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Vassar College

Delivered Divinities: Senatorial Power and Senatorial Peril in the Importation  
Narratives of Cybele, Asklepios, and Bacchus

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in Greek and Roman Studies

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to analyze the Roman Senate's actions during the importation of three different gods — Cybele, Asklepios, and Bacchus — into Rome during the Middle Republic (400-133 BCE) in order to deduce how the Senate manipulated these religious events to increase their own power and reinforce elite, Roman social norms. Religious events of such importance would not normally be so closely monitored by the Senate, but rather, specific colleges of priests. However, in looking at the ancient narratives of these events, this is not the case.

In order to explore this idea of Senatorial manipulation, the three case studies have been carefully chosen. The first chapter will center on Cybele, the second on Asklepios, and the third on Bacchus. The Cybele and Asklepios narratives share many similarities that allow for a fruitful comparison of supposedly perfect importations. In both of these instances, the Senate is able to tie the importation to a concurrent political event which allows them to extend their sphere of influence further into the religious sphere and create a situation in which they are made stronger.

Bacchus, the third imported god whose story will be looked at, underwent an altogether different sort of importation. Rather than being sought out by the Romans, the Senate saw the incursion of the Bacchic cult as parasitic. They argued that this cult threatened their power and dealt with the sect accordingly.

These three narratives reveal a trend of Senatorial interference in divine importations in order to augment their power and reinforce Roman values that benefit the Senators' position in the world.

## INTRODUCTION

Contrary to popular belief, there is no Roman religion. There are, however, Roman religions. The religious practice of the Romans were not a set of homogenous beliefs practiced from the time of Romulus until Justinian, rather they were as varied as the people within the empire and differed drastically according to the period and governmental structure of Rome itself.

Roman religious practices were exceedingly flexible by modern standards. Throughout the course of Rome's lifespan gods and goddesses were added and taken away from its pantheon as public opinion changed and new territories were conquered. Rituals and public festivals were added whenever new rulers came into power and observances were banned from the state when leaders believed that they were gaining too much popular support.

In this thesis, I will examine the importation of three divinities during the Middle Republic era of Roman History (400-133 BCE) — Cybele, a mother goddess from Asia minor in 205 BCE; Asklepios, a healing god who inhabits a sanctuary in Epidaurus, Greece in 293 BCE; and Bacchus, the Greek god of wine and drunkenness, in 186 BCE.<sup>1</sup> These three events occurred in the span of about one century. The relative contemporaneousness of these events ensures that systemic issues, such as the governmental system, are about as consistent as they can be. Of course, there were different extenuating circumstances at each of these times which must be

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<sup>1</sup> These divinities underwent name changes when they were imported — Cybele became the Magna Mater in Rome, Asklepios in Greece became Aesculapius in Rome and Dionysus in Greece became Roman Bacchus. Throughout this paper I will refer to them exclusively by their names written in the above text.

taken into account. But, by ensuring that each of these importation scenes is being played against the same background, we can keep these comparisons as tight as possible.

The main powers of the senate in the Republic can be lumped into four categories: legal matters, financial matters, international matters, and religious matters. The Senate was a place of discussion in Rome and Senators would debate policy back and forth and issue a *lex* (law) or *consultum* (a piece of advice that could be legally enforceable). It was also responsible for enforcing these pieces of legislation when necessary. The Senate had control over the finances of Rome and would be able to fund public works projects, public games and festivals, or to levy an army if necessary. The Senate was also tasked with declaring and conceding wars, ratifying treaties, and maintaining the status of Rome throughout the world and in the provinces. The Senate also had limited influence over the religious sphere. Whenever there would be some religious activity in the city, the Senate would be informed of it. However, the Senate would not act on the change, they would direct the necessary people, the various priestly colleges to act on it instead.<sup>2</sup> This last point is especially important for this thesis — the Senate, while it was made aware of the religious happenings of the city, was not responsible for any religious action itself.

To begin the analytic section of this thesis, we will look at the example of the goddess Cybele, a goddess who hails from Pessinus, a region of Asia Minor. During the Second Punic War, the Romans were at the mercy of Hannibal and his army of Carthaginians. The Romans suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE at the hands of Hannibal and the Carthaginians and they had been trying to recover the lost ground ever since. The outcome of

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Frost Abbott, *A History and Descriptions of Roman Political Institutions* (3 ed.), (New York: Noble Offset Printers Inc., 1962) pp. 233–244.

the war was not certain and it appeared as though the Romans might lose — thus halting their imperial expansion throughout the world. However, the Romans found a prophecy stating that if they were to import Cybele, they would win the war. This created a unique environment in which the Senate, in charge of the war, was able to gain influence over the practice of Roman religion. Not only could they elevate certain men and families, they were able to reinforce their own power. However, this is not as straightforward an act as one might imagine. The cult of Cybele had some more unorthodox practices that had to be accounted for. This redirection of the cult to meet elite Roman morals is also a method of the Senate increasing their own power. But, all things considered, the importation of Cybele went very well and the process of extracting the goddess from Pessinus went smoothly. These issues will be explored in the first chapter.

After establishing the importation of Cybele as an example of how the Roman Senate executes a divine importation in a time of crisis, we will turn to two further examples of divine importations. The first of these examples will concern the cult of Asklepios, a Greek healing god. He was brought to Rome during a plague, when the city was in need of healing. However, unlike with Cybele's importation, the Greeks were not willing to part with their god and the Romans had to adapt to bringing a god into their city without his symbol of power. Additionally, much like in the case of Cybele's importation, the Senate had to figure out how to fashion the importation as a way to increase their own power and influence in the world. This will be the focus of chapter two.

The final example, explored in chapter three, is that of Bacchus, the Greek god of wine and drunkenness. In this case, the cult of the god was unofficially making its way into the Roman world. The lower classes were beginning to practice the Bacchic rites, having learned them from



some Greek immigrants. This unsanctioned importation was threatening to the Senate, not simply because it gave power to the lower classes, but because they saw the rites of the cult as threatening to the very fabric of Roman society. In this case, we see the steps that the Senate takes in order to prevent the adoption of a foreign cult into Italy. What is worthy of considering in the case of Bacchus is trying to find out what exactly it was about the cult that made the Senate so uncomfortable. The Senate, just two decades earlier was willing to import a goddess from Asia Minor (considerably more 'foreign' than the origin place of Bacchus, Greece) who had her priests self-castrate (a practice that seems to be just as radical, if not more so, than the practices of the Bacchantes).

In order to examine these importation stories, I will analyze the stories that are extant in the ancient literary record. I have at least two sources for each of the stories which allows for more nuanced analysis. Livy, the Roman historian active at the turn of the millennia, wrote lengthy accounts of the importations of Cybele and Bacchus that remain to us; unfortunately, his account of the importation of Asklepios is lost to time. However, in the fourth century CE scholars wrote the *Periochae*. The *Periochae* are a collection of summaries of Livy's books of history. Luckily, the *Periochae* entries for all three importations remain. Ovid, a contemporary of Livy's provides more sources for the importations. In his *Fasti*, which gives an explanation for various Roman festivals, he detailed the importation of Cybele. In his *Metamorphoses*, a chronicle of world history told in a mythical way, he described Asklepios's importation. The final primary source that I will be using is the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*, an official order from the Senate describing their reaction to the importation of Bacchus.

By using these literary records, I will examine the Senate's action, or reaction, towards the movements of these three foreign cults, looking for any places in which the story is hiding an underlying motive. Any changes to the Roman world would influence the way the Senate carried itself in the city — and, making use of their authority, the Senate could ensure that these changes resulted in a positive net outcome for itself —guiding the machinations of fate for their own benefit. In this thesis I will show that the Roman Senate, in the Middle Republic, manipulated the importations of foreign gods in order to increase their own influence in the Roman world and to perpetuate their own, elite values.

## CHAPTER 1: CYBELE

The period of the Second Punic War was perhaps one of the most precarious moments in the Roman republic. For the first time, the expansionary power that was Rome was being seriously threatened by a foreign enemy. Hannibal and the Carthaginians had defeated the Romans at the battle of Cannae in 216 BCE and for the next decade the Romans' luck had not much improved. It was under these circumstances that the Roman Senate sought out a solution for their woes, looking for any course of action that could turn the tide of the war and bring about a Roman victory.

Luckily, when seeking an interpretation for a series of meteor showers in the Sibylline Books, the Senate came across an apt prophecy that stated: “when a foreign enemy should make war on Italian soil, he is able to be driven off from Italy and conquered if the Idaean Mother (Cybele) should be imported from Pessinus into Rome.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the Senate knew what had to happen next — they had to bring Cybele to Rome.

