PHRYGIAN MATAR: EMERGENCE OF AN ICONOGRAPHIC TYPE

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The earliest Greek representations of the mother goddess Kybele are in the form of a simple architectural frame or "naiskos" containing an image of the goddess. These so-called "Kybele naiskoi" emerge in western Anatolia during the middle decades of the sixth century B.C. The source for their iconography can be recognized in a series of Phrygian stelai from the vicinity of Ankara and in the rock-cut monuments of the Phrygian highlands. A variety of literary, inscrip­tional, and lexical references, documenting the Greek belief that Kybele came from Phrygia, complement these iconographic origins. In particular, several late Classical lexica, such as the Suda and Stephanos of Byzantion, derive the name Kybele from a mountain in Phrygia named Kybeleia. The aim of this paper will be to demonstrate that the iconography of these Phrygian monuments is shaped by this conception of the goddess as "mountain mother". A review of the Greek Kybele naiskoi will suggest, in turn, that their standard architectural format is dependent for meaning on the mountain imagery of the Phrygian monuments. The colonizing history of the important Ionian city Miletus in the region of the Hellespont and Propontis will, moreover, emerge as a significant factor in this Greek adaption and dissemination of the Phrygian image of the mother.

1 This study was originally presented as a paper at the 94th Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America: AJA 97 (1993) 318 (abstract). I am grateful to Professors Lynn Roller and Eugene Lane for their valuable assistance in providing additional bibliography and advice.


4 References to a Phrygian mountain named Cybele also occur in Virgil, Aeneid III.111; XI. 768 and Ovid, Fasti 4.249, 363.

5 A corpus of Kybele representations is included in F. Naumann, Die Ikonographie der Kybele (Tübingen 1983).
The Phrygian iconography of the Mother serves as a clear complement to the Greek sources which derive the name Kybele from a mountain located in Phrygia. The natural rock outcroppings of the Phrygian highlands furnish numerous cliff faces designed in the form of a building façade with a prominent doorway. These monuments celebrate a goddess identified from inscriptions in old Phrygian as Matar. On the best known of these façades, the so-called "Monument of Midas," usually dated to the late eighth century, Matar is mentioned three times and the doorway, now empty, would originally have contained her image. The relevance of this Phrygian Mother to Greek Kybele is demonstrated by two inscribed monuments from the Highlands on which the goddess is named Matar Kubileya. This titular compound resembles the common designation for the Greek Mother, "Meter Kybele". These inscribed Phrygian monuments, therefore, supplement and confirm the sources which represent Kybele as Phrygian in origin.

That the Phrygian form Kubile is the source for the Greek theonym Kybele has been recognized since the late nineteenth century. The decipherment of Hittite hieroglyphs in the 1920’s led the semiticist William Albright to recognize a further resemblance between the Greek theonym Kybele and that of the North Syrian goddess Kubaba. The full extent of this phonetic similarity was explored in a seminal article by Emmanuel Laroche, in which he proposed that the Phrygians were responsible for transforming the north Syrian theonym into the form eventually adopted by the Greeks. This suggestion correctly preserves the Phrygian intermediary advertised by the ancient sources. Political and cultural relations between Karkemish, the chief site for the worship of Kubaba, and the Phrygian capital, Gordion, strengthen the view that the theonym Kubaba was somehow the inspiration for the Phrygian form Kubile.

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6 C. Brixhe and M. Lejeune, Corpus des Inscriptions Paléo-Phrygiennes (Paris, 1984) W-01A-b; W-04; W-06; B-01; M-01C-e.
7 Brixhe & Lejeune, M-01C-e; Haspels 73-76, figs. 8, 598.
8 Brixhe & Lejeune, W-04; B-01.