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Lara Dubosson-Sbriglione, *Le culte de la Mère des dieux dans l'Empire romain. Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 62.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2018. Pp. 551. ISBN 9783515119900. €78,00 (pb).

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Preview

Dubosson-Sbriglione's book about the cult of the Mother of the Gods in the Roman world is divided into five chapters, preceded by an introduction presenting the evidence, the state-of-the-art and the main research questions. The first chapter deals with the goddess' arrival in Rome in 204 B.C.; the introduction of her cult in the *Urbs* and the "legendary stories" ("récits légendaires" surrounding it; her temple on the Palatine; the issue of Attis' presence alongside the goddess). In chapter 2, the author presents the rites and the metroac festivals, starting with the April ceremonies articulated around the *ludi Megalenses*, and continuing with the March cycle of rituals. The next chapter addresses the agents of the cult: first the ones qualified as "Oriental" by the author (Phrygian priests and priestesses; *galli*, castrated devotees of the goddess); secondly the Roman agents (magistrates; priests and priestesses, *archigallus* and several cult assistants such as music players). In chapter 4, Dubosson-Sbriglione presents the *collegia* and associations related to the goddess' worship, first of all the *dendrophori* (with a useful table of the epigraphic evidence), followed by the *cannophori* and other minor "brotherhoods" ("confréries") and less-documented associations. The last chapter focuses on the *taurobolium* and *criobolium*, the sacrifice of a bull or a ram to the goddess, whose testicles are manipulated in a particular way. The author examines at length the well-known literary and epigraphic evidence. She then turns to the

iconography of the taurobolic altars, which scholars have largely ignored. She also presents the archeological evidence and finally addresses the issue of the nature of the *taurobolium*: was it a Roman sacrifice and a mystery-rite?

The volume has indexes and includes useful illustrations, as well as three appendices: I. “Prosopographie des prêtres et prêtresses”; II. “Taurobole et criobole. Recueil des inscriptions et des autels anépigraphes”; III. “Prospographie des personnes citées dans les inscriptions tauroboliques”. The titles of Appendices I and III are misleading. They are not, *stricto sensu*, prosopographies but simple lists. Priests and priestesses are presented in alphabetical order (which does not facilitate searches by city or province and does not reflect the civic character of the cult). Only the provenance, the dating and the references are given. It would have been useful to include other aspects, such as the legal status of the priest/priestess and the nature of the documents related to him/her. As for Appendix II, the author does not explain why she includes two texts from Pessinous and a text from Aïn Tounga, which do not mention or even allude to the *taurobolium* (pp. 458-459, 461). It should also be noted that the anepigraphic altars of Sos del Rey Católico (pp. 378, 386, 468) are probably not related to this rite.^{[1](#)}

The book, developed from a doctoral dissertation defended at the University of Lausanne in 2016, suffers from some formal defects: not very useful pages on peripherally-related subjects (see for example the excursus on the *collegia* [pp. 218ff]); intermediate syntheses that are often redundant; and some odd formulations (for example: when the Mother of the Gods will arrive in Rome “she will have to be welcomed by a pure hand (whose sex is not specified)” (“elle devra être accueillie par une main pure (dont le sexe n’est d’ailleurs pas précisé)”, p. 29). Surprisingly, the author does not translate ancient texts, which are not otherwise published in French, and makes the strange choice to provide the Italian translation of Sanzi.^{[2](#)}

Dubosson-Sbrigione intends to propose “a synthesis of knowledge on the worship of the Mother of the Gods in Rome and in the Roman Empire, as well as an update of the work of Graillot” (p. 19). Therefore, the goal seems both very broad and relatively modest. Indeed, the spatio-temporal context is very vast—the whole Roman world, from the end of the 3rd c. B.C. to the end of the 4th c. A.D.—even if the eastern part of the Empire is almost untreated and if the author does not pay much attention to chronological evolutions and regional variations (see for example, pp. 338ff, on the *taurobolium*

actors, or her considerations on the iconography of the taurobolic altars which evolved significantly between the 2nd and the 4th c.).³ However, the objective seems modest in terms of research question, since the main goal is to draw up a synthesis conceived as an update of Graillet's book, which dates from 1912.⁴ Moreover, the title and plan of Dubosson-Sbriglione's book largely reflect those of the French scholar.

