

Mother Goddess, Male World, Myriad Social Classes:  
The Cult of Cybele's Impact on Phrygian Culture

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In our world there has always been controversy surrounding women in power. The past century has yielded great advances for females, yes, but the stigma and sexism against women is rooted deeply in the past, stretching as far back as the Phrygian empire and even earlier. Gender roles often seem to have remained static as the rest of the world evolves; women in 750 BCE were primarily housewives and mothers just as women during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were. Men were perceived as dominant and therefore acted that way. And, while a handful of women did rule publicly, and not all women were oppressed as second-class citizens, there is a definite deficit in powerful women, which is most disappointing, especially for a young woman today. What is interesting, however, is the intense, potent, continuous presence of dominant female deities, most specifically the goddess Cybele. One of the most honored goddesses of the Phrygian empire, Cybele is known as the Mother goddess. She served as the maternal godhead for generations, beginning in the early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE. For the Phrygians, Cybele was a powerful goddess, yielding total obedience from male worshippers in intensely regimented cult rituals (Roller 1999:1). The juxtaposition between how men viewed the female deity and how they treated women in their communities is interesting and ironic. Examining the significance of Cybele and her cult following perhaps will allow today's communities to better understand just why ancient Phrygian women were viewed as second-class citizens, and how gender roles were developed and practiced in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

One of the main clues available to archaeologists today about Cybele's importance to the Phrygian empire is the plethora of representations retrieved from excavation sites in Turkey. One such Cybele image is an eighth/early-seventh century limestone statue found in Boğazköy, initially from a Phrygian citadel in Büyükkale, located in the former Hittite city of Hattusha.

Located today in Ankara's Archaeological Museum, the statue presents Cybele standing between youths (Vermaseren 1987: 14).<sup>1</sup> Each of these youths holds a musical instrument; the one to Cybele's left clasps a harp, while, to her right, the youth plays a flute.<sup>2</sup> Cybele herself wears an elaborate headdress, or *polos*, and is adorned with what appear to be earrings. Her right hand is positioned over her chest, and her left hand clutches a pomegranate.

To explore the significance of this figurine, it is necessary to examine Cybele's history amongst the Near Eastern peoples. While the earliest Phrygian reference to Cybele dates from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, there is evidence that previous cultures may have worshipped a maternal goddess figure, as well. The most notable evidence of a very basic pre-cursor goddess to Cybele comes from the sites of Çatalhöyük and Hacilar (Roller 1999: 3)<sup>3</sup>. Çatalhöyük, which was inhabited from roughly 6800 to 6300 BCE, yielded some figurines representing females (Roaf 2008: 43). Of the female figurines excavated from an earlier period of Çatalhöyük, very few are representations of childbirth or fertility. The bulk of female figurines come from Hacilar, dating from approximately 5600 BCE (Roller 1999: 34). These figurines, preserved because of a fire, include women of all ages – young girls, pregnant mothers, older women. While it is unclear how precisely the increase in the number of female figurines is connected to the development of Cybele and her cult, the presence of those figurines does suggest the growing significance of female figures, specifically when connected to reproduction, within these cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> Vermaseren writes that in *Acta Antiqua Academiae Hungaricae* 25, 1977, 337f, I. M. Diakonoff argues that this statue is not of Cybele but instead a "bad restoration of a young eunuch." For this paper, I contend Diakonoff's assumptions, having chosen this piece intentionally because of its age, as well as the inclusion of musical instruments, which acted as cult objects, and the pomegranate, a typical symbol of fertility associated with Cybele.

<sup>2</sup> See attached for photograph of statue (Vermaseren 1987: Plate IV).

<sup>3</sup> See Roller 1999:32-33 for photos of Çatalhöyük/Hacilar goddess figurines. Ample body and large bodice label them as fertility/maternal pieces (very rare for time period), though the actual use of "Mother" is not implemented until the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE (Roller 1999:2).