In the *Periochae*, late-antique summaries of Livy’s histories, there is a shortened version of this importation that is useful in order to get an overview of the importation story:

Mater Idaea deportata est Romam a Pessinunte, oppido Phrygiae, carmine in libris Sibyllinis inuento: pelli Italia alienigenam hostem posse, si mater Idaea deportata Romam esset. Tradita est autem Romanis per Attalum, regem Asiae. Lapis erat, quem matrem deum incolae dicebant. Excepit P. Scipio Nasica Cn. filius, eius qui in Hispania perierat, uir optimus a senatu iudicatus, adulescens nondum quaestorius, quoniam ita responsum iubebat ut id numen ab optimo uiro exciperetur consecrareturque.<sup>4</sup>

The Idaean Mother (Cybele) was brought to Rome from Pessinus, a Phrygian town, because according to a discovered prophecy in the Sibylline book: it would be possible to drive out the foreign enemies from Italy, if the Idaean Mother was brought to Rome. And

<sup>3</sup> All translations provided in this thesis are my own.

<sup>4</sup> Livy, *Per.* 29

she was handed over to the Romans by Attalus, king of Asia. It was a stone, which the locals were saying was the mother goddess. She was received by Publius Scipius Nasica, son of Gnaeus, who had died in Spain, judged to be the best man by the Senate, a young man not yet of the age of a quaestorship, because it was ordered, having been answered by the oracle, that the goddess must be received and consecrated by the best man.

As can be seen from the above passage, the quest to get Cybele was successful and the Romans would bring her rituals into their pantheon of worship. However, this was not a purely religious or nationalistic move but rather was a manipulation of religion to achieve a desired end. The Senate rather than the *decemvirs*, the college of priests charged with the maintenance of foreign gods, imported the goddess.<sup>5</sup> While the Senate would have been made up of well-respected men who were ritually competent, it was not the Senate's main charge to ensure the religious, but rather the political well-being of the Roman state.<sup>6</sup> As such, we must read all of the actions that the Senate took in the importation as calculated and political. The following chapter will attempt to analyze the literary record of Cybele's importation in order to pick apart the Senate's manipulation of the religious activity to serve their own purposes by consolidating all aspects of the response — military and religious — under Senatorial control.

To start at the beginning of the story, after deciding that they needed to procure the foreign goddess, the Senate must have had to decide how they would go about getting her. As one might assume, they sent men to Asia Minor, men tasked with bringing home the goddess

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<sup>5</sup> Tadeusz Mazurek, "The *Decemviri Sacris Faciundis*: Supplication and Prediction.: *Augusto Augurio: Rerum Humanarum et Divinarum Commentationes in honorem Jerzy Linderski*, (2004): 151-168.

<sup>6</sup> Being ritually competent means that one has all of the necessary pre-requisites and skills needed to perform a ritual. It means that one is able to interact with their god(s) without doing harm or offending them. (*Women's Ritual Competence in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean*, ed. by Matthew Dillon, Esther Eidinow and Lisa Maurizio, Routledge Monographs in Classical Studies (London ; New York: Routledge, 2017).)

with the power to save Rome. Livy reports that *legati*, or ambassadors, were selected for the trip including “Marcus Valerius Laevinus, who was twice consul and had done business in Greece, Marcus Caecilius Metellus, an ex-praetor, Servius Sulpicius Galba, an ex-aedile, and two former quaestors, Gnaeus Tremelius Flaccus and Marcus Valerius Falto.”<sup>7</sup> These men were granted the use of five *quinqueremes*, boats so large that they would immediately impress upon all men who saw them the stature and prowess of Rome.<sup>8</sup> They were to make a journey into Pessinus to see King Attalus and escort Cybele back to Rome. These men, although officially tasked with importing a foreign goddess into the state cult of Rome, do not appear to have been chosen for their religious piety but rather for their civic expertise and stature, as Livy tells us, all of these men held government positions and had even seen combat.

Marcus Valerius Laevinus had been consul in both 220 and 210 BCE, and thus had experience leading the Roman people and executing official governmental functions.<sup>9</sup> I suggest that even more important for his selection was his service as a commander in the First Macedonian War. In this war, Marcus Valerius Laevinus was a general in charge of the navy at Brundisium; when the Macedonians got too close to Rome for both the Senate’s and his own comfort, he started negotiations with the Aetolians to form an alliance against the Macedonians, solidifying this alliance in 211 BCE.<sup>10</sup> King Attalus of Pessinus was among the Aetolians with

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<sup>7</sup> Livy 29.11

<sup>8</sup> Livy 29.11

<sup>9</sup> Robert S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic, Volume I*, (New York: The American Philological Association, 1951), 235 and 277.

<sup>10</sup> Nathan Rosenstein, *Rome and the Mediterranean 290 to 146 BC: The Imperial Republic*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 155-156.

whom Marcus Valerius Laevinus negotiated. Sending Marcus Valerius Laevinus back to see King Attalus six years later, in 205 BCE, with another request was the logical choice. The two men had presumably established some degree of rapport during their negotiations and would be able to trust each other. Livy notes that the Senate, in sending men to visit King Attalus, was sending them to lands in which the Romans did “not yet have any treaty in respect to allyship.”<sup>11</sup> Sending someone that Attalus would immediately recognize would have decreased the likelihood that he order them to be killed on sight or that he might mistake them for a hostile force looking to wage war against him. As a man of Senatorial rank himself, Marcus Valerius Laevinus would have been able to assume the intent of the Senate and make decisions that they would approve of, in the event of any unforeseen circumstances, lending both authority and legitimacy to the expedition.

Another one of the named men sent was Servius Sulpicius Galba, he is also called Publius Sulpicius Galba Maximus and was consul in 211 BCE.<sup>12</sup> In 209, he took over from Marcus Valerius Laevinus as proconsul in Macedonia. In this role he continued the fight against the Macedonians with the help of the newly established Aeolian League (the work of Marcus Valerius Laevinus).<sup>13</sup> He “joined up [his fleet] with Attalus” so that their combined naval force was stronger and to show faith and trust in one another.<sup>14</sup> Then Attalus and Servius Sulpicius

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<sup>11</sup> Livy 29.10.1-2

<sup>12</sup> Robert S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic, Volume I*, (New York: The American Philological Association, 1951), 287.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Livy 27.33.4-5

Galba “wintered together” and “sailed to Lemnus, the Romans having 25 ships and King Attalus having 35.”<sup>15</sup> It is likely that these two men forged a bond during the time they spent together. Sending Servius Sulpicius Galba back to visit King Attalus, just as with Marcus Valerius Laevinus, would establish trust immediately and allow for a more open and honest dialogue, or at least the illusion of it, between the Roman delegation and the king.

The other three named men who were sent on the voyage, Marcus Caecilius Metellus, Gnaeus Tremelius Flaccus, and Marcus Valerius Falto, did not have as distinguished a pedigree as the other men. However they had all held governmental positions ranging from that of quaestor to urban praetor. I read this as indicating that what was most important to the Senate when selecting ambassadors was governmental experience. Perhaps this is because the Senate knew that, in order to complete this mission, the men would have to travel to lands in which the Romans had no allies.<sup>16</sup> Knowing this, it is no wonder that the men who were picked to lead this expedition were experienced in state craft and had direct relationships with the heads of state of the lands they were traveling to. The men were leading five large ships’ worth of Romans into an unallied land and were not sure whether they would be perceived as hostile or friendly which is why statecraft was the most important skill for them to have. Choosing to send men experienced in statecraft, rather than those known for their religious experience and piety proves that in the eyes of the Senate this was, at its heart, a governmental mission.

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<sup>15</sup> Livy 28.5.1

<sup>16</sup> Livy 29.10

These five men all held positions along the *Cursus Honorum*, the series of political appointments that a man in Rome was eligible to hold in his lifetime. The least of these positions was that of quaestor and the highest was consul. Along the course you could also become an aedile, a proconsul, or a tribune. All of these positions were a part of the body of the Senate and were therefore responsible for helping to run Rome in any way that was needed. In this case, they were sent on a mission to Pessinus, however they could just as easily have been asked to investigate a theft in Rome or debate a new law in court.

Because of their previous government experience, the Senate must have trusted these men enough to give them the power to travel to Pessinus and back without fearing that they might abuse the power given to them (or fail in their mission by offending Attalus). This power, it seems, came with only the vague instructions to obtain the goddess, without specifics on where to stop or how long the entire journey should take. Livy says that although they were only ordered by the Senate to visit King Attalus in Pessinus and procure the sacred stone of Cybele, they made a pit stop on their journey. The ambassadors stopped at Delphi in order to consult with the oracle.<sup>17</sup> The oracle gave them information that was critical to the success of their mission, but it was the decision of the ambassadors, not the Senate to stop there. This action begs the question: Why did they decide to stop at the oracle? Pessinus, their ultimate destination, is located in central Asia Minor, and the oracle is located in mainland Greece.<sup>18</sup> Although the most common shipping routes did not take the men too far away from oracle, any stop would have

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<sup>17</sup> Livy 29.11

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas G.L. Hammond, *Atlas of the Greek and Roman in Antiquity*, (Park Ridge: Noyes Press, 1981), 20b.



added time to their overall journey, and if they are seeking out the goddess so that Rome can win the Second Punic War, one might assume that time was of the essence.<sup>19</sup> Did the men want second confirmation from the gods that the importation was the appropriate action to take? Could there have been personal motives? Either way, this example shows that the men were given the power to bring the goddess home, a power that could be used however they saw fit.

