Munn, Mark

*The Mother of the Gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia: A Study of Sovereignty in Ancient Religion*


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*Mother of the Gods* is a densely written and densely documented study of an especially seminal period in the development of Athenian religious and political culture in the fifth century B.C.E. And although the focus of Munn’s book is on developments in Athens set in the context of the interplay between Athenian religious and political culture and that of various successive regimes in Asia Minor, the implications of Munn’s work stretch far beyond the focus of *Mother of the Gods*. It is simultaneously a study in the construction of authority, in the operations of religious discourse, as historical case study serves as groundwork for theorizing religion, as well as shedding somewhat different light on later developments such as the formation of both the Hellenistic and Roman imperial formations. For this the book will serve many ends: as historical exposé, as extensively documented reference work, and as useful recommended resource for senior/graduate students.

The core argument of *Mother of the Gods* deals with the circumstances surrounding the introduction of the cult of Cybele/Meter Megale (or, Kybaba/Kybebe, as she was known in Phrygia and Lydia) in Athens, from her initial rejection at the beginning of the fifth century to her arrival in Athens in the last decade of the fifth century B.C.E. Tracing these developments mainly through the eyes of Herodotus (but also other Greek writers—
historians, poets, dramatists—as well as later writers from the imperial age and even later antiquity, and in conversation with a wealth of recent scholarship), Munn sketches a picture of an ambiguous divinity whose shape and symbolic function are determined by the fluid historical, cultural, and political discourses that encoded the variously shifting Athenian (and in general: Greek) adaptations to the flow of events in which they were caught up. In chameleon-like fashion the “Mother” is variously mother of the gods; consort of the chief deity; consort of the sovereign; fertility deity; seductress; virgin; upholder of customs, laws, and constitutions; and bearer of many masks across different religious cultures from ancient Persia, Media, Babylonia, Assyria, Lydia, Phrygia, Ionia to Attica and the Peloponnese (a feature that in studies of religious history has led to the, theoretically unsatisfying, formulation: “x is identified with y”). But it is exactly this facet that opens a window onto the discursive manufacturing of gods and its ideological underpinnings and that Munn expertly uncovers in the course of his historical narrative and analysis.

In summary, Munn argues that the Mother of the Gods formed the focal point for, and embodiment of, discourses about an ideology of tyranny and sovereignty (basileia) that ordered power relationships and was used in the construction of communal identity, worldview, and religion itself. Its first clear manifestation is seen in the eighth-century B.C.E. (Homeric epoch) Lydian kingdoms of Midas and Croesus, which inaugurated a legacy of tyranny understood as transgressive excess signifying divine justification of tyrannical rule. Not limited to Lydian and Phrygian political and religious culture, tyranny also marked the political culture of Greeks on the mainland and elsewhere. However, the fall of the Lydian kingdom to Achaemenid Persian hegemony, and the adoption of the ideology of tyranny by the Persians, forced a Greek reconsideration of how to respond to the aggressive claims of Persian sovereignty. While Greeks were not unfamiliar with tyrannical regimes of their own, the “Persian situation” opened up a space for debates about the nature of sovereignty and the institutionalization of sovereignty in communal institutions rather than vesting this in powerful personalities, developments that saw Lydian-Phrygian-Persian style tyranny acquire the character of odious oppression in Greek representations of power exercise. In this process a key role is played by the symbols of authority, the gods, and how they were appropriated, rejected, and used.

The central event that defined the Athenian reaction is the account of the murder of the ambassador sent by Darius to Athens demanding recognition of Persian sovereignty, the Metragyrtes (= “beggar of the Mother,” the eunuch priest of the Mother of the Gods at Sardis), which event unleashed a century-long history of revenge, warfare, shifting alliances (Athens, Sparta, the Ionian Greeks, even with the Persian satrapy in Asia Minor), and even intermittent peace treaties between sometime enemies. It is in the
Athenian construction of the event—itself a fluid phenomenon—that the mythicizing processes of interpretation of the significance of historical actions can be detected (the “political uses of myth,” so Bruce Lincoln): the choice for “the gods of the Greeks” as the rallying cry for the construction of Greek or pan-Hellenic identity in contradistinction to the earlier regnant encompassing “pan-Asian” worldview; the construction of Europe and Asia as mutually exclusive identities; the recalibration of Greek gods (or Greek versions of the Mother) to embody opposing characteristics disallowing constructions of tyranny (features such as virginity in contrast to emphases on sexuality); yet, gradually, also the adoption of the Great Mother as an act of appeasement for the murder of her ambassador in answer to the various calamities befalling Athens in the long conflict with Persia; the introduction to Athens of the cult of the Mother as guarantor of “wise counsel” (i.e., as symbol of democratic deliberative harmony); and as the ever-ambiguous embodiment of both Greek aversion to tyranny as well as the recognition of the power and ideology of tyranny as underlying and feeding the Athenian empire in the exercise of its sovereignty and dominance of the Aegean Sea as a maritime power. The Mother of the Gods was an irresistible power (as Nemesis and Themis; as patron of sovereignty and carnivalesque nurturer, Demeter, Aphrodite, Rhea, and Ge) that had to be defined and controlled.

