

**Dionysian Semiotics: Myco-Dendrolatry and Other Shamanic Motifs in the
Myths and Rituals of the Phrygian Mother**

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

The administration of initiation rites by an ecstatic specialist, now known to western scholarship by the general designation of ‘shaman’, has proven to be one of humanity’s oldest, most widespread, and continuous magico-religious traditions. At the heart of their initiatory rituals lay an ordeal – a metaphysical journey - almost ubiquitously brought on by the effects of a life-changing hallucinogenic drug experience. To guide their initiates, these shaman worked with a repertoire of locally acquired instruments, costumes, dances, and ecstasy-inducing substances. Among past Mediterranean cultures, Semitic and Indo-European, these sorts of initiation rites were vital to society’s spiritual well-being. It was, however, the mystery schools of antiquity – organizations founded upon conserving the secrets of plant-lore, astrology, theurgy and mystical philosophy – which satisfied the role of the shaman in Greco-Roman society. The rites they delivered to the common individual were a form of ritualized ecstasy and they provided an orderly context for religiously-oriented intoxication.

In the eastern Mediterranean, these ecstatic cults were most often held in honour of a great mother goddess and her perennially dying-and-rising consort. The goddess’ religious dramas enacted in cultic ritual stressed the importance of fasting, drumming, trance-inducing music, self-mutilation, and a non-alcoholic ritual intoxication. Far and wide the dying consort worshiped by these cults was a god of vegetation, ecstasy, revelation, and salvation; by ingesting his body initiates underwent a profound mystical experience. From what limited information has survived from antiquity, it appears that the rites practiced in the eastern mystery cults were in essence traditional shamanic ordeals remodeled to suit the psychological needs of Mediterranean civilization’s marginalized people. This paper argues that the myths of this vegetable god, so-called ‘the Divine Bridegroom,’ particularly in manifestation of the Phrygian Attis and the Greek Dionysus, is deeply rooted in the life-cycle, cultivation, treatment, consumption of a tree-born hallucinogenic mushroom, *Amanita muscaria*. The use of this mushroom is alive and well today among Finno-Ugric shaman and this paper explores their practices as one branch of Eurasian shamanism running parallel to, albeit in a different time, the rites of the Phrygian goddess. Using extant literary and linguistic evidence, I compare the initiatory cults long-assimilated into post-agricultural Mediterranean civilization with the hallucinogen-wielding shaman of the Russian steppe, emphasizing them both as facets of a prehistoric and pan-human magico-religious archetype.

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Foreword

The multifaceted nature of the term “history” has made it easy for scholars to misunderstand each other when studying religious phenomena. Our extant information is generally anecdotal – a snapshot of one individual’s perspective standing apart from an ocean of worshippers – and this is most certainly the case with the mystery cults that revolved around deeply psychological ritual dramas instead of great monuments, temple courtyards, and inscriptions. In accounting for the evolution of ritual or tradition, scholars are generally incapable of relating a perfectly clear picture of how things unfolded in the psyche of any given participant. Naturally, they could do so if clear and abundant documents allowed for it, but this is seldom the case. Throughout the course of our investigation, we must never forget that many facts concerning religion, myth, and ritual are not entirely reducible to a clear-cut chronologically ordered ‘history’ but rather a discussion. My topic covers many cultures and a vast expanse of time, and thus it is difficult to clearly relate all the parallel developments across several cultures in chronological order. The ‘history’ of a given religion is rarely capable of relating the totality of that religion’s chronological evolution, since the details concerning its myths, symbols, and rituals rarely survive intact once the people practicing them cease to exist. Details relating what exactly occurred during mysteries of Dionysus, or any ‘mysteries’ for that matter, were occulted by symbolism and myth in the written record to distort their clarity. Our clearest vestiges are the writings of aristocratic poets and church fathers; some of these were former initiates, and some were mere critics watching on at a distance. The writers of antiquity were all aware of the risk in divulging the mysteries of a god as wrathful as Dionysus, and this includes identifying the sacrament through which union with the god was achieved. These types of profanations were by no means tolerable offenses, and many stories exist of men being sentenced to death for their public profanations. Ultimately, it is mostly through the works of stifled ancient authors that our picture of mystery cults has arisen.

Before moving forward, I would like to define some terminology for a handful of words which appear often in my work in order to ensure a consistent and meaningful

employment of the terms. As one with an interest in etymology, I often lean heavily on the meaning of a word's ancient root as the basis for my own definitions. Religion, as I understand it, stems from the Latin *religare* 'to bind fast' and it consists of the collective beliefs, symbols, and practices (or 'rituals') which are shared by a social group and are communally binding. When I use the term 'myth' I am, of course, referring to stories, folklore, and fables. These stories, however, are fundamentally vivid catalogues of shared subconscious archetypes from which many details may be extrapolated concerning its respective culture. Our chief source for understanding myth comes down from the extant literature, and therefore, it is in the writings of the ancient authors, both Christians and pagans, upon which I must formulate my myth-centered arguments.

The term 'cult,' taken from the Latin verb '*colo, colere, colui, cultus*' (which in this context refers to the acts of maintaining, honoring, worshipping, adorning, dressing, decorating, and embellishing) is the word I use to encompass the widespread corpus of practices (or 'rituals') of any given religion. When I speak of 'mystery cults' I am of course referring to a title which is a modern invention. The ancients did not have the same need to elaborately categorize their religious landscape as we do. The 'mystery cults' were a handful of marginal Eastern Mediterranean cults which achieved popularity throughout the Roman empire and were distinguished as a unique religious phenomenon by Franz Cumont in his 1906 in *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*.¹ This label of 'mystery cults' has now long been used as a blanket designation to cover the cults held in honour of Mithra, Attis and Cybele, Isis and Osiris, Demeter and Persephone, Orpheus and Bacchus/Dionysus, and the Samothracian Kabeiroi, among many other minor and local groups. Each of these (with perhaps the exception of Mithraism) revolved around the dramatic and ecstatic veneration of "dying-and-rising-gods," a title formulated by James G. Frazer (1854-1941) and developed by British and Scandinavian members of the Myth-and-Ritual School. The 'Divine Bridegroom' is similarly a name I use for these dying mystery gods. The mystery religions were sanctuary based, taking place in a *telestrion*, caves, or mountain groves, and structured with hierarchical degrees of initiation among their members. The "mysteries"

¹ Franz Cumont. *Les Religions Orientales dans le Paganisme Romain*. (Paris: Musée Guimet, 1905).

themselves generally entail esoteric initiation ceremonies connected to the annual agricultural and astrological cycles.² Already the mainstream view of ethnologists is focused on the notion that the mysteries are survivals of ancient “rites of passage,” especially by Mircea Eliade and Angelo Brelich. Many believe that the origin of the mysteries should be sought in some stage of primitive agricultural development, and it is *in illo tempore* to which I wish to return with this paper with myth and pre-history.³

² Giovanni Casadio and Patricia Johnston, *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 2-4.

³ Casadio and Johnston, *Mystic Cults*, 5.

Introduction

“The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their *enlarged & numerous senses* could perceive... Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar... thus began Priesthood; choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. And at length they pronounc'd that the Gods had order'd such things. Thus men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast.”
– William Blake, *Marriage of Heaven & Hell*, Plate XI

In the latter half of the 20th century, persuasive archaeological arguments were finally put forth regarding the use of psychoactive substances as sacraments in some of mankind's earliest belief systems.⁴ The reemergence of interest in this subject first sprung from anthropological investigations of modern preliterate cultures whose local shamanic traditions widely made use of locally available hallucinogenic substances to induce visionary states (or “mystical experiences”) and ecstatic (or “out-of-body”) flights.⁵ The limited information concerning the role of hallucinogens in the West before this period can be explained by the thousand-year reign of medieval Christendom which left the majority of Europe oblivious to non-alcohol induced states of altered consciousness. The ties between hallucinogens and ‘witchcraft’ have long been, and continue to be, stressed by missionaries who designate all indigenous shaman as “witch-doctors” and a sorcerous blight from the devil. Nevertheless,

⁴ Andrew Sherratt, “Sacred and Profane Substances: the Ritual Use of Narcotics in Later Neolithic Europe.” In *Sacred and Profane*, by P. Garwood and et al., 52. Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1991; M. D. Merlin, “Archaeological Evidence for the Tradition of Psychoactive Plant Use in the Old World” *Economic Botany* 57, 3 (2003): 295ff.

⁵ The terms ‘entheogen,’ ‘psychedelic,’ and ‘hallucinogen’ are all fundamentally interchangeable. Though it is a fairly loaded neologism in and of itself, I occasionally use the term ‘entheogen’ which was first proposed by Gordon Wasson and Jonathan Ott. It derives from the same root as *enthousiasmos* and refers specifically to the use of hallucinogens in a ritual, religious, or spiritual context. ‘Hallucinogen’ is the most common term used to designate these types of substances in the academic literature. The main objection to this term, however, is that these plants do not necessarily induce ‘hallucinations’ in the conventional English sense of delusions or perceived illusions. ‘Hallucinogen’ when used in the sense of its Latin root, the deponent verb *alucinor, alucinari* “to wander in the mind/to ramble unreasonably/to dream,” is quite an accurate term to designate the experience caused by these substances – especially since these wanderings came to be known colloquially around the world as ‘journeys’ or ‘trips.’ ‘Psychedelic’ was first devised by Aldous Huxley and Humphrey Osmond to mean ‘mind manifesting’ before it was eventually taken up and vulgarized by Timothy Leary and the Harvard group of the 1960s. Since then, the term has come to carry a negative connotation (which may or may not have been fairly attributed), and as such I tend to avoid its use in this paper unless specific context merits it.

the prophets and mystics of our contemporary world's most widely respected 'revealed' faiths also worked through the medium of ecstasy, whether with the help of mind-altering substances or not. Ecstasy was the means by which they connected to the divine, thus validating it as an integral subject for historical, literary, and anthropological inquiry.⁶

The modern world stands at odds with the whole of human history due to its difficulty in reconciling the orderly use of consciousness-altering substances with our current conceptions of rational materialism. As a result of this gap, the sciences and humanities have struggled to unravel the social, psychological, and spiritual importance of intoxication upon the individual and our wider culture. On the one hand, modern research has enthusiastically recorded the culture and history of the West's favourite drug: alcohol – but on the other hand, it has been relatively silent as to what other means existed for people such as Thracian slaves, Delphic priestesses, or Ionian philosophers to alter consciousness with religious intent. The civilizations of the Mediterranean and Near-East were surely not so constipated in their world-view that for sheer moral reasons they, above all other cultures, should turn their noses up at the only locally available food, medicine, or drug. Many scholars of the 20th century were comfortable in accepting the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms in the far-off lands of Vedic India or among the 'primitives' of Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, while the linguistic, archaeological, and literary evidence suggesting the use of hallucinogens around the Mediterranean and in Northern Europe has been largely ignored.

Among those who refute or openly discount the importance of psychoactive substances in the Greco-Roman mystery cults, it is often clear that such opinions have arisen out of ideological presentism. In many instances, errors and oversights are unintentional and entirely understandable, being perhaps the result of an all-too-human near-sightedness which distorts our attempts to experience the texts and material evidence in the way the ancients did. In other instances, these refutations are deliberately construed from a selective

⁶ Eliade, *Shamanism*, xxv; Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.15.71: Clement was one to recognize the fundamentally shamanic origins of philosophy which flourished "long ages ago among the barbarians, diffusing its light among the gentiles, and eventually penetrated into Greece. Its hierophants were the prophets among the Egyptians, the Chaldeans among the Assyrians, the Druids among the Galatians, the *Sramanas* of the Bactrians, and the philosophers of the Celts, the Magi among the Persians who announced beforehand the birth of the Saviour, being led by a star till they arrived in the land of Judaea, and among the Indians the gymnosophists, and other philosophers of barbarous nations."

misreading of the scholarship to the exclusion the quality of evidence.⁷ Refutations of legitimate research have revealed the deep-seated conservative anxieties of certain scholars over drugs. These are then aggravated by the 20th century discourse propagated by public service announcements depicting meth-labs, heroine fiends, crack dens, and inner-city gangs. When the past is used to legitimize the present, to write about drugs beyond the narrow confines the ‘treat-the-addict’ and ‘incarcerate-the-criminal’ paradigms creates some potential risks.⁸ Prohibitionist rhetoric often demonstrating little understanding of man’s prehistoric relationship with psychoactive substances has led our society to the widespread belief that if an individual does not condemn the consumption of illegal substances, then he himself must be an outlaw or addict and therefore incapable of rational inquiry and unbiased research. These denunciations perpetuate a shy, sterilized, and ‘Victorian’ reconstruction of the past while stifling honest historical inquiry. Contrary to popular belief, the majority of hallucinogenic plants have neither dangerous long-term effects nor addictive properties.⁹ Whether or not one believes the use of mind-altering substances by moderns or ancients is morally objectionable, it is an irrefutable fact that these substances have had an extensive part to play in the development of human culture and religion, and will likely continue to do so.

Since the boundaries between eisegesis and exegesis easily blurred in the field of religious history, the cultural climate in which a work is written has a dramatic impact on how research might be interpreted, delivered, and received.¹⁰ The widespread notoriety surrounding psychedelic drug use in the 1960s led the renowned authority on shamanism,

⁷ See Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 108-109 for an example of the unscholarly attitudes of mainstream scholarship against the legitimate arguments brought forth by Ruck, Hofmann, and Wasson, where Burkert denies the possibility of a drugged sacrament with presentist rhetoric, proclaiming: “the use of drugs, as our time has been doomed to see, does not create a true sense of community but rather leads to isolation.” Perhaps Burkert would best explain his reasoning to the billions around the globe using coffee, tobacco, tea, alcohol, and cannabis among other substances as the focal point of countless social interactions. This remark is not intended to diminish the enormous contribution which Burkert has made in the study of ancient religion, but to remind us of the complexity of human-plant symbiosis and how it cannot be so easily swept aside in discussions of mystery initiations.

⁸ Michael Rinella, *Pharmakon: Plato, Drug Culture, and Identity in Ancient Athens* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010), xxv.

⁹ Richard Evan Schultes, *Hallucinogenic Plants* (New York : Golden Press, 1976), 5.

¹⁰ Rinella, *Pharmakon*, xxv.

Mircea Eliade, to declare (contrary to his own evidence) that the use of drugs by shamans was exclusively characteristic of shamanism's final decadent phase before lapsing out of existence.¹¹ Nevertheless, the notion that plants with the potential to elicit mystical experiences were not exploited by humans is entirely untenable in the face of the literary and archaeological evidence. Anthropologist Peter Furst reported that prior to his death, Eliade ultimately confessed that he had come to accept that in essence there was no difference between plant-induced ecstasy and ecstasy achieved through other means.¹² Eliade's groundbreaking work, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, was first published in 1951 and largely served to broaden the definition of the term 'shamanism' for religious scholars, defining it concisely as "techniques of ecstasy." Broadening the definition of this word to extend beyond the boundaries of Russia allowed Eliade to expand the utility of a word and concisely encapsulate a global phenomenon, making headway for modern scholars to compare and contrast shamanisms various manifestations across the globe.

In the turbulent intellectual climate of the mid-20th century, the most thorough research concerning the historical use of psychoactive plants came first from among unlikely characters. The argument that hallucinogenic mushrooms lay at the heart of man's oldest recorded religions was explored in detail by retired J.P. Morgan banker and amateur mycologist Robert Gordon Wasson, who published his magnum opus *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* in 1968. John Allegro, one of the eight translators of the Dead Sea Scrolls following their discovery in 1947, authored his notorious book *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (1970) based on his linguistic research done while deciphering the texts. Decades later, Wasson's work, which placed the mushroom in the foreign and exotic context of Vedic India, still holds weight for many. The work of Allegro, which was composed as a concerted stab at the heart of conventional Christian scholarship, has not been met with such acclaim. Having once been a candidate for the Methodist ministry, Allegro foolishly

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 401.

¹² Peter Furst, "Introduction: An Overview of Shamanism" in *Ancient Traditions*, ed. Gary Seaman and Jane S. Day (Boulder: University Press of Colorado: 1994), 23.

presented his work on the mushroom in ancient religion with the overt purpose of debunking Judeo-Christianity and thereby ‘liberating’ the modern world from its influence.

Allegro’s mistake was the argument that if Christianity was no more than a branch of countless sacramental societies centered on a mushroom, then its moral teachings were nothing more than drug-induced fables. Naturally, the response from the wider scholarly community, chiefly from Christian theologians, was one of outrage and outright rejection with little consideration of his arguments – his entire academic career was ruined. Allegro was principally criticized for his hasty linguistic methodology and his gratuitously sexualized interpretation of Christian scripture as primitive fertility myth; nevertheless, the data he gathered concerning the mushroom and its relationship with ancient religion in general was vast. Erroneously, his critics argued *Amanita muscaria* had never even existed in the Middle-East and thus wrote off all of his arguments wholesale.¹³ In the face of the bitter dismissals of his straight and sober scholarship, Allegro resigned from his post and until his death in 1988 he dwelt on the fringes of academia in literary exile.¹⁴

Since the early 1970s, the torch of scholarship concerning the role of hallucinogens in shamanism and antiquity was taken up by Albert Hofmann, Richard Evans Schultes, Jonathan Ott, Carl Ruck, along with their numerous collaborators. Over three decades have now passed since Wasson, Ruck and Hoffman put forward their highly convincing reconstruction of the Eleusinian mysteries which fixed it around the consumption of an ergot-derived lysergic acid alkaloid potion, the *κυκεών*.¹⁵ It is my wish to extend their findings and suggest that the consumption of such a drug along with many other shamanic practices or

¹³ Recent scientific literature is clear on the widespread global distribution of *Amanita muscaria* and *Amanita pantherina*. See Oda Takanashi et al., “Molecular phylogeny and biogeography of the widely distributed *Amanita* species, *A. muscaria* and *A. pantherina*,” *Mycological Research* 108, 8 (2004): 885. József Gelm et al., “Evidence for strong inter- and intracontinental phylogeographic structure in *Amanita Muscaria*, a wind-dispersed ectomycorrhizal basidiomycete.” *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution* 48 (2008): 694. This well-researched mushroom is intra-continentially distributed and abundant as a result of its wind-dispersed spores. Though its preference is to grow along with the birch and the pine, it can graft itself onto a wide variety of coniferous and some angiosperm host trees. According to Gelm, the resilient *Amanita muscaria* is considered an invasive species to the southern hemisphere, brought southward long ago from the North around the globe.

¹⁴ James Vanderkam and Peter Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance For Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity*. (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 323-327.

¹⁵ R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann and Carl Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2008). See also Peter Webster, Daniel M. Perrine, and Carl A.P. Ruck. “Mixing the Kykeon.” *Journal of Psychoactive Plants and Compounds New Series* 4 (2000): 2-25.

‘techniques for ecstasy’ were central to many, if not all, the “oriental mystery cults” aptly named by Franz Cumont in 1906. It is well known, after all, that the deeply Hellenized mysteries of Isis and Osiris were directly influenced by the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter and Kore, not vice-versa, and that all our sources confirm that the so-called oriental mysteries primarily took their character from the Eleusinian model which had become widespread as a direct result of Hellenization around the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁶ The theme of the great goddess and her lost child/consort was as central to the Phrygian cult of Cybele as it was to the Eleusinian model of initiation, as was the ritual consumption of a sacramental drink. In his comprehensive study of the Greco-Phrygian cult, *Attis and Cybele*, Maarten J. Vermaseren wrote how central to the mysteries was the consumption of a sacred meal and a subsequent supernatural vision:

With complete dedication, by dint of serious study and abstention from or consumption of certain kinds of meat and drink, the faithful could sometimes acquire, during their life on earth, the privilege of beholding their heavenly protector. In this way they were given not only understanding of the meaning of earthly existence, but could also gain knowledge of the divine.¹⁷

In light of recent research, I wish to hypothesize what sort of sacramental food or drink was consumed during the mystery rituals of the Phrygian Mother. Since there is little debate on the ecstatic and orgiastic character of the goddess’ religion, I argue these rites emerged from a thoroughly ‘shamanic’ tradition stretching back to the Neolithic. Ecstasy was an integral part of the Greco-Roman religious landscape, and to highlight this fact I will discuss myths, symbols, and literature concerning the Greco-Phrygian mysteries and compare them by analogy with modern anthropological data recorded concerning the ‘narcotic shamanism’ of the Russian steppes which is likewise centered on fasting, dance, drumming, self-mutilation, incubation, the consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms, and tree-oriented rituals of cosmic ascent and so forth.

I do not wish to suppose that the shaman of the steppes are somehow the direct descendants of Phrygian or Greek cults, but rather that they both share in a mystical tradition which prizes the direct experience of ecstasy above all dogma or praxis. These are then more

¹⁶ Casadio and Johnston, *Mystic Cults*, 5.

¹⁷ Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis: The Myth and the Cult* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 7.

akin to the earliest religions of man than the polis-based paganism of antiquity or the heavily dogmatic and theological religions of the modern West. I do not either wish to overlook the notion that drug-use in general, including the use of the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom, may have been discovered (and rediscovered) by different groups at different times, though similar experiences and modes of preparation were used. In drawing upon these analogies and comparisons, I hope to add a few additional details to the picture of antiquity's mystery cults for a modern audience which goes beyond the conventional conservative picture which often avoids making any explicit claims concerning ritual or an initiates personal experience.

It was the ever-intensifying state assimilation of religion during the historic period, including the aristocratic and patriarchal control of intoxication festivals, which spurned the development of clandestine groups of individuals seeking ecstasy, as exemplified by the maenadic women of Euripides' *Bacchae* or Livy's account of the Dionysian cult prohibitions. By the 4th century BC, assemblies of Greek women, Thracian slaves, and resident aliens from the Near East gave substance to a figure they could worship in exchange for the liberating gift of ecstasy. The dissemination of communities with secret Dionysian doctrines and rites was carried out by individuals who sought purpose and identity beyond the fringes of traditional society. The appeal for many in the Greco-Roman world exerted by 'eastern' religions was attested by their wealthy and influential clergies who maintained thousands of years of tradition which Greek philosophy, astrology, and theurgy often helped to legitimize.¹⁸ Whilst eastern religions had their lavish sanctuaries and rites, the Greeks and Hellenized easterners learned to adapt elements of eastern tradition on a smaller scale and make them appeal to the sensibilities of uprooted and downtrodden people.¹⁹ Well into the Roman period, these alienated individuals, mostly women and slaves meeting in secret cells, preserved some semblance of the atavistic pre-agricultural character of goddess worship. The figure of Attis consequently exploded into popularity as a mystery cult persona rivaling his cognate Divine Bridegroom, Dionysus. For centuries these types of orgiastic cults had coexisted side by side with the tamer and more docile domestic cults of Ceres, Hestia, Hera, and many other more cultivated manifestations of the goddess. Until the cult of Cybele

¹⁸ Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 23.

¹⁹ Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*, 17.

(along with all the other mystery cults) was decreed a *religio illicita* by the Theodosian proscriptions of 389-391, the initiates of this goddess met to celebrate the death and resurrection of Attis, who is both φαρμακός and Divine Bridegroom. Off in their mountains and caverns they maintained a rich collection of shamanic traditions rooted in primitive fertility magic and ultimately coloured by the cumulative developments in Hellenistic astrology, Gnostic spiritualism, Alexandrian Neo-Platonism, Orphic soteriology, Pythagorean mystical philosophy, and many other rich ideological models which were popular around the Mediterranean during the height of the Roman Empire.

The Mystical Experience, Ecstasy, and Shamanism

It is around the abiding concept of *ecstasy* – ἔκστασις, the state of standing entirely outside the body – that primitive man may have first understood himself as *homo religiosus*. The Greeks formed the verbal noun from ἐξίστημι, meaning ‘to be one out of his senses.’ Originally it meant insanity or bewilderment, but later came to be used in describing the withdrawal of the spirit from the body. This ecstasy could take two forms, with both often overlapping. The first is an orgiastic form wherein outbursts of delirium are poured out into vigorous physical activity accompanied by raving or prophesying; the second is a paralytic trance brought on by incubation wherein the subject is physically inert and sensible only to the hallucinations upon the backdrop of their own eyelids.²⁰ Though either state might occur spontaneously or through intense meditation, both these forms of ecstasy could be – and were – traditionally induced by ingestion of various psychoactive substances.

