

XVII

THE MOST ANCIENT GODDESS CYBELE

By F. LEGGE

IN the year 204, exactly two centuries before the date generally accepted as that of the birth of Christ, the Roman State had passed through an experience much like that of our great Ally across the Channel in the autumn of 1914. Hannibal, the lifelong enemy of Rome, had surmounted obstacles thought to be insurmountable, had swept into Italy like a whirlwind, and in a few pitched battles had destroyed six consular armies. After one of these victories, his Moorish cavalry had raided right up to the walls of Rome, then only defended by old men and boys, and the Eternal City seemed to be at his mercy. Yet at the last moment he turned aside, as did von Kluck in our day, and pushed into the rich province which was afterwards Naples, whence it took all the nibbling strategy of Fabius to dislodge him. When Capua at last fell, he still kept his grip on the Calabrian coast, where he waited for reinforcements which never reached him, to again attack Rome. So long as he was on Italian soil, there could be no rest nor peace of mind for those Romans who, like the elder Cato, had seen the fierce African spearmen galloping through the Campagna, firing the thatched huts and driving off the cattle which formed all the wealth of the peasant farmers, then the backbone of the Republic. During all this time, too, the Roman populace had behaved beautifully. Even after Cannæ they had not despaired of the Republic; they had suspended their long quarrel with the patricians; and, after a few very unsuccessful experiments with mob-appointed generals, had left the conduct of the war in the

more capable hands of the Senate. But when a shower of stones—probably *lapilli* from some volcano on the coast—fell upon the city, they were seized with one of the superstitious panics to which they were prone. They cried out that the gods were angry with them, and, as the unknown is sometimes more terrible than the known, there was more fear of their weakening before this menace than before Hannibal.

What a modern government would have done in these conditions, it is difficult to see; but Roman statesmen had a remedy at hand for all such troubles in the Sibylline Books. These were now consulted in due form, and pronounced that if the Mother of the Gods could be brought to Rome, Hannibal would be driven out of Italy. Now the Mother of the Gods, sometimes called merely the "Great Mother", was worshipped all over the Eastern Mediterranean under the names of Gê, Rhea, or, most often, Cybele. At Athens, the *Metrôon*, or House of the Mother, had been built in her honour, and Phidias himself had carved her statue. But her most famous image at this time was the *baetyl* or black stone said to have fallen from Heaven at Pessinus in Phrygia, which it made the centre and Holy City of the religion. All Phrygia, or Central Asia Minor, had been tossed about like a tennis-ball during the wars between Alexander's marshals which broke out upon the great conqueror's death; but in 204 was under the rule of Attalus of Pergamum, the Asiatic king who had earliest foreseen the great future before the Republic and was most anxious for the title of "Friend of Rome". Hence the special embassy that was at once sent to him had little difficulty in persuading him to give up the statue; and as Rome, though defeated on land, was still mistress of the seas, it was announced before long that the Mother of the Gods had arrived at Rome's seaport of Ostia.

The reception of the famous stone was stage-managed with a care that shows how real had been the peril it was

expected to conjure. The Oracle of Delphi, which the Roman embassy had consulted on its way to Pergamum, had advised that the goddess should be attended in her new home by her accustomed priests and priestesses and should be received by the most virtuous man among the citizens. The Senate had no difficulty in deciding this to be Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica, one of the great patrician house that was later to break the Carthaginian power at Zama, and in the Third Punic War to wipe it off the face of the earth. Nasica therefore went to Ostia: but the passage of the goddess from Ostia to Rome could not be accomplished without a miracle. The barge containing the statue ran upon one of the mudbanks common in the undredged Tiber, and neither sailors nor landmen could get it off until Quinta, a Roman lady of the Claudian House whose virtue had been unjustly suspected, declared that only the girdle of a pure woman would be effective, and fastening her own to the prow of the vessel, drew it off as easily as a child drags after him a toy-boat. Medals have come down to us commemorating this episode, which has been described by Ovid.¹ But other versions of the story seem to show that Claudia Quinta had from the first been appointed by the Senate to help in the reception of the goddess. There was seldom much love lost between the Cornelian and the Claudian Houses, and the lady's association with a Scipio in the affair is therefore some proof that the invitation to the goddess to come to Rome was the result of a transaction amongst the patricians entered into for some political end.²

The scene which followed on the statue's arrival in the city has been described by poets and historians writing centuries after the event, but may perhaps be reconstructed

¹ *Fasti*, iv, 76.