Munn’s narrative of the Great Mother spans a long history. It starts with the deep-reaching roots of classical Greek conceptions of sovereignty and tyranny in seventh- and sixth-century Asian mythologies of power centered on Sardis and Gordium (the centers of the Phrygian and the Lydian empires) and evidenced in the royal ideologies of the dynasties of Midas and the Mermnads (Croesus) with their mythologization of the transgressive excesses of divine-human rulers as harbingers of paradisal wholeness and carnivalesque excess in a kind of Saturnalian golden age, with the concomitant spread of the Mother of the Gods through the then-known oikoumene as the symbolic embodiment of the ideology and practices of Lydian tyranny (chs. 1 [13–55], 2 [56–95], 3 [96–130], and 4 [131–77]). It proceeds to the construction of mutually exclusive worldviews and identities of Asia and Europe and the division of the oikoumene into two separate domains of sovereignty (ch. 5 [178–220]). Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the establishment of Persian sovereignty in Asia Minor and Persian appropriation of the ideology of Lydian tyranny and the effects this had on Persian-Greek interaction, delineating the various ways in which Greek recalibrations of divine identities answered developments in the political sphere (221–61, 262–92, respectively). Chapter 8 provides a closer consideration of the rhetoric operative in Herodotus’s account of the history of the introduction of the Great Mother to Athens as interwoven with his own analysis of the presence and effects of the hand of the god in the political vicissitudes of Athens as an element in the construction of Athenian self-awareness of their own “imperial” place in the oikoumene (293–316). Finally, in chapter 9 Munn draws the lines together in a discussion of the
introduction of the Great Mother to Athens and the establishment of her cult, but now recalibrated with different characteristics, as well as evidence of an Athenian accommodation to a world in which they shared sovereignty with Persian Asia—and thus the introduction of the cult of the Mother in effect constituted a kind of “religious peace treaty” with the Persians of Asia Minor (317–49).

The book is rounded off with a conclusion (351–58) in which the main elements of the argument throughout the book are concisely restated. In fact, this is one of the great features of Munn’s book, namely, that every chapter is introduced by a paragraph or two mapping the argument thus far and ends with both a short rehearsal of the chapter’s argument and with a view ahead to what comes next. Not only essential in a densely documented and argued work, but it also allows the reader to remain fully oriented with regard to the progression of the argument. An extensive bibliography and two indexes (“General Index” and “Index Locorum”) close the book.

I have said at the beginning that the significance of Munn’s work extends far beyond the narrow confines of the history analyzed and interpreted here. I venture only a few remarks on this. Since Simon Price’s foundational work on Roman imperial cult, it has become commonplace to see the rise of imperial cult in the Greek-speaking provinces of the eastern Roman Empire (i.e., mainly the province of Asia) as evidence of Greek comportment with the novel phenomenon of absolute imperium vested in the person of the emperor. Munn’s book now invites a reassessment of this view, or at least a more nuanced restatement of it: the transgressive excess that characterized the royal ideologies and practices of the early Lydian and Phrygian kingdoms can be understood as providing the enduring paradigm for what became Hellenistic (both in Alexander and in the Diadochi) and Roman imperial formations. If the cult of the Roman emperor and his apotheosis was premised inter alia on the paradoxical and wholesale transgression of normal human—and even divine—boundaries (so Brian Bosworth), then it can be concluded that Greek dealings with “apotheosized tyrannical imperium” had deep-reaching antecedents indeed.

While Munn mentions the Roman transportation of the Great Mother (in the shape of her image, the black meteorite stone) from her home seat at Pessinus in Phrygian Galatia at the height of the second Punic war only in passing (342), the fact that this event took place equally at a time of ambiguous evaluations of the outcome of the war, during a struggle for maritime supremacy, is significant. That the Mother and her cult was severely constrained and controlled in Rome in an effort to contain the excesses associated with her cult speaks volumes of dual Roman awareness of her efficacy in enabling imperial formation and control of the sea (as in the case of Athens two centuries before), as well as the temptation to tyrannical power grabs inspired by the Mother—to be contained by the
Republic still nominally beholden to democratic ideals (again, reminiscent of Athenian praxis of two centuries before). And in this the subsequent history of Rome is very much a replication of the attitudes and practices in contestation in Athens, as well as of the eventual fate of Athens and its democratic discourse.

The “triumphal march of Isis” through the Mediterranean world (so Henk Versnel) illustrates the ambiguities embodied by imperialized female deities even better: as represented in the Kyme aretalogy (IK Kyme 41), Isis is both tyrant and the destroyer of tyrants, both deliverer from tyranny and binding devotees in bonds of exclusive loyalty, as tyrant controls the sea and fate, and gives civilization and the fruits of agriculture to the human race. As civilizer, as tyrant, as guarantor of a restored paradisal age, Isis indeed comes to function as an “Egyptian Great Mother,” something further demonstrated by her character as myrionyma—all the other female deities embodied. And it is no coincidence that she assumes the position of tutelary deity to the Flavians after 69 C.E. and remained the symbol of the presence of Roman sovereignty on the borders of the empire, a political formation the justification of which was premised on the restoration of the saeculum aureum, a mythical golden age. When later the Virgin, the Mother, God-bearer, Queen of Heaven assumed a similar position in the Christian empire, we can discern the remarkable persistence of myth in the eastern Mediterranean world from the seventh century B.C.E. to the present day, variously expressed and represented to be sure, but with a consistency of ideology and symbolism that is truly remarkable.