

**Religion in the Late Roman Republic:
The affairs of the Magna Mater and the Bacchanalia**

Following the Punic Wars, the political situation in Rome had begun to fragment. The loss of nearly an entire generation of men at the battle of Cannae in 216 BCE had forced the Senate into a desperate situation. Following dire omens, the Senate introduced the cult of the Magna Mater, which was integrated into the state religion, despite the obviously foreign nature of the cult. The Cult of the Magna Mater seems to have been accepted into Roman religion, but the foreign rituals and nature of the cult clashes somewhat with traditional Roman practices. Despite the misgivings of the citizens, the Senate tolerated the cult of the Magna Mater, along with the other foreign religions that operated within Roman territory. This situation changed in 186 BCE with the affair of the Bacchanalia. The Bacchanalia was a secretive mystery cult that gained popularity shortly after the introduction of the Magna Mater. However, the Senate treated the Bacchanalia as a conspiracy against the state and cracked down on the cult, having most of the so-called “conspirators” executed. In addition to this, the Senate enacted laws that prevented large religious gatherings without the consent of the Senate. These two events reveal the significance of religion in the late Roman Republic. The differing treatment of these two foreign cults demonstrates how the Senate used religion to further their political goals. Comparing these two events together reveals the Roman public’s view on foreign religions, and how the definition and perceived threat of “foreign” changed after the introduction of the Magna Mater, leading to the destruction of the Bacchanalia and increased the Senate’s religious control over all of Italy.

During and immediately following the turmoil of the second Punic War, Rome was in a desperate state. Ill omens caused the Roman state to look for help, and in doing so they consulted the Sibylline Books of prophecy. Ovid includes the prophecy in *Fasti*: “The Mother is absent; thou Roman, I bid thee seek the Mother. When she shall come, she must be received by chaste hands”¹. This was interpreted as a reference to Cybele, the Magna Mater, an Anatolian goddess that had been worshipped at Troy. This was not without precedent; the Romans had used the practice of *evocatio* to bring the goddess Venus Erycina to Rome, also after consulting the Sibylline books. This required a vote of the full senate, giving the idea that the *evocation* of the Magna Mater was well-favoured by the ruling class². With the approval of the Senate, the Magna Mater was introduced to Rome, along with her cult of self-castrating priests. Livy reports in *Ab Urbe Condita* that the goddess was received by the foremost individuals of Rome, and that the goddess was safely transported to the Palatine by the Matrons of the city, notably by Claudia Quinta, who pulled the statue to shore, thus proving her purity³. The prophecy was thereby fulfilled, and the bad omens and war shortly subsided. This was viewed as a great achievement for Rome and the Senate, but also introduced a new and foreign cult to Rome, creating a series of new issues to be addressed.

The arrival of the Magna Mater and the subsequent treatment of the cult is vital to establishing the late Republican view on state religion and foreign cults. Primary sources are not terribly clear on the matter, and it is clear that there was not consensus on what incorporated “Roman” religion, and what exactly was defined as “foreign”. Historian Mary Beard describes the marked Roman distaste for the eunuch priests, and the broadly held view that the Romans did

¹ Ovid, *Fasti*, VI. 247

² Rüpke, J., *A Companion to Roman Religion*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011, 62.

³ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, 29.14

not truly understand the cult they had introduced to their city. She also addresses the clash between the formalized Roman priesthood held by the upper classes, and the independent and self-actualizing nature of the Magna Mater cult. Ultimately, Beard addresses the historic Roman view on religion, that the religions of conquered territories were tolerated as long as they did not pose a threat to the Roman state⁴. Ultimately, the introduction of the Magna Mater was the first time that a distinctly foreign religion had been introduced into state religion, and the reaction to that introduction would impact the Roman view on religion going forward.