² Probably the transfer of the war to Africa, in which policy the Scipionic party was opposed by Fabius.

with fair probability from what we know about the worship in later times. The procession which the astonished Romans then saw for the first time was probably headed by priestesses playing flutes and pipes, clashing castanets and cymbals, and beating tambourines. Then came the bearers of the sacred emblems, the mystic chest, the pine-cones, and the drum, together with other assistants brandishing snakes.¹ Then the statue of the goddess, represented as a seated matron of majestic beauty, holding in her right hand a sceptre, and on her head a turreted crown in which was set the famous aerolite or black stone,² which in earlier days had itself been worshipped as divine. The statuē was probably fashioned in ivory and gold, and was shown in a shrine in which the goddess' chair was flanked by lions, which in later times at all events were of silver. The car bearing it was escorted by the Corybantes or male attendants of the goddess, armed with sword and buckler, which they rhythmically clashed together with a ritual significance.³ Then followed—strangest sight of all to Roman eyes—the eunuch-priests of the East, dressed as women, with long perfumed hair, painted faces, and eyes darkened with kohl. They were led by the high priest or *archigallus*, a man chosen for his tall stature, clothed in royal robes, and wearing a golden crown from which floated a long white veil. The procession was closed by the male novices, who with the eunuchs danced along with wild

¹ Demosthenes, *de Corona*, 259 sqq.

² The pains taken to build a ship on purpose for its transport (see Ovid, *ubi cit.*) shows that the statue and not only the stone, probably a very small affair, was sent. Pergamum had a school of art of its own, and it is probable that its statue gave the type that we find on coins (see Graillet, *Le Culte de Cybèle*, Paris, 1912), pl. x. The still more beautiful one carved by Phidias for the Athens Metrôn probably lacked the crown of towers and other specially Phrygian attributes. See Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, iii, p. 298.

³ Sometimes called Curetes. The noise was said to have been made by the orders of Rhea (another form of Cybele) to prevent Kronos from hearing the cries of the infant Zeus.

yells, tossing themselves about as if in ecstasy, lashing themselves with scourges and cutting themselves on the arms and shoulders like the Biblical priests of Bāäl. To such a pitch did the frenzy of these last sometimes reach that now and again one of them would dash away and mutilate himself in memory of the god who, as we shall see, was worshipped together with Cybele. After this, he was given women's clothes and passed the rest of his life as a priest.

All this must have been extremely shocking to the ideas of the Romans, to whom any public display of emotion was repulsive in the highest degree. They had always a very exalted idea of their personal dignity, and to the last were marked with that *gravitas* which may be likened to the *morgue* or phlegm with which we English used to be credited on the Continent. Particularly was this the case in religious matters, the ancient State rites being as coldly restrained and as purely symbolical as those of the Chinese worship of Heaven. Hence the Scipios and other patricians responsible for the presentation of this charivari must have felt very much ashamed of themselves. But what were they to do? To send back the Mother of the Gods to her Phrygian home would have been at once to offend Attalus mortally and to imperil the re-establishment of the public *moral* which was the object of her importation. On the other hand, the last thing they wanted was any increase of public hysteria in the very crisis of the war. In face of this dilemma, they took the middle course and wisely compromised. The Mother of the Gods was given a habitation on the Palatine and an establishment maintained for her at the expense of the State; but no Roman was allowed to join in her worship, which was restricted to foreigners. The sacrifice of virility with which it sometimes culminated was made an offence punishable with exile and later with death. Once a year the priests might hold a public

festival, and once a month might beg in the streets like Buddhist monks or mendicant friars. At other times the worship had to be kept to the Palatine. The goddess does not seem to have resented these restrictions, for that year gave Rome the best harvest she had enjoyed for ten years, and the next Hannibal left Italy for ever.