The question, therefore, is how the Phrygian model of Cybele develops. For the Phrygians, Cybele is “almost never portrayed with any overtly maternal characteristics” (Roller 1999: 38). A precursor to the Greek goddess of the same name and to the Roman goddess Rhea, Cybele is the goddess of “fertile earth, caverns, mountains, nature [and] wild animals (“Cybele”: par. 1). She is referred to as “Mother Goddess” or “Mater” in Phrygian, both in the early inscriptions and later, in poetry, but truly can hardly be considered “maternal” at all (Roller 1999:2, 66). Instead, Phrygian Cybele is powerful and demanding, associated with the mysterious cult following that is centered around her lover Attis who castrated himself. How and why, therefore, did the Phrygians develop this cult and create the fascinating deity that is Cybele? What social changes resulted in the production of Cybele statues, like the Boğazköy one described above, instead of those myriad little female figurines?

Frustratingly enough, there is actually “little inscribed material from this period” of the Phrygian Empire (Kuhrt 1999:547). The inscriptions that have been found and deciphered come primarily from “facades, niches, arches, or other rock monuments” connected to the Mother Goddess’ cult (Roller 1999: 65). From the highly skilled construction of Gordion, Phrygian’s capital, which was crafted by excellent masons and decorated by some of the world’s first mosaicists, one can tell that the “level of culture [was indeed] high,” but as for the people and society, little is known. (*Phrygian Art* 1959: 6). The Phrygian empire is first mentioned in the Assyrian annals during the rule of Tiglath-Pileser, between 1116-1098.<sup>4</sup> The Phrygian empire initially arose on the Anatolian plateau after the demise of the Hittite empire in the mid-12<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Muscarella 1967: 65 for more detailed information about Phrygia’s relationship with other kingdoms, such as Assyria, Cappadocia, and Cyprus.

century BCE and was heavily influenced by Hittite culture (Kuhrt 2002: 562; Roaf 2008: 146).<sup>5</sup> Centered around the political hub of Gordion, Phrygian control included all of central Anatolia and stretched as far as Cappadocia (Roller 1999: 64; Kuhrt 1999:562).<sup>6</sup> By the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when the Boğazköy statue of Cybele was created, the empire was thriving.

Cybele's development from figurines to cult figure is not as simple to trace as Phrygia's development into an empire. The Hittite Empire, which thrived during the Bronze Age, had a quasi-female goddess, the Sun Goddess of Arinna (Roller 1999: 42). However, the Hittites' religious practices were not as centered on iconography as Phrygian religion, focusing instead on natural elements, such as springs and rock reliefs.<sup>7</sup> Instead, rather, it is the Neo-Hittites, or "the successor states to the Hittite kingdom in southeastern Anatolia", who are most directly comparable to the Phrygians in their cult practices (Roller 1999: 44). They are one of the first peoples to have an official female deity. Called Kubaba, she was technically a minor deity who had a relatively significant cult following at a number of Neo-Hittite cities (Roller 1999: 44-45)<sup>8</sup>. Even her name, "Kubaba," can be historically linked to "Kybebe," and therefore to "Kybele" and "Cybele," our Phrygian Mother Goddess.<sup>9</sup> Other similarities include appearance, as both wear the same type of dress and headpiece. The connection between the two of them seems to end there, however. More parallels can and have been drawn, but they truly seem to rest on "fairly superficial features" such as style of dress and chance similar sounding names (Roller 1999: 52).

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<sup>5</sup> There is some speculation that the Phrygians may have been part of the notorious, band of rogue troublemakers known as the sea peoples (Kuhrt 1999: 562; Roaf 146). More information about these "sea peoples" can be found in Kuhrt 1999: 386-387).

<sup>6</sup> For map of Phrygia, see Roaf 2008: 214.

<sup>7</sup> See Roller 1999: 42-43.

<sup>8</sup> See Roller 1999: 50-51 for images of Kubaba reliefs.

<sup>9</sup> See Roller 1999: 44-47 for excellent explanation of complexities and significance of Cybele's name change/comparison.

