This book, a revision of the author’s Ph.D. thesis submitted to the University of Lausanne in 2016, aims to present an updated version of Henri Graillot, ‘Le culte de Cybèle, Mère des dieux, à Rome et dans l’Empire romain’, published in 1912. Such an undertaking would be a daunting task, given that the amount of new information on the cult of the Mother of the gods has grown substantially during the past hundred years, as has the scholarly literature on the topic. Dubosson-Sbriglione’s study, however, actually has a more limited scope. The book does not attempt to cover the entire Roman Empire, but instead focuses primarily on the cult of the Mater Deum Magna Idaea, often called the Magna Mater or Cybèle, in Rome and the western Empire. Even here the work does not attempt general coverage of the deity’s worship, but treats five central topics related to the Magna Mater cult: the arrival of the goddess in Rome, rituals and festivals for the goddess, cult personnel, colleges and religious associations, and the ritual of the taurobolium and the criobolium. The work also includes three appendices: a list of all attested priests and priestesses of the deity from the whole Empire (not only the western Empire), a list of all known altars connected with the taurobolium and criobolium, inscribed and uninscribed, and an index of the individuals named in the taurobolium inscriptions.

Chapter I discusses the circumstances surrounding the arrival of Cybele and Attis into Rome in 204 BCE. Dubosson-Sbriglione summarizes major literary sources that describe the advent of the goddess and discusses some of the inconsistencies found in them. As she notes, there are two distinct traditions, one preserved by Livy and the other by Ovid. Livy stresses the importance of the man charged with receiving the Magna Mater cult into Rome, Scipio Nasica, while Ovid’s account emphasizes the role of the prominent woman, the matron Claudia Quinta. Dubosson-Sbriglione explains this dichotomy as a reflection of the dual priesthoods of the goddess, one male and one female. Dubosson-Sbriglione devotes special attention to the problem of Attis, who is not mentioned in any of the literary testimonia describing the goddess’s arrival but whose presence is attested archaeologically through the groups of terracotta figurines found in the second century BCE temple of the Magna Mater on the Palatine hill in Rome, suggesting that the worship of Attis was established at the same time as that of the Magna Mater.

While Dubosson-Sbriglione provides an extensive examination of both the written and the material evidence for the goddess’s arrival, the analysis offered follows a line of argument already laid out by earlier scholars. The author assigns historical accuracy to the connection of the deity’s arrival with the Second Punic War and places the transfer of the goddess to the Romans in Pessinous. The treatment of the various versions of the legends surrounding Attis also follows earlier interpretations, which claim that the Attis legend is derived from two Anatolian sources, one called Lydian and the other Phrygian. The author’s reading interprets Attis as a symbol of sterility, with no family and no capacity to reproduce; thus Attis becomes the antithesis of what would have been expected of a Roman citizen. The problem of why a castrated male should have such a prominent role in the Roman cult of the Magna Mater is not addressed.
Chapter 2 examines the rites and festivals held for the Magna Mater, with special focus on the Megalesia festival for the goddess, celebrated in April, and the March festival that commemorated the death and rebirth of Attis. The April festival of the Magna Mater was established at the time of the goddess’s arrival into Rome and is extensively described in several ancient sources, primarily Lucretius and Ovid. Dubosson-Sbriglione analyzes these in detail, stressing the unusual combination of both foreign and Roman elements of the ritual, and emphasizes some distinctively Roman ritual practices, such as the tradition of mutitationes, the reciprocal banquets in honor of the goddess held by the Roman aristocracy. The second festival of the goddess, celebrated on the 15–27 of March, was supposedly instituted during the reign of Claudius (41–54 CE), although it is best known to us through a much later source, the fourth century CE calendar of Philocalus. Like earlier scholars, Dubosson-Sbriglione interprets this festival as a commemoration of the sequence of events surrounding the self-castration and death of Attis; these include the ritual mourning for him, his resurrection and reunification with the goddess, and finally the ritual washing of the goddess’s image. Here too the author follows the outlines already laid out by earlier scholars, although she downplays the rather sensational fascination with an assumed self-mutilation of the Galli, instead arguing that the ‘sanguem’ (blood) ritual does not refer to the actual castration of Galli, but rather to blood spilled from animal sacrifices. Throughout this section Dubosson-Sbriglione emphasizes that the more unusual rites for the Magna Mater were a product of the deity’s Phrygian background, although she acknowledges that there is little evidence to show what those Phrygian rites might have been.

