“Et ipse pileatus christianus est”: thus a priest of Attis to St. Augustine in defence of his religion.¹ St. Augustine’s reaction to this rather curious remark was one of disgust and contempt, but also of alarm: “it is only this way they can seduce Christians”. Nor was he alone in his dislike of the metoac cult. Firmicus Maternus after writing an expose of the rites of Attis and Cybele concluded darkly “therefore the devil too has his chrisτs”² and St. Jerome promptly reversed Cybele’s cult title of Mater Deorum into that of Mater Daemoniorum.³

Both sides in this dispute could be seen as doing nothing more than engaging in a skirmish in the long battle fought out between paganism and Christianity in late antiquity. The priest’s plea could have been that of the syncretist in general—arguing that both Christ and Attis are merely different manifestations of the same principle. While such an attitude is alien to a monotheist religious climate, it would have been more than familiar in late antiquity. A fourth-century account of Alexander Severus, for example, saw nothing incongruous in portraying the emperor venerating Jesus in his private chapel alongside Moses, Orpheus, Apollonius of Tyana, and his ancestors.⁴ St. Augustine himself tells us of another pagan, Marius Victorinus, who could not see why espousing Christianity necessarily meant abandoning his other objects of worship.⁵ On the other hand, the Christian authors cited above could be seen as simply re-iterating the Christian claim that pagan gods were in fact nothing but demons.

However the strength of the Christian attack on the metoac cult might suggest that more was at stake here. Mystery religions in general were not a focus of Christian polemic; Attis and Cybele on the other hand appear to have been a favourite target for the invective of Christian writers. Some have seen the attack going back to the

¹ In Ioh.evang. tract.7.6. Is there an insulting pun on Pilatus here?
² “habet ergo diabolus chrisτos suos”, De Errore prof.rel.22.3.
⁴ S.H.A. Alexander Severus 29.
⁵ St. Augustine, Confessions 8.2.3–5.
earliest days of Christianity interpreting the Whore of Babylon of Revelation 17.3–6 as a veiled depiction of Cybele.  

One approach for explaining why we find such a concentrated attack on the metroac cult would be to seek the answer in the structure of early Christian polemic. One of the standard sources used by Christian apologists to ridicule the beliefs of their opponents was the work of earlier pagan mythographers. St. Augustine’s extensive use of Varro is a good example of this technique. The practices attacked are frequently those of early rather than contemporary paganism. Unlike most mystery religions the metroac cult had arrived in Rome early in her history. It could be argued that this early arrival in Rome meant that archaic material on the cult was available for Christian polemicists in a way in which it was not for other sects. Were this the case the number of attacks on Cybele and Attis could be seen as a product of the sorts of source material available to Christian writers rather than any especially marked antipathy on their part towards the metroac cult. However this solution, while superficially attractive, is flawed. Early Roman antiquarian writers such as Varro were interested in early Italian religious practice, not all religious observances performed by their ancestors. As such it is extremely unlikely that they would have provided copious materials for later writers on the subject of Cybele. Christian antipathy to Cybele therefore cannot be explained as an accident of history.

If this literary explanation is unsatisfactory what others are available? Pragmatic considerations need to be examined. Clearly a popular pagan cult, which the metroac cult indubitably was, would be more likely to suffer denunciation than a smaller obscure one as it would have been seen as a more serious rival. However this in itself will not explain the venom and persistence of the attacks. One solution which immediately presents itself is the possibility that the metroac cult was seen as more threatening to Christianity than other pagan religions. Both St. Augustine and Firmicus Maternus dwell on the seductive nature of the cult and the danger they perceive is the nearness of its rituals to those of the Christian church.

St. Augustine’s worries may have been justified. The cluster of heresies known normally referred to as “Montanist” in modern writ-


7 See also Arnobius who frequently attacks early Roman religious belief rather than the paganism of his own day, e.g. *Adv.Nat.*5.1.