

**A Tale of Two Cults: A Comparison of the Cults of Magna Mater and Bacchus**

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Category for Submission: Humanities



Although ancient Rome was well-known for being accepting of additions of foreign deities to the “traditional” Roman pantheon, different cults and deities garnered remarkably different receptions from the official religious establishment of Rome. An example of two similar cults which were treated very differently can be found in a comparison of the cults of Magna Mater and Bacchus, two cults with Eastern origins that rose to prominence in the city of Rome at approximately the same time. The cult of Magna Mater was welcomed into Rome’s state religion and the cult of Bacchus was brutally suppressed because the former was perceived as “Roman” and not threatening to the Senate’s authority, while the latter was perceived as the opposite on both counts. These cases both demonstrate the Senate’s motivations of strengthening Senatorial authority and creating a “Roman” identity.

Both cults rose to prominence in the city of Rome during a period of tension in defining what it meant to be “Roman” as the empire grew. During this time, much of Rome’s expansion was particularly directed towards the East. This expansion brought increasing contact with foreigners, particularly Greeks and Sicilians in both commercial and cultural contexts (Foreign Cults in Rome). Rome’s reliance on assimilation as a means of governance further increased this contact, since it integrated citizens of conquered lands into the Roman identity using methods such as broad grants of citizenship to conquered peoples (“The Roman and the Foreign”). The result was that Romans could no longer define themselves purely by geographical boundaries because people could now be “Roman” without being geographically located within the city of Rome (“Octavian and Egyptian Cults”). Combined with broad grants of citizenship, Rome’s adoption of foreign deities facilitated the creation of stronger relationships and a shared identity between those subjects of the empire living in Rome and those living in other locales (Foreign Cults in Rome, “The Roman and the Foreign”). These strains on the traditional “Roman” identity from

the East were compounded by Rome's taking over communities on the Italian Peninsula. Even though these communities were geographically and culturally closer to Rome than the East, they had their own unique customs. In fact, the differences between these communities and Rome were so significant that they led to more than fifty years of civil war, which had recently ended at the time of the adoption of the cults of Magna Mater and Bacchus (Foreign Cults in Rome). As part of an effort to rebuild relationships with these Italian communities, Rome also adopted some of their local deities and customs ("Octavian and Egyptian Cults," "The Roman and the Foreign").

Against the backdrop of Rome reformulating her identity, the cult of Bacchus gained prominence. Analysis of the cult's rise and repression is made more difficult by the questionable veracity of available sources. Modern scholars rely primarily on two sources: an inscribed bronze copy of a *Senatus Consultum*, or senatorial decree, and a surviving portion of Livy's *History*. The *Senatus Consultum*, which details restrictions placed on the cult of Bacchus, can only yield limited information but corroborates other sources. Livy's *History* offers more information but is not entirely verified by the *Senatus Consultum* and was written more than 150 years after the repression of the cult (Beard, North, and Price). Additionally, Livy's narrative aims to advance the agenda that, in his time, Rome was undergoing a moral decline that could be traced back to the time of the Bacchic Scandal (Nousek). There are a number of indications that Livy may be manipulating the facts to convey his moral message, beginning with archaeological evidence suggesting the cult was present and wide-spread in Italy long before Livy claims it was (Beard, North, and Price). Furthermore, the entire plot of Livy's narrative strongly resembles a popular drama from this time (Nousek). This problem is compounded by the fact that the speech of the consul in the retelling of the Bacchic scandal is suspiciously similar to other speeches found

earlier in Livy's narrative, which advance the same themes of the dangers of an influx of foreign religions into Rome (Schultz). Some scholars have even postulated that Livy was memorializing Cicero, whom he admired greatly, by modeling the consul's speech on one made by Cicero (Nousek).

Unreliable sources aside, modern scholars have developed an outline of what happened. The cult seems to have developed in Italy around 200 BC (Beard, North, and Price). According to Livy, a woman tried to initiate her son into the rite as a means of blackmailing him into silence about his stepfather's misdeeds (Nousek). The son's freedwoman mistress knew of the cult's debauched rites, which included drinking, orgies, and loud music, and convinced him not to join the cult (Nousek). The matter ended up before the consul and, in turn, the Senate (Nousek). The whole affair sparked a crackdown that led directly to the severe punishment of more than 7,000 individuals (Foreign Cults in Rome, Schultz). The entire cult was also subject to a series of sanctions designed to curb its internal authority by forbidding the presence of male priests in the cult, the swearing of oaths of loyalty, the holding of any common funds, and worship in groups containing more than five people – three women and two men (Foreign Cults in Rome).

