

Moretum at the Megalensia: The Significance of Roman Peasant Food on the Goddess's Table

During the Republican festival in honor of the Magna Mater, the Megalensia, the people of Rome held banquets in annual celebration of the goddess's arrival. One of the dishes that was traditionally served at these banquets was that most quotidian of dishes, moretum. (Columella De Re Rustica XII.viii, *Appendix Vergiliana* 2.4) Moretum is a soft goat cheese mixed with herbs that was one of the staples of a Roman rural diet. It was often thought of in association with shepherds and farmers. Ovid notes in his *Fasti* that banqueters were not ashamed to set it on the goddess's table, even though it is considered low class fare. (Ovid *Fasti* 4.367-372)

The presence of moretum in the Magna Mater's public cult reflects the inherent "Romanness" of her conceptualization. The Magna Mater was introduced to Rome as a foreign goddess from Phrygia, but the moretum invokes the agricultural festivals of Rome's earliest religion. Ovid claims that moretum is the traditional dish of the Magna Mater's followers in Phrygia, but the dish is specifically Roman. The diet of Phrygia was Middle Eastern, rather than Mediterranean and did not include a cheese-based pesto, so the inclusion of a Roman country staple does not even reflect a comparable food in Phrygia. In fact, the custom of holding banquets has no comparable Phrygian observance.

The tradition of consuming moretum conflicts with the accepted conception of the goddess as a foreign import who did not fit into Rome's social structure. (Thomas, G., (1984). "Magna Mater and Attis," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt; Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung II*, 1500-1535.) Authors like Ovid try to overlay the Magna Mater's festival with a veneer of the exotic, but at its heart the Megalensia festival harkens back to the agricultural festivals of the early Republic. (Scullard, H. H. (1981). *Festivals and ceremonies of the Roman Republic*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y.). The

practice of celebrating the Magna Mater by eating moretum shows that the Magna Mater was not a religious anomaly, but a normalized part of Rome's religious landscape.