In book two of his *De rerum natura* (600–60), Lucretius describes the rites for the goddess Cybele in a powerful, detailed passage that has become the standard starting point for all discussion of her cult. He describes a turreted Cybele seated on a throne that itself sits atop a chariot pulled by yoked lions. Frenzied attendants accompany her, who play their clashing, clanging music, brandish their knives stained with the blood of castration, and shake the crests of their helmets in fearsome fashion. Despite first appearances, Lucretius does not imagine a mythological scene. He refers to the worshippers who line the streets watching the goddess’s lion biga go by, terrified by the display of the knives, but awed by the spectacle in general. They strew her path with bronze and silver coins as offerings, and sprinkle rose petals on her statue. He has a real, cultic event in mind.

In analyzing this passage scholars have tried to determine whether Lucretius is describing Greek, Phrygian, or Roman rites, or perhaps even all three at the same time. Typically they have followed the historian of Cybele’s cult in Rome, who writes,

> Assistait-on à ce spectacle dans les rues de Rome, vers la fin de la République? Lucrèce, à vrai dire, semble plutôt n’en parler que d’après ses lectures... Il évite d’autre part toute allusion à Rome et au temps présent, comme s’il voulait conserver à son œuvre un caractère universel.¹

From Graillot two basic assumptions emerge, one or the other of which many subsequent scholars have accepted: 1) Lucretius has taken his description *in toto* from Greek writers;² 2) Lucretius can be used as evidence for how the cult was practiced throughout the

Mediterranean world at all times. Both of these assumptions, I argue, are wrong. Contemporary material and literary evidence suggests that Lucretius only describes the cult as he saw it practiced firsthand on the streets of Rome every April 4th during the festival of the Megalensia. He both excludes the Greek and Phrygian elements of the cult which other evidence indicates the Romans had rejected in practice, and includes some uniquely Roman elements of the cult. This shows that Lucretius was addressing his audience within the context of their own personal experiences, speaking as one Roman to another about contemporary issues.

I will be making the following arguments: 1) Lucretius is describing a procession, a pompa that has no counterpart in Greece for Cybele's cult; 2) he excludes all the Greek mystic elements of the cult; 3) he has a different list of musical instruments than the Greeks; 4) certain visual images that Lucretius gives are well attested in Rome for this period, but are not Greek. Pinpointing Phrygian rites precisely presents a problem, since so little evidence survives, and since they had assimilated so much Greek culture by this time, but when the evidence permits, I will compare Phrygian rites as well.

Before proceeding with these four arguments, we should mention two preliminary matters. First, the cult of Cybele in the ancient world was not uniform. Throughout the centuries in Greece and Asia Minor

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3 For example, J. Jope, “Lucretius, Cybele, and Religion,” Phoenix 39 (1985) 250–262, at 254, takes the expressions per magnas terras (608) and magnas per urbis (624) to prove that “Lucretius was interpreting the cult universally.” On the basis of the same phrases, Jope goes so far as to say that the Lucretius is not describing a specifically urban cult. Léon Lacroix, “Texte et réalités à propos du témoignage de Lucrèce sur la Magna Mater,” Journal des Savants (Jan.–March, 1982) 11–43, ignores historical developments within the cult and assumes that Asia Minor coins from the second century A.D. can be compared with Lucretius’ description.

4 Jacques Perret, “Le mythe de Cybèle (Lucrèce 2.600–660),” REL 13 (1935) 332–357, has argued the Romanness of Lucretius’ description, but without the benefit of accurate information about the cult as practiced in Greece and apparently no knowledge of its practice in Phrygia. He comes to the rather strange conclusion that Lucretius had a source, and that source was “œuvre d’un Romain cultivé, très au courant et de la littérature grecque et des méthodes allégorisantes, mais qui, tout en utilisant les souvenirs que pouvait lui fournir une même, avait médité sur ce qu’il avait sous les yeux, appliqué à un objet nouveau les méthodes de ses maîtres et fait œuvre originale” (p. 355). For a refutation of many of his points see P. Boyancé, “Une exégèse Stoïcienne chez Lucrèce,” REL 19 (1941) 147–66.