To this day, one aspect of shamanism seeks to dissolve the neuroses of the individual brought on by the harsh contradictory realities of nature. The shaman do this by forcing either themselves or their initiates (or both) into a state of ecstasy wherein they might examine the world from an ostensibly ‘supernatural’ viewpoint. This visionary perspective is very often interpreted by the ecstatic person as that of the disembodied, the dismembered, the pre-natal, or the deceased. In these moments of disembodied *hierophany*, all things are declared holy; it mattered little where exactly the sacred was manifest to these people: the rocks, mountains, and trees are each as spiritually profound as the loftiest of experiences in the presence of a Sky Father.²¹ Under the influence of what Rudolf Otto famously coined the ‘*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*,’ or what Eliade called the ‘wholly other,’ the specialists of visionary experience have aided their fellow humans to cease their fear of the inevitable winter, the death of their crops, and ultimately the loss of their own lives.²²

²⁰ Homer W. Smith, *Man and His Gods* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1957), 131.

²¹ Eliade, *Shamanism*, xxiii.

²² Rudolf Otto and John Harvey, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine* (Kessinger Publishing, 1926), 12. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 12.

Modern science has hitherto been incapable of bridging the gap between such mystical experience and empirical research. Since such subjective experiences cannot be measured with reasonable accuracy; researchers must rely on comparing large bodies of anecdotal data from individuals who claim to have undergone the experience. If we were to collect and compare these reports with our extant accounts from those who attended the mysteries of Isis or the festival of Eleusis, we would observe a number of striking similarities between their experiences and those of modern people administered mushrooms in a clinical trial. Following his transformative initiation, Sophocles reflected on the Hymn to Demeter, writing how true life is granted to those mortals who depart for Hades having seen the rites of the Goddess.²³ Centuries later, Cicero held that from among all the institutions which Athens contributed to human life, none surpassed the mysteries:

For by their means we have been brought out of our barbarous and savage mode of life and educated and refined to a state of civilization; and as the rites are called ‘initiations,’ so in very truth we have learned from them the beginnings of life, and have gained the power not only to live happily, but also to die with a better hope.²⁴

Laudatory claims similar to Cicero’s made by other ancient authors, including those of aristocratic authors well-known to be skeptical on religious matters, attest to their own sincere spiritual transformations following initiation into the mysteries. Their words resonate with the reports of patients studied by one recent study done on patients using psilocybin, a very potent hallucinogen. In 2006, the John Hopkins University School of Medicine performed a study attempting to affirm scientifically the potential for mystical experience set off by the consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms.²⁵ “When administered under supportive conditions,” wrote researchers “psilocybin occasioned experiences similar to

²³ Soph. Frag. 719 (Dindorf), trans. G. E. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 284; cf. *Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 480-2 and Pind. Frag. 102.

²⁴ Cic. *Leg.* 2.14.36 (trans. C. W. Keyes): “...quibus ex agresti immanique uita exculi ad humanitatem et mitigati sumus, initiaque, ut appellantur, ita re uera principia uitae cognouimus, neque solum cum laetitia uiuendi rationem accepimus, sed etiam cum spe meliore moriendi.”

²⁵ Roland Griffiths et al., “Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance,” *Psychopharmacology* 187 (2006); it should be noted that during this study a psilocybin extract was administered to participants rather than the psilocybe mushrooms themselves; and whilst this chemical does not entirely mirror the pharmacological effects of Ibotenic Acid and Muscimol on the nervous system, the study demonstrates in a broader sense the lasting spiritual significance of a strategically administered hallucinogen (especially in regards to negating the fear of death, an explicit goal of the mystery initiations).

spontaneously occurring mystical experiences that, at 14-month follow-up, were considered by volunteers to be among the most personally meaningful and spiritually significant of their lives.”²⁶ Such claims toward a deep personal significance contained within the hallucinogenic experience cannot be dismissed – especially not when bearing in mind its enduring relevance to shamanism and the mysteries. Rather, these claims can be applied to give further context to the praises (or invectives) of ancient writers toward a clearer understanding of the mystery schools’ initiation techniques.

Apart from the mystical experience itself, it appears shamanism has endured for so long as a pan-human phenomenon on account of the visionary experience’s seemingly practical characteristics: weather prediction, the location of hunting grounds, the discernment of lies, the recovery of lost objects, the performance miraculous healings, and even guiding of recently deceased to their appointed place in the afterlife. Long before writing, agriculture and civilization, the shaman played the pragmatic role of priest, prophet, mythmaker, healer, herbalist, bard, teacher, and elder. Over hundreds of thousands of years in co-existence with nature, successive generations of humans managed to accumulate vast repertoires of plant lore. The earliest attempts at unlocking the healing, nutritional and mind-altering properties of plants must have been exceptionally hazardous, and people doubtless came to learn these properties through both trial-and-error, and by observing the effects of suspect substances on animals.²⁷ As time went on, bodies of experimental herbal lore reached such size and complexity that they grew beyond the grasp of the common pre-literate hunter-gatherer.

With such a large volume of plant lore, preliterate people required certain individuals be set aside to specialize in devising systems of harnessing dangerous plants for their healing, religious, and prophetic power. Ensuring the security of their position in society, these

²⁶ Roland Griffiths et al., “Mystical-type Experiences Occasioned by Psilocybin Mediate the Attribution of Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance 14 Months Later” *Psychopharmacology* 22, 6 (2008).

²⁷ See Maret Saar, “Ethnomycological Data from Siberia and North-East Asia on the Effect of Amanita Muscaria” *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 31 (1991): 168; R. Gordon Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1968); J. Stříbrný et al., “GC/MS determination of ibotenic acid and muscimol in the urine of patients intoxicated with Amanita pantherina” *International Journal of Legal Medicine* 126 (2012). The psychoactive effects of Amanita Muscaria were first likely observed among the reindeer of the Siberian forest-belt who avariciously seek them out regardless of the season, even beneath thick blankets of snow and soil. The consumption of the reindeer’s own alkaloid-enriched urine was probably observed long before human experimentation with the intoxicating urine consumption, a technique R. Gordon Wasson put at the center of his Soma/Mushroom hypothesis.

individuals maintained strict secrecy over their expertise, taking on apprentices and passing on their knowledge orally across generations.²⁸ Visitors from faraway lands could introduce new species or simply new methods of unlocking the properties of previously available substances. Among some of these itinerant ideas were the preparation processes used for *Amanita muscaria*: the hanging, drying, and pressing the mushroom to make it safe for consumption. Another example is the agricultural practices necessary for rearing the grapevine, then pressing, and storing wine. As the interconnectivity of the world grew, each culture's individual geographic background contributed to mankind's rich pharmacopoeia of useful vegetation.

Through their tried and tested methods, the shaman became an institutionalized *other*, possessing access to a region of the sacred that is hidden from society at large. The shaman or mystic often could perform the promethean task of descending into madness and return with an art or knowledge useful to the tribe, nevertheless, practical knowledge was seldom the ecstatic's priority. Many techniques used as far back as the Paleolithic era are still used today by shamans around the globe representing an unbroken continuation of mankind's oldest magico-religious practice – a practice concerned with direct experience. At present, shamanism is still commonly found among isolated pre-literate societies. The *Ayahuasceros* of the Amazon jungle continue their complex ancestral practices, relying on archaic systems of boiling the bark of the monoamine oxidase inhibiting (MAOI) *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine with the leaves of several shrubs containing dimethyltryptamine (DMT) to access worlds far beyond conventional human senses.²⁹ Mycolatry, the religious veneration of mushrooms, was a widespread phenomenon amongst the pre-Columbian civilizations of Mesoamerica.³⁰ Among the Aztecs, *psilocybe* mushrooms were christened *teonanacatl*, 'the flesh of the gods' in the Nahuatl language. The mushroom ceremonies (*Velada*) have survived among the

²⁸ John M. Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross, 40th Anniversary Edition* (Los Angeles: Gnostic Media Publishing, 2010), 29.

²⁹ Schultes, *Hallucinogenic Plants*, 98-103. Michael Balick and Paul Cox, *Plants, People and Culture: The Science of Ethnobotany* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1996), 152-160.

³⁰ Jose Luis Diaz, "Ethnopharmacology of Sacred Psychoactive Plants used by the Indians of Mexico" *Annual Review of Pharmacology and Toxicology* 17 (1977). Éric Navet, "Les Ojibway et l'Amanite tue-mouche (*Amanita muscaria*): Pour une Ethnomycologie des Indiens d'Amérique du Nord" *Journal de la Societe des Americanistes* 74 (1988). B. Lowy, "Amanita Muscaria and the Thunderbolt Legend in Guatemala and Mexico" *Mycologia* 66 (1974).

isolated Mazatec people despite the systematic suppression of this *theophagy* by 16th century Dominican and Franciscan missionaries.³¹

Among the Tungusian people of eastern Siberia, Cossack explorers were the first to hear and write down the term *šaman*, which is a word not native to the region.³² One ingenious 19th century scholar saw the word ‘shaman’ linking back etymologically to the Sanskrit ‘*çramaṇa*’ and the ascetics of India said: “Les peuples Tartares ont sans doute reçu le mot chaman de l’Inde avec le bouddhisme, car il est indien d’origine, et signifie un homme qui a vaincu toutes ses passions.”³³ The Sanskrit word ‘*çramaṇa*’ with the Prākṛit form ‘*samaṇa*’ has now become broadly known outside of the pale of India, reaching the ears of even Strabo, who described the Buddhist monks under such names as *Sarmanes*, *Sarmanai*, or *Samanaioi*.³⁴ Max Müller confirmed this in 1857, claiming that the modern conception of Siberian shamanism had found its way there from India via Tibet, China, and Mongolia: “Rules on the formation of magic figures, on the treatment of diseases by charms, on the worship of evil spirits, on the acquisition of the supernatural powers, on charms, incantations, and other branches of Shaman witchcraft, are found in the Tanjur, or the second part of the Tibetan canon, and in some of the late Tantras of the Nepalese collection.”³⁵ In any case, it is most probable the Indo-European word was imported from the south and applied to a class of ascetics already inhabiting the Russian lands before the arrival of Buddhism.

Though shamanism was recognized to be global phenomenon in the 20th century, no group was subject to more anthropological research than the shamans of Siberia and the Russian steppes so well-known from Eurasian folklore. For their own conveniences, many

³¹ Schultes, *Hallucinogenic Plants*, 61-71. Wasson, Hofmann and Ruck, *Road to Eleusis*, 26-27, 66. Marlene D. De Rios, *Hallucinogens: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984). Ralph Metzner, “Hallucinogenic Drugs and Plants in Psychotherapy and Shamanism.” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 30, 4 (1998): 5.

³² Berthold Laufer, “The Origin of the Word Shaman,” *American Anthropologist, New Series* 19, 3 (1917): 361-362, 371. The Tungusian words *šaman/saman/xaman*; Mongolian *saman*; Turkish *kam* and *xam*; etc. meaning ‘cloud/sky walker’ are all closely linked etymologically. The strong consistency of the word throughout such a widespread geographic area bears witnesses to the antiquity of traditional shamanism in those regions. Strab. *Ge.* 7.3.3 reports similarly named individuals among the Mysians, a Thracian group from north-western Anatolia, who possessed members in their society called the *καπνοβάτης* (“smoke-walkers”) who practiced vegetarianism and consumed nothing but honey and dairy products.³²

³³ Laufer, “Origin of the Word Shaman,” 363.

³⁴ Strab. *Geo.* 15.1.59; Laufer, “Origin of the Word Shaman,” 364.

³⁵ Laufer, “Origin of the Word Shaman,” 363.

western scholars simply lumped the vast diversity of Siberian and Turko-Tartar religious practices into ‘shamanism’ and this had done violence to the idea behind the word.³⁶ Shamanism is nothing more than a tool or a τέχνη to be applied within the context of any given religion – it is not a *religion* in and of itself since the ecstatic experience stands at odds with dogma or canon by its very nature. Although shamanism permeates and influences the religions of North and Central Asia, as it does in the Amazon basin, it was never *the religion* of a given region. Any given religion can lend its symbols and discourse as a framework or point of reference to communicate the contents of an individual’s subconscious. The mystical or ‘shamanic’ experience is entirely subjective to the individual undergoing it and therefore, ‘shamanism’ stands outside the realm of the ordinary communal ‘religious’ experience.

³⁶ Eliade, *Shamanism*, 7.

The Indo-European/Finno-Ugric Connection

In discussing the prehistory of Mediterranean goddess cults which preceded the Greco-Phrygian mysteries which gained popularity across the Roman Empire, it is difficult to define clearly in which direction religious ideas flowed from one linguistic or ethnic group into another. In assembling this study I have consulted a wide body of texts concerning the history and linguistics of both Indo-European and Semitic cultures, understanding them to have existed in a state of cultural symbiosis founded upon one underlying Mediterranean substrate. It should be noted that when discussing speculations over Indo-European origins, my investigations have led me to work according to the ‘wave of advance’ model of the ‘Anatolian hypothesis’ proposed by Colin Renfrew in 1987 (although revised in light of new evidence since then) which presumes that most inhabitants of late Neolithic Europe already spoke Indo-European languages. Renfrew argues the language family was gradually disseminated with the peaceful spread of agriculture out of Anatolia between 7,800 and 5,800 BC. Civilization, nomadism, patriarchy and radical social stratification ensued long thereafter, a symptom of which was the later violent migrations during the Bronze Age when some well-established Indo-European groups swept in to subjugate others.³⁷ Ultimately, we must understand how the notion that the Proto-Indo-Europeans were once a unified race of horseback nomads, constrained in their steppe homeland with a perfected language just waiting to burst out into the rest of Eurasia “waving swords and spreading paradigms” is nothing more than a latent manifestation of 19th century ‘Japhethism’ clinging on in popular culture and among disinterested academics.³⁸

Between the Late Neolithic and the Chalcolithic Age, the most successful agriculturalists of Eurasia were disseminating their farming techniques, specialized crops, their language and their religion. The first of these Indo-European farmers who travelled westward in search of new farmlands came upon Greece, while others populated the regions

³⁷ Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology & Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Russell Gray and Quentin Atkinson, “Language-Tree Divergence Times Support the Anatolian Theory of Indo-European Origin,” *Nature* 426 (2003).

³⁸ J.P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 22.

as far west as the North Atlantic coast. With the proliferation of these avant-garde farmers, Europe was slowly blanketed by a patchwork of linguistic, religious, and cultural permutations which had ultimately emerged from one loosely bound linguistic group – this was a process which took over 3,000 years to unfold. Wherever these Indo-European speaking people spread their crops, they fought, mingled, assimilated and settled down with the local inhabitants. At times, they came into contact with Neolithic communities which had already independently discovered agriculture themselves, while at other times, they met with enduring bands and tribes of hunter-gatherers with unbroken ancestries stretching back to the Paleolithic.

Travelling north and eastward, the descendants of these avant-garde farmers entered the steppes and adopted nomadism, some of whom extended the Tocharian language all the way out into Central Asia. The respective ancestors to the Thracio-Phrygians, Scythians, and Indo-Iranians Indo-European sub-groups initially developed out near the frontiers of the Eurasian steppes where they flourished into wealthy warrior aristocracies. They established themselves as local powers and synthesized various elements of sedentary agriculture and the harsh life near the steppes. Living in these frontier regions, these Indo-European populations exchanged elements of traditional shamanism with their neighbours to the North.

The Thracio-Phrygians who introduced the rites of the Anatolian goddess to the Greeks once inhabited the regions west of the Black Sea and ultimately found themselves torn apart by the churning of the Bronze Age civilizations to the south, causing a large part of them to migrate and settle in central Anatolia where they absorbed what remained of a collapsed Hittite culture. As late comers from the Balkans to Anatolia, the Phrygians adopted the indigenous near eastern Goddess after entering their new lands – strictly speaking, there was nothing particularly ‘Phrygian’ about this goddess – that is merely how the Greeks perceived her since their first contact with this goddess was via Phrygian trade.³⁹

³⁹ Keith DeVries, “The Gordion Excavation Seasons of 1969-1973 and Subsequent Research.” *American Journal of Archaeology* 94 (3): 390. Six potsherds uncovered at Gordion in 1978 have been recognized as early Greek, though none were found within their stratigraphical context: two Corinthian Late Geometric kotyles, two Early Proto-Corinthian kotyles, an East Greek Late Geometric oinochoe, and a Euboean Late Geometric closed shape vase. See also Rodney Young, 1962. “The 1961 Campaign at Gordion.” *American Journal of Archaeology* 66 (2): 153-168 and subsequent excavation reports (see Bibliography). The flow of goods and

By the 7th century BC, the Phrygian and the Greek worlds were inextricably interconnected and this fact is clearly attested by the similarities in painted Phrygian and Ionian clay wares, the Phrygian use of the Greek alphabet, the Greek use of Phrygian music and instruments, the religious syncretism between the Olympian deities and the goddess religion of Cybele. Considering how much the Phrygians shared their culture with their nearest neighbours, it is likely they also passed on the knowledge of their local psychoactive substance lore to those cultures around them, especially to those cultures to which the Phrygians imparted their gods.

Given the vast body of scholarship done on the subject, it is now clear that cultures from lands as far apart as India and Scandinavia demonstrate similar means of achieving ecstasy. A vast array of myths which were passed on orally from generation to generation for millennia and are intertwined with metaphors explicitly evoking herbal folklore have now survived for modern analysis. The Rigveda with its many hymns to Soma is one of these Indo-European works now recognized as one of the most popular collection of these myths. Stemming from the oral traditions of north-western India, the Vedas were formulated sometime between the 18th and 10th centuries BCE and redacted several times thereafter once written down at a much later date. Before descending into Iran and India, the Indo-European speakers of central Eurasia co-existed in a broader system of cultural exchange with the Finno-Ugric cultures of the Russian steppes. There is conclusive evidence that Sanskrit, Avestan, and ancient Greek each share small parts of their vocabularies with languages of the Finno-Ugric family.⁴⁰

Out of 1,028 hymns, one hundred and twenty were devoted to Soma, who is simultaneously god, plant, and sacramental drink that provided vast visions of the divine world.⁴¹ In the text, the poet mentions neither roots, nor leaves, nor branches, nor blossoms, nor fruit, nor seeds for this substance which stood at the heart of the Vedic texts. For this, and many other reasons, it was convincingly argued by Gordon Wasson in the 1970s that the original Indo-Aryan Soma/Haoma (before its specific botanical identity was obscured by

influence from east to west during the late 8th century is mostly manifest in the bronze fibulae, cauldrons, belt-buckles and bowls found in Greek coastal sites in Ionia, the islands, and on the mainland.

⁴⁰ Joseph Wohlberg, "Haoma-Soma in the World of Ancient Greece," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 22 (1990), 334.

⁴¹ Wohlberg, "Haoma-Soma," 334.

centuries of separation from the ancestral Indo-European ‘homeland’) was a hallucinogenic mushroom, whose ritual use had extended into Central Asia whilst surviving into the present among Siberian and Finno-Ugric tribes of Russia. It is not the place here to carry on the debates over botanical identity of Soma since such arguments abound elsewhere. Having examined the evidence and arguments put forward by various scholars, I am most inclined to that theory put forth by Wasson which holds Soma to have been the *Amanita muscaria* brought down from the North by the Indo-Europeans migrating into India. Over centuries, this original Soma was lost and in that vacuum, many other available plants with psychoactive properties came to be used as surrogates (*Cannabis indica*, *Ephedra sinica*, *Nymphaea caerulea*, etc.).⁴²

Extant derivatives of the Indo-European vocabulary have left historians with a window into religious discourse wherein value systems, societal and family divisions, and even rituals may be discerned. In matters of specifics concerning Indo-European linguistics, of course, problems arise on a case-by-case basis, as there are changes in the meaning of individual words, isolated and parallel developments or borrowings; as a result, the vocabulary common to all Indo-European languages is quite minimal. In interpreting religious vocabulary there is an additional complication whereby a word will appear to maintain a sacred sense in one language and a profane sense in another.⁴³ It is impossible to determine whether these loan words originated among the Indo-Europeans and were

⁴² See the essays in Thomas Riedlinger, *The Sacred Mushroom Seeker: Essays for R. Gordon Wasson* (Portland: Dioscorides Press, 1993): in his later years, Wasson’s unpublished letters revealed how open he was to the *Psilocybe* mushrooms, along with a handful of other psychoactive plants as alternative Soma candidates or surrogates to the original *Amanita muscaria*. Popular ethnobotanist Jonathan Ott admitted that the proof which Wasson provided for Soma, such as sacred role of intoxicating urine, would fit as equally well with *psilocybin* mushrooms as with *Amanita muscaria*, since their derivative alkaloid psilocin is also excreted intact by the urinary system. The true botanical identity of the Vedic Soma continues to be passionately argued among scholars who will likely never come to a consensus. Ultimately, what was groundbreaking about Wasson’s scholarship was his explanations of how consciousness-altering substances could have an enormous impact on shaping the psychology and religious make-up of countless cultures. What most scholars are comfortable to admit is that if the Soma of the *Rigveda* cannot be pinpointed to one specific plant, it should then be interpreted as the deification of the ecstatic ideal at the very least. Geographically speaking, the non-alcoholic intoxicant of choice among the proto-Indo-European ‘homeland’ makes the mushroom a likely candidate, and if this deity had stemmed from one specific plant and moved toward a general abstraction of plant-induced ecstasy, then I believe it is still safe to argue for Soma’s fungal origins alongside of Wasson, though I am mostly partial to the candidacy of *psilocybin* mushrooms.

⁴³ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 17.

absorbed into Uralic culture, or vice versa. One thing, however, is clear: Soma appears to have been a major point of overlap between the two neighboring language families.

Specifically in connection with the symbols surrounding Soma in the Vedas, Thomas Burrow listed thirty words in common amongst Uralic and Indo-European languages: mother, father, lord, hero, pig, boar, udder, gold, sister, strong drink, elk, grass, bee, fly, goat, etc.⁴⁴ If the ancestors of today's Finno-Ugric people lived in a system of cultural exchange with some branches of Indo-Europeans at one time, using a comparative anthropological approach between Indo-European religion and contemporary steppe shamanism may shed light on what life was like for Indo-Europeans living among a similar climate, flora, and fauna. Among the Finno-Ugric people, the original name for *Amanita muscaria* was *pongo* (Vogul: *pānχ*; Ostyak: *panχ/ponk*; Mordvinian: *panga/pango*; Cheremis: *pongo*) which is cognate with the Latin *fungus* and the Greek *σφόγγος/σπόγγος* (sponge).⁴⁵ This proves that there was at least some degree of intercultural exchange concerning fungi, and this lends weight to the theory put forward by Wasson. Baltic linguist Joseph Pashka also believes the Indo-Aryan Soma to have been preserved in the Estonian *Soim* 'hewn manger' or the Khanty word *Sōma* 'hewn wooden mortar-bowl' which he contends were ceremonial wooden objects used in pressing out the *Amanita muscaria* drink.⁴⁶ *Amanita muscaria* is prepared in a vast number of ways, some more potent than others, and some more dangerous. It is generally eaten dry or in the form of some extract, but it has been reported to be eaten raw, fried, cooked and in the meat of intoxicated reindeer.⁴⁷ Dried caps can be submerged to re-absorb water like a sponge then pressed since their main hallucinogenic alkaloid is water-soluble. For this reason the poet of the Rig Veda explains how "Soma un-pressed has never

⁴⁴ Thomas Burrow, *The Sanskrit Language* (London: Faber & Faber, 1955), 23-32. Some examples include the Latin *sal*, 'salt,' with the Finnish *suola*; Sanskrit *mādhu*, 'honey,' Latin *mel*, Greek *μέθυ*, with Finnish *mete*-; Sanskrit *nāman*- 'name', Greek *ὄνομα*, Finnish *nime*-; Gothic *watō* 'water', Finnish *vete*-; etc.

⁴⁵ Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la Langue Grecque* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2009), 1040; Thomas Gamkrelidze & Vjaceslav Ivanov, *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans: A Reconstruction and Historical Analysis of a Proto-Language and a Proto-Culture* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 825; Eliade, *Shamanism*, 400-401; R. Gordon Wasson, "The Soma of the Rig Veda: What Was It?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 91, 2 (1971): 186.

⁴⁶ "Virdainas," J. Pashka, accessed November 24, 2012, <http://www.suduva.com/virdainas/proto.htm>.