Interestingly, the cult was introduced into the city proper, inside of the Roman *pomerium*, and the temple of Cybele was erected on the Palatine hill. This was unusual for a foreign cult, as most were not well-regarded inside of the city. Eric Orlin provides the argument that the Magna Mater was not considered truly foreign, and that the Romans may have considered her a long-lost ancestor rather than a truly foreign goddess ⁵. While the goddess Cybele herself may not have been considered foreign, the self-castration and wild rituals of the *galli* priests were entirely out of place within the Roman *mos maiorum*. With this in mind, it is important to note that the Senate placed a series of restrictions of the practices of the cult, preventing native Romans from the priesthood and limiting the actions of the *galii* to religious holidays. In addition to this, the Senate created a series of festivals for the Magna Mater that were markedly different from the traditions of the Galii ⁶. Mary Beard echoes this, describing Roman religious officials as “...drawn almost exclusively from the Roman governing elite, and they dealt with the affairs of

⁴ Beard, M. "The Cult of the 'Great Mother' in Imperial Rome." *Greek and Roman Festivals*, 2012, 323-62. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199696093.003.0013.

⁵ Orlin, E., "Foreign Cults in Republican Rome: Rethinking the Pomerial Rule." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 47 (2002): 1. doi:10.2307/4238789, 7.

⁶ Rüpke, 2011, 63-64

gods in much the same way as they dealt with the affairs of men”⁷. Here, it can be noted that the Senate were seeking to create a clear denotation of “Roman religion”, as opposed to foreign religions and cults. While the Senate were tolerant of the foreign practices of the Magna Mater, they introduced “Romanized” celebrations, and attempted to prevent Roman citizens from participating in the more foreign elements of the cult. However, some of Cybele’s traditional symbology would be preserved. In 78 BCE, Marcus Volteius issued a series of coins to commemorate the annual games of Rome. Included is a coin depicting the Magna Mater with a Lion-pulled Chariot (fig. 1). On the reverse is a young helmeted head, thought to be a eunuch of Cybele or her companion god Attis. This coin shows that the traditional symbols of Cybele were preserved, even in her Romanized form⁸.

Following the introduction of the Magna Mater to mainstream Roman religion, a number of other changes can be observed in the Roman view on religion and foreign cults. Notably, following the introduction of the Magna Mater, a number of other foreign cults grew in popularity within Rome’s boundaries, most notably the cults of Isis and Serapis, both cults with Egyptian (and Greek) origins, and Vitruvius specifically mentions Isis and Serapis in association with the marketplace⁹. This indicates that foreign cults had influence within the walls of Rome, especially among the lower classes, judging by their prominence in marketplaces. However, when compared to the treatment of the Magna Mater, it becomes clear that these cults had not become “Romanized” in the same way that the Magna Mater had. As established earlier, the cult of the Magna Mater was only in good standing after having its rites sufficiently “Romanized”. In

⁷ Beard, 2012, 323-62.

⁸ Welch, Bill. "Cybele, The Mother Goddess." Forum Ancient Coins. November 19, 2018. Accessed December 05, 2018. http://www.forumancientcoins.com/moonmoth/reverse_cybele.html.

⁹ Vitruvius, The Ten Books on Architecture, 1.7.1

fact, Roman citizens were all but banned from participating in the more “foreign” elements of the cult. This is a distinct polarity between the cult of the Magna Mater and other foreign cults. Foreign cults such as those of Isis and Serapis, and later the more exotic elements of Bacchic worship, were not under the jurisdiction of the Senate. With ‘Roman Religion’ now clearly defined by the Senate, these cults existed outside of Senatorial control. The introduction of the Magna Mater had been politically convenient for the Roman elite, and set the standard for how foreign religion would be treated within Rome. Non-Roman religions would had to be “Romanized”, and the existence of non-Roman religions outside of senatorial control presented a prevalent threat to the Senate’s newly established hold on Roman religions and cults.

By 186 BCE, there were several notably foreign cults operating within Roman territory. The aforementioned Egyptian cults of Isis and Serapis were prevalent, in addition to other mystery cults that operated largely outside of conventional state-sanctioned Roman religion. One of these mystery cults were the cults to Bacchus. While Bacchus did have a place within the state religions, Livy describes a separate cult that drew more heavily from the Greek Dionysia. Livy’s description of the cult as a “pestilential evil”, brought from Etruria by a low-born Greek sets the tone for his account. Livy emphasises the foreign nature of the cult, setting it apart from the Roman worship of Bacchus and tying it more heavily to the Greek worship of the god Dionysus. Livy focuses heavily on is the scandalous nature of the cult, commenting on the orgiastic nature, mixed gender, and mixed classes of the cult. However, Livy delivers the narrative surrounding the discovery of the Bacchanalia in a strange way, describing the problems of P. Aebutius and his lover Hispala Faecina, and how the cult was revealed to the Consul and later the Senate¹⁰. As