How is it, then, that the Mother goddess cult became such an integral part of the Phrygian empire? Representations of Cybele are quite prominent among archaeological remains, supporting the fact that the Mother goddess was indeed an important figure in the lives of Phrygians. Most commonly, these representations exist as reliefs on walls or even actual rock in the landscape. Many reliefs, specifically, display Cybele standing in a mythical doorway, representing a gateway between the divine and regular worlds. (Roller 1999: 74)<sup>10</sup>. These reliefs acted as cult images; visual representations of the deity to whom people prayed were typical for cult worshippers. In the same vein, iconic statues, such as the Boğazköy statue, were also created and worshipped during cult practices. Specific things were often included when creating the statues. For example, Cybele was almost always depicted as a grown woman, with at least one arm bent across her chest, wearing a long-sleeved, high necked dress, as well as the *polos* headdress (Roller 1999: 71). The Boğazköy statue of Cybele, while wearing a long skirt instead of the traditional dress, fits the traditional mould. What is interesting about this style of dress is that it derives from what Neo-Hittite women would have worn (Roller 1999: 71). Here, sculptors of this cult art seemed to have looked to everyday women for inspiration of how to dress the Mother goddess. It is interesting that the artists, who were most likely male, would intentionally choose to represent a powerful female deity in a way similar to how “normal” women looked and dressed. For the Phrygians, “Mater” looked just like any well-dressed woman would look.

Since there does not seem to be any significant differences between how Cybele and the general female populations are dressed, the power distinctions may come in the formal cult symbols that represent specific, divine attributes. For example, the doorway reliefs, explained

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<sup>10</sup> See Roller 1999 for various images of reliefs, altars, and votive figurines.

above, gave Cybele a divine stance and alerted worshippers and viewers that *she* had the power to use this “sacred doorway” (Roller 1999: 83). Another example of a prominent cult symbol is the pomegranate. Everyone would have been familiar with it as a fertility symbol, recognizing its divine status and power. Having Cybele posed with a pomegranate reminded worshippers of her status. A third cult symbol associated with Cybele is the lions. Cybele is often seen with two lions, another representation of her power and dominance over many things, including wild beasts.<sup>11</sup> A fourth example of a cult symbol is the bird of prey.<sup>12</sup> Though not used in the Boğazköy statue of Cybele, a bird of prey would have still been widely recognized by cult worshippers. As a symbol of power, it demonstrated that the figure could master the all aspects of the world, especially the wilderness. For the peoples of the ancient Near East, specifically the Phrygians, being in touch with and in command of nature was a laudable skill. For this reason, many of the Mother goddess’ cult altars, icon niches, and shrines were created out in the open, carved from live rock. The tie to the natural elements, such as the landscape, rocks, and springs, was extremely important; much spirituality was drawn from being connected and in touch, literally, with nature.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to the actual cult practices, once again very little is known as specific rituals.

Evidence implies that the majority of Phrygians were cult worshippers of varying socioeconomic

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<sup>11</sup> Some believe that the association of lions with the Mother goddess dates all the way back to Çatalhöyük and Hacilar, where females figurines sitting on leopard thrones and holding leopard cubs were found (Roller 1999: 36). However, since there is no clear-cut connection between the female figures found at these sites and the Phrygian Mother goddess, I do not believe there is any significance in this fact, other than that ancient peoples recognized the power that come from controlling wild animals.

<sup>12</sup> Roller goes into detail about the first uses of birds of prey divine symbols by the Hittites during the Middle Bronze Age, as well as the Early Iron Age (Roller 1999: 43).

<sup>13</sup> See Roller 1999: 80-81, 87-89, and 91-95 for photographs of rock altars, niches and shrines, as well as more detailed information about the history of landscape cult worship.

classes. For example, the cult may have been sponsored by the government or by the empire itself because of the extensiveness and the intricate details of the monuments and reliefs. In fact, some names of wealthy, powerful men have been found carved into these ritual monuments, suggesting that they paid for the object or scene, perhaps as an offering to the goddess (Roller 1999: 111). Sometimes even kings would offer a relief, honoring both the Mother goddess and themselves, trying to equate themselves with Cybele's divine power.<sup>14</sup> The existence of smaller, less intricate Cybele representations also suggests that the goddess was popular even amongst the lower classes. The offertory votives, that were cheaply and efficiently made, prove especially to be very prevalent and were most likely the offerings of poorer people (Roller 1999: 112).