And while the *legati* may have been given a mandate that allowed for the use of any means necessary to bring the goddess home, they were not required to use any overwhelming force in their dealings with King Attalus, the man ruling the region where Cybele's cult was centered. In the *Fasti*, we learn that the King was not very amenable to the idea of giving up his beloved goddess to these foreign Romans. But, through a supposed action of the goddess, King Attalus was convinced of the Romans need for the goddess and ceded to their petition. Ovid says that "the earth shook with a long rumble, and from her sanctuary the goddess said this: 'It is my wish to be looked for. Do not delay. Dispatch me as I wish. Rome is a worthy destination for any god'."<sup>20</sup> After the goddess spoke thusly, King Attalus had no choice but to allow the Romans to leave Pessinus with the goddess in tow. So they boarded their ship and sailed home to Rome.

This direct petition from Cybele makes it clear that the goddess's intentions are to go to Rome. There is no way that a mortal king such as King Attalus can deny the goddess of her desires. However, reading this passage, it seems very propagandizing for her to say "Rome is a

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<sup>19</sup> Nicholas G.L. Hammond, *Atlas of the Greek and Roman in Antiquity*, (Park Ridge: Noyes Press, 1981), 30a.

<sup>20</sup> Ov. *Fast.* 4.266-270

worthy destination for any god.”<sup>21</sup> Ovid is making Rome out to be the best place in the world, which would serve him well in his own time. However, at the time of importation, Rome was almost overwhelmed by its enemies in the Punic War. At this point, it may not have been the most “worthy destination” for a goddess. This sentiment also rationalizes all of the divine importations that Rome has done throughout its long span. If Rome is a place that all gods want to be, the Romans are doing them a favor by bringing them into the city. It turns a narration of cultural appropriation and theft into one of repatriation and pride. Yet, even if Ovid is personifying the goddess in order to make a point about the imperialist nature of Rome, it must be seated in the historical fact that King Attalus willingly, and without trial, gave over the goddess.<sup>22</sup>

An interesting question that these descriptions of importation are silent on is who exactly these men are dealing with in their capacity as ambassadors. It is clear that they were sent by the Roman Senate for the purpose of extracting a foreign god. However, in the eyes of the Senate, is this a deed that is negotiated between the divinity and the Romans or is it between the Romans and the foreigners who are currently worshipping the desired deity? I believe that Livy’s use of the legal term *legati* and his mention of not having any allied states in Asia implies that this was thought to be a relationship between two states. The men needed to be able to negotiate with

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<sup>21</sup> Ov. *Fast.* 4.266-270

<sup>22</sup> It may seem strange that King Attalus willingly gave over away one his his people’s gods. However, Attalus and the Romans had formed an alliance a decade prior during the First Macedonian War and remained on good terms. The two kingdoms were on such good terms that only 70 years later, Attalus’s descendant would cede his kingdom to Rome upon his death. This must mean that the Attalids were not the most powerful of monarchs and that Attalus might not have been able to mount a resistance against the Roman delegation that was asking to take his god away with them. (Graham Shipley, *The Greek World After Alexander: 323-30 BC*, Routledge History of the Ancient World (London: Routledge, 2000) 318-319.)

those in power, in this case King Attalus of Pessinus, to achieve their desired ends. This would make sense as the Senate was not strictly a religious body. The Senate's job was to govern Rome, not to ensure the religious well-being of Rome. Sure, many of the Senators were also probably members of various priestly colleges, but these were still two distinct jobs. This religious manipulation to serve government purposes gives the Senate explicit power over a larger sphere of the Roman world than they would normally have.

By creating this situation where the Senate is now taking responsibility for not only the political welfare of the state, but also the religious welfare, the Senators were increasing their own power in the Roman world. Traditionally, one would think that the *decimviri*, a college of priests whose job was to reconcile foreign religious practices with those of Rome, would have been more heavily involved with the importation of a completely foreign goddess.<sup>23</sup> However, the sources give no indication that they were consulted at all in this matter. Would this have been seen as an overreach of power by the Senate? Or was the importation of Cybele related closely enough to the goal of beating Hannibal and his troops that the people did not question their involvement in a religious setting.

This idea of the *legati* being between the two states is further emphasized by the advice the ambassadors received from the oracle while they were at Delphi. They were told that after conveying the goddess to Rome “the best man in Rome, who should receive the goddess with all

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<sup>23</sup> Tadeusz Mazurek, “The *Decemviri Sacris Faciundis*: Supplication and Prediction.: *Augusto Augurio: Rerum Humanarum et Divinarum Commentationes in honorem Jerzy Linderski*, (2004): 151-168.

due hospitality must be sought out (by the Romans).<sup>24</sup> This person, as ordered by the oracle, needed to interact directly with the goddess once she reached the shores of Rome. Publius Scipio was chosen to be this man. In his capacity as the official greeter of the goddess, he “received the goddess (in the form of a sacred stone) from her priests and brought her to land.”<sup>25</sup> This relationship placed the divine and the mortal in more of an equal relationship. In the previous paragraphs, it is clear that the men sent by the Senate had to interact with King Attalus in order to complete the job, which was why they were chosen for their governmental experience. However, Publius Scipio did not have to interact with anybody other than Cybele herself. As the “best man” in Rome, he was worthy of being a personal ambassador to the goddess when perhaps others were not.<sup>26</sup>

Publius Scipio was chosen for this position when he was still too young to be a quaestor.<sup>27</sup> This detail is important because if he was too young to be a quaestor, then he was also too young to hold other government positions.<sup>28</sup> This strengthens the idea that Publius Scipio was the ambassador to the goddess while the other men were ambassadors to King Attalus. We should also consider any motives for Publius Scipio being chosen as the “best man.” Livy says

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<sup>24</sup> Livy 29.11.8

<sup>25</sup> Livy 29.14.11

<sup>26</sup> Livy 29.11.8

<sup>27</sup> Livy 29.14

<sup>28</sup> While a formal age requirement was not established until 24 years after the importation of Cybele, Livy still recognizes Publius’s youth and inexperience in this passage. (Livy, trans. Frank Gardener Moore, *Histories*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), pp. 259.)

that his father died fighting in Spain.<sup>29</sup> Dying in battle would have been an honorable death for the Romans. The Senate, by choosing the deceased's son as "best man," may have been trying to give an honor to the family — especially since the Scipios were a prominent family in Rome at this time. Publius Scipio's cousin would go on to become Scipio Africanus after his defeat of Hannibal at Zama.<sup>30</sup> Because of their relation, we can read this story as Cybele twice-blessing the Scipio family. The first blessing bestowed is allowing Publius Scipio to greet her upon her arrival in the city. The second blessing is by guiding Scipio Africanus in his defeat of Hannibal. The reason that Cybele was imported was to end the Second Punic War, so it is logical that she would be seen as aiding its most famous general in his mission to do so. In choosing Publius as the most noble man, the Senate is shining a spotlight on the Scipios—ennobling a family that gave the life of their patriarch for the Roman cause, making them receive the blessing of a new-to-Rome goddess and showing, in a not so subtle way, the rewards that come from living your life how the Senate wants you to.

All of the men that the Senate has chosen thus far, whether it be the *legati* to King Attalus or Publius Scipio were elite Roman men. Either they held governmental positions, were part of prominent Roman families, or embodied some combination of the two. By giving these men the chance to save the Roman Republic through this importation, the Senate is reinforcing the idea that upperclass men are the real saviors of Rome. They are able to reinforce the Roman social norms, and at the same time, because they picked the men, increase their standing in the eyes of

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<sup>29</sup> Livy 29.8

<sup>30</sup> Howard Hayes Scullard, *Scipio Africanus in the Second Punic War*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1930), pp. 37–38.

the public. They get to position themselves as the wise Senators who saved Rome — not just in a political sense, but in a religious one as well.