¹⁰ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, 34.9-15

noted by Eric Orlin, apart from Livy's account, it is hard to measure how tolerant the Roman people were towards foreign cults, but its presence on the Aventine hill lead to the idea that the cult was generally tolerated by the common people of the city, as many foreign cults based their activities on the Aventine¹¹. Upon the discovery of the cult by the Senate, the Senate immediately set out to destroy the Bacchanalia, with over 7000 people eventually executed. Following this, the Senate passed legislation that restricted the actions of foreign religions throughout the whole Roman territory, and extended their religious influence into other parts of Italy. This extreme response to a relatively minor cult draws attention to the actions of the Senate, especially when considering the legislation passed by the Senate, which helped extend their.

The decree of the Senate concerning the Bacchanalia one of the most notable surviving inscriptions of a Senatorial law, and contains a telling amount of information regarding the affair. The law placed a number of restrictions on the worship of Bacchus, and contains directions to "those who are in alliance with us". The law contains restrictions on when and where the worship of Bacchus is to be permitted, and permission to do so had to be passed through the praetor urbanus. In addition, the law provides: "No man is to be a Bacchantian, neither a Roman citizen, nor one of the Latin name, nor any of our allies unless they come to the praetor urbanus, and he in accordance with the opinion of the senate..."¹². This section of the law is highly reminiscent to the treatment of the cult of the Magna Mater, with Roman citizens were forbidden from joining the *Galii* priesthood and participating in the cult's traditional festivals, with many of the Magna Mater's traditional worship being "Romanized". The decree of the Senate

¹¹ Orlin, 2002, 2

¹² Thatcher, Oliver J. (ed.). *The Library of Original Sources. The ideas that have influenced civilization, in the original documents—translated. University Edition.* Volume III. pp. 76–77

concerning the Bacchanalia codifies this previous treatment of Roman religion, and sets a legal precedent for the treatment of non-Roman religions, ensuring that they can no longer exist without the express permission of the Senate. While the worship of Bacchus was not outright banned, the law provisions that only the Roman version of Bacchus was to be worshiped, in contrast to the worship promoted by the “conspirators”, which was a more traditionally Greek celebration. What is most remarkable is that this law extends to “allied territories”, provisioning for the enforcement of this law within the entirety of Italy. This effectively forced Italian states to require the permission of the Senate to follow their religious practices.

When considering the Bacchanalia the main point of contention is whether or not the relatively small cult posed a threat to Senatorial control of the state and religion. Sarah Limoges describes the cult as a threat to the senate due to it being outside of senatorial control. Other Greek cults had become popular during the Punic wars, with most of them not being officially sanctioned by the senate, although these cults largely existed outside of the boundaries of Rome’s traditional territory. These cults were tolerated by Rome, as they existed in Italian territories that Rome did not yet have formal authority over¹³. In addition, Limoges suggests that Rome wished to expand their judicial authority into other parts of Italy, with the Bacchanalia affair providing an opportunity not only to crack down on foreign cults, but to expand Rome’s sphere of influence¹⁴. This is not to say that the cult did not pose a threat to Rome. It seems that many politicians viewed the scandal as a sign of the decay of republican values. Valerius Maximus writes of the disgrace of the scandal: “Many of the women were found guilty by the consuls, and they were all out to death by their relatives in their homes. The disgrace of this

¹³ Limoges, Sarah. "Expansionism or Fear: The Underlying Reasons for the Bacchanalia Affair of 186 B.C." *Hirundo* 7 (2009): 77-92., 81.