These reforms focused on the structure of the cult because the cult was perceived as a threat to central Roman authority during a time when the Senate was attempting to establish its dominance and stability (Schultz). This idea runs directly counter to Livy's assertions about why the cult needed to be regulated, as he frames the issue in terms of how genders interacted within the cult, claiming that women were drinking to excess, perpetuating other kinds of debauchery, and engaging in objectionable mixed-gender worship (Schultz). Livy's hypothesis does not hold up to scrutiny when one considers that mixed-gender worship happened in many other cults, including "traditional" Roman cults (Schultz). The difference was that foreign cults offered more

relaxed restrictions on women's worship and were generally less accountable to central Roman authority (Foreign Cults in Rome). In contrast, men and women worshipping together without male priests, as was forced on the cult by the Senate's restrictions, was "classically" Roman and patriarchal (Schultz). The Senate's actions are clearly more motivated by a desire to "Romanize" and limit the cult's worship than concerns about gender-based misconduct. This argument gains even more traction when one considers that women had acquired unprecedented political power following the Punic Wars, to the point that matrons marched on Rome to push for the repeal of a law (Scheid). Also in line with this idea was the Senate's concern that, when young men were initiated into this cult by their mothers, this act supplanted the traditional civic initiation process (Scheid). These concepts align with a multitude of other pieces of evidence indicating that the Senate suppressed the cult to reclaim its authority. Firstly, the nature of sanctions imposed on the cult did not try to eliminate the cult altogether (Beard, North, and Price). Rather, these penalties undercut its internal structures of authority by targeting men of the political class for punishment while allowing politically disenfranchised women to continue worshipping in much the same way, albeit in smaller groups (Scheid, Schultz). The Senate's actions also forced a reversion to patriarchy by requiring women to be punished by their guardians (Scheid, Schultz). Together, these two actions rebuilt the Senate's authority within Rome by placing the cult under Senatorial control and reinforcing its status as the final arbiter of all religious matters (Scheid, Schultz). Secondly, these restrictions allowed the Senate to increase its power outside of the city of Rome, since they led directly to a public reading and display of the *Senatus Consultum* all over Italy and undermined the power of a cult that was popular among rising aristocracy in Etruria and Campania (Foreign Cults in Rome, Schultz). By enacting these restrictions all over Italy, the

effects of which lasted much longer outside of Rome than within the city, the Senate was able to permanently limit the autonomy of allied communities throughout the Italian peninsula (Schultz).

In contrast to the organic rise and brutal repression of the cult of Bacchus, the cult of Magna Mater was deliberately imported and instituted as part of the official state religion. Our primary sources tell us that during the Hannibalic War religious portents such as numerous showers of stones led to the consultation of the Sybilline Books, which advised the direct importation of a new goddess (Beard, North, and Price). After consulting the Oracle at Delphi, the Senate decided to import the goddess Magna Mater, also known as Cybele, and dispatched an embassy to King Attalus of Pergamum, who was the ruler of the area of Asia Minor where the black cult stone of Magna Mater resided (Foreign Cults in Rome). Attalus consented to the Romans taking the cult stone, so it was shipped to Rome, where it was received with a great deal of pomp and circumstance in 204 BC (“The Roman and the Foreign”). The *vir optimus*, or best man of the city, was sent to receive the stone, along with the maidens of the city (“The Roman and the Foreign”). The stone was then stored in a place of honor within the Temple of Victory on the Palatine Hill while the Temple of Magna Mater was completed (Beard, North, and Price).

The cult of Magna Mater was different from the cult of Bacchus in two main ways: it was artificially imported in one fell swoop, making it easier for the Senate to control and less threatening to the Senate’s authority, and a connection to Rome could be easily justified from its very origins. The cult’s first tie to the city of Rome is based on its geographical origins. It was thought by contemporary sources to have originated from Mt. Ida, which overlooks the Plain of Troy (Burton). Even if some primary sources were not certain that the cult originated from Mt. Ida specifically, they all agree that it came from Asia Minor in the vicinity of Troy (Beard, North, and Price). Since Romans traced their lineage through Aeneas and Troy, any cult coming