While the author relies heavily on Borgeaud's book and Van Haeperen's articles,⁵ she omits or makes very little use of several other fundamental books and articles (Roller, McLynn, Alvar, Beard, Latham).⁶ In addition, Dubosson-Sbriglione tends to attribute to herself several reflections, analyses and interpretations already formulated by previous scholars. Thus the chapters on the cult actors and on the *taurobolium* and *criobolium* are much more indebted to the books or articles of Duthoy, Borgeaud, McLynn and Van Haeperen than it would appear at first glance.⁷ In this respect, some expressions used a few times by the author are revealing: she speaks of an "opinion shared by" another scholar (pp. 183, 372), or earlier scholars who "had already made the same findings" (pp. 183, 311). Moreover the author does not seem aware that some of her propositions have already been formulated previously (the pages of Alvar could have supported her reflections on the nature of the *galli*'s self-castration; on the possible mystery-cult nature of the *taurobolium* [pp. 388ff], Borgeaud's book is hardly used, and the articles of McLynn and Van Haeperen are not even quoted, while the author largely adopts their conclusions).

In other cases, Dubosson-Sbriglione seems to hesitate between two divergent interpretations, or even to contradict herself. Thus, the self-castration of Elagabalus (following the example of the *galli*) is considered very likely on pp. 148-149, whereas it is deemed unthinkable on p. 315 (given the evidence—the *Historia Augusta*—, great caution is required). As for the appearance of Attis, the goddess' consort, in the Latin epigraphic record, it is quite confusing: it dates back to 228 A.D. on p. 67 or to 295 A.D. on p. 74, but, on p. 96, Attis is said to be implored as *dominus* in the *defixiones* of Mainz (late first-early second century A.D.). And when the author claims (p. 115) that Latin literature is interested in Attis' figure only a century after Claudius' reforms, she forgets Ovid's *Fasti* (IV, 223-244).

The way Dubosson-Sbriglione deals with ancient evidence is sometimes problematic. In several cases, she gives only one interpretation of a text or an image, without considering other

relevant hypotheses, and without explaining why she favors one interpretation over another. See for example the portrait of Lanuvium she identifies with an *archigallus* (pp. 188-190) or the identification of the place where L. Valerius Fyrmus, priest of Mater Magna and of *Isis Ostiensis* officiated (pp. 167, 381).⁸ As for her analysis of the taurobolic iconography, it is unfortunately too limited to allow new understanding of this sacrifice.

The author's new interpretations of some ancient texts are also questionable. The passage of John the Lydian (*De mensibus* IV, 49) on the date of March 15 cannot be interpreted in the sense of an agrarian festival devoted to Jupiter, whose purpose was to promote mountain cultures (pp. 87, 89). The Byzantine author first mentions the feast of Jupiter of the Ides, which had a particular character in March, since public prayers were formulated for a healthy year (March had been, until 153 B.C., the first month of the year). He then mentions (*de kai*) another festival: the sacrifice of a six-year-old bull, for the cultures (or the pastures) of mountain, under the direction of the *archiereus* and the *cannophori* of the Mother of the Gods. Thus, this bull sacrifice was not performed for Jupiter, who played no role in the metroac festivals of March, but for *Mater Magna*, as shown by the presence of her cultic agents.

The interpretation of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* II, 19, 35, about the Phrygian priest and priestess of the goddess, is also problematic. Dubosson-Sbriglione deems them a couple, who would have arrived in Rome at the same time as the goddess, and considers that this Phrygian priesthood would have died out under the Republic and would have been substituted by Roman *sacerdotes* (pp. 122-128). However, the Greek author does not mention a couple nor the arrival of these priests in Rome at the end of the Second Punic War, but rather their activities in the city, in his time. These priests are contemporary to him, be their Phrygian origin real or constructed. As shown by a long tradition of research, the priest and priestess mentioned by Dionysius correspond to the priests and priestesses of the goddess attested by epigraphy—some of them wearing the *insignia* described by the ancient author.

Furthermore, Dubosson-Sbriglione wants to identify two new functions in the cult of the goddess: the *thalamas* and the *chrionis*, which would be attested in two inscriptions of Cordoba (pp. 205-207: *CIL* II²/7, 233-234). The *thalamas* would correspond to a “chamberlain” (“chambrier”), the *chrionis* to “a kind of prophetess exercising an oracular function” (p. 207). However, several major problems arise. On the one hand, the term *thalamas* does not have

that meaning and, contrary to what the author claims, it is not used in connection with the *galli* of the goddess in the *Anthologia Palatina*: it is the word *thalamopoios*, which appears in it. On the other hand, the punctuation given by Dubosson-Sbriglione is not mandatory: rather than reading *tauribolium fecit Publicius Valerius Fortunatus, thalamas; suscepit c(h)rionis Porcia Bassemia*), it is appropriate to propose *tauribolium fecit Publicius Valerius Fortunatus; thalamas suscepit c(h)rionis Porcia Bassemia*. This is all the more likely, given that *thalamas* appear in two other inscriptions related to the worship of the goddess, in which a priest of *Mater Magna* buried (*condidit*) the *thalamas* (*CIL* X, 1597 ; *Supp. It.* 25, 1 = AE 2010, 313). As argued convincingly by Camodeca (in *Supp. It.*), the *thalamas* correspond to the testicles (*uires*) of the sacrificed animal, the verb *condere* being sometimes used in taurobolic inscriptions to describe their burial (thus these texts should have been included in Appendix II). In Cordoba, a woman transmits (*suscepit*) the *uires-thalamas* of a ram (*chrionis*), whose name is given in a Grecicized form – the “transmission” of the *taurobolium* or of the *uires* is indeed attested in other taurobolic inscriptions (see pp. 330-338).