What, now, was this foreign divinity who was thus brought from Asia Minor to save Rome in her hour of need? Every god of classical antiquity had his or her myth or legend, and that of Cybele was so opposed to all our conventional ideas as to show that it must be referred to a very primitive state of society indeed. Cybele or Agdistis—both are names taken from mountains in Phrygia and have no special significance—was said to have sprung by a kind of accident¹ from a rock, and to have been originally an androgyne or man-woman. The terrified gods, on beholding this monster, took from her her manhood, but in doing so gave life to an almond-tree, the fruit of which was plucked by the virgin daughter of the River Sangarios, who thereby became the mother of Attis, the most beautiful of men. Attis, at his birth, was exposed on the bank of the River Gallos, but was rescued, brought up as a goatherd, and was later sent to Pessinus, where he was given as a husband to the king's daughter. But at the marriage feast Cybele, who had conceived a passion for her son—or rather grandson—broke into the town by beating down the walls with her head, and so frightened him that he mutilated himself under a pine-tree and died of the hurt. Then Cybele repented, and after mourning over the body of Attis, prayed to Zeus to restore him to life. The prayer was granted by making him a god, and Attis became the companion and charioteer of Cybele, driving with her in her car drawn by lions over the wooded mountains of the earth, where the noise of its wheels is heard by men as thunder.

¹ A *pollutio nocturna* of Zeus.

This extraordinary story, which we have from both Pagan and Christian sources,¹ is amply confirmed by what we know of the Megalesia or festivals of the Great Goddess, which from her first arrival were celebrated in Rome at the Spring Equinox. They began on March 15 with the *Canna Intrat* or Day of Reeds, when the guild of the Cannophori, mostly children, entered the temple in procession carrying reeds in memory of those among which the infant Attis had been exposed, like Sargon of Akkad or the Hebrew Moses. Then followed a *novena* or fast of nine days, during which the faithful had to observe strict continence and to abstain from bread and everything made from cereals, from roots, pomegranates, dates, quinces, pork, fish, and wine. On the 22nd came the *Arbor Intrat*, when the Dendrophori or guild of tree-bearers cut in the wood sacred to Cybele a young pine-tree, which they wrapped in wool and crowned with violets in memory of those which were fabled to have sprung from the blood of Attis, a small image of whom was attached to the top branches. The procession bearing this on its way to the temple, chanted funereal hymns in Greek with much beating of the breast in sign of grief. The tree, which was considered as the body of Attis himself, was set up outside the temple for three days, and surrounded day and night by a mourning crowd of worshippers, while a priest cried at intervals "Wail for Attis! Smite yourselves for Attis!" On the 24th this mourning reached its height in the *Dies Sanguinis* or Day of Blood, when the priests with yells and dancings lashed themselves with scourges and cut themselves with knives so as to sprinkle the tree with their blood; and the day finished with the solemn burial of the tree within the temple, to be dug up and burnt when its successor

¹ Pausanias, vii, c. 17; Arnobius, *adv. Gentes*, v, cc. 5 sqq. Diodorus Siculus gives a third version and Ovid a fourth, but without essential variation.

arrived the following year. During the night of the Day of Blood, the faithful might eat nothing and drink only milk, while they watched in silence round the darkened temple.

Their reward came the next day, called *Hilaria* or Day of Joy. At midnight a solitary light was seen to shine from the inner sanctuary, and the public were admitted to see Attis, this time in human form, dressed in silk and gems, lying on an ivory bed before the statue of the Great Mother. Something like a modern service followed, with hymns and perhaps prayers in Greek, and the high priest delivered a discourse on the joys reserved for those who believed on Attis. Then he purified all present by anointing them upon the lips with the whispered formula, evidently reserved for those fully initiated: "Be of good cheer, ye mystæ of the god who has been saved; for, for us too there will be salvation from our ills." Then, as dawn broke, the throng of worshippers poured out into the streets, to find them decorated for the triumphal marriage procession of Attis and Cybele, when everyone had either to be dressed in gay colours or to wear a disguise as in a modern carnival. The centre of the procession was the silver car in which the bridal pair were seated, and the faithful who surrounded it were crowned with flowers, carried torches, and cried as they went along: "Attis is risen." But this was not the end. The following day, called *Requies*, was given up to much-needed rest, but on the day after this, called *Lavatio*, the procession set forth again, bearing this time the silver statue of the goddess only. It was taken by the Appian Way to the brook Almo, where it was solemnly bathed, together with the car and the knives used by the *galli*. Then, having been implored to return to Rome by the Quindecimvirs, or Committee of Fifteen whom the State set to look after exotic cults, the goddess was taken back to the Palatine, there to remain till the next spring, while

banquets, games, and performances in the theatres were given in her honour.