Not only did the Senate choose the men who aided in the importation, they were also instrumental in choosing how the importation was allowed to happen. And, as such, we cannot ignore the role that they allowed Claudia Quinta to play. According to Ovid, Claudia was a Vestal Virgin who had been suspected of being unchaste.<sup>31</sup> She, along with a crowd of noble and common women, came to Ostia, the seaport of Rome, to see the goddess arrive and follow her in a procession all the way back to the city of Rome. When Claudia approached the goddess, she first purified herself “three times” with the river water.<sup>32</sup> This mark of respect for the goddess did not go unnoticed. Before the goddess, Claudia asked for help in clearing her name of any suspected impiety saying: “Mother, fertile mother of the gods, accept the prayers of your supplicant under certain conditions. They say I am not chaste. If you damn me, I will admit it is deserved; I will pay with my death having been punished with a goddess as judge. But if the crime is missing, give testimony of my life and chastely follow my chaste hands.”<sup>33</sup> After this supplication, the goddess would find Claudia chaste and it would be through her, Claudia’s that is, efforts that the final steps of the importation, actually bringing the goddess into Rome proper, would be successful.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ov. Fast.* 4.296 and 307

<sup>32</sup> *Ov. Fast.* 4.315

<sup>33</sup> *Ov. Fast.* 4.315

One thing about Claudia Quinta's role in the importation that is worth noting is her status as a Vestal Virgin. The status of the Vestal Virgins was extremely closely tied with the well-being of the Roman state. In times of panic, when the state seemed to be failing in some regard, the people would assume a Vestal had broken her vow of chastity and that she would have to be buried alive to atone for it.<sup>34</sup> If Claudia Quinta was a Vestal Virgin, this story becomes even more complex than it was originally. At face value, Claudia Quinta would be helping to save Rome by aiding in the importation of the goddess, prophesied as being able to end the Punic War. However, the goddess is simultaneously absolving Claudia of any perceived impiety, which increases faith in her as a Vestal. As noted before, the strength of the state is intertwined with the strength of the Vestals, so that increased faith in the Vestals also strengthens the state. Claudia and Cybele are stuck in a positive feedback loop in which each can help to make the other stronger.

The story of Claudia Quinta, as noted above, is transferred through history in Ovid's *Fasti*. This is noteworthy because Ovid is writing under the reign of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. At the time of writing, the Claudii were still a prominent, Roman family.<sup>35</sup> In writing this passage that praises Claudia, Ovid could have been seeking favor from the emperor and his court. While we should be critical of the passage in our analysis of it, I do not believe that the mere fact that the Claudii were a powerful family at the time of its writing means that it would

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<sup>34</sup> Holt N. Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State." *The American Journal of Philology* 125, no. 4 (2004): 579-580.

<sup>35</sup> Eleanor Winsor Leach, 'Claudia Quinta (Pro Caelio 34) and an altar to Magna Mater', *Dictynna: Revue de Poétique Latine*, 4 (2007).

have been completely fabricated. Rather, I believe Ovid may have accentuated the importance of Claudia in order to catch the attention of the emperor.

All of the people that have been mentioned so far, the Senate included, were of the elite class in Rome. It is not surprising that the Senate, the elite ruling body of the state, sent out its peers for the job, and being a Vestal was essentially the most honorable thing a woman could aspire to be in Rome. However, the majority of Romans would not have fit into this elite category and there is very little evidence for what role they might have played in this importation. There must have been dozens of men onboard the *quinqueremes* that sailed to Pessinus to get Cybele from King Attalus and Livy says that “all the matrons...passed the goddess through their hands” and that “people prayed, gracious and favorably, [so that] she (Cybele) might enter the city of Rome.”<sup>36</sup> Likewise, in the *Fasti*, Ovid mentions that women, both young and old, and men come to see the goddess imported.<sup>37</sup> These short asides indicate the possibility that although the common folk were not given much agency in state ritual, they were aware of the ongoing importation. By showing up at her arrival, the people are showing their support of the goddess and demonstrating their ritual competency.

If the Senate was going through all this trouble to bring Cybele into Rome, one would hope they did their research on the goddess first. However, it appears that they did not. There are some aspects of the worship of Cybele that the Romans appear not to have anticipated — namely, that her priests, the *Galloi*, self-castrate. This would be shocking to anyone hearing it for

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<sup>36</sup> Livy 29.14.13-14

<sup>37</sup> Ov. *Fast.* 4.295-297



the first time, and the Romans were taken aback. This self-mutilation results in the priests of Cybele being rendered impotent and unable to have children. The Romans, with their obsession over ensuring pure, Roman bloodlines would not be able to fathom why elite Romans, of high enough status to become a priest, would want to effectively end their family lineage.

However, in many ways, it was too late for the Senate to change its mind regarding the importation. Men has been dispatched to Asia Minor and they still needed a way to end the Punic War. The importation of Cybele would have to move forward. To combat this, the Romans drastically changed the worship of Cybele, creating a new Romano-Cybele that was much different than the Cybele one would have found in Asia Minor. To start, the Romans brought with them to Rome all of the existing *Galloi* so that Roman men would not have to join the priesthood and self-castrate.<sup>38</sup> They also confined the *Galloi* to the temple complex of Cybele so that they could not mingle with the rest of the Roman population and influence them with their “foreign” ways and customs. They did not just prevent the priests from leaving the temple, though. The Senate made it illegal for a Roman citizen man to become a priest of Cybele. If one did become a priest, they lost their citizenship. Also, the Megalesian Games which were established to honor Cybele were a decidedly less frenzied and ecstatic version of the rites that would have been celebrated in Asia Minor.<sup>39</sup> This Romanization of the goddess demonstrates the need to bring her into Rome, but also the resilience of the Senators to adhere to the status quo.

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<sup>38</sup> Eric Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 100-110.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

The aggregation of these events — retrieving the god from Pessinus, establishing Publius Scipio as a greeter, allowing the women to escort Cybele home, and sanitizing the foreign cult for a Roman audience — reveals a Senate that only wanted to maintain their place in the hierarchy of the Roman world. A hierarchy that placed the Senate on top, and forced everyone below the Senate into submission. Even though religion and the state were intrinsically tied together in the Roman world, the Senate would not have been the ones responsible for the religious well-being of Rome — that would have been delegated to the various priestly colleges. However, by tying this religious ritual of importation to the fate of the Punic War, the Senate was able to command religious force. They were able to be the saviors of Rome through the importation and be exalted as heroes. They were also able to use their power and influence to make sure that others groups of people could be used as pawns within this scheme.

For instance, by allowing Claudia Quinta and the Roman matrons to participate in the welcoming of Cybele, the Senate was using the elite women of Rome to achieve their means. Just as in using the elite men, the use of the woman emphasizes the position that the Senate believes the women should occupy in society. The women were not directly involved in the act of procuring the goddess, however, their role to play was realized within the goddesses home. That is, once the goddess arrived at her new home of Rome and only then, the women were called in to help. This places importance on the women of Rome not showing their own agency, but rather being in the background in a supporting role, ever willing to step in when needed by the men furthered the illusion of women's centrality to Roman religion while in fact real power was kept in the hands of elite men. In co-opting the women of Rome, both elite and plebeian,

into their scheme, the Senate created an event which they women approved of (because they were participating in it) but did not give them any power.

The Senate was also showing that the elite Roman men were a powerful force for good, an opinion, which, when held by the public, only serves to increase their power as well. From Marcus Valerius Laevinus to Publius Scipio, the Senate gives important positions of power to the men whom they know can be trusted and counted on to get the job done. These men also belong to the elite class of Rome, who were probably members of the Senate previously, or who would hope to be in the Senate one day.

As can be seen in the analysis of this story, the Roman Senate was not an observer to the actions of importation, but a main agent. They engineered the entire plot — starting with the sending of the *legati* and ending with the procession of women. Each of these events, and all of those in between, serve to further glorify the Senate itself and increase their power throughout the Empire.

## CHAPTER 2: ASKLEPIOS

The next example of a divine importation into Rome that will be discussed is that of Asklepios, a Greek god of medicine. This importation occurred in 293 BCE — almost 100 years before Cybele was brought into Rome.<sup>40</sup> While it may seem counter-productive to analyze these events in a non chronological way, I believe that this anachronous order can aid in the analysis, rather than hinder it. The narrative that remains of Cybele's importation is much more complete than that of Asklepios. Because each of these events were Senate-enacted, divine importations, it is logical to assume that there is a pattern between the two. By first analyzing the more complete story of Cybele, it is easier to fill in the *lacunae* in the story of Asklepios.

Cybele's story was described in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, and later summarized in the *Periochae*; it was also discussed in Ovid's *Fasti*. The *Periochae* mention the importation of Asklepios, but unfortunately, the portion of the *Ab Urbe Condita* that would have discusses the importation of Asklepios is lost. Ovid does describe this importation, this time in the *Metamorphoses* rather than the *Fasti*. Because the literary record of these importations is so similar, it makes it easier to draw these parallels between the stories because the authors would presumably have had a continuous theme to their work.

Cybele was imported into Rome in 205 BCE about 90 years Asklepios had been brought to the city in 293 BCE. In 293 BCE there was a plague that was ravaging Rome and the Senate was, understandably, concerned about the health and welfare of the Republic. The Seante

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<sup>40</sup> Filippo Coarelli, et al. *Rome and Environs: An Archaeological Guide*. (California: University of California Press, 2014) 348.

decided that they would petition a foreign god to come into their city in order to attempt to thwart the disease. In this case, the Senate sought out the Greek god Asklepios, a healing god whose cult was centered on the island of Epidaurus. It makes sense that, in trying to cure a disease, the Senate would want to import a god whose purview was healing. In the importation of Asklepios, just as in the importation of Cybele, the Senate manipulated the story and created a narrative that allowed them to reinforce their power over the Roman people and increase their esteem in the public eye.

