THE ANCIENT MOTHER OF THE GODS
A MISSING CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY
OF GREEK RELIGION*

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I. Introduction

The subject of the missing chapter is a goddess familiar to everyone who has explored Greek literature, art, or documents. She dwells in the mountains, and sits enthroned between two lions, and is worshipped with tumultuous rites. Her name, however, will vary according to the sources we consult.

In the actual record of cult—inscriptions, Pausanias, any sort of antiquarian comment—her constant title is Μήτηρ (τῶν) θεών “Mother of the Gods” or simply Μήτηρ “Mother”. Literary sources—poets, historians, and the rest—often agree, and further describe her as Μήτηρ ὀρέων “mountain Mother”. But in place of these transparent titles they also use the names Ρέα “Rhea” and Κυβέλη “Cybele”. “Rhea” was always current, from Homer onwards. Yet it never occurs in cult, with a single unexplained exception, a civic cult on Cos, where “Rhea” makes contrast with the usual title elsewhere on the island. “Cybele” appears towards 600 B.C., first as a graffito on a sherd, then in the poet Hipponax; from the late fifth century it has an ever increasing vogue. Whereas the origin of “Rhea” is unknown, that of “Cybele” is not in doubt. It is Phrygian, and means something like “rock” or “mountain”; in a Phrygian inscription an adjective form serves as epithet of the native Phrygian Mother. But like “Rhea” it is almost never used in cult in the Greek world (including Hellenistic and Roman Anatolia).

The goddess so named is not a new-comer to Greece, nor do her

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* The argument has already been briefly indicated in M. Silver (ed.), Ancient Economy in Mythology. East and West (Savage, Md. 1991) 8–10, and at Festivals and Legends. The Formation of Greek Cities in the Light of Public Ritual (Toronto 1992) 27–30. I thank Professor Lane for allowing me to honour the memory of a scholar whose seven volumes, Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque, are a resource unmatched in the study of any other major deity in the Greek and Roman world.
characteristic rites undergo any significant change at any time, in so far as they belong to the general custom of Greek cities (from the fourth century onward, certain elements of Anatolian worship were brought to Greece by private persons). Any Greek deity, be it Zeus or Apollo or Demeter, is revealed to us by a gradual process during the Archaic and Classical periods, as literature and art develop, and as documents appear. Literature speaks of "Rhea" and the "Mother" from the outset. The enthroned figure with lion or lions is rendered in sculpture and terracottas from the mid sixth century onward. The Mother's shrines, if we gather up all the indications, are found throughout the Greek homeland and the colonies. At a few places, notably Athens and Thebes, the evidence is early; and the cult is carried from a mother city to its colonies, notably from Miletus to Cyzicus. It is not surprising that one of the few major deities named in Linear B is Μήτηρ θεῖα "Mother of the Gods" ("Divine Mother", as it is sometimes translated, is not plausible as a cult title).

The Mother then is age-old in Greece. Yet this is not the picture presented in the handbooks and elaborated by current research. It is always assumed that the Anatolian cult of "Cybele" was introduced to Greece in the late Archaic period or at the beginning of the fifth century, when the Mother happens to be suddenly illuminated at Athens and at Thebes, by the remains in the Agora and by several passages of Pindar. Some have even maintained that begging eunuch priests arrived at the same time. Quite recently, since Locri in Italy yielded a sherd inscribed with the name "Cybele", conjecture has traced various routes by which the cult may have passed from Phrygia to Ionia, then to the Greek peninsula, and finally to Magna Graecia. And we are often told as well that the Anatolian Mother coalesced in Greece with some vestige of a putative "great mother" formerly worshipped by Minoans and perhaps Mycenaeans. The insubstantiality of these notions is well evinced by the name "Cybele", which is by far the favourite name in modern accounts, and yet was scarcely ever used by ancient worshippers.

The misunderstanding of the Mother has led to other misunderstandings. They concern the god Cronus and the infant Zeus. Cronus is a vivid figure of myth, the Mother's consort and the chief representative of an older world (for the other Titans are plainly fictitious and secondary). Yet he is virtually unknown in cult, except as a consequence of his literary renown. And yet again we find a festival "Cronia", a month "Croniôn", places called "Cronian", the personal name "Cronius". The fullest studies have arrived at opposite results.