These ceremonies were annually celebrated from the first arrival of the Mother down to the last day of the Republic. During this time the faith was evidently making itself slowly known among the citizens; and although no formal sanction was given to the cult, the restrictions imposed by the Senate must have been somehow relaxed. When a Phrygian *archigallus* in his costume of office visited the Forum and was driven out by the tribune Aulus Pompeius for daring to bring emblems of royalty into the Republic's Holy of Holies, it is recorded with some satisfaction that the goddess avenged the insult by a fever which carried the tribune off in the night. Doubtless this increased popularity was in great part due to the other foreign cults which were now beginning to pour into Rome as the result of her Eastern wars, and to many of these the little church on the Palatine acted as a temporary shelter. Particularly was this the case with the worship of Mithras, with which that of Cybele formed such intimate relations as to give rise to the likely theory that the worship of the Mother was considered especially suited to the wives and daughters of Mithraists. At all events, the establishment of the empire removed all bars to its extension. Its privileged position as a State establishment saved it from the dislike with which Augustus regarded all exotic religions; and, under his successors, Roman men and Roman women of good birth began to join the guilds or associations for its practice until then given up to foreign slaves, freedmen, and merchants. The Emperor Claudius greatly extended its public ceremonies and made its clergy more than ever officers of State. Its apogee was probably reached under the Antonines, when Faustina the elder became its devotee, and henceforth the emperors were the official heads of the cult and

Rome took the place of Pessinus as the metropolis of the religion.

It was during this period that a new rite made its appearance in the worship of the Mother. This was the ceremony of the blood-bath or *taurobolium*, in which the votary was placed in a pit covered with a grating of planks pierced with holes, on which a bull and a ram were slaughtered, so that the blood dripped through on to the recipient below. This disgusting rite, which by a natural confusion with the subject of the Tauroctony, or altar-piece of the Mithraic temples, has been thought peculiar to the worship of Mithras, was certainly introduced into the West by the priests of Cybele, and to the last, perhaps, was administered by them alone. It was thought to have a magical effect on the votary, who often records on votive tablets and altars that he or she has been by it "reborn unto eternity". It also seems to have been sometimes performed, like the Catholic Mass, for the benefit of others, since we hear of it being celebrated for the health of the emperor, the success of the Roman arms, and other like purposes. It is fairly certain that its celebration, instead of forming, as has sometimes been suggested, a regular incident in the initiation of a new votary, was always a rarity,¹ and it is said, although it is not easy to see why, that it was so costly that only the rich could afford it.

Beside this there were secret rites, or Mysteries of the Mother, at the nature of which we can only guess. Those who are curious in the matter can read the attempted reconstruction of them by M. Henri Graillet in his great work *Le Culte de Cybèle*, which, had it been written by a German instead of a French scholar, would before now have been hailed with a chorus of admiration

¹ Graillet's theory (*Culte*, p. 232) that it was sometimes substituted for the ritual mutilation is enticing, but has, I am afraid, little evidence to support it.

by every teacher of classics in England and America.¹ Thorough as he is, however, M. Graillot seems to me to arrive at his conclusions on this part of his subject only by throwing together all the hints we have from various sources as to what took place in the Mysteries of the Eleusinian deities, of the Greek Isis, of Mithras and of other gods, and then assuming that those of Cybele proceeded on the same lines. It may be so, and he has the support of Dr. Farnell in thinking that the initiate of Cybele, after many purifications, fastings, and trials, was himself actually married to the goddess, and enthroned with her as "part of the mesmeric process which aimed at producing the impression of deification in the mortal".² I prefer here to confine myself to the two pieces of direct evidence from eye-witnesses that we have as to the secret ceremonies of the Mother of the Gods. Clement of Alexandria,³ who was himself initiated before conversion, tells us that the initiate in the Phrygian rites was taught to say: "I have eaten out of the tambourine, I have drunk from the cymbal, I have carried the Kernos, I have stolen into the bridal-chamber," which seems to point to something like a sacramental feast, and the witnessing of some divine nuptials like those which were performed in pantomime in the Eleusinia. Hippolytus, also, gives us in his *Philosophumena*⁴ some stanzas of what he calls "a song of the great mysteries" (of Cybele), which may be translated—

"Hail, Attis! whether thou art the offspring of Kronos, or of blessed Zeus, or of great Rhea whose sad mutilation thou art.