from the region of Troy would inherently have ties to city of Rome itself (Burton). These ties were also strengthened by the Julian family tracing its lineage to Aeneas and the fact that, supposedly, the goddess had wanted to follow Aeneas when he came to Rome but waited until her presence was needed (Beard, North, and Price). Together, these links allowed the importation of the cult to be framed as a return to Rome's roots and matched other propaganda used in this era, much of which revolved around the idea of a return to the past and traditional practices ("Octavian and Egyptian Cults"). These connections were further linked to contemporary Rome by Herodian's account of a Vestal virgin being one of the maidens who helped to physically import the cult stone into Rome ("Re-reading Vestal Virginité"). Finally, since the cult of Magna Mater was deliberately imported by the Senate and under its control from the beginning of its presence in Rome, it never represented a threat to Senatorial authority. Furthermore, this strict control meant that acceptably "Roman" forms of worshipping Magna Mater, such as *ludi* (games) in her honor, could be instituted from the beginning of the cult's presence (Wilhelm).

Conversely, in spite of the differences between the two cults, there were also similarities in objectionable portions. As expected, these objectionable portions of the cult of Magna Mater were heavily restricted using means similar to those employed in suppressing the Bacchic cult. The most visibly objectionable part of the cult of Magna Mater was her *galli*, or castrated priests and, even as the goddess herself was accepted as inherently Roman, the *galli* were marked out as foreign and distinctly separated from the city of Rome, characterized as the "benevolent goddess and her fanatical devotees" (Latham). Our primary sources agree with this argument. For example, Ovid referred to Magna Mater in respectful terms as the "Great Mother of Ida" and the *galli* as *semiviri*, which translates to "half-men" (Burton). The *galli* fell outside the bounds of what it meant to be acceptably "Roman" and acceptably male to a Roman (Latham). They were

castrated but continued to engage in “deviant” sexuality in spite of being castrated (Latham). They kept their hair long and wore long, brightly colored clothes, both of which were seen by Romans as components of the ideal female appearance (Roller). They danced around wildly to loud music and engaged in self-flagellation as part of their religious rituals (Roller). They even failed to fulfill the tradition of alms-giving in a properly “Roman” manner, since they begged for alms, rather than giving them out as was customary at Roman festivals (Latham). Accordingly, the *galli* were restricted to their temple for the majority of the year (Roller). Additionally, in order to prevent the ranks of the *galli* from growing, laws were passed forbidding any Roman to castrate himself, wear bright clothing, or dance in the street to loud music – essentially, forbidding him to become a *gallus* (Roller, Latham). At least initially, Romans were also forbidden from being priests of Magna Mater in any capacity (Foreign Cults in Rome). Even the *ludi* held in honor of Magna Mater were restricted and marked as foreign. They were held within the Temple of Magna Mater, no slaves were allowed, and senatorial seating was separate from the rest of the crowd – all of which were distinctive elements compared to traditional “Roman” games (“The Roman and the Foreign”). The summary of these restrictions is that Romans were forbidden from engaging in worship of Magna Mater in the traditional, flamboyant Eastern style within the city of Rome. Rather, Romans worshipped the Eastern goddess in a truly “Roman” way, even as they marked parts of the cult as foreign elements requiring restriction.

The differing reactions to the cults of Bacchus and Magna Mater clearly indicate that an overarching agenda of constructing a new “Roman” identity, since the old identity was under considerable strain from the Empire’s expansion, was motivating the Senate’s actions in both cases. On one end of the spectrum, the parts of the cult of Magna Mater which were viewed as traditionally “Roman” were accepted into the official religious establishment of the state. This



choice is in keeping with the idea that the Roman Senate was attempting to craft a coherent “Roman” identity, since it allowed the state to strengthen relationships with conquered peoples while grounding innovations in widely accepted traditions. On the other hand, the cult of Bacchus was quashed because it was marked as clearly foreign and presented a threat to the authority of the Roman Senate in formulating a “Roman” identity. The fact that elements of the cult of Magna Mater which were objectionably foreign and outside the scope of “traditional” Roman ideas, such as the galli, were restricted using tactics similar to those employed in the repression of the cult of Bacchus serves to further demonstrate the fact that the same agenda was applied in reactions to both cults. The reasons for the different receptions that the two cults received are that Magna Mater was portrayed as having Roman roots and not posing a threat to the authority of the Roman Senate, while the opposite was true of Bacchus on both counts.

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