The importation story of Asklepios, just as with the story of Cybele, is detailed in the *Periochae*, the late antique summaries of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*. The *Periochae* say this about the incident:

cum pestilentia civitas laboraret, missi legati, ut Aesculapi signum Romam ab Epidaurum transferrent, anguem, qui se in navem eorum contulerat, in quo ipsum numen esse constabat, deportaverunt; eoque in insulam Tiberis egresso eodem loco aedes Aesculapio constituta est.<sup>41</sup>

When the city was pained with a pestilence, and with the ambassadors having been sent so that they might bring back the sign of Aesculapius to Rome from Epidaurus, brought home a serpent, which had crawled into their ship by itself and in which it was agreed that the god himself was present. The serpent having gone ashore on the island of the Tiber, in that place a temple was built for Aesculapius.

As can be seen, this summary is shorter and less detailed than the summary given to Cybele's importation. The 4th century summarizers had to choose which details from the longer text were most important to include in the *Periochae* and the entry provides the outline of a story.

Although the entry in the *Periochae* is less detailed in the case of Asklepios than it was in the

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<sup>41</sup> Livy, *Per. II*

case of Cybele, the details that have been provided must have been deemed important enough to make it into the text.

Because Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* does not fully survive to us in the present day, this brief entry in the *Periochae* is all that remains of Livy's telling of the importation. Ovid describes the incident in more detail in his *Metamorphoses*, however, the *Metamorphoses* are written as poetry and not as history. In interpreting Ovid's telling of the story, we must look for the threads of fact that are woven as the baseline for his story and work with those for the purpose of analyzing the impact of the importation on the Senate's power and position in Roman society.

Now that we have discussed the importation of Cybele at length and have a grounded understanding of the Senate's actions in importing the goddess, it is most useful to use that story as a model to compare with the story of Asklepios. While we do not have as many specific details regarding the importation of Asklepios, we can take what we know about Roman conceptions of divine importation and apply these tenets to the information we do have about Asklepios's importation in order to make more inferences and judgements than would be possible without using this comparative method of study.

This comparative method of study will also be helpful in assessing the shortcomings of Asklepios's importation. In the analysis of Cybele's importation all of the actions that the Senate wanted to be undertaken were carried out. Throughout this chapter, I will discuss how this is not the case in the importation of Asklepios. In this way, the importation of Cybele will not only allow us to further extrapolate details that are not explicitly stated but also gives us a more perfectly executed importation narrative to compare to the more *ad hoc* importation of Asklepios. By looking at the Senate's response to the shortcomings of the importation, their desire to put

forth a facade of perfection can be made out and in this search for excellence the desire to preside over the Roman people can be seen.

Remember that the importation of Cybele occurred around 100 years after the importation of Asklepios and that Livy wrote his histories in an annalistic style, meaning the section on Cybele comes after that of Asklepios. In describing the Cybele story, Livy said: “However, remembering that Asklepios was also imported from Greece when there was not yet have any treaty in respect to allyship.”<sup>42</sup> Livy's reference back to the story of Asklepios's importation when describing Cybele's is enlightening. In his description of the later event, he refers to the former — comparing the circumstances himself. Thus, we can assume that the events were likely similar in their progression, seeing as they occupied the same space in Livy's mind. This comparison implies that there is a formulaic approach to the importation of gods that would have been clear to a contemporary reader of Livy's histories and it is this formulaic approach that allows us to make these extrapolations.

Comparing the *Periochae* entry concerning Asklepios and the tale of Cybele told in both the *Periochae* and the *Ab Urbe Condita*, the largest parallel between the stories of Asklepios and Cybele is the use of *legati* in both cases. These ambassadors, although we do not know what their names were or even how many of them there were, were almost certainly state officials with experience in diplomacy and foreign affairs, like those sent to procure Cybele. These qualifications would have been very important, just as it was important the ambassadors sent to procure Cybele had this background. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid says that “they [the *legati*]

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<sup>42</sup> Livy 29.14

approached the fathers, the council of the Greeks.”<sup>43</sup> He goes on to say that the “their [the Roman ambassadors’ and the Greek councilors’] thoughts on the matter disagreed with each other and were varied, part thinking help should not be denied, more recommending keeping their god and not letting go of their wealth or surrendering their divinity.”<sup>44</sup> The Greek council at Epidaurus was not sure that they wanted to lose their god and give him over to the Romans. If they had decided that they wanted to keep the god for themselves — and their entire economy was built upon Asklepios’ sanctuary —, it would have been up to those Romans who were sent on the mission to convince them otherwise. The fate of the city of Rome was in their hands, and they could not be anything but successful in their attempt. The continuation of the city of Rome was dependent on which party, the Greeks or the Romans, was better at statecraft and political negotiation.

The *Periochae* does not mention any other Romans in its summary of the event. Because of this, it is safe to assume that in the case of Asklepios, the ambassadors were the most important men. In the summary for Book 29 found in the *Periochae*, the book in which the importation story of Cybele is found, both the ambassadors and Publius Scipio are mentioned.<sup>45</sup> Because there is no mention of a greeter for the Asklepios in the *Periochae* summary of the Asklepios story, it is safe to assume that the greeter was a specific feature of the Cybelean importation dictated by the encounter with the oracle of Delphi rather than a prescribed ritual practice for all importations.

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<sup>43</sup> Ov. *Met.* 15

<sup>44</sup> Ov. *Met.* 15

<sup>45</sup> Liv. *Per.* 29



As discussed previously, the ambassadors sent to the Greeks would have been upper class Roman men from elite Roman families. They would most likely have served in the Senate, or would be on track to serve in the Senate. By publicly saving Rome from plague through the importation of this god, these men would bring esteem to their elite families and to the Senate, which sent them on this journey. In doing this, the values associated with these families were reinforced and the strength of the Senate increased through the renewed faith of the Roman people in them. It is likely that, just as in the case of Cybele, the *legati* were of varying political experience — a few senior men, tribunes or ex-consuls perhaps, accompanied by men of lesser political status, such as aediles and quaestors.

In his account of the importation, Ovid focuses much of his attention on the ambassadors and their journey. First, on their getting the god and second, on their transporting him back to Rome. He does, however, add that once the ship carrying the god reached the mouth of the Tiber “From everywhere the crowd of people came rushing to meet him: mothers and fathers and those Vestals who tend the flames...”<sup>46</sup>As discussed in the case of Claudia Quinta, the Vestals are responsible for the fate of Rome in their own way. It makes sense that they would be among the crowd ensuring that the importation was successful. If the importation was not successful, the plague that was ravaging the city would continue and many more people would die. It also makes sense that as some of the most holy priestesses in the city, they would be there to welcome a new god into their home.

This short phrase also illustrates how the common people of Rome would have been involved in the importation. Just as in the Cybele story, they showed up for the god’s arrival to

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<sup>46</sup> Ov. *Met.* 15

cheer and to pray to him. Because the crowd does not have the official power to import the god themselves, they are ignored in the stories, but it is necessary to acknowledge their presence at the event. Similar to how the people go mostly unnamed in the story of Asklepios's importation, the Senate also goes largely unacknowledged. However, just like in the Cybele story, the Senate must be the ones who are enacting the importation on a larger scale. Their presence should be felt in all areas of the importation, even if not explicitly stated in the text.

The only other salient detail in the *Periochae* entry is that Asklepios, after being transferred to Rome in the form of a snake, chose his own resting spot — Tiber Island. This is a way for Livy and the rest of the Romans to show that Asklepios wished to be in Rome to help the city heal; just as Cybele is said to have proclaimed that “Rome is a worthy destination for any god.”<sup>47</sup> This idea of the divine willingly offering aid to Rome seems to be an important part of the narrative.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as stated, gives a corroborating account of Asklepios's importation. This poetic rendering of the tale attributes a great deal of action to the god himself. And while it may seem counterproductive to try to interpret the actions of a god, in interpreting the *Metamorphoses* depiction of these events, we are actually interpreting the Roman writer's version of these events. The presence of the Senate, and at the time Ovid was writing, the Emperor, permeated all areas of Roman life, the arts notwithstanding. As such, any form of writing was political. Vergil's *Aeneid* was written under Augustus and often seen as a piece of pro-Roman propaganda that idealizes the past in order to make nationalistic sentiment in the

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<sup>47</sup> Ov. *Fast.* 4.266-270

present more popular.<sup>48</sup> I believe that we can read Ovid's description of the importation of Asklepios the same way.

