

## Cybele as Tellus in Roman Republican Literature

In 204 BCE, the Roman senate introduced version of the Hellenized Phrygian goddess Cybele, the Mater Deum Magna Idaea, as a civic goddess to protect Rome's borders and build connections with the Hellenistic Kingdoms of Asia Minor (Roller 1999, Burns 2025). Although neither the goddess's mythology (best expressed in Catullus 63 and in the myth of Claudia Quinta (Burns 2017)) nor the rituals of her civic festival, the Megalensia, had any connotations of fertility, two of the earliest references to the goddess in Latin literature indicate that she was strongly associated with the goddess Tellus, the personification of the earth, early in her tenure as a Roman divinity. This paper will consider whether the association is an indication that Magna Mater had fertility associations in her earliest Roman manifestation were absent in her documented worship in the first century C.E.

In a fragment of Varro's *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum* preserved in Augustine's *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos* (Varro *Div.* 16 fr. 267 C. = August. *De civ. D.* 7.24), Varro describes the goddess's attributes and their proper interpretation. The fragment begins with the clear statement that Tellus is called the Magna Mater, worded in such a way to suggest that the fragment is drawn is a larger discourse on Tellus, and Varro is interpreting the Magna Mater as one aspect of Tellus (Rolle 2017, Rolle In Review). Despite Tellus's role as the personification of agrarian fecundity, the only reference within the Magna Mater passage to fertility is actually a reference to infertility. In a subclause describing the Galli, castrated priests of the Magna Mater, Varro notes that the Magna Mater as personification of the wholistic source of all things attracts worshipers those who "semine indigeant," lack semen, and are therefore prohibitively infertile.

The second description of the Magna Mater as an aspect of Tellus comes in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (Lucr. 2.598-643). The passage offers a long allegory of the Magna Mater and all her attributes as the personified Earth (Rolle 2017, Summers 1996). He uses both Tellus and Mater Deum Magna Idaea to refer to her, but all the attributes mentioned belong solely to the Magna Mater. This passage is modeled as Greek philosophical allegory and draws heavily on the convention of syncretizing the Greek mythology of the goddess Rhea with Cybele.

Tellus was a fertility goddess, but by the time these two passages were written her role as civic goddess had far overshadowed her agrarian roots the minds of Rome's urban population (Marcattili 2020, Turcan 2001, Beard, North, and Price 1998). Varro's treatise was the definitive work on Roman civic religion in the 1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C.E. and C.E., and her inclusion alone coded her as a civic deity, with or without her agrarian associations (Rolle 2022). Like Varro's analysis, Lucretius's allegory eschews any language associated with fertility in favor of the civic connotation of Rhea as the mother of the Olympian gods, particularly Zeus as the supreme divinity of natural and civic order. He only uses the name Tellus to as the Roman equivalent of Rhea. In both instances where the Magna Mater is syncretized with Tellus, it is her role as civic patroness that drives the association, not her function as a fertility goddess.

#### Works Cited

- Beard, Mary, North, John, and Price, S. R. F. 1998. *Religions of Rome*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, Krishni. 2017. "Constructing a New Type of Woman for the Body Politic: The Creation of Claudia Quinta." *Helios* 44 (1): 81-98.

- Burns, Krishni. 2025. *Bringing Their Mother Home: Roman Multiculturalism and the Mother of the Gods*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Marcattili, F. 2020. "Il Cibo e la Dea: il Magmentarium di Tellus e il Lectisternium di Cerere." *Revue Archéologique*, 69:1, 103-115. <https://doi.org/10.3917/arch.201.0103>.
- Rolle Alessandra. 2017. *Dall'Oriente a Roma. Cibele, Iside e Serapide nell'opera di Varrone*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.
- Rolle, Alessandra. 2022. "Coming Home: Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and the Canonisation of Roman Religion". In *Canonisation as Innovation. Anchoring Cultural Formation in the First Millennium BCE*, edited by Damien Agut-Labordère and Miguel J. Versluys. Leiden: Brill.
- Rolle, Alessandra. In Review. "Call me by my name Cybele's (various) names in Republican Rome." In *Shifting Identities: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Worship of the Great Mother*, edited by Thomas Biggs, Katherine Wasdin, and Krishni Burns. Leiden: Brill.
- Roller, Lynn E. 1999. *In Search of God the Mother: the Cult of Anatolian Cybele*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press.
- Summers, Kirk. 1996. "Lucretius' Roman Cybele." In *Cybele, Attis, and Related Cults: Essays in Memory of M. J. Vermaseren*, edited by Eugene N. Lane, 337-66. Leiden: Brill.
- Turcan, Robert. 2001. *The Gods of Ancient Rome: Religion in Everyday Life from Archaic to Imperial Times*. North American ed. New York: Routledge.