⁴⁷ Saar, "Ethnomycological Data," 187.

intoxicated Indra, nor the pressed juices unaccompanied by sacred hymns.”⁴⁸ It is also why the swollen plant from which Soma is pressed is likened by the poet to a cow’s udder being milked.⁴⁹ Across the two distinct language groups, there is evidence of a single shared preparation method for the consumption of *Amanita muscaria* that spanned at least from the Russian steppes down on through Iran and into northern India.

In his studies on modern shamanism, Eliade noted how morphologically comparable the north and central Asian religious vocabularies are to those of the Proto-Indo-Europeans, as both attach utmost importance to a patriarchal Sky Father; both are devoted to the notion of God’s ‘sons’ or ‘messengers’ as mediators between man and god (Dioscuri, Aśvins, etc.); in addition both groups share the same veneration for horses, fire, lightning, the heavens and the underworld, and their joining *axis-mundi*, the Tree of Life.⁵⁰ Along with their languages, religions, and culture, the Indo-Europeans absorbed indigenous Neolithic populations and instilled in them the values of patriarchy and patrilineality, martial prowess, and social stratification based on agricultural surplus. On a sociological and economic level, Eliade points to the correspondence between the Proto-Indo-Europeans and Turko-Tartar culture as both being patrilinear and upheld by an economy of hunters and herdsmen-breeders. Given numerous parallels, to what extent can we predict later Finno-Ugric shamanic cultures to have preserved any rituals which were important to their ancient neighbours, the Indo-Europeans?

⁴⁸ *Rigveda* 7.26.1.

⁴⁹ Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, “Dionysus and Siva: Parallel Patterns in Two Pairs of Myths,” *History of Religions* 20, 1 (1980): 338; Wasson, *Soma*, 43-45; *Rigveda*, 3.48.3; 4.23.1; 7.101.1; 8.9.19; 9.68.1; 9.69.1; 9.107.5; 9.97.9. At a first glance, the link between mushrooms and bulls seems obscure, but when ancient man worshipped these creatures, they did so for all of their gifts: labour, hides, milk, cheese, butter, meat, blood, and not least of all, little coprophilic *Psilocybe* mushrooms. The hallucinogenic mushrooms would themselves have appeared as the direct product of livestock. One epithet for Dionysus found in Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 53-55: “*Bougenes*” (cow-born), is most suggestive of a *Psilocybe* mushroom epithet. These mushrooms, conventionally preserved in honey, were likely of equal or greater importance than *Amanita muscaria* in regions where they were openly accessible for shamanic use. This phenomenon may even be responsible for beginning humanity’s long-standing religious relationship with cattle. Though these globally distributed hallucinogens whose spores naturally favour the manure of cattle are not the topic of my discussion, an in-depth treatment of their use by ancient and prehistoric man beyond the rhetorical performances of Terence McKenna is much needed.

⁵⁰ Eliade, *Shamanism*, 10-11.

Among the scholars of Indo-European religion, much ink has been spilled over the negation of death through the consumption of sacred foods. The gods were believed to be immortal only inasmuch as they were steadily supplied with their fix of ἀμβροσία, nectar, *amṛta*, or Soma. The poet of the Rigveda writes: “We have drunk Soma and become immortal; we have attained the light, the Gods discovered. Now what may foeman’s malice do to harm us?”⁵¹ The Greek ἀμβροσία is etymologically bound to the Sanskrit *amṛta* (अमृत), which is synonymous with the god-substance Soma. Both of these mythical substances were preserved in Indo-European lore as the food and drink from which the gods maintained their immortality. Suetonius wrote of the mushrooms in which are generated a poison (or drug, *uenenum*) as *deorum cibum* following the Greek convention which called mushrooms βρῶμα θεῶν, the “food of the gods.”⁵² The Mycenaeans of ‘*Mykenai*’ derived their own name from the μύκης, suggesting the importance of the mushroom to that branch of Indo-European culture.⁵³ The Greek word for mushroom itself, ‘μύκης,’ can be traced back to the syllabary Mycenaean period.

In writing about the mythological founding of Mycenae during the 2nd century AD, Pausanias gives us clues to the Mycenaeans’ suspected eastern origin and their affinity for mushrooms in retelling the founding of the city by Perseus:

For on its site the cap [μύκης] fell from his scabbard, and he regarded this as a sign to found a city. I have also heard the following account. He was thirsty, and the thought occurred to him to pick up a mushroom from the ground. Drinking with joy the water that flowed from it, he gave to the place the name of Mycenae.⁵⁴

It appears just as well that the poets who composed the earliest Indo-European sacred text also ‘drank with joy’ the water which flowed from Soma. Among the Indo-Aryans who

⁵¹ *Rigveda*, 8.48.3 (trans. R. T. H. Griffith).

⁵² Suet. *Ner.* 33.1. “Parricidia et caedes a Claudio exorsus est; cuius necis etsi non auctor, at conscius fuit, neque dissimulanter, ut qui boletos, in quo cibi genere uenenum is acceperat, quasi deorum cibum posthac prouerbio Graeco conlaudare sit solitus.”

⁵³ Wasson, Hofmann and Ruck, *Road to Eleusis*, 49; Rinella, *Pharmakon*, 82.

⁵⁴ Paus. 2.16.3 (trans. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod): “τοῦ ξίφους γὰρ ἐνταῦθα ἐξέπεσεν ὁ μύκης αὐτῷ, καὶ τὸ σημεῖον ἐς οἰκισμὸν ἐνόμιζε συμβῆναι πόλεως. ἤκουσα δὲ καὶ ὡς διψῶντι ἐπῆλθεν ἀνελέσθαι οἱ μύκητα ἐκ τῆς γῆς, ῥυέντος δὲ ὕδατος πῶν καὶ ἡσθεῖς Μυκήνας ἔθετο τὸ ὄνομα τῷ χωρίῳ.” See also Ruck et al., *Mushrooms, Myth & Mithras: The Drug Cult that Civilized Europe* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011), 87-88.

migrated down into the Indus Valley during the mid-2nd millennium BC bearing their “full-bellied priests [who] piss the flowing Soma,” the mushroom was held in highest regard.⁵⁵ Soma – a pseudonym literally meaning the ‘Pressed-One’ – was itself a sacrament.⁵⁶ Through an act of hierophagy one could *become* Soma, just as those initiated at Eleusis were made ‘Bakchoi.’ According to shamanic tradition, any hallucinogen or deliriant substance can be used as a medium between the individual and the divine, and it was in this fashion that the Aryans viewed Soma. The mushroom was perceived as an entirely tangible divinity, born to be destroyed by man in order that they might achieve the beatific vision.

One custom which Gordon Wasson believed was vital to the early Brahmin of Vedic India is the recycling of alkaloid-enriched urine from a recently intoxicated person or animal; this technique endures in Siberia to this day to maximize the use of *Amanita muscaria*.⁵⁷ One modern aficionado and author on the subject who claims to have experimented with this technique writes that, due to the purification of alkaloids from their toxic constituents by the human body, the second round is both more potent and far less nauseous.⁵⁸ It is probable people first discovered this technique from observing frenzied reindeer avariciously lapping up freshly-soiled snow to receive the amplified dose of freshly refined alkaloids.⁵⁹ The poet of the Rigveda writes: “Like a thirsty stag, come here to drink; Drink Soma, as much as you wish. Pissing it out day by day, O’ generous one, you have assumed your most mighty force.”⁶⁰ In these lines Wasson and his supporters felt that definitive proof of the mushrooms importance in the oldest corpus of Vedic literature had been found, a discovery that was conceived through observation of Siberia’s rich world of mushroom shamanism. In

⁵⁵ Rigveda, 9.74.4 (trans. D. H. H. Ingall); see Wasson, “Soma of Rigveda,” 177-179 for an excellent interpretation and discussion of this passage.

⁵⁶ Soma is derived from an Indo-Iranian root *sav- (Sanskrit: sav-/su) “to press”, and *sau-ma- is the drink prepared by pressing plant. K. F. Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda aus dem Sanskrit ins Deutsche übersetzt und mit einem laufenden Kommentar versehen*. (Cambridge: Harvard Oriental Series 3, 1951), 1-9.

⁵⁷ Štřibrný et al., “Ibotenic Acid and Muscimol in Urine,” 519-524; Saar, “Ethnomycological Data,” 168; Wasson, “Soma of Rigveda,” 178. Wasson writes: “He who drinks the juice of the hallucinogenic mushroom saves his urine, and others drink this urine with the identical inebriating effect, perhaps heightened, for there is reason to think that certain nauseating ingredients in the original mushroom are filtered out in passing through the human organism. This use of the urine can be repeated over and over again, it is said, until it has passed through five human bodies, when at last it loses its virtue.”

⁵⁸ Clark Heinrich, *Magic Mushrooms in Religion and Alchemy* (Rochester: Park Street Press, 2002), 200-203.

⁵⁹ Saar, “Ethnomycological Data,” 168.

⁶⁰ Rigveda, 8.4.10 (trans. D. H. H. Ingall).

elucidating the myths and rituals associated with the widespread ecstatic dying-and-rising vegetation god, a closer look into traditional Eurasian shamanism and its partner, *Amanita muscaria*, may be fruitful.

Anthropological studies of the Siberian tribesmen who continue to consume *Amanita muscaria* report that even the meat of intoxicated reindeer retains the psychoactive effects of the mushroom so long as it was slaughtered in the intoxicated state.⁶¹ If the intoxicating alkaloids (namely Ibotenic acid) remain intact within the bloodstreams of humans and reindeer, there is no reason to suppose this technique could not have been mimicked with sacrificial livestock, or even human sacrifice, given the circumstances of the ritual. This fact is reflected in a legend concerning the founding of Erythrae in Asia Minor, when a priestess of Hecate is brought from Thessaly to prepare a bull sacrifice within the sight of an opposing army. After having decorated the sacrificial animal, it is led to the altar and fed a ‘drug’ which hurls it into a state of frenzy. The bull charged toward the enemy lines, bellowing madly, until the enemy seized it. They sacrificed it and distributed the meat amongst themselves only to all be stricken mad and made easy targets for the invaders.⁶² It is of course possible that such kinds of animal sacrifices were made in the sacred groves and mountain shrines of the Great Mother, with animals being ritually fed mushrooms as a substitute for the cakes they were traditionally fed prior to their deaths. Though this would by no means be the most effective way of taking in the drug, the consumption of alkaloid-enriched meat would certainly have been sufficient to chemically induce a visionary experience given appropriate ritual preparations and context. Were this the case, it would seem as if the ‘spirit’ of the god which initially inhabited the earth took on the form of a plant, moved through a sacred animal, became the animal, was destroyed and finally was consumed before invading the ritually prepared human psyche.

Amanita muscaria has a rich and well documented history of shamanic usage stretching as far back as oral traditions can recall from the regions northeast of the Black Sea extending all the way into Siberia. The use of the mushroom in shamanic circles was first

⁶¹ Saar, “Ethnomycological Data,” 168.

⁶² Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.43. See Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 161.

overtly reported by anthropological field work in both the North-Eastern Chukotka region and in the plateau between the Ob and Yenisei rivers.⁶³ The earliest written eyewitness reports referring to the eating of *Amanita muscaria* for shamanic purposes concerned the Ob-Ugrian Ostyak people in 1658. It was not until the middle of the 18th century that exhaustive written accounts began to appear concerning the use of the mushroom among the Ostyaks, Samoyeds, Lapps, Voguls, and other Finno-Ugric groups.⁶⁴ Most importantly for our purposes is noting how the ecstatic specialists of many pre-literate tribes in Siberia and the Russian steppes such as the Chukchi, Koryak, Itelmen, Chuvanians, Even, and the Yukagir hold to the belief that the so-called Fly Agaric mushroom is itself a supernatural being. At present, their ritual intoxications still occur and have been for as far back as oral tradition can tell, though this convention is now rapidly disappearing.⁶⁵ According to the Khanty tribesmen, the mushroom itself is the only spirit capable of foretelling the future.⁶⁶ Any descriptions of a strong hallucinogen's subjective effects are virtually impossible to render into language; nevertheless, the experience allows the soothsayer, oracle, or shaman to leave his or her body, find stolen objects, discern lies, or even see through time. When a person or animal has fallen ill, the mushroom is used to see into the ailing body and reveal the cure. The reception of this mushroom 'spirit' into one's body is said to induce a process of self-identification with the plant itself, leading to a renunciation of the ego and a submission to the 'wholly other.'⁶⁷

On the Russian steppes the mushroom is and has been used for reasons which could be divided into four categories: the performance of epic poetry and tales; religious and magical rituals; hard physical labour; and recreational narcotic purposes. According to research by ethnobotanist Maret Saar, the consumption of *Amanita muscaria* has been reported in connection with the following activities:

Communication with the souls of the dead, communication with spirits, treatment of diseases, giving a name to a new-born child, making clear the cause of a dangerous situation and

⁶³ Saar, "Ethnomycological Data," 158ff.

⁶⁴ L. G. Czigány "The Use of Hallucinogens and the Shamanistic Tradition of the Finno-Ugrian People" *The Slavonic and East European Review* 58, 2 (1980): 213.

⁶⁵ Saar, "Ethnomycological Data," 158.

⁶⁶ Saar, "Ethnomycological Data," 161.

⁶⁷ Saar, "Ethnomycological Data," 163.

finding ways to overcome it, interpretation of dreams, prediction and fortune-telling, foreseeing of the future, seeing of the past, visiting of different worlds, [and] flights over the earth.⁶⁸

Due to the mushrooms' connection with oracles, clairvoyance, and divination – each of which are well accounted elements of Indo-European religious life – it is plausible that any religious specialists with the right knowledge and seasonal access to the widespread fungi would have made use of them in the aforesaid visionary practices. It is well known that the priestess at Delphi dispensed her oracles through direct ecstatic communication with Apollo; his spirit (ethylene and ethane gas) intruded into her body, making her the mouthpiece for his prophecies.⁶⁹ Any culture which stressed the association between high mountain caves and oracular incubation could not have overlooked one of nature's most colourful species growing in their midst. It was in this very type of shamanic setting (caves or sacred groves) that the earliest rites for the Goddess were performed in Anatolia as well, wherein the ingestion of a mushroom was an explicit invocation to be enthused by a 'supernatural' other.

⁶⁸ Saar, "Ethnomycological Data," 159-160.

⁶⁹ Plut. *De def. or.* 413-434b; H. Spiller, J. Hale, and J. De Boer, "The Delphic Oracle: A Multidisciplinary Defense of the Gaseous Vent Theory." *Clinical Toxicology* 40, 2 (2002): 189–196.

Amanita Muscaria – The ‘Drink of Gall’?

Since the initiates of mystery cults were forbidden to discuss the contents of their rites, our most important clues concerning the rites of Attis and Cybele must come from the pagan poets on one end of the spectrum, and the invectives of their chief opponents, the Christian apologists and church fathers on the other end. Arnobius of Sicca makes it very clear that wine was forbidden to initiates of Attis’ mysteries, for “it is forbidden for those polluted with wine to enter a sanctuary because it betrayed his silence [concerning Attis’ act of adultery against the Goddess],” nevertheless, a type of frenzied intoxication is an undisputed fact among the rituals of the Divine Bridegroom, and I am highly averse to the idea that this was all spontaneously achieved.⁷⁰ If wine was forbidden for use within the sanctuaries of Attis, then what intoxicants may have been available as sacrament for whipping Cybele’s devotees into frenzy? Laying bare the “rites the Phrygians perform in honour of Attis and Cybele and the Corybantes,” Clement makes clear to his readers the use of a “drink of gall” (πόμα χολής).⁷¹ It could be postulated that the sacrament could be any entheogenic, hallucinogenic, intoxicating, or narcotic substance, nevertheless, I propose the rites of the Goddess’ ‘drink of gall’ was, at least in its formative phases, a concoction of pressed *Amanita* mushrooms which is both deliriant and hallucinogenic.

Initiates used the mysteries as a process of self-dissolution and re-identification with the mythical lover of the Phrygian Mother whom she drove into madness, self-mutilation, and death. Clement is often quoted for his report on how initiates of the Phrygian mysteries were required to repeat the lines: “I have eaten from the drum (τυμπάνου), I have drunk from the cymbal (κυμβάλου), I have carried the sacred vessels, I have plunged beneath the

⁷⁰ Arnob. *Ad. gen.* 5.6.8 (trans. George E. McCracken): “<Diligebat> et Agdestis, blandus adulto comes et qua solum poterat minus rectis adsentationibus vinctum saltuosa ducens per nemora et ferarum multis muneribus donans, quae puer Attis primo sui esse dicebat laboris atque operis glorians: per vinum deinde confitetur et ab Agdesti se diligi et ab eo donis silvestribus honorari; unde vino, quod silentium prodidit, in eius nefas est sanctum sese inferre pollutis.” See also Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 115 for wine prohibition during fasts.

⁷¹ Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.15.3.

curtain.”⁷² The drum and the cymbal symbolized the importance of trance music, the sacred vessels implied the sacrament, and the bridal chamber (παστός) implied the marriage bed of the Goddess. There is a confirmed Indo-European ‘culture-word relationship’ in the Hittite vessel name ‘*kukupalla*’ and the Greek ‘κύπελλον’ (goblet) and ‘κύμβαλον’ (cymbal), and the Sanskrit ‘*kimpalá*’ (a musical instrument) indicating an ancient association between such types of cult vessels and percussive instruments.⁷³ The marriage bed, however, might be interpreted as the ecstatic state itself; what rendered this marriage ‘sacred’ was the very risk of dying these initiates exposed themselves to in the deliberate over-consumption of a toxic hallucinogen, the god’s own flesh and blood. We shall return to this theme of ‘sacred marriage’ in more detail throughout the later chapters.

One finds in the works of Firmicus Maternus, once a former pagan astrologer himself, a variation of this ‘Eleusinian’ liturgy whereby one becomes an initiate of the Goddess by a complete revelation following the consumption of a ‘poisonous’ sacramental drink. Firmicus states that the cult of Cybele and Attis has special signs and special responses, which the devil gave them in their secret meetings:

In a certain temple a person (doomed to perdition) says when seeking admittance to the inner chambers: “I have eaten from a drum, drunk from a cymbal, and learnt in depth the secrets of religion” – the Greek words being ἐχ τυμπάνου βέβρωχα, ἐχ κυμβάλου πέπωχα, γέγονα μύστης Ἄττεως. A sorry confession of the wicked thing you have done, unhappy man! You have quaffed the virus of deadly poison, and under the stimulus of guilty frenzy you taste the cup of doom. The sequel of that food is always death and punishment. This drink which you boast you have taken fatally chokes the vein of life and by the prolongation of contaminating evils, wreaks havoc in the seat of the soul.⁷⁴

⁷² Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.15.3 (trans. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson): “Ἐκ τυμπάνου ἔφαγον· ἐκ κυμβάλου ἔπιον· ἐκίρνοφόρησα· ὑπὸ τὸν παστὸν ὑπέδυν.”

⁷³ Jaan Puhvel. *Hittite Etymological Dictionary Vol. 3 Words beginning with H.* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1984), 359.

⁷⁴ Firm. Mat. *De err. prof.* 18.1-2 (trans. C. A. Forbes): “In quodam templo, ut interiores partes homo moriturus possit admitti, dicit: De tympano manducaui, de cymbalo bibi, et religionis secreta perdidici. Quod Graeco sermone dicitur “ἐχ τυμπάνου βέβρωχα, ἐχ κυμβάλου πέπωχα, γέγονα μύστης Ἄττεως.” Male, miserhomo, de admisso facinore confiteris, pestiferum ueneni uirus hausisti, et nefario furoris instinctu lethale poculum lambis; cibum istum mors sequitur semper, et poena aeterna. Hoc, quod bibisse te praedicas, uitalem uenam stringit in mortem, et sedes animae contaminata malorum te continuatione conturbat.”

In this rhetorical admonition, Firmicus rebukes members of the cult for the consumption of sacrament which causes frenzy and damage to the soul itself. Firmicus, the ex-pagan convert to Christianity goes on to warn his brothers and sisters to take no part in the food of the tambourine. He exhorts those lost in the spell of such cults to “seek the grace of the food of salvation, and drink of the immortal cup. [Since] Christ by His banquet calls you back to the light, and quickens your dull members and limbs rotting with grievous poison.”⁷⁵ To the already highly stratified 4th century Church, the apologist’s sober vision of Christianity had no place for ecstatic mysteries, orgiastic rites, or frenzy-inducing potions. Ecstatic cults were the chief competition against the Christianity in acquiring converts and controlling the religious landscape of the Late Roman Empire. During this period Saint Augustine railed against the Manichaeen Gnostics who he claimed offered him not God, but rather food-platters on which were served glittering hallucinations (“phantasmata splendida”) such as visions of the the Sun and Moon.⁷⁶ Unfortunately for the opinions of church fathers, these sorts of socially sanctioned initiation rites consisting of the consumption of ‘deadly poisons’ have long been a very important and natural part of human psychological and social development among countless communities untouched by Judeo-Christian morality.

It is widely accepted that Europe is, relatively-speaking, pharmacologically poor in plants apt for shamanic use. Predating the widespread use of mead or wine, the earliest manifestation of the Divine Bridegroom in European consciousness must have been oriented around substances more openly accessible: hallucinogenic mushrooms (*Amanita muscaria* and various types of coprophilic *Psilocybin*-containing mushrooms); opium (*Papaver somniferum*); ‘jimsonweed,’ ‘horsemad,’ or ‘thorn apple’ (*Datura stramonium*); mandrake root (*Mandragora officinarum*); cannabis; deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*); henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*); and a handful of other lesser known plants. Though all these plants may be said to possess shamanic usages, only a few might be said to be truly

⁷⁵ Firm. Mat. *De err. prof.* 18.8 (trans. C. A. Forbes).

⁷⁶ August. *Conf.* 3.6: “et illa erant fercula, in quibus mihi esurienti te inferebatur sol et luna, pulchra opera tua, sed tamen opera tua, non tu, nec ipsa prima... esuriebam et sitiebam et apponebantur adhuc mihi in illis ferculis phantasmata splendida, quibus iam melius erat amare istum solem, saltem istis oculis verum, quam illa falsa animo decepto per oculos.” I am of the opinion that this whole chapter in Augustine’s Confessions is the most convincing piece of extant literature in support of the belief that hallucinogens were in use by the Gnostic movements around the Mediterranean.

‘hallucinogenic’ and fewer still to be ‘entheogenic’ in the sense that its user experiences a deep sense of exaltation and enthusiasm. In fact, the only plants listed above which might reliably provide (a) a near-death ordeal without the high risk of killing its user, (b) a lengthy out-of-body experience, and (c) vivid hallucinations, are the Ibotenic acid and Psilocybin-containing mushrooms. Since mushrooms already have a rich history of shamanic usage in other parts of the world, there is no reason to suppose it could not have played at least some role in the Greco-Roman mystery schools wherein entheogenic trances overtook initiates who were then lost between alternating waves of silent awe and madness.

The *Amanita* is a superbly resilient and adaptable genus which can be found as far north as the arctic forest-belts of Siberia down to the peaks of Indian mountaintops and beyond, provided high altitudes and suitable host trees are available. Known more commonly by its folk-designation, the Fly Agaric, this mushroom is an ‘ἀγαρικόν/*agaricum*’ which is an archaic designation for any tree fungus.⁷⁷ The Modern Greek word for mushroom, ‘μανιτάρι,’ and the ‘*Amanita*’ of botanical Latin nomenclature may have derived from the Ἄμανός mountains south-central Anatolia where agarics are well known to grow.⁷⁸ In vernal and autumnal rains, they are found bursting through the pine-needle carpets on the sacred slopes of mountains as famous as Olympus and Helicon. Pliny expresses the ancient belief that a mushroom growing on the *quercus* oaks are highly esteemed whereas those growing from *robur* oaks, pines, and cypresses are ‘harmful’ (*noxios*).⁷⁹ This indicates that the ancients were conscious of the difference in host-parasite relationships, and had some knowledge that pine trees could produce poisonous organisms.

Despite their widespread availability, fungi are elusive organisms and do not easily submit well to human cultivation. The time at which the mushrooms springs up is contingent on warm, humid summers, limited sunlight, and abundant rainfall, each of which are essential elements for producing healthy fungi and softening the soil for their surfacing. This

⁷⁷ For uses of ἀγαρικόν/*agaricum* see Plin. *HN* 16.19 and 25.103.1; *Dsc.* 3.1; *Damocr.* ap. Gal.14.96 (iamb.); *Androm.* ap. Gal.14.39 (hex.).