¹ It forms vol. cvii of the *Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome*. Full references to the original authorities for all the statements in the earlier part of this paper are there given.

² *Cults of the Greek States*, iii, 301. On the analogy of the Eleusinian Mysteries, however, it was the hierophant who was married, and it was certainly the archigallus and not the initiate who was called Attis (Graillot, *Culte*, p. 235).

³ *Protrept.* ii, 15. His initiation is vouched for by Eusebius, *Præp. Evang.* ii, 2.

⁴ *Philosophumena*, v, 1, 9, pp. 176, 177, Cruice.

The Syrians call thee the much longed-for Adonis, Egypt names thee Osiris, the Greeks Sophia (Wisdom) or the heavenly horn of Mên, the Samothracians the revered Adamna, the Thessalians Corybas, but the Phrygians sometimes Papas, once dead or a god, at others the unfruitful one, or the goatherd, or the green ear of corn reaped, or he to whom the flowering almond-tree gave birth as a pipe-playing man.”¹

This was apparently intended to tell the initiates that the Attis they adored was the same god as Zeus, as Adonis, Osiris, the moon-god Mên, the Cabiric deity whom the poet calls Adamna or Adamas, the Corybas of whom Clement of Alexandria tells a story like that of the Orphic Dionysos, and as the Syrian Papas or the Father. Another hymn, of which Hippolytus gives an extract, runs—

“I will sing Attis, son of Rhea, not with a humming noise or the nasal sound of the Idæan Curetes’ flutes; but I will mingle with the song a Phœban strain of lutes, hailing him with Evohe, Evan, as Pan, as Bacchus, and as the Shepherd of white stars,”

which adds Pan, Bacchus, and Hermes to the list. No doubt such identifications were often made.² But the third century, in which Hippolytus wrote, was an age of syncretism, or what Max Müller used to call *henotheism*, when every pagan asserted that the god he worshipped by preference included within his own godhead that of all the rest; and no one would then have been shocked had this doctrine been proclaimed upon the housetops.

¹ Schneidewin’s reconstruction of the poem is slightly different. All the epithets here attributed to “the Phrygians” can be referred to episodes in the Attis legend, and are dealt with in detail by the “Naassene” or Ophite author whom Hippolytus quotes. For the “reaped ear” see *Philosophumena*, vi, 1, 8, p. 171, Cruice, where it is said to have been copied from the Phrygians by the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which it forms “the great and wonderful and most perfect visible (or epoptie) mystery” shown to the epopts.

² So Isis in Apuleius’ romance tells her votary immediately before his initiation that she is the goddess adored in various places as Hera, Athena, Cybele, Artemis, Nemesis, and so on.

Yet the hymns quoted are evidently very old, and may have come down to us from a time when this fusion of deities could only be whispered about in secret.¹

Everyone, I think, must be struck with the likeness between these spring ceremonies of the Megalesia and what goes on in Catholic churches at the present day during Eastertide. From the Day of Reeds, which is like Palm Sunday, down to the rejoicings on Easter Day, the parallel is fairly close, and even the appearance of the solitary light is found in the office of *Tenebræ*. Hence those who write about "Pagan Christs" and "Dying Gods" have tried to show that the Christian festival is imitated from the heathen. It would not be surprising if there had been some conscious borrowing in the matter, especially in point of date; because it can be shown from other instances that the Catholic Church adopted as her own many heathen festivals, and perhaps a few ceremonies. This has been acknowledged by writers of such different views as Mgr. Duchesne, Père Loisy, Professor Harnack, Count Goblet d'Alviella, and others. It was, indeed, the openly avowed policy of the Church, and it is recorded that Pope Gregory instructed the missionaries to the heathen that if they found among them customs harmless in themselves or which with a little alteration could be given a Christian meaning, they were to adopt them. Hence we ought not to be astonished that the mourning for Attis and the rejoicing over his resurrection so closely resemble the ceremonies of Good Friday, Easter Eve, and Easter Sunday. Spring festivals hailing the awakening of Nature from her winter sleep are common enough all over the world, and it is possible—although there is no record of the fact—that some Christian emperor, or his ecclesiastical advisers, may have decided to turn the

¹ One fairly strong argument in favour of their antiquity is that they nowhere identify Attis with any sun-god, which they would certainly have done if written after (say) the reign of Trajan.