The story Ovid tells us is not a simple one. It is not the transactional narrative that the *Periochae* presents: go to Greece, get to god, come home, save Rome. Instead, it details the trials and tribulations that the ambassadors have to go through in order to get the god from the Greeks. Ovid starts his tale by saying that the Romans had tried many methods for getting rid of the plague that was troubling their city, and not having found any that worked, they consulted the Delphic Oracle for guidance. The following passage from the *Metamorphoses* details the oracles response and the subsequent actions of the Romans, the Greeks at Epidaurus, and the god, Asklepios, himself:

“quod petis hinc, propiore loco, Romane, petisses,  
 et pete nunc propiore loco: nec Apolline vobis,  
 qui minuat luctus, opus est, sed Apolline nato.  
 ite bonis avibus prolemque accersite nostram.”  
 iussa dei prudens postquam acceperere senatus,  
 quam colat, explorant, iuvenis Phoebus urbem,  
 quique petant ventis Epidauria litora, mittunt;  
 quae simul incurva missi tetigere carina,  
 concilium Graiosque patres adiere, darentque,  
 oravere, deum, qui praesens funera gentis  
 finiat Ausoniae: certas ita dicere sortes.  
 dissidet et variat sententia, parsque negandum  
 non putat auxilium, multi retinere suamque  
 non emittere opem nec numina tradere suadent:  
 dum dubitant, seram pepulere crepuscula lucem;  
 umbraque telluris tenebras induxerat orbi,  
 cum deus in somnis opifer consistere visus  
 ante tuum, Romane, torum, sed qualis in aede  
 esse solet, baculumque tenens agreste sinistra

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<sup>48</sup> James E. G. Zetzel, ‘Rome and Its Traditions’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. by Charles Martindale, *Cambridge Companions to Literature* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Pr., 1997), pp. 188-203.

caesariem longae dextra deducere barbae  
 et placido tales emittere pectore voces:  
 “pone metus! veniam simulacraque nostra relinquam.  
 hunc modo serpentem, baculum qui nexibus ambit,  
 perspice et usque nota visu, ut cognoscere possis!  
 vertar in hunc: sed maior ero tantusque videbor,  
 in quantum verti caelestia corpora debent.”<sup>49</sup>

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“What you seek from here, Roman, you should seek in a closer place  
 and now seek in the closer place: there is no need of Apollo,  
 who lessons grievances, for you, but the son of Apollo.  
 Go with good omens and summon my son.”

When sensible Senate received the orders of the god,  
 while they worship, they searched out the city of the young Phoebus,  
 and they sent men seeking the shores of Epidaurus via the winds;  
 As soon as the emissaries docked their curved keel  
 they went to the council of the Greeks, and prayed that  
 they might surrender their god, who, being present, might end  
 the deaths of the Ausonian race: thus the oracle’s response said for certain.  
 They were disagreeing and there was variance of opinion, and part did  
 not think that help should be denied, more urged that they keep their god  
 and to not relinquish their power nor hand over their divinity:  
 While they are hesitating, evening drove away the light of dusk;  
 and spread darkness over the world with a shadow,  
 Afterwards the help-bringing god seemed to stand before your bed  
 in your sleep, Roman, but just as he is accustomed to  
 in his temple, grasping a rustic staff with his left hand  
 and stroking his long, beautiful beard with his right  
 and with such a calm voice spoke from his chest:  
 “Do not fear! I shall come and leave behind my statue.  
 Now observe this serpent, who out of custom encircles my staff,  
 so that its appearance is known and that you might recognize it!  
 I will change into this: but will be larger and will be seen as great as  
 the celestial bodies ought to be in their great changes.

This passage shows that not only did the Romans need help to start their mission to get the god,  
 which they received from the Oracle, they also needed help once they got to Epidaurus. As told  
 by Ovid, the Greek council argued over whether or not the Romans should be allowed to take

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<sup>49</sup> Ov. *Met.* 15

their god home with them. While the Romans slept and worried about whether or not their mission would succeed, the god appeared to them in their dreams.<sup>50</sup> He spoke to them calmly, saying: “Be not afraid; I shall come and leave behind my statue but see this serpent...for I shall change into this serpent, only larger, like a celestial presence.”<sup>51</sup>

The next day, when the Romans woke, they “assembled at the temple and prayed their god to give a sign” and “the god, all crested with gold, in serpent form [as he said he would be], uttered a warning, hissed terribly...and all the altars, all the doors, the pavement, the roof of gold, the statue, shook and trembled.”<sup>52</sup> After this display at the sanctuary he “came to the harbor...and went aboard the [Roman] ship.”<sup>53</sup> The fact that the serpent went aboard the ship of his own volition is also told by the *Periochae*.<sup>54</sup> This example, much like the Cybele’s speech to King Attalus above, really emphasizes the desire of the god to come to Rome. Not only did he willingly board the Roman ship in the harbor, he renounced his claim to the Epidauran sanctuary when he says that he looked upon the statues of the temple for the last time.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> This moment of Ovid is very nuanced. The sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidaurus is well known for its incubation rooms, where the god would visit his petitioners in their dreams and reveal cures to them in their sleep. The Romans are now at Epidaurus, petitioning the god, and he is going to them in their dreams to give them a solution. Not only is this a solution for the dilemma that the Romans are facing with the Greek council, it is also a cure for the entire plague that is afflicting Rome. Asklepios is giving the Romans the cure for their plague by showing the envoys who he can be imported into Rome. This use of one of Asklepios’s traditionally held powers shows how well known he was for dream incubation and how respected he was for healing and reinforced the idea that the Romans had some knowledge of the god which they were seeking.

<sup>51</sup> Ov. *Met.* 15

<sup>52</sup> Ov. *Met.* 15

<sup>53</sup> Ov. *Met.* 15

<sup>54</sup> Livy *Per.* 11

<sup>55</sup> Ov. *Met.* 15

These quotes which portray the god himself as desirous of emigrating to Rome serve to increase the prestige of Rome and its people. For a god to want to leave his primary place of worship to settle in a foreign country, that foreign country must be pretty spectacular. However, the Romans could not truly know the thoughts of the gods. Instead, the Senate presented their own masquerade as divine thought. By suggesting that the snake was the god in disguise, the Senate is distracting the attention of the public. Rather than focus on why the *legati* did not arrive home with the cult statue of Asklepios, the people were too busy watching a snake, which they believed to be divine, swim onto an island. Similarly, in the story of Cybele, we saw that Ovid increased the standing of Claudia Quinta, whose family was still prominent at the time of his writing. In this case, Ovid is maintaining the greatness of Rome at a transitional time in its history, when it is first being ruled by an emperor. In writing the greatness of Rome onto a past event, Ovid is demonstrating a continued legacy of excellence in the Roman state. Both of these examples show that the Senate and the elite men of Rome are willing to pawn a falsehood as the truth as long as they can reap the rewards of the lie being believed.

I believe, however, that Ovid's most significant moment of assigning agency to the god occurs at the very end of the narrative, once the delegation returns to Rome. As the boat carrying the god sailed up the Tiber River and into the city of Rome, Ovid says that the snake which the god was thought to be inhabiting "climbed the mast, swung his head about as if to seek proper habitation" and came ashore on Tiber Island.<sup>56</sup> In the *Periochae*, it states that "on the serpent's going ashore on the island of the Tiber" a temple was built.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ov. *Met.* 15

<sup>57</sup> Livy, *Per.* 11

In this final moment of the importation, both Ovid and Livy take the agency away from the mortal men and give it to the god. The god swam to Tiber Island, so it is on Tiber Island that we will build his temple and worship him. There must be a reason that maintaining the agency of the divine is important to the Romans. By showing the god acting of his own volition and choosing a place to live in Rome, it is marking the entire journey as successful. Not only did the *legati* travel to Epidaurus and successfully bring back a god, they did it in such a way that Asklepios felt so comfortable in Rome that he wanted to choose his own place of worship. In describing it this way, the god is solidifying his relationship to Rome and rewarding Rome for its piety.

This narrative, found in the library record, must have been the result of a longstanding tradition concerning the importation of Asklepios. As I said before, the Senate could not presume to know the thoughts of the god, but rather crafted the story of Asklepios's willingness to enter Rome to distract from the incomplete importation. The *legati* would have been aiming to get the cult statue and return with it, and when they did not, the Senate had to make an excuse for their failure. Rather than publicly blaming the *legati* they chose to craft this tale. If they blamed the envoys they would be forced to blame their equals, other elite, Roman men. This story, rather than showing the ability of the *legati* to overcome setbacks, shows the competency of the Roman Senate to manufacture stories that uphold their own honor even when things do not work out in the ways that they wish.

Now that I have outlined the steps of the importation of Asklepios and the ways which we can see the influence of the Senate and the Roman upper classes in the importation, I have to mention the ways that this importation differed than that of Cybele because the unplanned

difficulties of the importation bring to light more sharply the need for the importation and the ways in which the Senate is willing to forgo tradition in order to achieve their desired ends. This comparison, as mentioned before, takes the importation of Cybele as an ‘ideal’ importation story to compare against the case study of Asklepios’s importation.