The presentation of archaeological sources can also be problematic. The schola of the *dendrophori* of Ostia does not correspond to the older building situated behind the temple of the goddess, which partially obliterates it (p. 263). The Ostian *Attideum* is older than the middle of the 2nd century (pp. 263, 383 [9](#)). The identification of the metroac sanctuary of Lyon to which the author refers was questioned on solid bases by Desbat.[10](#)

Finally, an original and interesting interpretation of the feast of March 15, the procession of the reed (*canna intrat*), has to be mentioned. In spite of the absence of testimony, it is generally admitted that this feast is related to Attis, who, when he was a baby, would have been abandoned at the edge of a river. Dubosson-Sbriglione suggests that the *canna* symbolized the flute of the shepherd Attis, made from reed canes, and is linked with castration. Indeed, according to Pliny, there was a reed called a “eunuch reed” and, according to anthropological research, a reed could be used for the castration of pigs (p. 117). However, it should be noted that ancient texts never relate the reed to the castration of Attis or the *galli*.

Graillot’s book (1912) is certainly outdated—the *corpus* of evidence has grown, research questions have evolved—but, even if it would be desirable or feasible to update it in the form of an exhaustive synthesis, this book does not replace it.

Notes:

1. J. Alvar, *Romanising Oriental Gods. Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras*, Leyden, 2008, pp. 264-265.
2. E. Sanzi, *I culti orientali nell'Impero romano. Un'antologia di fonti*, Cosenza, 2002.
3. F. Van Haeperen, "Prêtre(sse)s, tauroboles et mystères phrygiens", in S. Estienne, V. Huet, F. Lissarague, F. Prost, eds., *Figures de dieux. Construire le divin en images*, Rennes, 2015, pp. 99-118.
4. H. Graillot, *Le culte de Cybèle, mère des dieux*, Paris, 1912.
5. Ph. Borgeaud, *La Mère des dieux. De Cybèle à la Vierge Marie*, Paris, 1996 ; see among others F. Van Haeperen, "Les acteurs du culte de Magna Mater à Rome et dans les provinces occidentales de l'Empire", in St. Benoist, A. Daguët-Gagey, Chr. Hoët-van Cauwenberghe, eds., *Figures d'Empire, fragments de mémoire. Pouvoirs et identités dans le monde romain impérial*, Lille, 2011, pp. 467-484.
6. L. E. Roller, "The ideology of the Eunuch Priest", *Gender & History* 9 (1997), pp. 542-559; L. E. Roller, *In Search of God the Mother. The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London, 1999; N. McLynn, "The Fourth-Century 'Taurobolium'", *Phoenix* 50 (1996), pp. 312-330; M. Beard, "The Cult of the 'Great Mother' in Imperial Rome. The Roman and the 'Foreign'", in J. Rasmus Brandt, J. W. Iddeng, eds., *Greek and Roman Festivals : Content, Meaning, and Practice*, Oxford, 2012, pp. 323-362; J. Latham, "'Fabulous Clap-Trap' : Roman Masculinity, the Cult of Magna Mater, and Literary Constructions of the Galli at Rome from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity", *The Journal of Religion* 92 (2012), pp. 84-122.
7. R. Duthoy, *The Taurobolium. Its Evolution and Terminology*, Leyde, 1969.
8. On these two priestly portraits, see now A. Klöckner, "Tertium genus ? Representations of religious practitioners in the cult of Magna Mater", in G. Richard, G. Petridou, J. Rüpke, eds., *Beyond Priesthood Religious Entrepreneurs and Innovators in the Roman Empire*, Berlin-Boston, 2017, pp. 343-384 and F. Van Haeperen, "Rappresentazioni dei ministri della Mater Magna a Roma e nelle province occidentali dell'Impero", in *Sacrum facere. Atti del IV Seminario di Archeologia del Sacro*, eds. F. Fontana, E. Murgia, Trieste, 2018, pp. 241-262.
9. See for example B. Bollmann, *Römische Vereinshäuser*, Mainz, 1998, pp. 318-320 (*schola dendrophorum*) ; P. Pensabene, *Ostiensium marmorum decus et decor*, Roma, 2007, pp. 327-329.

10. A. Desbat, “Nouvelles recherches à l’emplacement du prétendu sanctuaire lyonnais de Cybèle”, *Gallia* 55 (1998), pp. 237-277.

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