⁷⁸ Carl Ruck, “Fungus Redivivus,” in *Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, John M. Allegro (San Francisco: Gnostic Media Publishing, 2010), 361-362.

⁷⁹ Plin. *HN* 16.31.1: “tam multifera sunt, tot res praeter glandem pariunt robora, sed et boletos suillosque — gulae novissima inritamenta, qui circa radices gignuntur, quercus probatissimos, robur autem et cupressus et pinus noxios.”

is an entirely non-Mediterranean climate, and for this reasons caves and mountain groves were best suited for their location. The natural dampness and shade of pine-covered mountain caves are often overlooked as prime locations for wild fungus, and the mountainous regions around the Mediterranean had no lack of oracular caves sacred to the Mother Goddess and the rites of her beloved. Drought would bring most supplies to an absolute halt, and as far back as antiquity, the association between thunder storms and lightning with a good yield of mushrooms was fairly prevalent.⁸⁰ Pliny reveals that the very widespread folk-belief that the thunder-crack (*tonitrua creba*) ensures a good harvest of mushrooms was also held amongst Romans.⁸¹ This natural phenomenon now engrained in myth may be used to explain the story of Dionysus' birth as the 'twice-born' son of Zeus (Sky) and Semele (Earth), a maiden daughter of Cadmus. The notion that the archetypal mistress-mother to the Divine Bridegroom is always an Earth Goddess clues us in to her son's vegetal nature.⁸² After Semele was disintegrated with a blast of lightning, the immortal fetus of Dionysus was brought to term inside his heavenly father's thigh (a euphemism for his phallic beginnings).⁸³ This very same lightning-birth of ecstatic god is paralleled in Vedic myth when the Soma is created as Father God Indra throws a lightning bolt at the Earth.

The yields of annual mushroom hunts could vary extensively from one year to another, and these yields were always be finite in quantity, particularly in regions where rain

⁸⁰ For a discussion of the perceived importance of thunder and lightning worldwide in bringing forth the mushroom, cf. Plin. *HN*. 19.37; Frederick Dannaway, "Thunder Among the Pines: Defining a Pan-Asian Soma" *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 41, 1 (2009); Rinella, *Pharmakon*, 82; and Wasson et al., *Persephone's Quest*, 83.

⁸¹ Plin. *HN* 19.37 "De tuberibus haec traduntur peculiariter: cum fuerint imbres autumnales ac tonitrua crebra, tunc nasci et maxime tonitribus, nec ultra annum durare, tenerrima autem verno esse. quibusdam locis accepta <tan>tu<m> riguis feruntur, sicut Mytilenis negant nasci nisi exundatione fluminum invento semine ab Tiaris. est autem is locus, in quo plurima nascuntur. Asiae nobilissima circa Lampsacum et Alopeconnesum, Graeciae vero circa Elim."

⁸² Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 67-69; Otto Kern, *Die Inschriften von Magnesia am Maeander* (Berlin: W. Spemann, 1900), 214. Though mortal maiden according to a rational Greek interpretation, [Apollodorus], *De Mens*, 4.38 writes of how Semele was equated with the Earth Goddess Ge and had her own cult in Thrace. Her worship in the triennial festivals of Dionysus is explicitly emphasized in an Orphic Hymn, and in Magnesia, a marble altar was dedicated "to Dionysus and Semele."

⁸³ Eur. *Bacch.* 215ff.; Diod. Sic. 4.2.1; Paus. 3.24.4; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.26-27; Hes. *Theog.* 940; Ov. *Met.* 3.255.

and climate was unreliable.⁸⁴ It may be for this reason that the cult of Dionysus only celebrated its mysteries once every two years. The biennial nature of the Dionysian mysteries may have served to mitigate supply shortages and allow for more prosperous years to create a safeguard against scarcity. Just as any valuable commodity, specimens could be arranged for annual import from one more fertile region to another, as some believe was the case with the ‘Hyperborean offering’ from Scythia to the Delian sanctuary of Apollo.⁸⁵ Even the large scale lumber trade of the ancient world would have served to proliferate the spores of countless fungi across vast distances. Once harvested, properly dried fungi are quite easily stored and retain their alkaloid content for considerable lengths of time. Undoubtedly these could have been stored for a minimum of one year without preservatives in small air-tight containers easily stored or transported with secrecy.

The sight of the golden-yellow to bright-crimson *Amanita muscaria* is well ingrained in European culture and folklore; it is easily recognized as the mushroom often found alongside depictions of Santa Claus, faeries, gnomes, or other fantastic forest floor inhabitants. The red cap is often covered with the white flecks of its own broken veil, which can either appear soft and fleece-like or hard and thorn-like. In most cases, one large mature and dried cap of *Amanita muscaria* is adequate to induce a mild delirium for an individual unaccustomed to the alkaloids.⁸⁶ In spite of the numerous studies on the chemical breakdown of this mushroom, the way in which the human brain interacts with the variety of its psychoactive compounds is still unclear to modern science – even now, as with dreams or episodes of psychoses, science can give virtually no empirical explanation for the contents of a wholly subjective hallucinogenic experience. The water-soluble Ibotenic acid (*agarine*) and muscimol are confirmed as its main psychoactive constituents, and the red skin of the pileus and the fleshy yellow tissue beneath it contain the largest quantities of these mind-

⁸⁴ Wasson, *Soma of Rigveda*, 183. Cf. Apicius, *De re coq.* 25.1.1 which reveals a traditional Roman method for preserving dried truffles in jars with sawdust and gypsum. In Petron. *Sat.* 38.4.2, Tremalchio is said to have sent off a letter “in order that spores [seeds] of mushrooms might be sent from India” thus revealing that such a thing could and was being done, at least for culinary mushrooms. “Ecce intra hos dies scripsit, ut illi ex India semen boletorum mitteretur.”

⁸⁵ Wasson et al., *Persephone’s Quest: Entheogens and the Origins of Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 250-256.

⁸⁶ D. R. Benjamin, “Mushroom Poisoning in Infants and Children: the *Amanita Pantheria/Muscaria* Group,” *Journal of Toxicology: Clinical Toxicology* 30, 1 (1992): 13-22; Heinrich, *Mushrooms in Religion*, 15.

altering alkaloids. Trace amounts of anticholinergic alkaloids such as atropine, scopolamine, hyoscyamine, and bufotenin have also been found in *Amanita muscaria* which are each powerful substances in and of themselves when experienced in moderate doses.⁸⁷

Ibotenic acid and muscimol have structures similar to two of the main neurotransmitters in our central nervous system. These allow them to act as pseudo-neurotransmitters involved in regulating of neuronal activity in the central nervous system. These chemicals cross the blood-brain barrier causing vivid hallucinations whilst imitating the brain's endogenous neurotransmitters.⁸⁸ Its poisonous effects are first manifest thirty minutes to two hours after consumption. At first, the mushroom acts as a deliriant: it induces dizziness, impeding balance and coordination, and may also lead to tiredness progressing into unconsciousness or sleep. It can prompt gastric pain, confusion, vomiting, feverish chills and unconsciousness; with the onset of these side-effects, there may loom in one's mind the fear that a deadly variety was accidentally consumed. The so-called 'Death Cap,' *Amanita phalloides*, is filled with the lethal toxin amanitin; many other mushrooms visually similar *Amanita* species contain liver damaging amatoxins and phallotoxins.⁸⁹

Shortly after, these side-effects are followed by waves of enthusiastic euphoria, sensory distortions of time and space, and visual and auditory hallucination. These waves of weariness and exhilaration may come and go several times before the hallucinogenic chemicals wear off entirely. The duration of clinical testing does not usually exceed several hours.⁹⁰ The following day the consumer may have attacks of sickness and vomiting.⁹¹ One inevitable side-effect of the mushroom is caused by muscazone, a lactame isomer of

⁸⁷ For an in depth analysis of the psychoactive chemical contents of *Amanita muscaria*, see: Kenji Tsujikawa et al., "Analysis of Hallucinogenic Constituents in *Amanita* Mushrooms Circulated in Japan" *Forensic Science International* 164 (2006): 172ff; D. Michelot and L. M. Melendez-Howell, "Amanita Muscaria: Chemistry, Biology, Toxicology, and Ethnomycology" *Mycological Research* 107, 2 (2003); Leszek Satora et al., "Fly Agaric (*Amanita Muscaria*) Poisoning, Case Report and Review," *Toxicon* 45 (2005): 942.

⁸⁸ D. J. Connor et al., "Behavioral Impairments After Lesion of the Nucleus Basalis by Ibotenic Acid and Quisqualic Acid," *Brain Research* 555 (1991); Střibný et al., "Ibotenic Acid in Urine," 2.

⁸⁹ J. Vetter, "Toxins of *Amanita Phalloides*," *Toxicon* 36 (1998): 13-24; G. M. Trim et al. "Poisoning by *Amanita Phalloides* ("Death Cap") Mushrooms in the Australian Capital Territory," *Medical Journal of Australia* 171 (1999): 247-249; Rees et al., "A Near-Fatal Case Consistent with Mushroom Poisoning due to *Amanita* Species," *Australasian Mycologist* 28 (2009): 23-28.

⁹⁰ Satora et al., "Fly Agaric Poisoning," 942.

⁹¹ Saar, "Ethnomycological Data," 162.

muscimol, which adversely impacts the central nervous system with fatigue and confusion for some time after the main effects have subsided.⁹² This may account for Firmicus Maternus' attacks on the eunuchs of the Syrian Mother who could "barely hold their heads up on their limp necks" and who, "swept up by playing flutes, call their Goddess to fill them with an unholy spirit so as to seemingly predict the future to idle men."⁹³ At least a day of rest is needed after an evening of mushroom use, both to process the neural side-effects and to come to grips with what transpired on the sleepless night which passed. These side-effects make this particular mushroom rather unsuitable for profane use unless one is an accustomed user. Such fearful side-effects likely posed some difficulties to people's earliest use of *Amanita muscaria* leading to the invention of a number of ritualized processing methods.

Ultimately, the most widespread mode of consumption today is simply the ingestion of dried caps. The consumption of dried caps is most popular partly because drying is the easiest and best method of preservation, and partly because the fresh undried fungus contains the potent neurotoxin, Ibotenic acid.⁹⁴ Once having found the red caps, the one who combed the forests seeking the fresh mushrooms would hang them upon the outstretched branches of the tree to dry in the sun's rays, allowing their main poisonous constituent (as produced by Ibotenic acid) to be largely converted through decarboxylation into muscimol, thus enhancing their hallucinogenic potential and making them safer for ingestion.⁹⁵ Once dried upon the tree, the now more powerful caps were taken down to be torn apart and consumed. As we will see, the drying process itself as a shamanic ritual has been encoded in many myths concerning the sacrificial murder of the Year-King, who is exalted then made a scapegoat (or φαρμακός), hanged, eaten, and torn apart for the benefit of the community. In the ancient Near-East and Greece alike, this motif of hanging a dying god on a tree before he was sacramentally consumed was profoundly entrenched in the ecstatic rites of the dying and

⁹² Satora, et al., "Fly Agaric Poisoning," 942.

⁹³ Firm. Mat., *De err. prof.*, 4.2: "Exornant muliebriter nutritos crines, et delicatis amicti vestibus vix caput lassa cervice sustentant. Deinde, cum sic se alienos a viris fecerint, adimpleti tibiarum cantu, vocant Deam suam, ut nefario repleti spiritu vanis hominibus quasi futura praedicant."

⁹⁴ Saar, "Ethnomycological Data," 168.

⁹⁵ K. Tsunoda, N. Inoue, Y. Aoyagi, T. Sugahara, "Change in Ibotenic Acid and Muscimol Contents in *Amanita Muscaria* During Drying, Storing or Cooking." *J. Food Hyg. Soc. Jpn.* 34 (1993): 153–160; K.F.G. Waser, "The Pharmacology of *Amanita Muscaria*," in *Ethnopharmacological Search for Psychoactive Drugs*, ed. D.H. Efron, B. Holmstedt, N.S. Kline, (Washington DC: U.S. Public Health Service Publication, 1979), 419–439.

rising vegetation gods – a motif which remains well-maintained in the symbolic consciousness of the West, millenia after the pagan mysteries were stamped out by the Catholic Church.

The Mother and her Divine Bridegroom: The Zeus of ‘Nysa’

“Far behind me lie those golden-rivered lands, Lydia and Phrygia, where my journeying began. Overland I went, across the steppes of Persia where the sun strikes hotly down, through Bactrian fastness and the grim waste of Media. Thence to rich Arabia I came; and so along all Asia’s swarming littoral of towered cities where Greeks and foreign nations, mingling, live, my progress made. There I taught my dances to the feet of living men, established my mysteries and rites that I might be revealed on earth for what I am: a god.”

– Euripides, *Bacchae*, 14-19.

In amalgamating the most venerable traditions of all its surrounding regions, Roman foreign policy concerning religion (or perhaps lack thereof) inspired a return in some to mankind’s most primitive religion, a link which will be spelled out over the following pages. The smooth process of syncretic association between various local cults has long baffled the modern mind more attuned to the exclusive nature of Judeo-Christian monotheism. Syncretism (drawn from the Greek συγκρητίζω, ‘to unite against a common foe’) is a term used by religious historians to label the process of merging different and at times seemingly opposed belief systems. Syncretism asserts that beneath the many permutations of ancient myth and ritual there lays a small handful of common archetypes that reconcile all the local variations of any given sacred theme. Without the organic convention of pagan religious syncretism, the Greeks and Romans would never have suffered the oriental mystery gods and goddesses to stand in their cities side-by-side with their ancestral gods. By the 3rd century AD, when most of our information concerning the mystery cults in Rome comes into light, popular religion had long become a veritable patchwork of ideas, philosophies, and superstitions syncretized into many unique permutations within the minds of each individual. The Syrian rhetorician Lucian of Samosata satirized the debasement of Olympian stock which, by the late 2nd century AD, had been overrun by countless eastern mystery gods for centuries:

Well, Attis, at all events, and Korybus, and Sabazius – from what part of the world have *they* been rolled in upon us one after the other? Or that Mithras, the Median, with his oriental mantle and tiara, who does not even speak a word of Greek, so that, even if one drinks to his health he doesn’t understand? So, of course, the Scythians and Dacians, upon seeing their characters, bid us a long adieu, and immortalize and elect for Gods for themselves whomever they may choose; in the same manner in which Zalmoxis, slave though he was, was enrolled, who crept in I don’t know how. ⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Luc. *Dial. D.* 9-10 (H. Williams): “ἀλλ’ ὁ Ἄττης γε, ὃ Ζεῦ, καὶ ὁ Κορύβας καὶ ὁ Σαβάζιος, πόθεν ἡμῖν ἐπεισεκυκλήθησαν οὗτοι, ἢ ὁ Μίθρης ἐκεῖνος, ὁ Μῆδος, ὁ τὸν κἀνδυν καὶ τὴν τιάραν, οὐδὲ ἐλληνίζων τῇ φωνῇ,

The introduction of new cults into a foreign milieu must always overcome some degree of initial resistance, but divinities with ancient precedence were not to be arbitrarily rejected, no matter how strange they appeared to the local populace. The deeply personal mystery gods of Hellenistic elaboration were not above regional syncretism, since the ancients perceived a fundamentally shared origin among many of their gods. This syncretic atmosphere makes attempts to disentangle the myths, gods, and rituals of one group from another next to impossible. Names, epithets, titles, birthplaces, genealogies, and relationships are seldom agreed upon in myth; only broad archetypes coloured by many local permutation stand out for analysis. One must look toward large quantity of overlapping mythical nuances and variations comparatively, allowing one to develop a clearer picture of these cults by extrapolating the archetypal details which were shared by a common ancestor.

Both the Greeks and the Romans acknowledged the profound antiquity of the cult dedicated to whom they called ‘the Phrygian Mother.’ The chief figure in the Phrygian pantheon was Μάταρ, the Mother, and from the 6th century onward, Greek religion adopted the foreign goddess as Μήτηρ. Often depicted in the presence of wild lions, birds and snakes, Μάταρ was the mistress of savage nature, celestial flight and chthonic descent. In Phrygia, her alleged homeland according to Greek belief, she was venerated at door-shaped niches set with reliefs or freestanding images hewn from rocky mountainsides. In Greek-speaking lands she was syncretized with Ge, Gaia, Demeter, and particularly with Rhea, the mother of Zeus, who birthed the Sky Father in a cave on Crete.⁹⁷ The oldest and most unambiguous discoveries concerning the lion-flanked, consort-attended Goddess were those made at Çatal Hüyük in south-central Anatolia. This Early Neolithic town of hunter-gatherers contained religious sanctuaries and community commons which may have served for orgiastic purposes; these rooms contained symbolic wall paintings, ancillary burials, ritualistic cattle-head trophies, and, most strikingly, wall reliefs of a goddess with arms uplifted and legs spread open. Other excavated finds included female statuettes companioned

ὥστε οὐδ’ ἦν προπίη τις ξυνίησι; τοιγαροῦν οἱ Σκύθαι ταῦτα ὀρῶντες, οἱ Γέται αὐτῶν, μακρὰ ἡμῖν χαίρειν εἰπόντες αὐτοὶ ἀπαθανατίζουσι καὶ θεοὺς χειροτονοῦσιν οὓς ἂν ἐθελήσωσι, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον ὄνπερ καὶ Ζάμολξις δοῦλος ὢν παρενεγράφη οὐκ οἶδ’ ὅπως διαλαθῶν.”

⁹⁷ Jennifer Larson, *Ancient Greek Cults: A Guide* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 24.

by a youthful consort, and the most famous female figure emerging from the site: a woman enthroned and giving birth flanked by lions. The level of continuity between the Great Mother of the historical period and the one depicted at Çatal Hüyük is remarkable: here we have clear proof of religious iconographical continuity between the Goddess of the Phrygians and the Anatolian Mother of Çatal Hüyük lasting well over 5,000 years.⁹⁸ I am not implying that any cults from antiquity ever practiced some wholly preserved and perfected ‘Neolithic’ cult, but the relative consistency for all the ecstatic mystery rites across the Mediterranean seems to suggest that they all stemmed from a common ancestor. The parallels between the goddess of Çatal Hüyük and the Greco-Phrygian mother merely buttress the idea that the Greeks and Romans consciously venerated a goddess who was older than all of their own gods. Over millennia, iconography dedicated to this Mother Goddess was applied to a wide range of local earth goddess variants, but she always maintained some degree of consistency.

The widespread use of the name ‘Cybele/Kybebe’ as a blanket designation for many indigenous Anatolian mother goddess variants occurred only in the West where one particular variant from Pessinous was imported by Rome. Had some other local goddess variant been brought to Rome, it is likely the name ‘Cybele’ would have never been raised to such heights as to become the mother of all the gods. The goddess Kubaba, from whom Cybele received her name, was merely a minor deity in the Hittite pantheon. There once existed dozens, even hundreds, of local Hittite goddesses in Anatolia of which we now know little more than their names and titles. We know of Inar(a), a Hattic goddess of wildlife akin to the Greek Artemis; Halmasuit, worshipped as the deified throne; Kamrusepa, a goddess of magic and birth-rituals; and Kubaba who, over time, appears to have assimilated the functions of all of these goddesses. From at least the Old Babylonian period Kubaba had first been the city goddess of Carchemish. She was adopted into the Hittite pantheon when King Suppiluliuma I conquered and took over her city. After the fall of Hattusa, in the neo-Hittite period, Kubaba achieved high standing in northern Syria and south-eastern Anatolia corresponding with the increasingly important role of Carchemish. In the course of the early

⁹⁸ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 12.

first millennium BC, Kubaba's influence became widespread in Anatolia and was syncretized into the pantheon of the newly arrived Phrygians.⁹⁹

From at least the 7th century BC and onward, the worship of the Phrygian Mother was spread abroad into Greece and its colonies by means of itinerant specialists. These must have played a key role in the increasing number of votive monuments dedicated to the Mother Goddess throughout *Magna Graecia*, from Anatolia to southern Italy.¹⁰⁰ Testimonies exist concerning *homines religiosi* of this type, the Μητραγύρται or 'beggars of the Mother' who made a living by establishing her rites abroad.¹⁰¹ Aristotle mentions the Μητραγύρται as a pejorative equivalent to an Eleusinian priest whilst one of his own disciples writes how a destitute tyrant ended his life begging with his tambourine as a Μητραγύρτη.¹⁰² The myths of Zalmoxis, Orpheus, and even Zagreus/Dionysus themselves can be said to contain elements suggestive of these proselytizing types. While distinguishing the eunuchs from the Μητραγύρται, Borgeaud explains how the classic Μητραγύρτη was essentially a healer working on their own account which did not evoke the idea of a religious collectivity nor that of castration.¹⁰³ These individuals were fundamentally 'shamanic' figures as ecstasies who imported foreign deities and stretched out the influence of foreign gods out well beyond the Anatolian mainland.

The influence of similar types of itinerant ecstasies on northern European religion is alluded to in the narratives contained within the 12th century *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus or the 13th century *Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturluson, who proposed that the Æsir were wanderers from the Near East divinized long ago. Odin, the chief of the gods, who presided over the martial spheres of war, death, and battle, in addition to the shamanic spheres of poetry, prophecy, inspiration, and intoxication, was presented as an historical

⁹⁹ Trevor Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 148-149.

¹⁰⁰ Burkert, *Mystery Cults*, 36.

¹⁰¹ Plut. *Cleom.* 36.4 (trans. Bernardotte Perrin): "εἰ τὰς πρὸς Ἀντίγονον, ἄνδρα πολεμιστὴν καὶ δραστήριον, διαλύσεις ὑπεριδὼν Κλεομένης κάθηται μητραγύρτου βασιλέως σχολὴν ἀναμένων, ὅταν πρῶτον ἀπόθηται τὸ τύμπανον καὶ καταπαύσῃ τὸν θίασον, ἀποκτενοῦντος αὐτόν." "For it was an intolerable thing that Cleomenes, after scorning to come to terms with Antigonos, a man who fought well and wrought much, should sit idly down and await the leisure of a begging-priest [μητραγύρτου] of a king, who, as soon as he could lay aside his timbrel and stop his dancing, would slay him."

¹⁰² Rhet. 1405a, 20; Philippe Borgeaud, *La Mère des dieux: De Cybèle à la Vierge Marie* (Éditions du Seuil, 1996), 63.

¹⁰³ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 64.

character residing in Anatolia who could trace his ancestry back to the Phrygian king Priam of the *Iliad*. Odin wandered northward, allying himself with kingships in Denmark, Norway and Sweden along the way.¹⁰⁴ It is possible that itinerant religious specialists living in regions peripheral to the great Bronze Age civilizations could have escaped being absorbed into the structures of organized state religions by adamantly retaining their ecstatic character and wandered northward. There is, of course, no solid evidence to prove any definitive historical links between Norse and Phrygian mythology beyond their common Indo-European linguistic ancestry, and the trope of ‘Trojan origins’ is itself as old as western literary history.

In Athens, Μήτηρ was rapidly – though at first reluctantly – incorporated into civic cult near the βουλευτήριον (council chamber) in the agora. In the late 5th century, with the construction of a new one, the old βουλευτήριον was converted into the Metroön. Contrary to expectation, its position here was strictly political. The cult established on the Agora in honour of the Mother of the Gods was not erected as a center of mystery initiation, but rather as a center of managing the state archives.¹⁰⁵ Surely the Eleusinian Telesterion had fulfilled the Athenians’ needs for an initiatory temple long before the construction of this Metroön. Far from a divinity of exotic rites, on the grounds of the Metroön, the goddess was clothed with functions given to her by the assembly of the 500 instituted by Cleisthenes: her domain was justice and fertility. This rendered her more akin to what Borgeaud calls “Une Déméter sauvage,” who was only later assimilated to her Phrygian counterpart bit by bit.¹⁰⁶ Among the subsequent generations of elite men in Athens, the cult of Μήτηρ was viewed with suspicion for its associations with vagrants, foreigners, women, effeminate and alien rites. The popular appeal of her cult was confirmed by its rapid spread through the Greek world and by the abundance of votive offerings and figurines not only in her sanctuaries, but in domestic and funerary contexts as well. It was not until the 4th century in Greece, once the

¹⁰⁴ Saxo Gram. *Ges. Dan.*1. It should be mentioned that the myth of Trojan origins is a common theme in European literature (i.e. Virgil) and is in no way unique to the myths concerning the Æsir. The mythical motif (the importance of Trojan/Phrygian ancestry) is more important as it stands in the mind of the ancient authors than as it stands in history as fact.