With Cybele, King Attalus gave the Roman delegation the sacred stone of Cybele — the object in which the goddess was thought to reside. This transference was essential to the Romans believing that the power of the goddess was being brought to their aid in Rome. However, when the Romans asked the council of elders at Epidaurus for the sacred object (perhaps the cult statue) of Asklepios, the council refused — not wanting to lose their own god.<sup>58</sup> However, the *legati* could not let the mission fail. Just as the ambassadors stopped at Delphi on the way to Cybele without the orders of the Senate, the ambassador to Asklepios similarly improvised. The ambassadors took a snake, the sacred animal of Asklepios and decided that bringing a snake back to Rome would have to suffice (likely being confident an explanatory narrative could be spun and accepted).<sup>59</sup> When the ambassadors were not able to complete their mission perfectly, in the way that a proper divine importation should take place, they had to cut corners and do their best because Rome needed them.

Even though the importation was not a complete success, one would not know this by reading the story of Asklepios alone — it is only in comparison to other importations that its shortcomings become apparent. The literary tradition has framed the importation as perfect. This

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<sup>58</sup> *Ov. Met.* 15

<sup>59</sup> Snakes were sometimes involved in healing rituals on Epidaurus so perhaps in choosing to bring back a snake rather than a rooster, another sacred animal of Asklepios, the ambassadors were trying to heal Rome through the god’s power. (Aristophanes' *Ploutos*, lines 735-36)



shows a remarkable flexibility in Roman religious practice and that under duress, the Senate is willing to take extraordinary measures to get their way. This interpretation of the importation, that transporting the snake back to Rome was the true goal, must have been a prevalent enough opinion that drawing from the tradition both Ovid and Livy chose to report the story that way. This means that although at the time the Senate knew the importation was not what they wanted, they were able to take credit all the same. By bringing back the snake and framing it as an ideal importation, the Senate gets all of the credit for saving Rome at its time of need and preserving the Roman people. This time of strife made the Senate adapt to new practices in order to achieve their goals and allowed them to increase their power through channels that they had not previously considered.

### CHAPTER 3: BACCHUS

Just twenty years after the Senate sent men to retrieve Cybele so that they might defeat Hannibal in the Second Punic War, another divine importation was occurring. The year was 186 BCE and the cult of Bacchus had just been imported from Greece. However, in this case, the Senate did not initiate or approve of the importation of the god. Instead, they met him with hatred and persecuted the cult and its followers.

After seeing the similarities between the tales of Cybele and Asklepios, the origin story of the Bacchic cult in Rome stands in sharp contrast. Once again, we can turn to Livy's record of the event. He dedicated a large section of Book 39 of his histories to the Senate's reaction to the Bacchic presence in Italy. This story is different from the others because instead of welcoming the god into Rome, the Senate fought the increased presence of the cult of Bacchus. As such, this case study provides an interesting opportunity to examine to reverse of the Cybele and Asklepios story — how the Senate dealt with foreign gods that it did not want in Rome and what their motivations were for wanting to keep the gods at arm's length.

For a scandal that takes up a large portion of Book 39, the *Periochae* give only a short mention to the Bacchic controversy saying:

Bacchanalia, sacrum Graecum et nocturnum, omnium scelerum seminarium, cum ad ingentis turbae coniurationem peruenisset, inuestigatum et multorum poena sublatum est.<sup>60</sup>

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The Bacchanalia, a sacred and nocturnal rite of the Greeks, the seed of all evil, when mobs of huge size participated in the conspiracy, the cult having been investigated and punishments were given to many people.

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<sup>60</sup> Livy, *Per.* 39

However, even with its terseness, the passage is able to give all of the salient details. There was a foreign cult that came to Rome, and when many people started to participate in it, the Senate had it investigated and as a result of the investigation many people were punished. The *Periochae* do not give any background or context for the importation of Bacchus. For Cybele and Asklepios, the summaries are explicit about the reasons for the importation — so that Rome can win the Second Punic War and to cure a plague, respectively. There is no mention of a reason because there seemingly is not one. The health and security of the state was not in danger at the time of Bacchus's arrival. Because there was no political event tied to the successful importation of the god, there were no foreseeable consequences to denying the cult a foothold in Italy.

The most immediate difference between the importations of Asklepios and Cybele when compared to that of Bacchus is the lack of Senate approved envoys that bring the god into Rome. Livy described the man who had brought the god into Italy as “some obscure Greek” and as a “petty sacrificing priest and prophet.”<sup>61</sup> Livy attaches a diminutive ending onto the word for priest (*sacrificulus*) when describing his actions in Italy. This belittling action emphasizes how little Livy, and the Roman Senate, thought of the man responsible for the importation of Bacchus. A large part of this thesis has been dedicated to analyzing those who acted as emissaries for the gods, whether those be *legati* or greeters. The men in these other stories were chosen by the Senate for their renown and their government expertise. The “obscure” and “petty priest” is made to look even less important when held up to the example of those who imported gods in the Senate approved way. In his own way, the priest is an emissary for the god. As a priest of Bacchus, he must have felt an affinity for the god and was only looking to spread the knowledge

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<sup>61</sup> Livy 39.8.3-4

he had received from the god. However, because the Senate did not approve of the importation, the priest cannot be called an envoy, ambassador, or legate in the literary record. His mission in spreading the teachings of his god is brought to an end by the Senate. And because they ultimately condemn and ban the Bacchic rites in Rome, the priest must be made to be as feeble as possible for posterity's sake. Livy's description of him reinforces the idea that Senatorial approval is what garners acceptance and power in Rome.

However, even if the Senate did not approve of the cult, the common people of Rome found solace within its folds. In describing the growing popularity of the Bacchic cult among the commoners, as this unsanctioned importation took hold of Italy, Livy offers a particularly unflattering description of Bacchus's cult: "the evil grows and creeps further daily, now it is already greater than is able to be held by private fortune; it must be seen as the most important challenge of the republic."<sup>62</sup> The cult's power grew as the rites "began to be circulated among men and women" throughout Italy.<sup>63</sup>

These phrases demonstrate the power that the common people were gaining by practicing the Bacchic rites. Without the permission of the Senate, the people were creating their own rituals and practices that gave them agency that had traditionally been denied to them. In the stories of Asklepios and Cybele, the people were excluded from the narrative as if they did not matter and were merely observers to the events happening. However, this story shows that the people themselves had a lot of religious agency. If they had banded together, they might have

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<sup>62</sup> Livy 39.16.3-4

<sup>63</sup> Livy 39.8

been able to stop the importation of one of the other gods, much like they facilitated the importation of Bacchus.

One of the features of this new cult, that set it apart from the pre-existing cults at the time was its inclusivity. Livy says that within the cult there was a “mixing of men and women, of the young and the old.”<sup>64</sup> To Livy and the other elite Roman men, this inclusive space was not a welcome addition to the Roman social scene. During its rites, those who would not normally mingle came together to perform common rituals in the secret of night and under the influence of drink.<sup>65</sup> This blending was thought to be the seat of revolutionary thought and was one of the primary concerns the Senate had regarding to the Bacchic cult. When the lower classes, those who are suppressed by those in power, gather in groups they tend to discuss shared experience. For the cultists, this shared experiences would have been their oppression at the hands of the Senate. By creating a space in which the airing of grievances amongst equals can occur, the Bacchic cult is able to bring into the open the anger and frustration that people may be feeling. It is also creating a space that is threatening to the Senate.

Thoughts were not the only things being freely exchanged during cult meetings, so too, were people. Livy uses the verb *misceo* to describe this mingling, and like many words that can mean to come together or blend, *misceo* was often used idiomatically to imply sexual relations. The idea of large groups of Romans gathering to celebrate orgiastic rites would have threatened

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<sup>64</sup> Livy 38.8.6

<sup>65</sup> Livy 38.8.5

the power of the Senate.<sup>66</sup> So much of Roman public life depended on defined familial relations and clear lines of inheritance. These nocturnal orgies would not have fit into this idea of a rigid family structure. If the core values of family were no longer considered important in Rome than the Senators who got to rule based on their family prestige were treated with the loss of their power. For this reason the Senate had to act.

Fearing the power that those who practice the rituals had, as it allowed the people to form social groups where ideas of revolution could be sown, the Senate issued a decree known as the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*.<sup>67</sup> In it, the steps the Senate took to suppress the cult were detailed — “no man is to be a priest, neither man nor woman is to be a leader,” “no more than five people should gather, men and women, who wish to perform the sacred rites,” and that “none of the men are to have a place for the Bacchanalia.”<sup>68</sup> These provisions seem to have a singular goal in mind, namely, to prevent the people from fashioning their own channels of influence without the Senate knowing about it. By not allowing men or women to become priests, the Senate discouraged them from gaining authority and influence among their peers or granting structural legitimacy to the cultists. In prohibiting meetings of groups larger than five they were making sure that large faction could not rise up against the Senate. And by requiring

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<sup>66</sup> Although there is no mention of a credible threat of revolt in either the *Senatus Consultum* or in Livy’s record of the conspiracy, just the threat of one is enough to make the Senate fear for their power. Their influence comes from the obedience of the lower classes and if the lower classes were to suddenly rise up against them, their authority would become moot.

<sup>67</sup>J. J. Tierney, ed. “The "Senatus Consultum De Bacchanalibus"." Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature 51 (1945): 89.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

senatorial permission for any legal shrine of Bacchus to be established, they were ensuring that they knew of all the places that uprising could spring from.