Megalesia, so firmly rooted in the people's affections as not to be abandoned *without danger, into a solemn commemoration of the Death and Resurrection of Christ.* In like manner, it may be that the prototypes of the paten and chalice are to be found in the *tympanum* and *cymbalum* from which the initiate of Cybele took his sacramental meal, and that the rite of baptism common to both faiths had certain similarities of practice.

The copying tendency probably worked both ways, and if we had more detailed information about the worship of Cybele we might find that, alike in its fasts and in their management of the confraternities, the priests of Cybele were not above taking a hint from the infant Church. But that there was any community of doctrine between the two faiths, or that the Church ever regarded the worship of Cybele as a serious rival, I cannot bring myself to believe. Anything of the kind was made impossible by the extreme crudity of the older faith's legend, which must always have prevented it from appealing to the same order of minds as Christianity. Apart from its promise of the coming of the Kingdom, Christianity seems to have appealed to the masses of the Roman Empire by its insistence on morality, the help which its members rendered to each other, and its entire freedom from those incredible and indecorous stories about the gods of which even the heathen were ashamed. In these respects, many of the new Oriental religions lately introduced into Rome were much nearer to it than the worship of the Great Mother. Osiris, the good king who brought the gentler arts of life to his subjects before succumbing to the forces of disorder and chaos, and Mithras the soldier of Jupiter Best and Greatest against the powers of darkness, might be held up as examples to their votaries; but even Catullus, in his poem on Attis, shudders at the thought of imitating the effeminate divinity, and begs Cybele to take someone else for her service. So,

too, Isis, the faithful wife seeking for her dead spouse and watching over the divine child in which he is reborn, is a true type of the *Mater Dolorosa*; but what mortal would feel sympathy with the imperious deity who thrusts her unlawful love upon her irresponsible descendant and thus terrifies him into suicidal madness?

Nor should I be inclined to see, as some have done, in the whispered words of the *archigallus* any assurance of the immortality of the soul or the deification of the votary. The words might just as easily be taken to mean that death would prove "the poppied sleep, the end of all", and would therefore put a term to his sufferings. But I do not think that either construction is the true one. The purpose of all initiations in the ancient world seems to have been to give the initiate a privileged position in the life beyond the tomb. The Homeric Hymn to Demeter and the great Greek poets alike assure the Eleusinian mystæ that after death they will not have the same lot as the common herd, that they will be exempted from the bath of mud in which the uninitiated dead were supposed to lie, and so on. What is probably meant by the comforting assurance to the initiates of Cybele that as the god was saved so will they get salvation from their troubles, is that they, like him, will enjoy the favour of the goddess after as before death. So (the Greek) Isis in Apuleius¹ tells Lucius that if he is initiated,

"Thou shalt live blessed—thou shalt live proud of my protection, and when the term of thy life is spent, and thou at length dost descend to the Shades, there also, even in the subterranean hemisphere, thou, dwelling in Elysian fields, shalt continue to adore me still propitious to thee, and shalt see me shining amidst the darkness of Acheron and ruling over the secret places of Styx."

A perception of the fundamental discrepancy between

¹ *Metamorph.* xi, 6.

Cybele-worship and Christianity seems to have affected the Christian Fathers, who, although they hold the legend of Attis and Cybele up to ridicule as a monstrous and indecorous fable,¹ never appear to have felt towards the priests of the Great Mother the violent hostility which they displayed towards the Isiacists and Mithraists. The downfall of Cybele-worship was marked by none of the scenes of violence that attended the sacking of the Roman Mithræa under Gratian or the destruction of the Alexandrian Serapeum under Theodosius. On the withdrawal of the State subsidy and the confiscation of the funds of the confraternities, the establishment on the Palatine which had endured since the Second Punic War fell into disuse, and the site of the last *taurobolium* is now covered by the Vatican.