The religious actors and cult officials of the Magna Mater form the subject of the following chapter. Literary and epigraphical sources record many of these, including a Phrygian priest and priestess, instrumentalists who played the ritual music on the deity’s special instruments, the flute and the tympanum, and of course, the Galli, the goddess’s eunuch priests that have attracted much attention, ancient and modern. The author’s starting point is the passage in Dionysios of Halikarnassos 2.19, that describes a separate Phrygian clergy for the Magna Mater in Rome consisting of a Phrygian priest and priestess, who performed rites for the deity according to Phrygian custom; these rites, according to Dionysios, were to be kept separate from the traditional Roman rites that honored the deity. Here too the problem, as Dubosson-Sbriglione acknowledges, is that we have little or no information about what the Phrygian priest and priestess actually did and how their duties differed from those of Roman religious officials. In reviewing the epigraphical texts that preserve records of the individuals who celebrated the Magna Mater’s rites, there seems to be little difference between officials of the Magna Mater cult and those responsible for other Roman rituals.

Dubosson-Sbriglione provides a long discussion of sources that provide information on the status and function of the Galli. The abundant textual, epigraphical, and visual evidence about them strongly suggests that they were a visible presence in the cult; moreover, evidence for the Galli becomes more prominent during the second century CE and later. Dubosson-Sbriglione plays down much of the more sensational implications of ritual castration and suggests (correctly, in my opinion) that this practice may not have been as violent as is often
claimed and was perhaps no more intrusive than a modern vasectomy. She also notes the regular mention of musicians who took part in the goddess’s rites, including those who played the flute, tambourine (tympanum) and castanets, suggesting that a distinctive and, to Roman ears, unusual musical idiom was prominent in the rites.

Chapter 4 discusses the evidence for collegia, the religious associations that supported the cult of the Magna Mater. Eight different collegia for the deity are known. Of these, by far the best attested is the college of the Dendrophoroi, presumably individuals charged with celebrating the festival of the Magna Mater and Attis in March. Apart from a few literary testimonia, most of the evidence for this college is derived from an extensive epigraphical corpus, comprising 146 inscriptions primarily from Rome, Ostia, and Gaul, along with North Africa, Dacia, and Pannonia. Dubosson-Sbriglione includes a table summarizing the identities and functions of the various college members and demonstrates that the college of the Dendrophoroi enjoyed considerable prestige. One inscription calls the new dendrophoroi clarissimi, i.e. illustrious men, suggesting that the college attracted individuals who were influential members of their communities. Dendrophoroi were also active in the Imperial cult. In Ostia the schola, the meeting place of the Dendrophoroi has been located, and its arrangements show that communal dining was a feature of college membership, as were burial societies for college members. Dubosson-Sbriglione also examines the evidence for other religious colleges associated with Mater cult. While not nearly as abundant as records for the Dendrophoroi, epigraphical documents record organizations such as the cannephoroi, those who carried the reeds in the goddess’s festival in March, and the collegium of the Navis Salvi, the sacred ship in which the goddess arrived in Rome. Dubosson-Sbriglione’s investigation shows that the Collegia of Magna Mater were respectable, often prestigious associations, an important part of the religious life of the western Empire.