¹⁰⁵ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 178-179; Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 33.

¹⁰⁶ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 35-37.

goddess had been wholly reconceptualized into Hellenistic polytheism, that explicit iconography and dedications arose for the Great Mother's consort, Attis.

Hallucination, madness, trance, dreams, and the sense of utter psychological abandon were in the jurisdiction of Μήτηρ. Private sponsorship of Μήτηρ was widespread among the Greeks and often prompted by dreams or visions. Pindar was said to have established a shrine dedicated to Μήτηρ in Thebes after he had a vision of the goddess' statue walking, and her cult was brought into Magnesia by Themistocles after having been warned of an assassination attempt in a dream of the goddess.¹⁰⁷ When struck with a wasting sickness and refusal to eat or sleep, the chorus of Troezenian women wonder if 'the mountain mother,' ματρὸς ὀρείας, had possessed Phaedra.¹⁰⁸ Our English word 'lunatic' derives from the Latin adjective *lunaticus* ('belonging to the Moon') since the Moon was the celestial body with which women and the goddess were most often associated in Greco-Roman astro-theology. Even the unwilling are disposed to becoming μητρόληπτος or one "seized by the Mother" since the goddess was also held responsible for fits of epilepsy, the so-called 'sacred disease.'¹⁰⁹ Out-of-body experiences, whether induced by drugs or by severe psychological perturbations are potentially very terrifying and life changing experiences; in the ancient world, these events of temporary psychosis were often associated with a divine origin. A Hippocratic treatise on epilepsy tells us that "if a patient roars or suffers convulsions on the right side, [the physicians] say the mother of the gods is to blame."¹¹⁰ Epilepsy is often reckoned the *sine qua non* of shamanism among modern Siberian tribes and it surely had an analogous role to play among devotees of the Great Mother.

A glance at nearly any piece of extant literature concerning this mother goddess reveals the unyielding bond between the ecstatic and the feminine, and not coincidentally, a tight relation to the orgiastic Greek cults of Dionysus.¹¹¹ The literature and symbols which evoke details concerning the Greek Dionysus are therefore useful tools in filling the gaps in

¹⁰⁷ Larson, *Greek Cults*, 177.

¹⁰⁸ Eur. *Hipp.* 141-144. "†σὺ γὰρ† ἔνθεος, ὧ κούρα, εἶτ' ἐκ Πανὸς εἶθ' Ἐκάτας ἢ σεμνῶν Κορυβάντων φοιτᾶς ἢ Ματρὸς Ὀρείας."

¹⁰⁹ Hermias, *In Platonis Phaedrum Scholia*, 105a.

¹¹⁰ Lynn Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 156. Hippocr. *Morb. sacr.* 4.

¹¹¹ Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 64.

our historical information concerning Attis and the far more ancient Phrygian Mother. Dionysus, like the mushroom itself, was an archetypal intermediary straddling countless opposing semiotic categories in myth.¹¹² Twice-born of Earth and Heaven; annually broken though fundamentally immortal; masculine yet ultimately androgynous; child-like yet all-powerful; and many-named though essentially unnamable. Among the Greeks, Dionysus' divine portfolio was divided into four categories: tragic drama, viticulture, ecstasy, and mystical soteriology. Many 'primitive' cultures enduring today relegate these domains of drama, intoxication, dance, and myth to their local shaman. Though the vine and its rich produce was the most characteristic expression of Dionysus in later periods of Greco-Roman civilization, he was first like Attis, a god of trees in general. The vegetable god was primarily patron to all primal, orgiastic, cathartic, and alien experience. As it occurs, the lifecycle of Dionysus, likewise the beloved consort of the Phrygian Mother, extends as a mythical motif to before the coalescence of disparate hunter-gatherer societies into more sedentary lifestyles.

Three different routes have often been suggested for the arrival of Dionysus into the Peloponnese: some have believed him to have come from the north via Thrace,¹¹³ others from the east via Asia Minor, and others from the south via Crete.¹¹⁴ Linear B evidence has proven that *DI-WO-NI-SO-JO* was venerated among the Indo-European Mycenaeans at Pylos as early as 1,200BC.¹¹⁵ Discussions attempting to geographically pinpoint the origins of Dionysus from Thrace, Crete, or Anatolia are ultimately irrelevant since each these lands originally belonged to a greater Mediterranean substrate wherein Europe's earliest agriculturalists first adopted a mother goddess as their foremost object of worship.¹¹⁶ Figurines of a theriomorphic ithyphallic god, his phallus painted red and his face masked with the likenesses of bulls and goats were a large part of the sculptural repertoire of the

¹¹² Carl Ruck, *Sacred Mushrooms of the Goddess* (Berkeley: Ronin Publishing, 2006), 47.

¹¹³ James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1922), 396.

¹¹⁴ Dan Stanislawski, "Dionysus Westward: Early Religion and the Economic Geography of Wine" (*Geographical Review* 65, 4, 1975): 427-444; Kerényi, *Dionysus*, 5-28.

¹¹⁵ Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 463.

¹¹⁶ Marija Gimbutas, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe: 7000 to 3500 BC Myths, Legends and Cult Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 227.

Vinča culture from the central Balkans (5th – 4th millennium BC). Along with the figures of this deity, interpreted as “an archetypal Dionysus or an excited worshiper of the great goddess,” were a number of very explicit mushroom figurines carved from green crystal which, according to Marija Gimbutas, may have been connected to the intoxicating Soma of the Indo-Europeans as proposed by R. Gordon Wasson.¹¹⁷ It is possible that this archetypal figure hiding behind the theriomorphic masks was the Great Mother’s chief mediator, the shaman, who by use of his ecstatic techniques and by virtue of his divinatory abilities was ultimately euhemerized as a god himself.

In the much later and more violent conquests of the Bronze Age Indo-Europeans, groups of newly-stratified and highly patriarchal tribes invaded new lands and brought with them their Sky Father. Among the groups they conquered, some of these were already Indo-European speaking peoples, others were not. In Anatolia, as with Greece, the newly arrived cults encountered a much older cult headed by a goddess which had been well established for thousands of years prior. Rather than deposing of her, these migrating conquerors applied the natural principles of syncretism and married their Zeus (**dyew-*’; Sanskrit ‘*dyú*’; Latin ‘*Iovis*’; Old English ‘*Tīw*’; Hittite ‘*sius*’) to these native mother goddesses. Hierarchical arrangements among gods, of course, must mirror the level of stratification prevalent among the peoples who uphold such arrangements. In Greece this act of sacred marriage had great success in subordinating the goddess Hera to male power, but in Anatolia the influence of the goddess was so deeply rooted that she, in many areas, gradually gained authority over her new Indo-European husband.¹¹⁸ By around 500 BC, however, the general Homeric vision of Olympian godhood had faded in relevance to the common people, having been entirely absorbed by state cult and civic duties. No longer were the gods of great temples and gilded statues satisfactory to assuage the deep anxieties of those who yearned to become initiates of the mysteries. Here we see a shift, or rather a return, in attention from the fickle and indifferent Olympians towards the saving graces of foreign goddesses and their ecstatic consorts.

¹¹⁷ Gimbutas, *Old Europe*, 218-220.

¹¹⁸ J. G. Macqueen, “Hittian Mythology and Hittite Monarchy,” *Anat. St.* 9 (1959): 180.

The Greeks themselves observed the obvious bond between the rites of their own ecstatic god Dionysus, the Greco-Phrygian Attis, and the Thracio-Phrygian Sabazios, each of which were central to various women's initiation rites of around the eastern Mediterranean.¹¹⁹ The Thracian Sabazios and Cretan Zeus were also aptly conflated with Zeus and Dionysus by the Greeks as their names and myths stemmed from a core source. Euripides elucidates the ties between Dionysus' association with Phrygian Rhea and the rites of "Cybele the Mother" to his audience in his famous tragedy on the subject.¹²⁰ In the entry for Sabazios, the 10th century Byzantine lexicography known as the Suda reads: "He is the same as Dionysus. He acquired this form of address from the rite pertaining to him; for the barbarians call the Bacchic cry 'sabazein.' Hence some of the Greeks too follow suit and call the cry 'sabasmos'; thereby Dionysus [becomes] Sabazios."¹²¹ Strabo too gives us clues to the synonymous nature of these various wandering shamanic gods in his *Geography*:

They called the god 'Bacchus,' and Rhea 'Cybele' or 'Cybebe' or 'Dindymene' according to the specific places where she was worshipped. Sabazios also belongs to the Phrygian group and in a way is the child of the Mother, since he too transmitted the rites of Dionysus. Also resembling these rites are the Cotytian and the Bendideian rites practiced among the Thracians, among whom the Orphic rites had their beginning.¹²²

In these passages we see that characters with such seemingly various ethno-mythological backgrounds as Rhea and Cybele, or Sabazios and Dionysus, were all syncretized with one another because of their perceived common origins as a 'transmitter of rites.' Clement of Alexandria adds Attis into this mixture claiming that "certain persons, not inappropriately, equate Dionysus with Attis, because he too was separated from his reproductive organ."¹²³

¹¹⁹ Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*, 30.

¹²⁰ Eur. *Bacch.* 59-60.

¹²¹ "Sabazios." Suda Online. Tr. Alex Gottesman, 16 April 2000. Accessed 12 Feb 2013 <<http://www.stoa.org/sol-entries/sigma/3>> "Σαβάζιος: ὁ αὐτός ἐστι τῷ Διονύσῳ. ἔτυχε δὲ τῆς προσηγορίας ταύτης παρὰ τὸν γινόμενον περὶ αὐτὸν θειασμὸν: τὸ γὰρ εὐάζειν οἱ βάρβαροι σαβάζειν φασίν. ὅθεν καὶ τῶν Ἑλλήνων τινὲς ἀκολουθοῦντες τὸν εὐασμὸν σαβασμὸν λέγουσιν: ἔνθεν Σαβάζιος ὁ Διόνυσος. σάβους ἔλεγον καὶ τοὺς ἀφιερωμένους αὐτῷ τόπους καὶ τοὺς Βάκχους αὐτοῦ."

¹²² Strab. *Geo.* 10.3.15-16 (trans. H. L. Jones): "Τῷ δ' αὐτῷ καὶ κτύπῳ κροτάλων τε καὶ κυμβάλων καὶ τυμπάνων καὶ ταῖς ἐπιβοήσεσι καὶ εὐασμοῖς καὶ ποδοκρουστίαις οἰκεῖα ἐξέυροντο καὶ τινα τῶν ὀνομάτων, ἃ τοὺς προπόλους καὶ χορευτὰς καὶ θεραπευτὰς τῶν ἱερῶν ἐκάλουν, Καβεῖρους καὶ Κορύβαντας καὶ Πάνας καὶ Σατύρους καὶ Τιτύρους καὶ τὸν θεὸν Βάκχον καὶ τὴν Ῥεάν Κυβέλην καὶ Κυβήβην καὶ Δινδυμήνην κατὰ τοὺς τόπους αὐτούς. Καὶ ὁ Σαβάζιος δὲ τῶν Φρυγιάκων ἐστὶ καὶ τρόπον τινα τῆς μητρὸς τὸ παιδίον παραδοὺς τὰ τοῦ Διονύσου καὶ αὐτός. Τούτοις δ' ἔοικε καὶ τὰ παρὰ τοῖς Θραξὶ τὰ τε Κοτύττια καὶ τὰ Βενδίδια, παρ' οἷς καὶ τὰ Ὀρφικὰ τὴν καταρχὴν ἔσχε."

¹²³ Kerényi, *Dionysus*, 276-277; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.19.4 (trans. K. Kerényi): "Δι' ἣν αἰτίαν οὐκ ἀπεικότως τὸν Διόνυσόν τινας Ἄτιν προσαγορεύεσθαι θέλουσιν, αἰδοίων ἐστερημένον."

These manifestations of an archetypal arrangement are but the frayed ends of a continuous line leading back to a very solemn shamanic fertility rite.

The Greek name ‘Dionysus’ is itself an ambiguous title meaning the Zeus of ‘Nysa,’ a mysterious otherland of fairies, fauns and satyrs just beyond the margins of the rational where his maenadic celebrations take place.¹²⁴ Madness and theriomorphic hallucinations followed Dionysus wherever he wandered. Ovid tells us how “Bacchus himself, grape-bunches garlanding his brow... and at his feet fierce spotted panthers lay, tigers and lynxes too, in phantom forms.”¹²⁵ In some cases Mount Nysa was identified with Mount Cithaeron in Boeotia, the symbolic seat of Dionysiac orgies on the Greek mainland, nevertheless, classical authors have also identified Nysa with countless other mountains sacred to Eastern vegetation gods from lands as far apart as Thrace and India. The Homeric Hymn to Dionysus tells us of “a certain Nysa, a mountain most high and richly grown with woods, far off in Phoenicia, near the streams of Egypt.”¹²⁶ Hesychius of Alexandria, the 5th century AD Byzantine lexicographer provides a list of sites proposed by ancient authors for this mythic mountain: “Nysa and the Nysaeon Mount are not in one place alone, but in Arabia, Ethiopia, Egypt, Babylon, Erythea, Thrace, Thessaly, Cilicia, India, Libya, Lydia, Macedonia, Naxos, and about the Pangeum, a place in Syria.”¹²⁷ The assumption in antiquity was that the god was named after the mountain; nevertheless, it is more likely that the inverse was true – as is the case with mountains being named after goddesses in Anatolia. Nysa would be best understood as a realm in the mind rather than a physical place. The word ‘*nysa*’ has even been argued as etymologically related to either *νυστάζω* (to doze off, to be half asleep) or to *nysos*, the Thracian word for bride, hence his title as the ‘Divine Bridegroom.’¹²⁸

The ‘Divine Bridegroom’ was a title reserved for mankind’s chief mediator between human society and the wild and ecstatic realm of a Mother Goddess. A priest or mock ‘king’

¹²⁴ Ruck et al., *The Apples of Apollo* (Durham: California Academic Press, 2001), 4-6.

¹²⁵ *Ov. Met.* 3.572 (trans. A. D. Melville).

¹²⁶ *HH* 1 (trans. H. G. Evelyn-White).

¹²⁷ For Nysa as an unspecified location, see *Hom. Il.* 6.129; *HH* 26; *Ov. Met.* 3.304; Suidas s.v. *Nyseion*. For Nysa in Boeotia (Central Greece) see *Plut. Lys.* 28.4; *Philostr. Imag.* 1.14; *Opp. Cyn.* 4.230; *Pseudo-Hyg. Fab.* 131. For Nysa on Naxos, see *HH* 1; *Pseudo-Hyg. Fab.* 192. For Nysa in Phoenicia, see *Pseudo-Apollod. Bibl.* 3.29; *Diod. Sic.* 4.2.3; *Plin. NH* 5.74. For Nysa in Arabia, see *Herodotus, Histories*, 3.111. For Nysa in Egypt, see *Hdt.* 3.97. For Nysa in India, see *Philostr. VA* 2.2, 2.6-10; *Quint. Curt.* 8.10; *Plin. HN* 6.78.

¹²⁸ Wasson et al., *Road to Eleusis*, 98.

administered such initiation circles and played a surrogate role to the ‘Divine Bridegroom,’ giving himself up to the Goddess in a sacrificial drama to trigger mania, self-mutilation or emasculation, and ultimately, a spiritual death and resurrection for himself and for the initiates. This title came under attack by later Christian apologists who denied the title of Bridegroom to any other than Christ, the bridegroom of the church itself. In his vituperative tirades against the mystery god’s old title, Firmicus Maternus proclaims: “With you there is no light, nor anyone who deserves to be called ‘Bridegroom.’ There is one light, one bridegroom: the honour of these names has been taken by Christ.”¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Firm. Mat. *De err. prof.* 19.1 (trans. C. A. Forbes).

Attis, the ‘Phrygian’ Φαρμακός and the Goddess’ Eunuchs

By the 4th century, the metropolitan atmosphere of the eastern Mediterranean had rendered the civic cults of Greece (including those in honour of Dionysus) hollow and stifled in practice. To the alienated Greek woman weary of the loom and her children, the transient Syrian merchant, or the Thracian slave, the appeal of the Phrygian Mother provided a rallying point for those seeking a genuine religious experience. As a result of this allure, the foreigners living in the Piraeus fashioned our first known expression of the Dionysian spirit reimagined in the oriental likeness of shepherd-boy Attis. Attis was the divinized oriental wanderer, high priest, initiator of secret rites, and the beloved of the goddess. The Greco-Phrygian god embodied the mysteries of the Great Mother in their most exotic form: he was her conduit, her mediator with mankind, and the archetypal individual overtaken by the majesty of the Great Mother and driven into her service. From the 4th century onward, the Greeks and Romans came to hold Attis in equally high regard as a god of ecstasy and enthusiastic intoxication, a dying-and-rising saviour god, a chthonic guide over the souls of the deceased, and eventually, as a symbol for the Sun itself as source of all generation.

Our earliest indisputable depiction of Attis is found on a votive stele from Piraeus dating back to the third quarter of the 4th century BC. The identification of the figures depicted is confirmed by the inscription below: “Timothea [dedicates this] to Angdistis and Attis on behalf of the children, according to command.”¹³⁰ The relief portrays Attis distinctly as a Greek-perceived oriental stereotype, with his belted tunic extending above the knees, boots, trousers, and pointed Phrygian cap. With this shepherd-boy appearance, he echoes the old Sumerian/Babylonian vegetation god Dumuzi/Tammuz, a perennially dying-and-rising lover of the Goddess, Inanna/Ishtar. From this period onward, the costume here shown was used persistently to portray the god in subsequent representations. As a shepherd, Attis was a god of wandering mountainsides and guardian of the flock, motifs which stand semiotically opposed to those of agricultural society’s ‘grain gods’ – if he is to be accepted as a god of vegetation, his features hardly denote any links to grain fertility at a first glance.¹³¹ The

¹³⁰ *IG II2 4671*.

¹³¹ Macqueen, *Hittian Mythology*, 175.

eastern shepherd motif works nicely as a metaphor for a tree-bound mushroom: on a hot summer's day, the best place to find a red-capped shepherd boy is sitting beneath a tree taking solace in its shade.

It should also be mentioned that Attis' costume was not specifically indicative of Phrygian garb to the Greeks. Unrelated depictions of characters in these costumes began in the 7th century BC as a means of stressing the exotic and oriental backgrounds of the represented figures, whether Persian, Scythian, Phrygian, or otherwise. The cap and the outfit worn by Attis on the Piraeus stele would not then have had any specifically Phrygian implication. It would have simply identified him as an eastern foreigner.¹³² Though scholars have good reason to believe the first depictions of Attis were made in the Piraeus during the 4th century BCE, they have yet to trace the source or the reasons for Attis' origins through syncretic developments. Since no representations of Attis are known from Phrygia, Lynn Roller challenged Attis' Phrygian ancestry claiming:

If Attis was the regular companion of the Phrygian mother goddess, as Greek art and myth seem to imply, then one would expect his image to appear in Phrygia at least occasionally in conjunction with the Phrygian goddess, as it does on the Piraeus stele and frequently in later Greek and Roman art. Yet this is not the case. The source for Attis must be sought elsewhere.¹³³

This shepherd-boy Attis as depicted first by Greeks was essentially unknown to the early Phrygians; it was not until the Phrygian lands were conquered by Alexander the Great that the full impact of religious interculturalism was felt between Phrygians and Greeks. Naturally, Roller acknowledged that older representations of Attis may have existed and simply no longer survive. This possibility, however, seemed unlikely to her due to the relatively vast selection of Phrygian material available, all without an iconographical trace of Attis' existence. In referencing a passage by Demosthenes, Lynn Roller proposed that Attis may be the embodiment of the liturgical cry let out by initiates undergoing initiation: "*Euoe! Saboe!*" and "*Hyes Attes, Attes Hyes!*"¹³⁴ It would seem to me, however, that such cries

¹³² Lynn Roller, "Attis on Greek Votive Monuments: Greek God or Phrygian?" *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 63, 2 (1994): 250.

¹³³ Roller, *Attis: Greek or Phrygian*, 247.

¹³⁴ Dem. *De cor.* 260; Roller, *God the Mother*, 181.

existed to evoke a name which already existed. Glossolalia rarely fossilizes into concrete and consistently used sacred language unless it is already a well-known name, epithet, or expression. The name ‘Attis’ itself is most comparable to the English ‘Papa’ and was certainly Phrygian, but it did not designate anything divine since it was as one of the most frequently used personal names in Phrygia, exceeding almost all other common names.¹³⁵ The implications of Attis’ name are then twofold: on the one hand, it symbolizes his status as husband to the Mother Goddess and high priest of the Phrygian state; on the other, such a vague name explicitly conceals any real details concerning his identity. A strong characteristic in the Divine Bridegroom is the ephemeral nature of his name, so ‘Attis’ seems fitting. This reflects a long-standing custom in Near Eastern religion whereby divine names are made sacred with silence. Attis could therefore be said to exist merely one step above namelessness, as did the Semitic Adonis (“Lord”) or Greek Dionysus (“The God of Nysa”). To gain a deeper understanding of these quasi-aniconic gods bound together by a long series of slow syncretic developments accreted over history, we must not isolate these figures from one another in highlighting their subtle differences, but rather look to the countless similarities which bind them.

Theories for the origins of Attis are few, and those which do exist often fail to acknowledge the rather late development of ‘Attis the oriental shepherd boy’ as a concrete image. Before taking the form of a Greek divinity, Attis was a priestly title reserved for a high ranking member in Phrygian society. Roller remarked that there are instances where the name occurs in the context of Phrygian cult where the goddess was central:

In the form Ates, the name is that of the dedicator in the inscription on the magnificent rock facade at Midas City, probably of the 7th or 6th century BC, a facade which would have framed a cult statue (now missing) of the Phrygian mother goddess. Such a large and impressive monument was surely made under the influence of a rich and powerful individual, perhaps a member of the Phrygian ruling family.¹³⁶

This dedication on behalf of an Attis suggests that it was a name occurring among Phrygian nobility, as it was among the ruling dynasty of Lydia. Letters between the priests of the

¹³⁵ Roller, *God the Mother*, 181; Roller, *Attis: Greek or Phrygian*, 255; Ruck et al., *Mushrooms and Mithras*, 103.

¹³⁶ Roller, *Attis: Greek or Phrygian*, 254.

Phrygian Mother at Pessinus and the kings of Pergamum from the mid-2nd century BC exist in which the chief priest is addressed by the title of ‘Attis.’¹³⁷ Roller also raises the case of two other votive inscriptions with the name Attis (*Ates* and *Atas*) from 6th century BC Phrygian rock inscriptions, neither of which can be fully translated, but both use phrases corresponding with Greek Mother Goddess dedications. These examples provide evidence for the use of the name in cultic context, not for a god, but as the principal official of the Goddess. It is possible these Attis figures were the high priests who were ‘married’ off to the Goddess in the spring, given over to her in ritual as a sacrificial victim, but we cannot be sure. What is certain, however, is that Attis bereft of his Greek iconography still has deep historical roots in the traditional and truly ancient mountain cults of Anatolia.

At the height of Roman control over the cult, priests appointed outside of Rome required the authorization of the central sanctuary. The high priests or *archigalli* who offered the blood of their slashed arms to the tree-bound effigy of Attis on the *Dies Sanguinis* were Roman citizens exclusively and their elections had to be ratified by the *Quindecemviri*. The high priest at Rome had thus an official duty which was irreconcilable with castration since Roman law forbade such ‘barbarisms’ to its own citizens.¹³⁸ Since the cult of Cybele was formally brought into Rome at the end of the 3rd century BC, it was viewed with such distrust that the administrators of internal Roman affairs put plans in motion straightaway to impose a superstructure of non-eunuch local magistrates atop the cult. Despite this fact, it appears there was little difficulty in recruiting *galli* for it was a somewhat profitable way of life which provided opportunities for social advancement for men who could not have had acquired it outside the priesthood. Borgeaud believes the *galli* can be traced back – with no etymological pretense – to a category of Mesopotamian priests, the *galatur* and *kurgarru*, who appear to be something like the functional precursors to Cybele’s *galli*. They were priests and sacred prostitutes who participated in liturgy, sometimes masked and costumed. They could be seen playing music, singing, and dancing, most often in honour of the mother goddess Ishtar and they were described as avowed to passive homosexuality, some of them

¹³⁷ Roller, *Attis: Greek or Phrygian*, 254.