The real interest which this outworn faith has for us at the present day is that its origins can be traced to the very earliest civilization of whose existence we have any proof. The Phrygian Cybele whose worship we have seen brought to Rome was herself a Cretan goddess, and as such is called by Livy the Idæan Mother in his account of the transaction with Attalus. Remains of her worship have been found by Sir Arthur Evans at Knôssos, which go back to the fifteenth century B.C. But her pedigree can be traced a long way beyond that. All over Western Asia, from the very dawn of history, there was worshipped a divinity known as the Great Goddess, who combined the gentler attributes of her sex with those of a fierce and arrogant warrior, and of this goddess Cybele was only one form. Known as Mâ in Lydia, as Atargatis or the Syrian Goddess of Nero's adoration, as Bellona in Cappadocia, as Adrasteia or Nemesis in Mysia, and under other analogues elsewhere, her earliest name seems to have been Ishtar of Babylon. Her distinguishing mark under all her forms is that her sex is always doubtful, or rather

¹ See Graillet, *op. cit.*, pp. 546, 547.

that when worshipped as a female she usurps all the privileges of a male. Thus, in the legend of Ishtar, it is always the goddess who makes advances to her lovers with disastrous consequences to them, and it is she who, when Thammuz is done to death, ventures into Hades to rescue him. The same feature is visible in all later forms of the myth, including even its most artistic and beautiful one of Aphrodite and Adonis, while the goddess' lover is always represented as a more or less effeminate being, without a will of his own, who is unable to resist the goddess' advances. This inversion of the attitude of the sexes towards each other in classical times—which Swinburne sums up in the words

“The god pursuing, the maiden hid,”

—has been thought to be due to a state of society in which a scarcity of women has produced the practice of polyandry, which Mr. Kipling describes in the “Woman of Shumleigh” episode in *Kim*. It is significant in this respect, that the widespread story of an Amazonian nation somewhere in Asia has always had its scene in those countries where the worship of the Great Goddess was prevalent, and that these female warriors were generally represented in classic art with the double axe and bilobed shield associated with the worship of Cybele in Crete and Asia Minor. The tradition, too, of the matriarchate or descent through the mother only which polyandry implies, is to be found chiefly in Lydia, Lycia, and other prominent seats of the cult. Not less marked is the way in which the Great Goddess or the lover who is really her male counterpart is represented as having once possessed both sexes at the same time. This, as we have seen, was a feature in the myth of Agdistis. We are told that Adonis was bewailed by the women of Byblos with cries of “Alas, my lord! Alas, my lady!” and the Asiatic Dionysos, who was often identified with Attis, was not only represented in art with

markedly feminine characteristics, but is described in an Orphic Hymn as "of a double nature", or both male and female. The same idea goes back to the story of Thammuz, Ishtar's lover, who, as Dr. Pinches has shown, in some of the earliest Sumerian hymns known, is called "Princess" and "Mother" as well as by exclusively male epithets. Still earlier we have one of the many Sumerian accounts of the Creation, deciphered by Dr. Stephen Langdon, which makes the first beings created as a pattern for mankind to be of both sexes at once.¹

One explanation of this attribution of a bisexual nature to the goddess and her lover may be found in the fact that the Great Mother is always an earth-goddess, or rather, is herself a personification of the Earth. Sophocles already treats Gê or Gaia, the earth pure and simple, as the same person as Rhea, the mother of Zeus,² and Cybele and Ishtar are, like her Greek analogue the earth-goddess Demeter, "the life of fruits and corn." But nearly all primitive people have a myth in which the earth and sky figure as locked so closely together as to form one being, and everyone will remember the Egyptian group in which the Earth, there made not a goddess but a god, is separated from the overarching and female heaven by the air-god Shu, who supports her on his outstretched hands.³ Some such myth may well have

¹ PSBA. xxxvi, 1914, p. 196, n. 23. This is what I understood Mr. Langdon to mean, but I do not think his published words bear out the contention. For the bisexual nature of the earliest beings, according to the traditions of the Greeks, Jews, Samaritans, Ophites, and Manichæans, see my *Forerunners and Rivals of Christianity*, i, pp. 182, 189, 195; ii, pp. 37, 40, 298, 329.