¹⁴ Limoges, 2009, 82

scandal spread far and wide, but it was atoned for by the severity with which it was punished. If these women, by their disgraceful behaviour, had caused such great embarrassment to our state, their heavy punishment won us equally great praise”¹⁵. Maximus’ view on the conspiracy mirrors Livy’s, showing that the matter had been reinterpreted as a moral issue by the time of the empire. While the scandalous nature of the cult could certainly have been seen as threatening by the senate, it was also a good reason to prosecute foreign religions within Roman territory. Ultimately, Limoges suggests that the Senate had a legitimate reason to view the Bacchic Conspiracy as a legitimate threat, and that a broader fear of foreign religion had been a consistent concern to the senate. As such, the Senate’s reaction to the Bacchic conspiracy is an example of Roman ingenuity under threat. While foreign religions such as the Bacchanalia posed a threat to senatorial authority, they were also an opportunity to expand as a political entity at the same time passing laws that strengthened their hold over the all of Italy¹⁶.

Following the *Senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus*, the Senate assumed a greater role in the regulation of Roman religious life. However, the views of Livy and Maximus seem to reflect the degradation of Roman social and religious values. However, following the affair of the Bacchanalia, a radical shift in the opinion of “foreign” religions occurred. The popularization of Greek religion and Philosophy resulted in Senate-approved adoptions of Greek gods. Ultimately, the fear of the foreign had largely evaporated from the senate, but the laws and precedent established by the *Senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus* allowed the Senate to Romanize Greek religion, much in the same way that the cult of the Magna Mater had been Romanized¹⁷. It seems that the result of introducing the Magna Mater was a formalization of introducing foreign

¹⁵ Val. Max. 6.3.7.

¹⁶ Limoges, 2009, 92

¹⁷ Rüpke, 2011, 63-64

religions. While the Senate did not tolerate religions outside of its sphere of influence, changing cultural values allowed for the introduction of various Greek religions and festivals in the late Republic. With a formalized system of adoption in place, the Roman state had less to fear from foreign religions and influences. This was also when provincials were beginning to gain Roman citizenship, making them equal to those within Rome proper.

Ultimately, both the Introduction of the Magna Mater to Rome and the affair of the Bacchanalia are two sides of the same coin. Both were foreign religions that grew in popularity within Roman territory. However, one existed with the sanction of the Senate, while the other was a mystery cult that existed outside of traditional Roman religion. The key difference between these two religions is in the process of “Romanization”. The cult of the Magna Mater was formally adopted by the Senate following a consultation of the Sibylline books. There was an existing precedent for this form of *evocatio*, and the Magna Mater was formally introduced to Roman religion. However, the senate had full control over the rites and practices of the cult, placing restrictions on traditional worship and preventing Roman citizens from joining the eunuch priesthood. The cult of the Magna Mater was Romanized with the introduction of more traditional Roman religious customs, including a new priesthood drawn from the upper class, along with Roman games dedicated to the Goddess. This process of Romanization had not yet been legally formalized, but it was a useful mechanism for establishing senatorial control over this newly-introduced foreign cult.

On the other hand, the Bacchanalia was a secretive mystery cult that gained popularity along with a number of other foreign cults following the introduction of the Magna Mater. These cults existed outside of senatorial control, and had not been formally adopted. The distinctly

Greek elements of the cult were also of concern to the Senate. While the relatively small cult was not of pressing threat to the Senate, it was still a threat to Roman social values and Senate-approved religion. While the destruction of the cult by the Senate can be considered extreme, it set a precedent for the treatment of foreign religions. The *Senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus* formalized the system of Romanization for non-Roman religions, and allowed the Senate greater control over the religions of Rome, its provinces, and its allies.

Both the introduction of the Magna Mater and the affair of the Bacchanalia were key events in establishing the familiar Roman religion. Both of these events demonstrate Roman ingenuity under pressure, especially the ingenuity of the Senate. Both of these events served to extend the Senate's influence over religion, but also show Rome's complicated relationship with other cultures and religions. Following the Punic wars, Rome found itself in an unfamiliar situation, with numerous new provinces and Italian allies effectively relying on Rome. An influx of new cultures, religions, and philosophy challenged the Roman view on their religion and questioned the notion of "foreign". While the Magna Mater and the Bacchanalia were not always handled in the best way, they represent the growing pains of the Roman state, eventually leading to a formal system of adoption of foreign religions. This system of adoptions led to the wider Roman pantheon that would be established in the last years of the Republic and continuing on to the early Empire.

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http://www.forumancientcoins.com/moonmoth/reverse_cybele.html.

Figure 1



From: http://www.forumancientcoins.com/moonmoth/coins/repub_045.html