¹³⁸ Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*, 49.

being eunuchs.¹³⁹ Roman accounts of the goddesses' eunuchs across their own empire still exhibited these traits and played these roles. Among those rooted deeply in the civic or familial life, self-dedication to the Goddess was no easy task. Something truly deep and insightful must have provoked the desire to relinquish one's past life, and this something can be no other than a genuinely life-changing mystical experience.

In the myths associated with the mystery cults, ecstatic gods were often defined by their androgynous nature which had issued from a cosmic act of abscission. The mystery gods like Zagreus-Dionysus, Attis, and Osiris had themselves each suffered genital mutilation and death before returning to triumph over the grave.¹⁴⁰ According to the 2nd century AD Naassene Gnostics, the dismemberment of Attis meant that he was abscised from the low earthly regions of creation and carried up to the eternal essence where he is neither female nor male but a new being, who is androgynous.¹⁴¹ When asked what provoked the desire in men to castrate themselves, Ovid wrote that: "a woodland Phrygian boy, the gorgeous Attis, conquered the towered goddess with pure love. She wanted to keep him as her shrine's guardian," but upon being caught in an act of infidelity, he was driven to madness and self-emasculatation by the Goddess. "Suddenly no signs of manhood remained," writes Ovid, and thus "his madness became a model: soft-skinned acolytes toss their hair and cut their worthless organs."¹⁴² Attis castrated himself at the instigation of the Mother alone, establishing a ritual practice of self-castration. Through this deed her devotees became sons and lovers of Cybele. Borgeaud explains that "this practice was done in a state of trance, enthusiasm, in the frame of a ritual where the 'candidate,' encouraged by the other participants, was under the influence of flute music, suffumigations, and intoxication."¹⁴³ By performing Attis' fatal act, these priests identified themselves with Cybele's beloved and

¹³⁹ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 78.

¹⁴⁰ Giovanni Casadio, "The Failing Male God: Emasculation, Death and Other Accidents in the Ancient Mediterranean World." *Numen* 50, 3 (2003).

¹⁴¹ Casadio, "Failing Male God," 239, see Hipp. Ref. V 7, 15.

¹⁴² Ov. *Fast.* 4.222 (trans. A. J. Boyle).

¹⁴³ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 70.

took on the god's name, as did the votaries of Dionysus who took the title of 'Bakchos' upon initiation.¹⁴⁴

The castrated phallus of the god played a central role in the Goddess' mysteries in a manner which was perfectly indicative of the Roman sacrificial proverb: "*do ut des.*" While inevitably cutting off devotees from their duties as citizens and producers of offspring for the state, the goal of this initiatory ordeal among the worshipers of Attis was foremost to give sacrifice, prove dedication, and to grant male access to an ancient rite of plant fertility magic. We might compare this sacrifice to a spell found in Josephus, who writes that in order to prevent mandrake (a phallic tuber revered and feared for its hallucinogenic properties) from "shrinking away from the touch," it had to be anointed with the menses and urine of a woman. Where such 'maenadic' women were available to play the role of sacred prostitute, this was probably achieved through the direct exposure of the vulva to that part of the earth where sacred vegetation was thought to lie.¹⁴⁵ Exposure of a woman's genitalia for the well-being of vegetation can also be found in Pliny who wrote that in order to protect vegetation from predatory "caterpillars, worms, beetles and other vermin," menstruating women "walked around the cornfield naked" causing all pests to perish. Pliny tells us that the salubrious effect of menses on vegetation was discovered in Cappadocia, in eastern Anatolia, during "a plague there of Spanish fly, so that women... walk through the middle of the fields with their clothes pulled up above the buttocks."¹⁴⁶ It is possible that in the case of rearing, protecting and preparing *Amanita muscaria*, this type of magic blood offering occurred around the base of consecrated trees and later developed a formal ritual character devoid of its context, in many cases having lost touch with the primitive purpose of the ritual. The castration was a form of restitution to the tree-god by the ones who first robbed him of his own member. This interpretation, of course, does not disprove others, but rather coincides with them. Emasculation opened the male devotees of the Phrygian Goddess to the ritual position of sacred prostitute, allowing former men to undertake the fundamentally feminine rites which were necessary to arouse their Divine Bridegroom up from the underworld, that

¹⁴⁴ Casadio, "Failing Male God," 237.

¹⁴⁵ Joseph. *BJ* 7.181; cf. Allegro, *Mushroom and Cross*, 76.

¹⁴⁶ Plin. *HN* 28.78; cf. Allegro 1970, 77.

is, to call upon the mushroom. When these rituals took place outside of city walls, moistening the earth of suspect trees with large quantities of blood from animal or human sacrifice invoked the god's return; practically speaking, with soil sufficiently christened with blood and libation, the probability for a seemingly spontaneous rebirth of the sacrament would be improved.

The savagery in self-mutilation or castration by Cybele's, Bellona's, or the Syrian Goddess' attendants elicited revulsion from among those outside the cult, even among those like Apuleius having been initiated into other systems.¹⁴⁷ The initiation systems or 'rites of passage' from many cultures that test candidates by knife, fear, fire and poison are more often known to strengthen resolve than dampen it.¹⁴⁸ It is this taboo asceticism and ferocious dedication to the goddess which intensified the boundaries between a wholly sacred and wholly secular life – a boundary which was essentially blurred for adherents to most other cults. Castration and dependence on a sanctuary made apostasy impossible for the remainder of the eunuch's life. This dilemma is the theme which inspired the composition of Catullus 63, wherein Attis, following his castration, cries out:

Am I now driven to be a servant of gods and Cybele's slave?
Am I to be a maenad, am I to play that part, to be a sterile man?
Am I to live in the cold, snow-coated place of green Ida?
Am I to spend my life under the high mountain tops of Phrygia,
where the hind is a forest dweller, where the boar is a wood rover?
What I've done distresses me now, now I'm sorry.¹⁴⁹

Catullus brings to life the ambivalence in an initiates' mind concerning his decisions to offer himself to the Goddess' service. Most importantly, he explicitly highlights the parallel between the eunuch of Cybele and the Dionysian maenad. The roman poet plays with the

¹⁴⁷ For the scolding remarks of Latin authors concerning the effeminacy and self-mutilation of the goddess' priests see the pagan Apul. *Met.* 8.28; and the Christians Tert. *Apol.* 25; Arnob. *Ad. gen.* 5.14; August. *De civ. D.* 7.26.

¹⁴⁸ Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*, 21.

¹⁴⁹ Catull. *Carm.* 63 (trans. M. Van Wevelingen): "Ego nunc deum ministra et Cybeles famula ferar? Ego Maenas, ego mei pars, ego vir sterilis ero? Ego viridis algida Idae nive amicta loca colam? Ego vitam agam sub altis Phrygiae columinibus, ubi cerua siluicultrix, ubi aper nemorivagus? Iam iam dolet quod egi, iam iamque paenitet."

emotions of one now stranded on the other side of his own bloody deed, stuck with the assurance of a future life dedicated to the feminine, the ecstatic, and the other.

Alongside the Roman state superstructures which sustained the public cult and its mysteries, there were formed more reputable colleges, the *cannophori* and *dendrophori*, non-eunuchs who attached themselves to the cult following their own initiations. Their role in the cult was generally restricted to the festivals in March when they were charged with duties concerning the sacred pine and reeds.¹⁵⁰ During Cybele's spring festival the *dendrophori* were responsible for carrying the sacred pine into Rome onto which the effigy of Attis would be hung and spattered with the blood of self-mutilation. A detailed inscription from Bovillae in central Italy offers a comprehensive inscription from 147 AD concerning the civic college of tree-bearers calling themselves salubrious (*salutare*) with their sacred grove dedicated to Cybele. A curator of Bovillae named Gaius Dissenius Fuscus is said to have set aside a plot of land for the planting these pines (*ad pinus ponendas*) for the goddess' sacred grove.¹⁵¹ This sort of patchwork arrangement of mendicants, eunuchs, priestly colleges, and government officials appears to have existed in Ostia, where a large precinct of Meter and Attis has been fully excavated. Not much evidence survives concerning the interrelation of these local groups, but the recruitment of *galli* was likely as fundamental there as it was in Rome or Pessinus.¹⁵² For now, however, we must turn to our best extant myths containing the tales of Attis and his wrathful mistress, for only through these accounts do we receive the unique descriptions of these people's ritual practices and the stories by which they lived their lives.

¹⁵⁰ Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 114-115.

¹⁵¹ Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 63.

¹⁵² Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 37.

Attis in Myth

At the heart of the mystery rituals lay something wholly outside the realm of temporal or earthly power. For this reason, a common motif in the Greco-Roman literature concerning the Divine Bridegroom was the simultaneous acceptance and rejection of his cult in fear of all the lawless, effeminate and ‘oriental’ ecstasy it implied. The mystic revelation granted by ecstasy defies dogma and solidified ideology by its very nature. Wherever the orgiastic rites of the Goddess appeared in one of its permutations, it threatened only the exponents of orthodoxy, patriarchy, social stratification, and the *status quo* which once served to push these rites out onto the fringes.¹⁵³ Lucian of Samosata gives us a rationalized account concerning Attis as a historical figure which he claims to have heard from the lips of a wise man:

Now this Attis was by nation a Lydian and he first taught the sacred mysteries of Rhea. The ritual of the Phrygians, the Lydians, and the Samothracians was entirely learnt from Attis. For when Rhea deprived him of his powers, he put off his manly garb and assumed the appearance of a woman and her dress, and roaming over the whole earth he performed his mysterious rites, narrating his sufferings and chanting the praises of Rhea. In the course of his wanderings he passed also into Syria. Now, when the men from beyond Euphrates would neither receive him nor his mysteries, he reared a temple to himself on this very spot.¹⁵⁴

Having been rejected by the civilizations of Mesopotamia, Attis literally institutes his temple on the fringes of the foreign milieu. Shamanism, as embodied by a human Attis in this passage, has always been the endeavour of an eccentric fringe minority. Well-engrained in the western mind is the archetype of the old medicine woman or the lonely hermit living in on the edge of the village at odds with their society yet fundamentally vital to their well-being. In Greek society, this role was fulfilled in part by the itinerant proselytizers of the Goddess who disseminated the rites central to ‘maenadism.’ The foundation story for the Metroön of the Phrygian Mother in Agrai, or even Livy’s account for the arrival of Cybele

¹⁵³ For two well-known examples of this motif see Eur. *Bacch.* 35-54; Liv. 39.8-19.

¹⁵⁴ Lucian *Syr. D.* 15.29-31 (trans. H. A. Strong and J. Garstang): “Ἀττις δὲ γένος μὲν Λυδὸς ἦν, πρῶτος δὲ τὰ ὄργια τὰ ἐς Ῥέην ἐδιδάξατο. καὶ τὰ Φρύγες καὶ Λυδοὶ καὶ Σαμόθρακες ἐπιτελεύουσιν, Ἄττεω πάντα ἔμαθον. ὡς γὰρ μιν ἡ Ῥέη ἔτεμεν, βίου μὲν ἀνδρηίου ἀπεπαύσατο, μορφήν δὲ θηλέην ἡμίψατο καὶ ἐσθῆτα γυναικίην ἐνεδύσατο καὶ ἐς πᾶσαν γῆν φοιτῶν ὄργια τε ἐπέτελεεν καὶ τὰ ἔπαθεν ἀπηγέετο καὶ Ῥέην ἤειδεν. ἐν τοῖσιν καὶ ἐς Συρίην ἀπικέτο. ὡς δὲ οἱ πέρην Εὐφρήτῳ ἄνθρωποι οὔτε αὐτὸν οὔτε ὄργια ἐδέκοντο, ἐν τῷδε τῷ χώρῳ τὸ ἱρὸν ἐποιήσατο.”

into Rome both fit this archetype of simultaneous acceptance and rejection for ecstatic foreign rites.¹⁵⁵ The Metroön in Athens was built to appease the Goddess after the locals were struck with plague resulting from the unwarranted execution of a proselytizing μητραγύρτης. In 205BC, Cybele and her pine-worshipping, self-flagellating eunuch cult was ceremoniously brought into Rome at the behest of a sibylline oracle only to suffer immediate and severe legal restrictions.¹⁵⁶ We see in these stories that normative society must, by its very nature, simultaneously reject and embrace the ecstatic. It is for this purpose that many educated elites feared the rites of an oriental goddess. For the downtrodden, however, the experience contained within the mystery initiations offered something which neither wealth nor rank could offer in and of themselves.

For those too involved with the affairs of *this* world – that is, those interested in maintaining public order or social and political domination – the notion of escaping the body through perturbing consciousness appears foolish at best and dangerous at worst. Our most significant sources concerning the mysteries of Attis and the Goddess are therefore found in the attacks of the Christian church fathers writing in the later centuries of the Roman Empire. In an attempt to expose what he believed to be the absurd nature of Cybele’s cult, the Christian apologist Arnobius left us our most detailed and intact account concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Attis in Book V (5-7) of his *Case Against the Pagans (Adversus Nationes)*, written between 300 and 310AD. The renowned theologian tells us he composed his work from ancient books (*ex reconditis antiquitatum libris*), almost six centuries old, which were inaccessible to laymen and guarded by the eunuchs of Pessinus in Phrygian.¹⁵⁷ If we take this to be true and not merely a literary device to gain credibility from his readers,

¹⁵⁵ Liv. 38.15-16; See Peter G. Walsh, “Making a Drama out of a Crisis: Livy on the Bacchanalia” *Greece & Rome, Second Series* 43, 2 (1996): 194 for this breakdown of the speech contained in Livy 38 according to rhetorical structures set down by Quintillian: “The *exordium* emphasizes that the Bacchic rites are alien to the Roman religious heritage and threaten the security of the state. The *propositio*, or statement of the theme, argues that the new religious movement represents a looming danger to Rome which must be challenged. The *tractatio*, which discusses this thesis from various moral standpoints, stresses the dangers of lawless gatherings (the motif of the *periculosum*), their immorality (the *impium*), their criminality (the *nefarium*), and their alienation from the Roman religious tradition (the *religiosum*)... Clearly the whole speech, which will be an expanded but essentially faithful version of the content of his source, is an influential strand in the message of Book 39 that foreign influences were beginning to undermine the fabric of the state.”

¹⁵⁶ Liv. 29.10-14.

¹⁵⁷ Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*, 31.

the myth of Attis first written by one ‘Timotheus’ is very revealing in its botanical metaphors, providing perhaps the most convincing piece of evidence toward *Amanita muscaria*’s consubstantiality with the dying-and-rising god. This Timotheus was a specialist on Mysteries according to Tacitus, an exegete according to Plutarch, and a key figure in adopting Eleusinian religiosity to the Alexandrian cult of Serapis around 300BC.¹⁵⁸ An extremely similar version to Timotheus’ allegedly local Phrygian myth is also contained in Pausanias’ *Description of Greece* which, although it is less detailed, helps to confirm the antiquity of Arnobius’ account.¹⁵⁹ There is no way Arnobius’ account could be more detailed than Pausanias’ account if he had been relying on the geographer as a source.¹⁶⁰

The section of the myth relevant to our purposes narrates the birth of a hermaphroditic God(dess), the primordial androgyne, named Kybele-Agdistis who was an aspect of the Goddess named after the local name for Mount Agdos/Agdistis at Pessinus.¹⁶¹ Being androgynous, the God(dess) was driven mad and in her furious wanderings she posed a threat to the reign of the Olympian gods.¹⁶² This double sexuality is a pejorative force and clearly condemned by divine order.¹⁶³ Fearing Kybele-Agdistis’ rampages, the gods held a council to stop the God(dess). They consent to sending down Dionysus to drug Kybele-Agdistis and set a snare to sever her male organ (“*planta*”). Once tricked into drunkenness and abscised from her *planta* by Dionysus, Kybele’s severed phallus falls to the earth which swallows it up greedily (“*rapiuntur et combibuntur haec terra*”). Then, from the blood-soaked earth arose a tree with scarlet fruit (“*malum repente cum pomis ex his punicum nascitur*”). This fruit produced by Kybele-Agdistis’ castration was then placed in the lap of a water nymph named Nana, who then fell pregnant with Attis (“*in sinu reponit: fit ex eo praegnas*”). Attis, therefore, was born out of the sexual union between water nymph

¹⁵⁸ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 72.

¹⁵⁹ Paus. 7.17.9. Pausanias himself contrasts this version with the alleged Lydian version drawn from Hermesianax of Colophon.

¹⁶⁰ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 71-72.

¹⁶¹ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 116.

¹⁶² Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 75-77: Here Borgeaud summarizes how Walter Burkert and other scholars have shown that the myth of Arnobius is susceptible to a convincing analysis which holds the Kybele-Agdistis episode to have stemmed from an Anatolian myth from the 2nd millennium BC: the Hurrian myth of Ullikumi.

¹⁶³ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 85.

(representing moisture) and a phallus-tree, the now abscised divine member of a once intoxicated primordial androgyne.

Years pass by after this event and Kybele, now removed of her savage masculine counterpart Agdistis, falls in love with Attis who by now had grown up and was betrothed to Ia, the daughter of a King Midas who symbolizes archetypal Phrygian royalty. Upon the day of Attis and Ia's royal wedding ceremony, Kybele manifests herself unexpectedly in all her power, outraged with jealousy, and the young bridegroom was driven totally mad by her revelation. He took up his flute and thoroughly frenzied ("*perbacchatus*") he threw himself beneath a pine tree where he performed his deed of self-mutilation. Attis shore away his member and in immediate lamentation the princess Ia cut off her breast as some women allegedly did at the Roman *Dies Sanguinis* festival on March 24th. Attis died from the blood loss at the foot of the tree, but from the stream of gore sprung up a violet blossom ("*viola flos*") which entwined itself around the tree ("*redimitur ex hac arbor*"). The Goddess then takes the pine tree into a cave in order to lament the dead god further. Remorseful for what she had done, the Goddess sent for Zeus, persuading him to aid her in these matters. By a concession of Fate, Zeus decides not to resurrect the boy, but rather grant that his body beneath the pine should not decay, that his hair (or foliage, "*comae*") should grow eternally and that his phallus ("*digitorum minimissimus*") should live forevermore and be stirred alone by perennial provocation ("*perpetuo solus agitetur e motu*"). Satisfied with this concession, Kybele consecrated the body at the temple-state of Pessinus where Attis was celebrated with annual rites. Ovid echoes this part in a Grecian version of the myth, claiming the "pines, high-girdled... [are] the favourite of Cybele, the gods' Great Mother, since in this tree Attis doffed his human shape and stiffened in its trunk" referring to the man-made effigies of the Divine Bridegroom which were carved out of sacred trees in mountain sanctuaries across the Eastern Mediterranean and worshipped for their annual return of gifts.¹⁶⁴

In the detailed myth of Attis' death passed down to us by Arnobius we have seen all the themes central to the mysteries: sacred trees, madness, frenzied music, self-mutilation, castration, kings, and the ἱερὸς γάμος. Many scholars who have examined this myth in detail

¹⁶⁴ Ov. *Met.* 10.103 (trans. A. D. Melville): "pinus, grata deum matri, siquidem Cybeleius Attis exiit hac hominem truncoque induruit illo."

mention very little concerning the incorruptible body of Attis, his “little finger,” and his ever-growing hair. Borgeaud notes how neither Roscher, nor Rapp, nor Frazer, nor Cumont, nor Graillot, nor even Nilsson have any word to say about the mysterious story of Attis’ partial resurrection, while more recent scholars also maintain their reservations.¹⁶⁵ Borgeaud even dismisses Vermaseren’s phallic interpretation as the result of a modern projection. I, however, see no reason to discredit the phallic hypothesis so easily, and I would even extend this phallic symbol to be a mythic euphemism for the *Amanita muscaria*.

We have a slightly different version of the myth given to us by the late pagan grammarian Servius in his commentary on Vergil’s *Aeneid* which helps further to buttress the account contained in Arnobius as ‘authentic’ or at least somewhat ‘archetypal.’ Servius tells us that Attis, a beautiful boy who presided over the sacred rites of the Great Mother, was desired by the king of the city; but when Attis understood the sexual violence which the king wished to inflict upon him, he fled into hiding in the woods. When he was discovered and he understood the violence which would be brought upon him, he severed the seducer’s genitals who, whilst dying, cut off the same part from the boy. When the high priests of the Great Mother had found him half-dead lying beneath the pine, they brought him into the temple and tried in vain to restore him. When he had died, they buried him. In order that he should forever remain in memory, the Great Mother decreed that every year he would be mourned with his own sacred rites, and beneath the pine where he had lain, she had her devotees – those called archigalli – sever their own members.¹⁶⁶ What is important for our purposes is that this account still maintains many of the key themes we have already discussed with Arnobius: the dichotomy between the city (civilization) and the wild (lawless primitivism); the opposition of king and goddess; sexual desire turned to madness; the sacred pine tree under which Attis is castrated; and sexual violence as a form of lamentation.

¹⁶⁵ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 82-84.

¹⁶⁶ Serv. *In Verg. Aen.* 9.115: “Attis, puer speciosus, cum matris magnae praesset sacris, a rege civitatis suae adamatus est; sed cum intellegeret vim sibi a rege instare, clam in silvas profugit. cum ergo inventus vim sibi videret inferri, verenda stupratoris abscidit, qui moriens eandem ipsam partem corporis puero abscidit. quem semianimem sub pinu latentem cum invenissent antistites matris magnae, perlatum in templum deae frustra conati reficere, defunctum sepelierunt. cuius ut perpetua maneret memoria, mater magna instituit, ut quotannis in sacris suis plangeretur, pinumque arborem, sub qua iacuerat, tutelae suae adscripsit, et effecit ut cultores sui viriles sibi partes amputarent, qui archigalli appellantur.”

What we see working beneath the narrative of Attis' myth is a stream of symbolic imagery suggestive of herbal folklore. The apologist gives us a number of clues which give credibility to my hypothesis for Attis' botanical identity and the backdrop for this saviour god's curious resurrection story. What appears to be afoot is a description of *Amanita muscaria*'s life-cycle at the base of a tree, which begins in a spore dropped during the blooming and potential extirpation of a preceding generation of mushrooms. The spore falls into the earth and unites mycorrhizally with its host tree. The tree, which is the dismembered member of the once androgynous goddess, and its red fruit emerge first in the myth. The fruit conjoined with moisture, represented by Nana the water nymph, begets the birth of Attis. The vegetable god becomes the prized possession of the mountain mother, dwelling on her peaks until he is taken away from his humble origins and brought to a king's realm and given over to a princess. After Attis' death by castration at his own wedding, the vegetable-god becomes one again with the tree that produced him, and blessed by Zeus, the 'very smallest of his digits' is kept growing in perpetuity. From this myth it is clear that the priests of Pessinus, if they truly had a hand in this account, had some understanding of the mycorrhizal relationship between the tree and the mushroom at its base with its annual cycle of rebirth and death. Such an understanding of natural cycles should come to no surprise for the priestly organizations of the Near East who have long been recognized for their accumulated insights in mythmaking, calendar administration, and astrology.

The Hanged God and the Mystery Rites of the Goddess

Inanna sang: "Then plow my vulva, man of my heart! Plow my vulva!" At the king's lap stood the rising cedar; plants grew high by their side; grains grew high by their side; gardens flourished luxuriantly. "He has sprouted; he has burgeoned; He is lettuce planted by the water. He is the one my womb loves best. My well-stocked garden of the plain, my barley growing high in its furrow, my apple tree which bears fruit up to its crown..." – The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi

Humanity's intimate symbiosis with the plant-world began long before we learned to control them. The sophist Prodicus of Chios was the first among the Greeks to overtly 'rationalize' the gods, proclaiming that "primitive man, [out of admiration, deified] the fruits of the earth and virtually everything that contributed to his subsistence."¹⁶⁷ As trees, crops, flowers or fungi assuredly returned with every passing season, some eventually thought to apply this pattern to human existence, supposing a life beyond the grave. It was for the fulfillment of this purpose that the ecstatic rites of the Goddess were first formulated. To achieve this life eternal, however, a deep recognition and understanding of self *vis-à-vis* the cyclical nature of all things was obligatory, and this was the teaching central to the soteriological mysteries. Firmicus Maternus wrote that Phrygian cults "profess that the earth [Goddess] loves her fruits, they profess that this [Attis] is exactly this, which is born from fruits; however the punishment which he sustained, this they profess is what the reaper with his scythe does to the ripe fruits."¹⁶⁸ After the development of agricultural communities in the Eastern Mediterranean, the paradigm of dying-and-rising grain gods who perished during the scorching summer months and were resurrected by autumn rains exploded into popularity from a very early period. These, however, were often mere assimilations of the pre-agricultural vegetation gods who preceded them. It was in the very nature of these seasonal vegetation gods and their rituals to be bound intimately with the shaman's craft, and it is for this reason that ecstasy is personified in the mystery persona of the Divine Bridegroom.

