June 2002

Magna Mater: Cult and Temple through the Rule of Augustus

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The cult of Magna Mater was brought to Rome from Pessinus, the Phrygian goddess' chief sanctuary, in 204 B.C. In 191 B.C. construction of a temple to the goddess on the Palatine was dedicated and the cult stone was moved from the Temple of Victory to its permanent home. The ludi Megalenses were initiated to celebrate both the arrival of the stone in 204 B.C., as well as the dedication of the temple itself. This festival was played out in six days of theatrical performances in front of the temple, and a single day of circus games followed. Lucretius, in ca. 55 B.C., provides a full description of what it might have been like to attend a procession in honor of Magna Mater.

In 111 B.C., fire struck the brow of the Palatine, and the Temple of Magna Mater was destroyed. Reconstruction was undertaken shortly thereafter by a Metellus, widely posited to be Q. Caecilius Metellus Numidicus, cos. 109 B.C. During this stage of temple reconstruction, a concrete podium faced in opus quasi reticulatum replaced the original structure of massive tufa blocks. In A.D. 3, the temple again suffered damage by fire and was this time restored by Augustus. To this stage are attributed the Corinthian columns carved from peperino and covered in stucco that have been discovered during excavations.

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Fifty years before Augustus undertook the task of restoring the Temple of Magna Mater and at about the same moment Lucretius wrote, Catullus wrote Carmen 63. In this wildly exotic retelling of the self-castration of Attis, every aspect of the cult of Magna Mater that might be found uncomfortable to Roman hearers was brought to the foreground. However, this ecstatic view of Magna Mater is not the only possible view of the goddess. It is in her capacity as a bringer of civilization and defender of cities that she was accepted as a goddess of the Roman state. Furthermore, Magna Mater was associated with the stories of Aeneas’ flight from Troy and geographically linked with Rome’s founder, Romulus. It is in these aspects, not the Catullan, that Magna Mater was presented as a goddess acceptable to the Augustan program.