The terms of the decree clearly show that the Senate was scared of the *populus*. It is from the people that they gain their influence — as seen in the stories of Cybele and Asklepios, by saving Rome through their actions they gain more power due to the people’s renewed faith in them. It follows, then, that through the people they can also lose their power. Livy says that for a period of time, the Senate was unconcerned with the cult because it had “not yet had enough power to overthrow the republic.”<sup>69</sup> However, once they perceived the threat to be large enough, they had to act because if the state was overthrown, that means that why would be overthrown and loose their position as Senators and would become powerless. Looking at the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* as arising from these circumstances makes it clear that the Senate did not oppose the importation of a new god, it had imported Cybele within twenty years of the Bacchic incident, but feared this cult that gave power to the people and not only to an elite subsection of the population.

The Bacchic cult did not give the people power in the traditional, political way that the Senate had power. Instead, it gave them power in numbers. It provided a meeting space for the lower classes to gather and talk freely. There is a reason that ‘safety in numbers’ is a cliché and The Senate believe that the cultists were beginning to understand that joining together could help their cause. Even though there is no evidence for any type of planned rebellion against the Senate originating from the cult, the Senate believed that the practitioners were attempting to increase their power, first interpersonally, and then, when they finally had a critical mass, politically

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<sup>69</sup> Livy 39.16.3

through rebellion. And although this rebellion was a figment of the Senate's imagination, it was still determined to be plausible enough that action was required. As said before, the Senate was not going to risk the loss of their power so that a foreign cult could thrive in Rome.

In order to make sure the revolt did not occur and that they kept their power, the Senate enforced the proclamations of the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* by sending out aediles and magistrates throughout Italy.<sup>70</sup> The Senate's use of the aedile is contrasted here with their use of an aedile in the procuration of Cybele — one for the welcoming of a goddess and one for the banning of a god. However, in either case, the aedile is shown to be an instrument of the government that does the Senate's bidding. The aediles were told that they “should seek out all of the priests of his (Bacchus's) religious rites, and having been detained, should guard them in an open room for questioning.”<sup>71</sup> In the other importations, the aediles and other magistrates can be seen as messengers who were used to convey the wishes of the Senate in order to bring the gods into Rome. Now, the aediles are being used as messengers to punish the Bacchantes according to the will of the Senate.

Another interesting distinction between the Bacchic story and the other stories concerns the practice of naming specific individuals. In the Cybele story those who were singled out by name were done so for their excellence. Publius Scipio, Claudia Quinta, and the ambassadors sent to King Attalus were all being commended for the good deeds and were presumably named by Livy so that their memory would be preserved for later generations. However, in the Bacchic story most people are named for the opposite reason. Livy names those who most egregiously

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<sup>70</sup> Livy 39.14

<sup>71</sup> Livy 29.14.9



did wrong in the eyes of the Senate. Hispala was a woman who first confirmed to the magistrates that the rituals were being practiced in Italy.<sup>72</sup> Later on Livy names even more people saying that: “Marcus and Gaius Antinius of the Roman plebs, and Faliscan Lucius Opicernius, and the Campanian Minimus Cerrinius were established as the leaders (of the Bacchic cult).”<sup>73</sup> These men were most likely named for the same reason that the individuals were named in the Cybele story — so that history would remember who they were and what they had done. So that those who followed would heed their warning and remember not to threaten the power and stability of the Senate.

It is clear that the story of the importation of Bacchus is completely different than that of Asklepios and Cybele. However, the importation of Bacchus was stopped for the same reasons that the importations of Asklepios and Cybele were allowed — its impact of the power of the Senate. The popular cult threatened to give the Roman people *en masse* an outlet for their anger and frustrations with the government. It allowed people of all social classes and ages to gather and, if they were so moved, plot whatever kind of revolution they wanted. The Senate could not risk this. The cult threatened to blur the harsh lines of Roman inheritance and familial descent. In rituals that resembled orgies who would be able to say for sure who impregnated a woman? Uncertain parentage does not fit into the elite, Roman model of a household. If the state were to be overcome with illegitimate children the dynastic rule of Senatorial families would have to come to an end. This too, could not be allowed.

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<sup>72</sup> Livy 29.12.4-5

<sup>73</sup> Livy 29.17.6-7

And while it may seem hypocritical for the Senate to import Cybele, a goddess whose cult demanded that her male priests self-castrate but deny another god entry for perceived sexual deviance, the Senate was not worried about hypocrisy but power. The importation of Cybele came in the middle of a war and was deemed necessary by the Roman people to win or at least to improve morale. The Bacchic scandal occurred during a time of relative peace and the welfare of the state was not tied to Bacchus's successful importation. In times of peril, the Senate is willing to take advantage of any means to keep their favor among the people. As we saw, the Senate imported Cybele because they had to — but they changed the rules for becoming her priests and removed the element of self-castration. When it came to Bacchus, the Senate did not need to find ways to sanitize his rites because his cult was not needed to save the state of Rome. In fact, the Senate believed that his cult was not conducive to their keeping power, so it had to be stamped out. The cessation of the growth of the Bacchus cult highlights the Senate's desire to keep its own power and influence over the people of Rome.

## CONCLUSION

I would like to begin my conclusions by stating that this thesis is not an exhaustive analysis of the subject it aims to investigate. It was finished as COVID-19, a novel coronavirus swept across the world and caused first-of-their-kind social distancing measures, moving all schools online and limiting access to resources. While writing this thesis, particularly Chapter 2, I could not help but wonder if the United States could seek out our own Asklepios to end the plague that we are currently facing.

However, even under conditions that were not ideal, I believe that this thesis succeeded in its overarching mission. After analyzing the three importation stories, I think there is a clear trend of Senatorial involvement in the divine importations. It is clear from the literary and epigraphic tradition that in all three importation narratives the Senate was concerned about keeping their power and influence in Rome.

While obtaining the goddess Cybele, the Senate sent ambassadors who would uphold Roman virtues in their dealings with King Attalus and ensure that the mission was successful. The Senate then reinforced their own values by having both Publius Scipio and Claudia Quinta greet the goddess upon her arrival in Rome. In elevating the noble families that these two belonged to, the Senate was once again placing power in the elite class. And when the elite gained more power and prestige, the Senate did as well. At the same time as they were promoting the elite values of Rome, the Senate was also covering up the less wholesome aspects of Cybele's worship, such as the self-castration required of the *Galloi* so that Roman sexual morals were not in danger of being threatened.

Similarly, the senate elevated elite men as ambassadors to procure Asklepios. The literary record also makes it known that although the importation did not proceed according to plan, the Senate made sure to spin the story as though it was executed flawlessly. By increasing the competency of the ambassadors, the Senate reinforced the prestige and honor of elite men which, once again, reinforced their own prestige.

Lastly, the Bacchic conspiracy showed that the Senate, when they felt that their own power was in peril, was willing to effectively banish a cult from Italy in order to make sure they retained their power. The cult of Bacchus threatened the moral systems that they felt Rome was built on — clear family ties and that the Senate was above reproach from the public. The Senate believed that starting an inquisition among its own people, which must have caused some level of resentment, was a more surefire way to keep their power than allowing them to worship this new foreign god.

These three stories show just how invested the Senate was in religious life when it was impactful for them. The importation of the cults in question was used to manipulate the *populus* into venerating the Senate for their charitable actions and to bolster the presence elite values throughout the state. By allowing Cybele and Asklepios to come into Rome the Senate gave the public something to hope for in times of crisis and through banishment of Bacchus the Senate guaranteed that any potential rebellions were quelled and sexual *mores* were upheld.

I chose to limit this thesis to divine importations that occurred during the Middle Republic in order to limit as many variables as possible. The importations we studied all occurred within roughly one century of each other and, as such, the systemic institutions of Rome were as equal across all three importations as they could be. But, the Middle Republic is

not the only time that gods were brought into Rome from outside, though. It would be very interesting to analyze other importation stories with the lens that I proposed through this thesis. For example, in the first century CE the Egyptian goddess Isis became popular in Rome. After a period of extreme popularity, the emperor banned the worship of the cult, only for one of his successors to legalize the cult once more. The creation of the Imperial Cult once the emperor becomes an important figure in Rome and the affinity that Roman soldiers felt for the eastern god Mithras would be two further examples of Romans coming into contact with a foreign god that demanded a response from those in power.

Karl Marx would famously say in 1843 that “religion is the opium of the people,” meaning that through religion, the masses of people can be kept under control.<sup>74</sup> Although this quote comes two millennia after the Senate chose to import two gods and refute a third, it is very fitting. In controlling these religious importations, the Senate saw themselves as controlling the way the people under their control interacted with the world and with them. By manipulating the cults strategically, the Senate was able to augment its own power and preserve its treasured, Roman values for another day.

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<sup>74</sup> Karl Marx, "Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," *Collected Works*, v. 3. New York (1976).

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