brodu poznati je motiv rimske carske ikonografije, ipak ne jako učestao, vidljiv je samo na spomenicima iz Rima, i naravno, iz Ostije. Najbolji slikovni prikaz pomorskog putovanja Magne Mater je s oltara pronađenog na obali Tibera na Aventinu. Ovdje imamo i prikaz legende o Klaudiji Kvinti, još jednoj junakinji Ovidijeve mitografije u kojoj se opisuje dolazak božice u Rim.

Ovaj rad analizira povijesne, arheološke i ikonografske dokaze, s namjerom da prikaže najbolje od putovanja brodom Magne Mater u Rim i utjecaj koji je imala u rimskom svijetu.