The final section examines the taurobolium and the criobolium, the sacrifice of a bull and a ram respectively, offered to the Magna Mater. Dubosson-Sbriglione rightly dismisses the rather lurid account of the taurobolium by the 6th century CE Christian author Prudentius as largely imaginary and focuses on the direct evidence, especially the epigraphical texts and altars dedicated to the ritual; these date primarily to the third and fourth centuries CE. She compiles a list of all known inscriptions that record a taurobolium or criobolium sacrifice and examines their language in detail, including a discussion of the ritual procedures, the identity of the dedicators, and the priestly attendants. Her analysis shows that the taurobolium and criobolium often included the dedication of the vires, the castrated male organs of the animal, which she interprets as a substitute for human castration. Many of the taurobolium and criobolium sacrifices were dedicated to the health and safety of the emperor. The ritual would have brought prestige to the individual offering the sacrifice, since the victims were large and expensive animals. The rituals could also include mystery rites, although these are much less well documented. As Dubosson-Sbriglione notes, what little information we have comes from Christian authors who may not have been well informed.
The foregoing summary gives an overview of the contents of the book. The work makes a contribution by bringing together a large body of evidence, particularly the epigraphical evidence connected with the Magna Mater cult in Rome and the western Empire. Yet there are several problematic features that recur regularly throughout the book. The work clearly shows its origins as a doctoral dissertation. Each chapter includes an often lengthy review of previous scholarship on a topic; this seems unnecessary when much of scholarly literature discussed, such as the work of Franz Cumont, a Belgian scholar active in the early twentieth century, has already been shown to be unreliable. Other sections contain very general discussions that are not germane to the author’s argument, for example, the function of a Roman Collegium in Chapter 4. Both of these features could easily be eliminated. Another problematic issue is the author’s heavy reliance on francophone literature, and to a lesser degree on Italian-language sources. The author draws extensively on the work of Philippe Borgeaud, in particular his 1996 book, ‘La Mère des dieux: de Cybèle a la Vierge Marie’, as support for her arguments. Yet Borgeaud’s book, while a work of sound scholarship, is fairly short, half the length of Dubosson-Sbriglione’s book, and covers a much broader chronological and geographical range of material related to the Mother of the gods; thus it hardly provides a foundation for the present work. A long bibliography with critical literature in other languages is included, but the author does not seem to have made much use of it and rarely cites non-francophone scholarship in her chapter notes.

In the final analysis, this book, despite its length and abundant compilation of data, shows a distinct lack of originality. The author offers lengthy discussions summarizing ancient sources on a particular topic, yet often the outcome is to state points that have already been advanced by other scholars. She seems unaware of, or has chosen to disregard many studies that challenge the conventional interpretations of the Magna Mater cult. The alternative readings by Gruen on the arrival of the Magna Mater into Rome, 1 Beard on the Roman construction of the deity’s ‘foreignness’, 2 McLynn on the taurobolium, 3 and my own work on the origin and mythical tradition of Attis 4 are largely ignored. Moreover, the author frequently devotes an inordinate amount of attention to small details and fine points of language, yet fails to address broader issues of interpretation and meaning. The chapter on the taurobolium is representative. Dubosson-Sbriglione examines the inscriptional and textual evidence for the ritual in almost exhaustive fashion, yet misses several important questions: if the taurobolium was an important ritual of the Magna Mater cult, why did it become common


only during the late Empire, many centuries after the goddess’s cult was introduced into Rome? Why is it attested almost exclusively in the western Empire, when the deity’s original home was in Asia Minor? Why did the taurobolium bring prestige to those who performed it, when much of Roman literature presents a negative picture of the Magna Mater cult? These wider questions may never be answered satisfactorily but they should be addressed if we are to understand the prominent role of the Magna Mater cult in Roman society and Roman religious practice. For all the extensive detail with which the principal topics are treated, the author never really gets to the heart of the question as to why the Magna Mater cult, a cult for a foreign and eastern deity, enjoyed such a wide following in the western Empire. As a result, our understanding of the Magna Mater cult is not greatly advanced. Graillot’s 1912 book is certainly in need of revision, but this study does not fulfill that goal.

Lynn E. Roller


There is currently a vast number of new publications dedicated to the study of the imperial cult, a state of affairs that is by no means new. In fact, over 20 years ago G. Alföldy already noted that judging by the number of extant testimonies and academic writings on the subject, imperial cult should be considered the most important type of worship during the Roman imperial period.1

Since the appearance of S. Price’s ‘Rituals and Power’ in 1984, which is perhaps the most outstanding monograph on emperor worship – and still the most useful theoretical framework at least regarding the Greek East – most of these studies have been based on local or regional approaches.2 Price himself insisted on how necessary these types of approaches were in order to remedy the situation in which research in this field was floundering at the time.3 (Notwithstanding the fact that Price developed and even, one could say, went beyond the interpretive line that K. Hopkins had begun to pursue shortly before in his ‘Divine Emperors or the Symbolic Unity of the Roman Empire’, included in ‘Conquerors and Slaves’).4 Following swiftly in Price’s footsteps, in his monumental work on the imperial cult in the West Fishwick stressed the need for regional and local studies.5 A review of monographs on the imperial cult published to date indicates that, over the past two