

### The Magna Mater

Source: Livy, 29.10, 14; Prudentius: "The Taurobolion of Magna Mater," in *Peristephanon*. In Thatcher, Oliver J. *The Library of Original Sources; Ideas That Have Influenced Civilization, in the Original Documents, Translated*. Metuchen, N.J.: Mini-Print Corp, 1971.

*The Romans absorbed some alien religions and persecuted others; the case of the Magna Mater was special.*

#### Livy: 29.10, 14

About this time<sup>1</sup> the citizens were much exercised by a religious question which had lately come up. Owing to the unusual number of showers of stones which had fallen during the year, an inspection had been made of the Sibylline Books, and some oracular verses had been discovered which announced that whenever a foreign foe should carry war into Italy he could be driven out and conquered if the Mater Magna were brought from Pessinos [in Phrygia] to Rome. The discovery of this prediction produced all the greater impression on the senators because the deputation who had taken the gift to Delphi reported on their return that when they sacrificed to the Pythian Apollo the indications presented by the victims were entirely favorable, and further, that the response of the oracle was to the effect that a far grander victory was awaiting Rome than the one from whose spoils they had brought the gift to Delphi. In order, therefore, to secure all the sooner the victory which the Fates, the omens, and the oracles alike foreshadowed, they began to think out the best way of transporting the goddess to Rome....

203 BCE In this state of excitement men's minds were filled with superstition and the ready credence given to announcement of portents increased their number. Two suns were said to have been seen; there were intervals of daylight during the night; a meteor was seen to shoot from east to west; a gate at Tarracina and at Anagnia a gate and several portions of the wall were struck by lightning; in the temple of Juno Sospita at Lanuvium a crash followed by a dreadful roar was heard. To expiate these portents special intercessions were offered for a whole day, and in consequence of a shower of stones a nine days' solemnity of prayer and sacrifice was observed. The reception of Mater Magna was also anxiously discussed. M. Valerius, the member of the deputation who had come in advance, had reported that she would be in Italy almost immediately and a fresh messenger had brought word that she was already at Tarracina. Scipio was ordered to go to Ostia, accompanied by all the matrons, to meet the goddess. He was to receive her as she left the vessel, and when brought to land he was to place her in the hands of the matrons who were to bear her to her destination.

As soon as the ship appeared off the mouth of the Tiber he put out to sea in accordance with his instructions, received the goddess from the hands of her priestesses, and brought her to

land. Here she was received by the foremost matrons of the City, amongst whom the name of Claudia Quinta stands out pre-eminently. According to the traditional account her reputation had previously been doubtful, but this sacred function surrounded her with a halo of chastity in the eyes of posterity. The matrons, each taking their turn in bearing the sacred image, carried the goddess into the temple of Victory on the Palatine. All the citizens flocked out to meet them, censers in which incense was burning were placed before the doors in the streets through which she was borne, and from all lips arose the prayer that she would of her own free will and favor be pleased to enter Rome. The day on which this event took place was 12th April, and was observed as a festival; the people came in crowds to make their offerings to the deity; a lectisternium<sup>2</sup> was held, and Games were constituted which were known afterwards as the Megalesian.

#### Prudentius: The Taurobolion of Magna Mater

The high priestess who is to be consecrated is brought down under ground in a pit dug deep, marvelously adorned with a fillet, binding her festive temples with chaplets, her hair combed back under a golden crown, and wearing a silken toga caught up with Gabine girding. Over this they make a wooden floor with wide spaces, woven of planks with an open mesh; they then divide or bore the area and repeatedly pierce the wood with a pointed tool that it may appear full of small holes. Here a huge bull, fierce and shaggy in appearance, is led, bound with flowery garlands about its flanks, and with its horns sheathed—its forehead sparkles with gold, and the flash of metal plates colors its hair. Here, as is ordained, they pierce its breast with a sacred spear; the gaping wound emits a wave of hot blood, and the smoking river flows into the woven structure beneath it and surges wide. Then by the many paths of the thousand openings in the lattice the falling shower rains down a foul dew, which the priestess buried within catches, putting her head under all the drops. She throws back her face, she puts her cheeks in the way of the blood, she puts under it her ears and lips, she interposes her nostrils, she washes her very eyes with the fluid, nor does she even spare her throat but moistens her tongue, until she actually drinks the dark gore. Afterwards, the corpse, stiffening now that the blood has gone forth, is hauled off the lattice, and the priestess, horrible in appearance, comes forth, and shows her wet head, her hair heavy with blood, and her garments sodden with it. This woman, all hail and worship at a distance, because the ox's blood has washed her, and she is born again for eternity.

<sup>1</sup> 204 BCE.

<sup>2</sup> A seven-day citywide feast.