Cybele is also tied to myths, especially later when the Romans and Greeks adopted her from the Phrygians. Specifically with the Greeks in the Hellenistic period, second century BCE, there is the first appearance of Attis alongside Cybele. Mentioned briefly earlier, Attis was the young lover of Cybele. When he cheated on her with the daughter of a king, Cybele became furious and punished Attis by making him castrate himself (Vermaseren 1987: IX). If her influence and power are not evident enough in this myth, then the super cult she garners of men who willingly castrate themselves truly tells of the intense hold she had on the Phrygian peoples. Romans and Greeks continued the cult rituals, led by the eunuchs who were called "Galli;" the rituals developed into "orgiastic ceremonies with wild music, drumming, dancing, and drink" ("Cybele:" par. 3). Less is known about the Phrygian ceremonies, such as whether or not they too were led by eunuch worshippers. However, in looking at the Boğazköy piece, for example,

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<sup>14</sup> See Roller 1999: 111 for more detail, specifically information about King Midas and Greek mythology versus factual history.



one sees two cult worshippers. They have their musical instruments, leading to the assumption that Phrygian Cybele worship included musical celebrations.

The Boğazköy figurine essentially represents the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE version of Cybele. The figurine was used in a ritual worship that incorporated all social classes. In the centuries that followed, many of the same cult symbols were retained as worship of Cybele continued. Roman and Greek representations of the goddess developed off the original Phrygian designs and images, creating an even more powerful goddess who was formidable and relentless, based in traditional classical mythology (“Phrygian Cult Practice:” par. 5).<sup>15</sup>

Cybele was a powerful, though benevolent and helpful goddess who can be truly be considered the mother of the Phrygian peoples. The cult of Cybele succeeded in linking the rural landscape of Anatolia to the newly developing cities as worshippers practiced rituals at rock reliefs and altars. Worship of this “Mater” also united the Phrygian peoples, most notably in the confederacy that was established amongst people of different social classes. Each was able to worship the goddess in his own way. This realization was not expected with initial research, but has brought interesting new perspectives, especially with the realization that information about women of this time period is frustratingly sparse. Despite research, it was nearly impossible to find concrete evidence of how, if at all, the integral presence of a female deity affected the lives of ancient Near Eastern women. The mere fact that there is very little information demonstrates just how little women were thought of or even considered at all. Despite the similarities in dress of Cybele and her women counterparts, there still seems to be such a strong distinction drawn

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<sup>15</sup> See Roller 1999: “The Mother Goddess in Greece” and “The Roman Magna Mother” for specific information regarding mythology and changing perspectives; see Vermaseren 1987 for photos of Roman/Hellenistic Cybele representations.

between the divine goddess and everyday women. The only way a woman would, and could, receive any respect and attention was if she was a divine goddess. The disparity here is truly telling of the time period, representing the disparaging views towards women.

The intriguing irony of Cybele, “Mother” goddess, is that she is not overwhelmingly maternal. She is hardly ever depicted with a child and is more famous for her castration of men than her care of children. Perhaps, therefore, this is the reason why she was so popular in Phrygian culture – because she *was not* like every other woman. The figure Cybele, seen literally in the Boğazköy statue, exuded power and demanded respect, things that the typical Ancient Near Eastern woman would not have dared to do. Perhaps it was her confidence, not previously seen in a female figure and therefore incredibly refreshing, that attracted her cult of worshippers. As “Mother,” Cybele drew people from all different social classes, uniting them with a common focal point through her unique and compelling female power.



Boğazköy limestone  
statue of Cybele  
8<sup>th</sup>-early 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

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