¹⁶⁷ Jan Bremmer, *Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 90 from A. Henrichs "The Sophists and Hellenistic Religion: Prodicus as the Spiritual Father of the Isis Aretalogy," HSCP 88, (1984).

¹⁶⁸ Firm. Mat. *De err. prof.* 3.2: "Amare terram volunt fruges, amatum vero hoc ipsum volunt esse, quod ex frugibus nascitur; poenam autem, quam sustinuit, hoc volunt esse, quod falce messor maturis frugibus facit. Mortem ipsius dicunt, quod semina collecta conduntur."

Along with the intensification of agriculture and the coalescence of small tribes behind city walls, the influence of the shaman was reduced but was never removed entirely; rather, it was absorbed for the most part into mainstream religion. This worldwide profession has had a profound part to play in the social stratification inherent to the religious experience, myth, and ritual of antiquity. Millennia of accumulated oral tradition was passed down through various streams upon entering into the historical record as myth: on the one hand, shamanic lore was absorbed by those who would become priestly elites, leaders of state cults, and the organizers of public festivals; on the other hand, shamanism persisted on the margins of civilization in small circles of mystics. Ultimately, religion as we understand it today has received a substantial influence from the dialogue between the peripheral ecstasies (shaman, poets, priests, mystics, philosophers) and the religious experiences of society at large (slaves, farmers, soldiers, politicians, and merchants). The shaman belongs to the sacral class, in dialogue with the larger martial and economic classes, according to the tripartite division of Indo-European culture ('ceux qui prient; ceux qui combattent; et ceux qui travaillent.') as proposed by George Dumézil.

At the end of the late Neolithic, many tribes (or collective of tribes) eventually coalesced around specific individuals who gathered around themselves an aristocracy of powerful religious specialists and warriors. As no cities yet existed, life was generally organized around raising livestock and farming in small rural villages centered on fortifications built by these chieftains.¹⁶⁹ It was this position of chieftainship which is suggested in Proto-Indo-European society by this series: *raj* (Sanskrit); *rex* (Latin); *rix* (Gaulish); *rí* (Old Irish) and likely the Thracian Ῥῆσος. Emile Benveniste argued that the fundamental meaning of these words was 'one who determined what was right,' while Andrew Sihler suggested that the underlying root was 'to be efficacious' or 'to have mana,' suggesting a leader concerned with religious authority over sovereign coercive power.¹⁷⁰ What we might at least gather from the varied interpretations of this title is that the boundaries of the 'sacred' and the 'secular' were non-existent in the practice of ruling. By virtue of their rank, these chieftains were surrounded by individuals privy to the secrets of

¹⁶⁹ Ivan Venedikov. "Thrace." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series* 35, 1 (1977): 76.

¹⁷⁰ Mallory, *Indo-Europeans*, 125.

religion. With the help of these individuals, these chieftains propagandized themselves through a discourse of godhood and at some unknown period of time sought to legitimize themselves by taking over and making public an ancient rite which primarily evolved and was first transmitted among women. For this reason, much of our extant information concerning the fertility rite of ‘sacred marriage’ comes from the Near East and concerns the sexual union of a priest-king and high priestess. It was only after man learned to stockpile agricultural surplus that the conception of a ‘courtly’ god began to take form, and this was nothing more than a projection of a Near Eastern king’s propagandistic imagery.

Sumerian accounts tell us how the king is the lover of the Great Goddess who takes himself to her temple to be married.¹⁷¹ Kings – or at least individuals of noble birth – became revered as intercessors between man and the divine and because of their centrality in upholding the goodwill of the gods, they were euhemerized as gods themselves. Some attained godhood whilst still alive, others were made divine through mythology long after their deaths. Among many cultures in which god-kings were given over sacrificially in shamanic drama, the ruler universally donned the guise of ecstatic vegetation god.¹⁷² Many festivals held in honour of the goddess were centered on the ritual murder of a mocking, her consort, on or around a sacred tree. Over time these rites underwent a period of reform, having replaced the sacrifice of men with the hanging of effigies. Memory of these sacrificial figures faded, and later generations re-envisioned these men in a euhemeristic light: as gods, demigods, immortal heroes, psychopomps, and rulers over the land of the dead. Our earliest documentation concerning the mysteries of Eleusis reveal a state superstructure placed over the initiation rites wherein an annually elected βασιλεύς (‘king’) was drawn from the local aristocratic Eumolpidae family and charged with supervising the entire initiation process.¹⁷³

A wide array of sources concerned with public and private festivals in honour of the goddess provide us with the echoes of a truly primitive ritual of intoxication, centered upon

¹⁷¹ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 108.

¹⁷² For more details of this ritual, see chapters ‘Human Representatives of Attis’ and ‘The Hanged God’ in James G. Frazer, *Adonis Attis Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion* (New York: MacMillan and Co., 1906), 182-191.

¹⁷³ Burkert, *Mystery Cults*, 37.

the ritual ascent of a god within or upon a tree. We know decorated pines were central goddess cults in the Near East for millennia: they were employed at the Hittite New Year festival and likewise later in the spring festivals of the Syrian Goddess Atargatis in Hierapolis.¹⁷⁴ Upon sacrifice, the god was reunited with the goddess, a union which ensured the fertility of the earth and well-being for empathetic devotees. It was during these festival days that even bystanders of processions broke out into fits of drumming, singing, self-mutilation and castration. Lucian of Samosata tells us of a festival among the Syrian eunuchs held in the spring called ‘the Pyre’ or ‘the Lamp’ which revolved around the burning of live animal offerings. On this occasion they cut down tall trees, stood them up in the temple courtyard, dressed them with gold, silver and garments, and then brought goats, sheep, birds, and cattle to have them hung upon the trees. They then carried their gods around the trees and set the trees ablaze with all the animals hung upon them.¹⁷⁵

Such lavish public displays of the Goddess’ rites had not always existed in such an open state, but during the Roman period the cult’s festivals reached the height of their public popularity. We must not, however, mistake the open festivals with the mystery rites themselves which were private and restricted to small groups, despite seemingly sharing certain structural elements with the public displays. In Rome, the spring festival in honour of Attis began on March 15th with the *canna intrat* to open the ceremonies, this was reed-bearing ritual reminiscent of palm Sunday in the Christian tradition; on March 22nd the college of *dendrophori* brought in a pine for the *arbor intrat* procession, and on March 24th, at the climax of the public festival was the *dies sanguinis*, a grotesque carnival of sorts dedicated to Cybele during which a wooden effigy of Attis was united with a sacred pine where he was offered the cuttings of castration and sprayed with the blood of self-mutilation.¹⁷⁶ The day after Attis was crucified, the cult celebrated the *Hilaria*, a day of joy in honour of the resurrection which had been conceded to Attis. On the 26th of March the

¹⁷⁴ Jan Bremmer, “Attis: A Greek God in Anatolian Pessinous and Catullan Rome.” *Mnemosyne IV* 57, 5 (2004), 21.

¹⁷⁵ Lucian, *Syr. De.* 49.60-61.

¹⁷⁶ Diod. Sic. 3.59.7.

cult had a day of rest to recuperate from their celebrations, and on March 27th they brought the festival to a close with the washing of the blood-soaked idol of Cybele in the Almo.¹⁷⁷

Tree-worship and sacred marriage are well attested phenomenon for many Indo-European peoples, even as their religions began to manifest more anthropomorphic characteristics.¹⁷⁸ Among many cultures influenced by Indo-European agriculture, language, and consequently religion, the Tree of Life and its seven rungs became an archetype with religious significance as not only a map of the cosmos, but also as a central object of ritual: a cosmic ladder. The 2nd century Macedonian rhetorician Polyaeus gives us one account of a Thracian priest-king who threatened to desert his unruly subjects by ascending a wooden ladder up to the goddess Hera.¹⁷⁹ A similar ritual was preserved in works as far off as Scandinavia, such as the *Hávamál*, in which Odin describes how he sacrificed himself to himself to acquire his power: "...I hung on the windy tree for nine whole nights; wounded with the spear, dedicated to Odin; myself to myself."¹⁸⁰ Ultimately, it is through self-identification with the divine victim that man discovered the fundamentally immortal nature of himself. To understand more fully the archetype of the Divine Bridegroom, we must look to turn reasons why an ecstatic god might be so consistently associated with sacred coniferous trees and thus why effigies of the god were cut out of them. Many Greeks sacrificed to Zeus, Apollo, and Dionysus ἔνθενδρος or 'of the tree.' The image of Dionysus was that of a simple post or branchless tree draped in a cloak and decorated with a mask to represent the head. The oracle at Delphi instructed the Corinthians to worship a certain pine tree "equally with the god," so they created two images of Dionysus out of it with red faces and gilded bodies.¹⁸¹ It is hard to suppose no link exists between these ancient pine tree rituals and the rites of Divine Bridegroom, though historical lines lie now obscured.

Perhaps our clearest and earliest information concerning the extramural rites of the Phrygian goddess comes from Euripides, who himself spent the latter portion of his life in Macedonia near Thrace (whence the Phrygians had relinquished for Anatolia long before his

¹⁷⁷ Borgeaud, *Mère des dieux*, 131-132; Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*, 44-45.

¹⁷⁸ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 106ff.

¹⁷⁹ Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.22.

¹⁸⁰ *Hávamál*, 139 (trans. K. Simrock); see Frazer, *Adonis Attis Osiris*, 187.

¹⁸¹ Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 397ff.

time). Tragedy itself – the goat song – was inseparable from the cult of intoxication and its themes were often based on rituals deeply rooted in Greece’s shamanic past. The didactic message of Euripides’ most famous tragedy, the *Bacchae*, is clear: to reject mankind’s deep-seated relationship with intoxication was to call ruin upon one’s own house, especially among royalty. The *Bacchae* is a play about primordial origins, primitive rituals, and the clash of ideologies. It was long interpreted by the Cambridge Ritualists as containing the ritual pattern for the slaughtering of the ‘ἐνιαυτός δαίμων,’ the old ‘year-king,’ in order that he might be cast into the soil for the replenishment of the earth.¹⁸² The play recounts the fate which befell Pentheus, the mythical king of Thebes and grandson of Cadmus (the mythical founder of agriculture), after having rejected Dionysus as a god. While wandering the mountainsides dressed as a woman with Dionysus, King Pentheus espied the ritual preparations in “a little valley surrounded by precipices, irrigated with streams, shaded by pine trees, where the maenads were sitting, their hands busy with delightful labours.”¹⁸³ ‘Maenads’ (μαινάδες, literally the ‘raving ones’) was a label given to women – or castrated men¹⁸⁴ – dedicated to the orgiastic rites of the Phrygian Mother which took place in secret far off mountain sanctuaries.¹⁸⁵ Being a spectator, a θεατής, to the maenads’ unspeakable rites, King Pentheus is drawn in as a participant against his will.¹⁸⁶ The king is drugged (causing him to ‘see double’¹⁸⁷), adorned in female attire,¹⁸⁸ then exalted upon the “lofty top-most

¹⁸² Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides’ Bacchae*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 37.

¹⁸³ Eur. *Bacch.* 1046-1062 (trans. T. A. Buckley): “Πενθεύς τε κάγω--δεσπότη γὰρ εἰπόμην - ξένος θ’ ὃς ἡμῖν πομπὸς ἦν θεωρίας. πρῶτον μὲν οὖν ποιηρὸν ἴζομεν νάπος. τά τ’ ἐκ ποδῶν σιγηλὰ καὶ γλώσσης ἄπο σφύζοντες, ὡς ὀρῶμεν οὐχ ὀρώμενοι. ἦν δ’ ἄγκος ἀμφίκριμνον, ὕδασι διάβροχον, πεύκαισι συσκιάζον, ἔνθα μαινάδες καθῆντ’ ἔχουσαι χεῖρας ἐν τερπινοῖς πόνοις. αἱ μὲν γὰρ αὐτῶν θύρσον ἐκλελοιπὸτα κισσῶ κομήτην αὐθις ἐξανέστερον, αἱ δ’, ἐκλιποῦσαι ποικίλ’ ὡς πῶλοι ζυγά, βακχεῖον ἀντέκλαζον ἀλλήλαις μέλος. Πενθεύς δ’ ὁ τλήμων θῆλυν οὐχ ὀρῶν ὄγλον ἔλεξε τοιάδ’· ὦ ξέν’, οὐ μὲν ἔσταμεν, οὐκ ἐξικνοῦμαι μαινάδων ὄσσοις νόθων· ὄχθων δ’ ἔπ’, ἀμβάς ἐς ἐλάτην ὑψαύχενα, ἴδοιμ’ ἂν ὀρθῶς μαινάδων αἰσχροουργίαν.”

¹⁸⁴ See Catull. *Carm.* 63: “Ego nunc deum ministra et Cybeles famula ferar? Ego *Maenas*, ego mei pars, ego vir sterilis ero?”

¹⁸⁵ Painted pottery featuring the dancing maenads twirling around Dionysus and Semele unified in hierogamy exploded into popularity in the 4th century BC. See Yves Bomati, “Les Légendes Dionysiaques en Etrurie” *REL* (1984), 94.

¹⁸⁶ Eur. *Bacch.* 829.

¹⁸⁷ Eur. *Bacch.* 918f.

¹⁸⁸ Eur. *Bacch.* 912-976.

branch of the pine tree”¹⁸⁹ before being sacrificially dismembered and eaten raw by the maenads as φαρμακός.¹⁹⁰ Charles Segal believes that “the elevation in the high tree may symbolize the precarious delusion of phallic power. The fall to earth after the tree’s uprooting by the maenads, and the consequent dismemberment enact a nightmarish scene of failure and castration. The defeat of male phallic power by female.”¹⁹¹ This type of psycho-sexual interpretation may well be correct in a sense, but it does not consider the underlying ritual which Euripides is depicting in reverent and fearful esoteric ambiguity.

The Greek term ‘φαρμακός’ which comes directly from (and shares all its ambiguities with) the word for ‘drug’ (‘φαρμακόν’) is a designation for the scapegoat-king who was put to death for the purification of those committing the ritual murder.¹⁹² Before Pentheus is hung in the tree as φαρμακός by the band of Dionysiac women, he is made a pseudo-maenad, an androgynous figure. In liminal situations around the world, neophytes are often treated or symbolically represented as being neither male nor female. Alternatively, they may be allotted the characteristics of both genders, irrespective of their biological sex. In the given initiation rite, they are symbolically sexless or androgynous, as what Victor Turner calls “a kind of human prima material – as undifferentiated raw material.”¹⁹³ In this form, Pentheus meets his death as a ‘victim’ (“θύμα”) at the hands of a female priestess sacrificer (“ἱέρεια φονου”).¹⁹⁴ This ritual dismemberment (σπαραγμός) and consumption of a sacrificial victim recently hung upon a sacred tree is, I believe, the central process of actions in the rites of the Phrygian mother at large and has much relevance to the study of other mystery initiations.

The participants in this mystery were divided into two classes: the φαρμακός and the maenad. The φαρμακός and the maenads were both intoxicated, but the φαρμακός alone is sent on a cosmic journey into the heavens on a tree and watched on by the maenads who

¹⁸⁹ Eur. *Bacch.* 1070-1075 ((trans. T. A. Buckley): “Πενθέα δ’ ἰδρύσας ἐλατίνων ὄζων ἐπι, ὀρθὸν μεθίει διὰ χερῶν βλάστημ’ ἄνω ἀτρέμα, φυλάσσω μὴ ἀναχαιτίσειέ νιν, ὀρθὴ δ’ ἐς ὀρθὸν αἰθέρ’ ἐστηρίζετο, ἔχουσα νότοις δεσπότην ἐφήμενον: ὥφθη δὲ μᾶλλον ἢ κατεῖδε μαινάδας.” “He sat Pentheus down on the pine branch, and let it go upright through his hands steadily, taking care not to shake him off. The pine stood firmly upright into the sky, with my master seated on its back. He was seen by the Maenads more than he saw them...”

¹⁹⁰ Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, 29f.; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 64; Wohlberg, “Haoma-Soma,” 339.

¹⁹¹ Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, 205.

¹⁹² Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, 25, 49f.

¹⁹³ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 98; cf. Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, 196.

¹⁹⁴ Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, 51; Eur. *Bacch.* 1246, 1114.

dance and celebrate the union between god and goddess. Internally, this manifested itself as an ordeal and a spiritual ascent for the φαρμακός; essentially, his duty was to sacrifice himself to the goddess, mimicking the mushroom itself. He was dressed as the god and suspended himself in the sun's rays in order 'to dry' before he was taken down and ritually murdered and eaten by the maenads, as had been done with the mushroom. The poet Robert Graves was the first to suggest that the maenad's savage custom of tearing off their victims' heads was an allegorical reference to tearing off *Amanita muscaria*'s cap (since the stalk was not eaten).¹⁹⁵ Within the Dionysiac cult and its Orphic renditions into poetry, the σπαραγμός of Zagreus is equally tragic as the death of Pentheus, but the god is ultimately reborn from bodies of the Titans which consumed him; the Orphic Dionysus is renewed from the portions which remained uneaten and the ashes of the dead titans. The κῶμος or 'revel' which ensued during these rites was no beatific feast; rather, it is a scene of desperation attended by cries of lamentation and wailing.¹⁹⁶

The divinely-inspired lamentation of women is an all-pervasive phenomenon in the religions of the dying and rising gods. In cults of the Divine Bridegroom, lamentation existed hand in hand with the ecstatic behaviour arising at the sacred marriage. The practice of hysterical lamentation developed out of man's incongruous relationship with vegetation, for in order to benefit from it, man must first destroy it then lament it lest it never return. John Allegro postulated that the elaborate lamentation rituals of the Semitic Tammuz (Sumerian *Dumuzid*) – the shepherd consort of the Goddess Inanna – were rooted in the sexual faculties of women. Just as the maypole dancers ring around their axis, the purpose of the maenadic rites was to stir back to life the dormant phallus of the vegetation god by their arousing presence. In this way they might at last be sexually reunited with their god.¹⁹⁷ Allegro further remarked that to see Catholic women in the Mediterranean wracked with genuine grief as they contemplate the cross during Easter season leaves little doubt of their

¹⁹⁵ Robert Graves, *What Food the Centaurs Ate* (Steps: Cassell & Co., 1958), 319-343: In brief, Graves believed that the Satyrs, Centaurs and their women, the maenads, were a hazy Greek recollections distant shamanic-totemic tribes who lived in mountain woods and made brews from raw *Amanita muscaria* in order to induce prophetic vision, heightened sexual energy, senselessness and incredible physical strength.

¹⁹⁶ Eur. *Bacch.* 1162, 1167, 1172; Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, 39.

¹⁹⁷ Allegro, *Mushroom and Cross*, 80-81.

sincerity: “Doubtless the female votaries of the goddess Ishtar, bemoaning the fate of her husband Tammuz... were as genuinely moved in their emotions as the tearful suppliant at the foot of the Cross...”¹⁹⁸ Regardless of the extent to which such an act gratifies inward emotions, however, the objective intent in lamenting a deceased god is to call him back to life. The act of sympathetic identification with a suffering god lies at the heart of many faith systems, modern and ancient, particularly in those whose rituals are actively practiced by women.

Though the maenadic women are but one of many groups depicted performing this rite, it is possible that the feminine character of these rites stretches back into a prehistory, when crop fertility was irrelevant and men were off attending to their own duties. In those days, women were geared toward the duties of child-rearing and the gathering of nuts, berries, roots, tubers, and of course, mushrooms. Small bands of gatherers toiling on the forest floor at the foot of certain trees may very well have been responsible for Europe’s earliest ‘maenadic’ theophanies. Whether the goddess’ devotees really tore apart (or even castrated) men, or whether the whole rite was played out as a drama, the general theme of dismemberment is highly pervasive among shaman elsewhere in the world as it is a metaphor for a prolonged ecstatic experience. The motif symbolizes and originates from the subjective experience of self-dissolution in trance, when the body seems to lose importance and be cast off. In many examples which Eliade collected concerning shamanic initiation, there is a universal pattern of ritualized death whereby the ecstatic is dismembered and undergoes a process of renewal for his lost organs in a trance. One example of this might be the Yakut shaman whose soul descends to the underworld for three years where his head is decapitated and his body is cut up into small pieces to be distributed to spirits. Watching his body dismembered from the perspective of a third party, the Yakut shaman gains his healing power in trance. Another Yakut legend explains how shaman are born in the north where grows a giant fir from the eggs of the Bird-of-Prey-Mother. There hung in the branches of the tree, three devils come to dismember his body, put a lance through his head, and scatter

¹⁹⁸ Allegro, *Mushroom and Cross*, 83.

his remains as offerings.¹⁹⁹ Given the widespread nature of general dismemberment as a shamanic theme, it is no surprise to find it also central to the mystery initiations into the goddess religions of the Mediterranean.

At the heart of mainstream Athenian culture was the famed Anthesteria spring festival, held in honour of Dionysus ἐν λίμναις (“in the marshes”).²⁰⁰ Out in the swamps north-east of the acropolis, set apart from the busyness of the public festival ensued a clandestine ritual of sacred marriage between a royal priestess and the image of the ecstatic god on an annual basis.²⁰¹ In this example of a viticultural sacred marriage from Athenian civilization, we find startling consistency between the Dionysian tree-cult practiced by these priestesses and the tree-cults of Attis in Rome separated by hundreds of years. Surprisingly, the name of the Athenian festival has little to do with wine itself. Ἀνθεστήρια is derived from the Greek ἄνθος, ‘bloom’ or ‘flower,’ and is even cognate to the Sanskrit *ándhas* ‘herb’ or ‘plant from which the sacred Soma is made.’²⁰² For a very select group of women, the Anthesteria was a night set aside for sacrifice, ritual intoxication, dance, and a drama of lamentation around a sacred tree on which was hung a Dionysian effigy. Painted upon a handful of the so-called Attic ‘Lenaia vases’ is what Burkert interpreted to be “an utterly primitive form of Dionysiac statue that has sparked the curiosity of religious historians for a long time.” Dionysus is depicted in no anthropomorphic form on the Anthesteria artwork, but is rather manifest within a wooden column onto which are hung a mask and a robe. In place of arms and legs are left small protruding branches onto which were skewered sacrificial cakes; a three-legged altar is also placed at the foot of the column and covered with the sacrificial food and wine.²⁰³ Of all the speculation surrounding the images depicted on the Lenaia vases, Burkert held the following to be clear:

¹⁹⁹ Eliade, *Shamanism*, 35-38.

²⁰⁰ Thuc. 2.15

²⁰¹ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 109. Dionysus’ attraction toward high status women is popularly reflected in an episode of Athenian myth wherein Ariadne, abandoned on Naxos, is rapt up for marriage with the ecstatic god

²⁰² A. Goebel, “Das Suffix θες in seinem Verhältnisse zum suff. ες oder die Neutra in θος,” *Gebiete des Deutschen, Griechischen und Lateinischen 11* (1862), 58; Pisani “Armenische Studien. I. Zur armenischen Etymologie,” *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der Indogermanischen Sprachen* 68, 3 (1944), 160.

²⁰³ Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 235.

Amid the prayer and sacrifice, running blood and flickering fire, the mask was raised, clothed, and adorned, that amid the singing of hymns, the drinking of wine and dancing with ever greater frenzy around the column, the god would suddenly appear in the middle of the night to celebrate his sacred marriage...²⁰⁴

What we can be sure of is that following a sacrifice and the consumption of a sacramental inebriant placed at the foot of a costumed wooden post or tree, groups of women once gathered on an annual basis to arouse the god to life solemnly with dance and lamentation, enticing the masked effigy to renew his intoxicating gifts. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the tree in the wild on which Pentheus is perched for his death is anachronistically called a "stake" or "pole" (σκόλοψ) and this description bears much similarity to the Dionysian rites depicted on the Lenaia vases.²⁰⁵ The effigies of Dionysus there depicted are highly suggestive of the continued importance of intoxication during these sacred marriage rituals.²⁰⁶ In his exhortations to the Greeks, Clement of Alexandria mocks the revels of the Lenaia festival and those initiations held on Mount Cithaeron and Helicon in 'temples of error' which by the 3rd century AD were truly ancient:

For my own part, mere legend though they are, I cannot bear the thought of all the calamities that are worked up into tragedy; yet in your hands the records of these evils have become dramas, and the actors of the dramas are a sight that gladdens your heart. But as for the dramas of the Lenaean poets, who are altogether like drunken men, let us wreath them, if you like, with ivy, while they are performing the mad revels of the Bacchic rite, and shut them up, satyrs and frenzied rout and all – yes, and the rest of the company of demons too – in Helicon and Cithaeron now grown old...²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 237.