² *Philoct.* 391. Cf. Farnell, *op. cit.*, iii, p. 379.

³ Maspero, *Hist. Ancienne*, i, p. 86. Many instances were given in the discussion which followed the reading of this paper of the worship in India of the Earth as an androgyne being like the Orphic Phanes. The observed fact that the Earth appears to bring forth without male assistance, and therefore must contain both sexes within herself, may have been the idea underlying such stories. That the division of this androgyne deity into two sexes brings about the castration of the male

been the foundation of all the stories of hermaphrodites or men-women which we meet with not only in classical literature but, as we have seen, in the very oldest legends known to us. Be that as it may, it is Cybele's identification with the Earth which proved the most enduring feature of her worship. Although, as I have said, Cybele-worship had little or nothing to do with orthodox Christianity, on the more or less Christian sects which we call Gnostic its influence was profound. Hippolytus tells us of a sect which he calls the Ophites or Serpent-worshippers, who were accustomed, he says, to frequent the mysteries of the Great Mother, alleging that only they could understand them.¹ The stories of secret orgies which the orthodox told about the Gnostics doubtless sprang from this habit. All the Gnostics, too, found a place in their Pantheon for a female power called Sophia or Wisdom, who is fabled as descending into Hades like Ishtar, and round whom the whole scheme of creation centres. That this Great Goddess or Sophia reappears as the Mother of Life or of all living things in the Manichæan religion, which inherited so many Gnostic ideas, I have before suggested; and also that her position in Manichæism owes much to the corresponding one in the Zoroastrian faith of the one female Amshaspand, Spenta-Armaiti, who is set over the earth as her male fellows are over the fire, the metals, and so on.² Hence we see that a modified worship of the Great Mother endured long after the triumph of Christianity, and indeed cannot be said to be entirely extinct even now.

person of the godhead is suggested by the Greek myths of Uranos and Gê, Kronos and Rhea (Hesiod, *Theogon.*, 1, 159, and Porphyry, *de antro Nymph.*, p. 118). Dr. Wallis Budge (*Book of the Dead*, c. 69, vol. ii, p. 235) thinks that the same fate attended the Egyptian earth god Seb.

¹ *Philosophumena*, v, 1, 9, p. 177, Cruice. The first chapter of the fifth book is indeed little but a commentary on the "song of the great mysteries" given above.

² See *Forerunners*, ii, p. 45, n. 1, and ii, p. 300, n. 2, for references.

The Mandæans or Christians of St. John, who are to be found on the Tigris between Basra and Baghdad, still preserve many of the Manichæan traditions, including the reverence for the Mother of Life. But we might find examples nearer home than that. The Gnostic Church of Paris, if it has survived the War, still numbers among its bishops, whose titles are all derived from "Albigensian" or Provençal towns, a sort of female prelate called "the Sophia of Warsaw", in memory of the Eon Sophia in the system of Valentinus. Some of the Russian Dissenting sects, too, indulge in an orgiastic worship presided over by a female dignitary called the "Mother", of whose office and proceedings some scandalous stories are told.¹ As the sect of Skoptziz, to which most of the Moscow cab-drivers belong, practise the ritual mutilation of the priests of Cybele, which seems to be connected with this, it cannot be said that all traces of her worship have vanished from Europe with the triumph of Christianity. Russia has inherited without a break much of the old Byzantine culture from which these curious sects derive their practices, and Byzantine history is full of stories of the persistence of Pagan worships in secret, including the religion of Cybele. The Sumerian civilization, which perhaps was the original source of the Cybele story, goes back to nearly 7,000 years B.C., which is about two millennia earlier than the earliest date that can be assigned for the appearance of any organized religion in Egypt. It therefore seems possible that these Russian sects, of which very little is really known, still possess some relics of a religion which is more than 9,000 years old, and that the worship of Cybele as our common Mother the Earth, is not only the most ancient but the most persistent religion known to civilized man.

¹ Cf. Dmitry J. Merejkowsky, *Pierre le Grand*, Paris, pp. 243 sqq. Tsakni, *La Russie Sectaire*, seems to be the authority for all these stories.