²⁰⁵ Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, 57; Eur. *Bacch.* 1070-1113.

²⁰⁶ Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 244. This rite is also reflected in part in what remains of Euripides' extant tragedy, *Protesilaos*, wherein the widow Laodameia sets up a wax or wooden image of her deceased husband one night. She laments, wreaths herself, dances for him and falls into a trance before the image of her husband. Protesilaos hears her lamentations and rises out from the underworld to share her bed for one more night, after which Laodameia commits suicide.

²⁰⁷ Clem. Al. *Protr.* 1.2.1-3 (trans. E. Capps and W. H. D. Rouse): "Κιθαιρῶν δὲ ἄρα καὶ Ἑλικῶν καὶ τὰ Ὀδρυσῶν ὄρη καὶ Θρακῶν τελεστήρια, τῆς πλάνης τὰ μυστήρια, τεθείασται καὶ καθύμνηται. Ἐγὼ μὲν, εἰ καὶ μῦθος εἰσι, δυσανασχετῶ τοσαύταις ἐκτραγωδομέναις συμφοραῖς· ὑμῖν δὲ καὶ τῶν κακῶν αἱ ἀναγραφαὶ γεγόνασι δράματα καὶ τῶν δραμάτων οἱ ὑποκριταὶ θυμηδίας θεάματα. Ἀλλὰ γὰρ τὰ μὲν δράματα καὶ τοὺς ληναίζοντας ποιητάς, τέλεον ἤδη παροινούοντας, κιτῶν που ἀναδήσαντες, ἀφραίνοντας ἐκτόπως τελετῇ βακχικῇ, αὐτοῖς σατύροις καὶ θιάσῳ μαινόλη, σὺν καὶ τῷ ἄλλῳ δαιμόνων χορῶ, Ἑλικῶν καὶ Κιθαιρῶν κατακλείσωμεν γεγηρακόσιν, κατὰ γωμεν δὲ ἄνωθεν ἐξ οὐρανῶν ἀλήθειαν ἅμα φανοτάτη φρονήσει εἰς ὄρος ἅγιον θεοῦ καὶ χορὸν τὸν ἅγιον τὸν προφητικόν."

Clement is unambiguous here in identifying the ties between the Bacchic rites at the Lenaia festival and the fabled mountain sanctuaries of Thrace with their devilish initiations. Although Clement dismisses the roots of the mysteries as mere legend, he admonishes those individuals who wish to revive such myths by practicing intoxicated revelries.

The nefarious Dionysian rites during the time of the Roman Republic still retained a very dominant role for ‘maenadic’ women. Recalling the speech from 186 BC which triggered the first incidence of religious persecution in the West, Livy tells us how the Bacchic rites had long been performed in Italy, and just before being outlawed “they have been celebrated even in many places in Rome itself... a great part of them are women, and they are the source of this evil thing; next, there are males, scarcely distinguishable from females.”²⁰⁸ The speech’s introduction is clear that the Dionysian rites were alien to the Roman religious heritage and threatened the security of the state.²⁰⁹ Livy provides a vivid though propagandistic account of the cult of Dionysus at Rome replete with orgiastic maenads and men with ‘captured minds’ being bound to contraptions and dragged off to hidden caves:

There were more obscenities practiced between men than between men and women. Anyone refusing to submit to outrage or reluctant to commit crimes was slaughtered as a sacrificial victim... Men, apparently out of their wits would utter prophecies with frenzied bodily convulsions... Men were said to have been carried off by the gods – because they had been attached to a machine and whisked away to hidden caves out of sight ...²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Liv. 39.15.6-9 (trans. H. Bettenson): “Bacchanalia tota iam pridem Italia et nunc per urbem etiam multis locis esse, non fama solum accepisse vos sed crepitibus etiam ululatusque nocturnis, qui personant tota urbe, certum habeo, ceterum quae ea res sit, ignorare: alios deorum aliquem cultum, alios concessum ludum et lasciviam credere esse, et qualecumque sit, ad paucos pertinere. Quod ad multitudinem eorum attinet, si dixero multa milia hominum esse, ilico necesse est exterremini, nisi adiunxero qui qualesque sint. primum igitur mulierum magna pars est, et is fons mali huiusce fuit; deinde simillimi feminis mares, stuprati et constupratores, fanatici, vigiliis, vino, strepitibus clamoribusque nocturnis attoniti.”

²⁰⁹
²¹⁰ Liv. 39.13.8-14 (trans. H. Bettenson): “Primo sacrarium id feminarum fuisse, nec quemquam eo virum admitti solitum. tres in anno statos dies habuisse, quibus interdum Bacchis initiarentur; sacerdotes in vice matronas creari solitas. Pacullam Anniam Campanam sacerdotem omnia, tamquam deum monitu, immutasse: nam et viros eam primam filios suos initiasse, Minium et Herennium Cerrinius; et nocturnum sacrum ex diurno, et pro tribus in anno diebus quinos singulis mensibus dies initiorum fecisse. Ex quo in promiscuo sacra sint et permixti viri feminis, et noctis licentia accesserit, nihil ibi facinoris, nihil flagitii praetermissum. plura virorum inter sese quam feminarum esse supra. Si qui minus patientes dedecoris sint et pigriores ad facinus, pro victimis immolari. Nihil nefas ducere, hanc summam inter eos religionem esse. viros, velut mente capta, cum iactatione fanatica corporis vaticinari; matronas Baccharum habitu crinibus sparsis cum ardentibus facibus decurrere ad Tiberim, demissasque in aquam faces, quia vivum sulphur cum calce insit, integra flamma efferre.

This ‘machine’ which whisked these men away to ‘hidden caves’ during the Bacchic ritual refers to nothing other than the ceremonial axis, a symbol of initiatory exaltation into the Goddess’ rites; onto these posts or ‘σκόλοψ’ upon which enthused initiates were hung before sacrifice. In India sacrificial posts (*yūpa*) were central to the *dūrohana*, “the difficult ascent,” through which Brahmin raised themselves to the heavens, thus “climbing a tree” became a frequent image of spiritual ascent in the Vedic literature.²¹¹ Before such mystery rites spread across the Mediterranean world, these posts were the very host trees perched over the sacred mushrooms, then eventually they were abstracted as metaphysical axes or sacred ladders to reach the Goddess. This goddess-axis conjoined the celestial, chthonic, and terrestrial realms as a point in space and time which transected the material world with the help of the ‘otherness’ brought on by the ecstatic state.

The theme of physical ascent for initiates finds itself equally embedded in the mysteries of Isis and Mithras. Mircea Eliade was among the first to collect enough information to conclude that the ascension to heaven, or ‘rupture of planes’ by means of a ritual ladder was central to most of the mystery initiations in antiquity.²¹² We must not let superficial geographical differences affect our core understanding of the goddess’ mysteries since most of the Eastern Mediterranean was partial to the opinion that the Phrygians were progenitors of the world’s oldest goddess.²¹³ Across the Mediterranean dramatic reenactments were being performed depicting the spiritual ascent of the soul through the heavenly spheres following death. Even in Egypt, by the 2nd century AD the whole process of initiation had become fully saturated with Eleusinian soteriology and Hellenistic astrology.

raptos a diis homines dici, quos machinae illigatos ex conspectu in abditos specus abripiant: eos esse, qui aut coniurare aut sociari facinoribus aut stuprum pati noluerint. Multitudinem ingentem, alterum iam prope populum esse; in his nobiles quosdam viros feminasque."

²¹¹ Eliade, *Shamanism*, 403-405.

²¹² Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991), 48-49.

²¹³ Gwyn J. Griffiths, *The Isis-Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 74-75, 148; Apul. *Met.* 11.5. When Isis rises from the sea, she tells Lucius that her single godhead is adored throughout the whole world in variegated forms, and the “Phrygians, earliest of all races” (“*primigenii Phryges*”) call her “Pessinuntia, Mother of the Gods” (“*Pessinuntiam deum matrem*”). This passage is a clear window into understanding the syncretic attitudes of international Roman religions during the 2nd century AD.

During the initiations, initiates would climb the axis of the world, rising up as a body of light toward the Empyrean. First they were refined by the elements on Earth, then confronted by each circle of the seven planets, and then once they reached the constellations of the Zodiac in the 8th sphere, the full mystery was unveiled. Among the pseudo-Persian mysteries of Mithras, Celsus tells us how a ceremonial axis was erected with seven steps, each made with progressively more valuable metals corresponding to their respective planets.²¹⁴ Climbing this ritual axis was a symbolic drama of death and spiritual ascension. Initiates acted out their deaths, impersonating their own souls which would one day be uplifted to the firmament and be refined rung by rung on the ‘ladder of ascent’ as it was eventually known to the writers who compiled the Hermetic texts of the Nag Hammadi Library.²¹⁵ Apuleius describes a similar process following the mystical vision received by Lucius during his initiation into the cult of Isis. He claimed that he came to the edge of death, walked the threshold of Proserpina and was born aloft through the elements where he saw the Sun shining at night and dwelled among the gods above and below.²¹⁶ Leading up to this vision, when the Isiac procession had first reached temple for initiation, the high priest, image-bearers, and older initiates retired into “the chamber of the goddess and arranged those breathing effigies, each in its due place.”²¹⁷ Without revealing too much, Apuleius explains the outward ritual procedures required for the initiation. He stood in the midst of the sanctuary before the goddess’ image on a raised wooden dais, robed in a cloak made of linen and covered by rich embroideries of zodiacal figures. He held up a torch in his right hand and was garlanded in palm, “whose leaves” he claims “stood out like rays.” He continues: “After I had been thus adorned as the Sun and set up like to the image of a god, the curtains

²¹⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6.22.

²¹⁵ See “The Discourse of the Eighth (*Ogdoad*) and Ninth (*Ennead*)” in Martin Krause, James M. Robinson, Frederik Wisse, *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2-5 and VI with Papyrus Berolinensis 8502, 1 and 4*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 341-373 or James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins), 321-327. The ‘Ogdoad’ and the ‘Ennead’ are the names given to the last two levels or rungs of the initiatory ladder. Texts concerning initiation into the first seven spheres are no longer extant, that is if they ever existed at all beyond the Hermetic astrological treatises on the seven planets.

²¹⁶ Apul. *Met.* 11.48.

²¹⁷ Apul. *Met.* 11.17 (trans. H. E. Butler).

were suddenly withdrawn and the people thronged in to gaze upon me.²¹⁸ Here we see that central to the initiation was an ecstatic vision of the goddess taking place during a drama which is divided into actors and spectators, and was likely assisted by the contents of a cult vessel taken before the drama of ascent, as it had been done at Eleusis for centuries before Alexander conquered Egypt.

Originally, the widely scattered tree-cults which fashioned these ladders and goddess images were private and seldom did these rites occur within the public eye. To the original cult of the goddess, hidden groves, caves, and pine forested mountains were their temple. In his *Bithyniaka*, Arrian mentions how the worshippers of Attis went up into the mountains to cry out for him, and it is in these regions where we must search for more details on the more primitive forms of the goddess' rites.²¹⁹ One of our most visual descriptions of a Metrian grove sanctuary comes to us from Lucan's *De bello civili*. Lucan describes a grove about to be felled by Caesar's men in which the goddess' bloody tree ritual has recently occurred:

There was a grove, never violated during long ages, which with its knitted branches shut in the darkened air and the cold shade, the rays of the sun being far removed. This no rustic Pans, and Fauns and Nymphs all-powerful in the groves possessed, but sacred rites of the Gods barbarous in their ceremonial, and elevations crowned with ruthless altars, and every tree was stained with human gore... the saddened images of the Gods are devoid of art, and stand unsightly formed from hewn trunks. The very mouldiness and paleness of the rotting wood now renders people stricken with awe: not thus do they dread the deities consecrated with ordinary forms; so much does it add to the terror not to know what Gods they are in dread of. Fame, too, reported that full oft the hollow caverns roared amid commotion, and that yews that had fallen rose again, and that flames shone from a grove that did not burn, and that serpents embracing the oaks entwined around them.²²⁰

Here the Roman *vates* describes a scene of unutterable sanctity, both in horror and in reverence. He hints at the two-fold setting of the mysteries, among the sacred trees where

²¹⁸ Apul. *Met.* 11.24 (trans. H. E. Butler): "caput decore corona cinxerat, palmae candidae foliis in modum radiorum prosistentibus: sic ad instar solis exornato me et in vicem simulacri constituto, repente velis reductis, in aspectum populus errabat."

²¹⁹ *FGrH* 156 F 22.

²²⁰ Lucan 3.399-421 (trans. H. T. Riley): "Lucus erat longo numquam uiolatus ab aevo obscurum cingens conexas aera ramis et gelidas alte summotis solibus umbras. hunc non ruricolae Panes nemorumque potentes Siluani Nymphaeque tenent, sed barbara ritu sacra deum; structae diris altaribus arae omnisque humanis lustrata cruoribus arbor. Siqua fidem meruit superos mirata uetustas, illis et uolucres metuunt insistere ramis et lustris recubare ferae; nec uentus in illas incubuit siluas excussaue nubibus atris fulgura: non ulli frondem praebentibus aurae arboribus suus horror inest. Tum plurima nigris fontibus unda cadit, simulacraque maesta deorum arte carent caesisque extant informia truncis. ipse situs putrique facit iam robore pallor attonitos; non uolgatis sacrata figuris numina sic metuunt: tantum terroribus addit, quos timeant, non nosse, deos. Iam fama ferebat saepe cauas motu terrae mugire cauernas, et procumbentis iterum consurgere taxos, et non ardentis fulgere incendia siluae, roboraque amplexos circum fluxisse dracones."

sacrifices occurred, and within the caverns where the orgies occurred. The language used is indicative of the primitive Bacchic or Metriian mystery rites during which the hollow caverns are said to have once roared amid the commotion of bacchanalian frenzy (*cauas motu terrae mugire cauernas*) while sacred yew trees were felled and re-erected as idols (*procumbentis iterum consurgere taxos*) and a ‘flame shone from the grove that did not burn’ (*non ardentis fulgere incendia siluae*); a riddle given meaning by the symbols in the following clause which describes serpents embracing the oaks, entwined around them. Through intoxication, orgiastic dance, and ecstatic lamentation – sexually ambiguous acts of fertility magic – the maenadic women who had now fled Lucan’s grove were once there to entice their dead god back up the *axis mundi*, like a serpent from the underworld. The symbolic serpent-to-axis motif is mentioned here at the heart of the Goddess’ rites, and we shall return to this symbol. In these types of groves, trees were hewn into images of the Divine Bridegroom, a nameless god, whose phallus was called out from the earth for ritual consumption. On the forest floor, *Amanita muscaria* itself appears as a blazing red fire glowing beneath the pine. Pindar’s dithyramb in honour of Dionysus similarly states “to perform the prelude in thy honour, μάτερ μεγάλα, the whirling of cymbals is at hand, and among them, also, the clanging of castanets, and the torch that blazeth beneath the tawny pine-trees.”²²¹ These flames which shone yet did not burn are allegorical references to what the worshippers of the Divine Bridegroom believed was his eternally-resurrected member: the bright red mushroom so deeply rooted in European folklore.²²²

In Clement of Alexandria’s deliberations against the mysteries of the Kabeiroi, a Samothracian cult closely associated with the rites of the Phrygian goddess, he tells us that the ritual killers of the ‘dying god’ had imported his castrated phallus in a basket from Northern Greece to Italy.²²³ Disregarding the fact that Christ himself was betrayed, tortured,

²²¹ Strab. *Geo.* 10.3.13 (trans. H. L. Jones and J. R. Sitlington Sterrett): “Σοὶ μὲν κατάρχειν, μάτερ μεγάλα, πάρα ῥόμβοι κυμβάλων, ἐν δὲ κεχλάδειν κρόταλ’, αἰθομένα τε δᾶς ὑπὸ ξανθαῖσι πεύκαις.”

²²² See Plin. *HN* 16.19 for a description of the torch-like characteristics of bright agaric mushrooms being hunted at the foot of trees even at night: “galliarum glandiferae maxime arbores agaricum ferunt. Est autem fungus candidus, odoratus, antidotis efficax, in summis arboribus nascens, nocte relucens. Signum hoc eius, quo in tenebris decerpitur. E glandiferis sola quae vocatur aegilops fert pannos arentes, muscoso villo canos...”

²²³ Kerényi, *Dionysus*, 276-277; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.19.4: “Καβείρους δὲ τοὺς Κορύβαντας καλοῦντες καὶ τελετὴν Καβειρικὴν καταγγέλλουσιν· αὐτῷ γὰρ δὴ τούτῳ τῷ ἀδελφοκτόνῳ τὴν κίστην ἀνελομένῳ, ἐν ἧ τὸ τοῦ

martyred, and resurrected, the ante-Nicene father writes critically of the cult dedicated to the Kabeirian martyr as nothing more than a religion of the tomb:

If you wish to inspect the orgies of the Korybantes, then know that, having killed their third brother, they covered the head of the dead body with a purple cloth, crowned it, and carrying it on the point of a spear, buried it under the roots of Olympus. These mysteries are, in short, murders and funerals. And the priests of these rites, who are called kings of the sacred rites by those whose business it is to name them, give additional strangeness to the tragic occurrence, by forbidding parsley with the roots from being placed on the table, for they think that parsley grew from the Corybantic blood that flowed forth...²²⁴

This passage highlights the funerary nature of the mysteries and explains how the priest or mock ‘king’ administers the Korybantic rites by “giving additional strangeness” in the form of dietary prohibitions and other ritual purifications. One interesting point stressed by Clement is the link highlighted between the blood of the dying god and the generation of sacred vegetation. Here I believe there is an indication toward a deeper understanding of the ritual patterns in preparing the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom; we see in the myths related to the Phrygian mother an ever recurring pattern which involves someone being crimson-cloaked, crowned, dismembered, and loftily hung just as the red-capped, white-horned mushroom was once itself hung to dry and ceremonially destroyed. Human sacrifice and plant symbolism stand bound together in many Eastern Mediterranean myths including those of Pentheus, Dionysus, Orpheus, Zagreus, Marsyas, Attis, Osiris, Adonis, and so forth

Διονύσου αἰδοῖον ἀπέκειτο, εἰς Τυρρηνίαν κατήγαγον, εὐκλεοῦς ἔμποροι φορτίου· κἀνταῦθα διετριβέτην, φυγάδε ὄντε, τὴν πολυτίμητον εὐσεβείας διδασκαλίαν αἰδοῖα καὶ κίστην θρησκευεῖν παραθεμένω Τυρρηνοῖς. Δι' ἣν αἰτίαν οὐκ ἀπεικότως τὸν Διόνυσόν τινες Ἄττιν προσαγορεύεσθαι θέλουσιν, αἰδοίων ἔστερημένον.”

²²⁴ Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.19.1-3 (trans. William Wilson): “Εἰ θέλεις δ' ἐποπτεῦσαι καὶ Κορυβάντων ὄργια, τὸν τρίτον ἀδελφὸν ἀποκτείναντες οὗτοι τὴν κεφαλὴν τοῦ νεκροῦ φοινικίδι ἐπεκαλυψάτην καὶ καταστέψαντε ἔθανάτην, φέροντες ἐπὶ χαλκῆς ἀσπίδος ὑπὸ τὰς ὑπωρείας τοῦ Ὀλύμπου (καὶ ταῦτ' ἔστι τὰ μυστήρια, συνελόντι φάναι, φόνου καὶ τάφοι). Οἱ δὲ ἱερεῖς οἱ τῶνδε, οὗς Ἀνακτοτελεστάς οἷς μέλον καλεῖν καλοῦσι, προσεπιτερατεύονται τῇ συμφορᾷ, ὀλόριζον ἀπαγορεύοντες σέλινον ἐπὶ τραπέζης τιθέναι· οἷονταί γάρ δι' ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ ἀπορρυέντος τοῦ Κορυβαντικοῦ τὸ σέλινον ἐκπεφυκέναι...”

The Serpent and the Tree: Symbols of Ecstasy and Death in the Eastern Mediterranean

Once syncretism reached its apex in Rome just before the institutionalization of Christianity, the thoroughly shamanic cult of the Phrygian Mother found itself inextricably interwoven with the traditions of Orphic soteriology, Chaldean astronomy, Pythagorean numerology, Gnostic mysticism, and Neoplatonic cosmology – and not unjustifiably. The individual experiences of shamanic ecstasy provided by the mysteries became exceptional tools of exploration for philosophically-inclined initiates such as the Emperor Julian who is known to have been initiated into three distinct mystery schools. In order to communicate the content or meaning of their experiences, adherents of the schools produced rich cosmologies replete with extensive caches of old symbolism, allegory, and allusion through which the experienced secrets of religion might be communicated. As many expressions of magico-religious tradition are known to have survived from the pre-agricultural world into the polis-based paganism of classical antiquity, it should not come to much surprise that some of the symbols we will examine were truly ancient.

One symbol most relevant to our interests is that which the ancients used to depict the soul in ecstatic flight, whether through death or mystical experience. On one 5th century BC Orphic bone inscription from Olbia, a Greek colony on the northern coast of the Black Sea, the words “for Dion(ysos) and Psyche” can be read, revealing the importance of a transcendent soul in connection with a god of intoxication.²²⁵ An Orphic bone graffiti containing the words “βίος θανάτος βίος” and inscribed with little ‘Z’ pictograms that can be interpreted as serpents reveal the widespread and consistent nature of Dionysian cult as far north as modern Ukraine.²²⁶ In mystery initiations practiced by the Orphic cults, ecstatic experiences and flights of the soul were vital for a complete revelation of reality. In recent decades, several golden Orphic lamellae found in Italy, Greece, Lesbos and Thessaly have been uncovered and divided into two distinct purposes: the first is containing an address by the deceased to the authorities of the underworld; the second is a set of instructions for the wandering soul. It is unclear, however, in what context these lamellae were used, perhaps in

²²⁵ Jan Bremmer. *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 42.

²²⁶ M. L. West. “The Orphics of Olbia” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 45 (1982): 18.

initiatory or funeral rites. The ivy-shaped Pelinna lamellae published in 1986 were used to bridge the gap between these two categories whilst providing additional evidence for the connection between Orphic soteriology and the mysteries of Dionysus, reading: “Tell Persephone that Bakkhios himself has set you free.”²²⁷ The poetic climate which seems to associate ecstasy and death closely may well have emerged from the shamanic dismemberments, near-death experiences, and ‘flights of the soul’ faced by individuals served hallucinogenic sacraments or involved in incubatory rites. It is my belief that there was a direct link between the rising use of hallucinogenic substances during mystery initiations and the growing belief in worlds beyond the material guarded by soteriological figures.

No initiate ventured past the gates of a mystery school with the expectations of having a good party. When Apuleius’ character Lucius is confronted by a priest about his initiation into the rites of Isis, he answered: “The gates of hell and the power of life are in the hands of the goddess, and the very act of dedication is regarded as a voluntary death and an imperiling of life.”²²⁸ Out-of-body experiences provoked by an overdose of hallucinogenic or deliriant substances can appear indistinguishable from the hallucinations onset by life-threatening fevers, bouts of temporary psychosis, and near-death experiences. The fear of death would have been ever present for an initiate launched into a state of overwhelming intoxication, and leading up to an out-of-body experience the process of self-dissolution can be unbearable – especially among those who ‘resist’ the experience.²²⁹ In such experiences a shaman or priest often acts as a psychopomp and guide for the dying or ecstatic soul. Plato’s myth of Er (*Republic*, 10.614-10.621) features a man who dies in battle and suddenly awakes ten days later atop his own funeral pyre. During his journey through the afterlife, Er found himself immersed in a metaphysical world with four openings, two above and two below,

²²⁷ Bremmer, *Greek Religion*, 87-88.

²²⁸ Apul. *Met.* 11.21 (H. E. Butler): “Nam et inferum claustra et salutis tutelam in deae manu posita, ipsamque traditionem ad instar voluntariae mortis et precariae salutis celebrari...”

²²⁹ For more on the subject of out-of-body experiences and self-dissolution from a neuro-scientific point of view, see: Jane Aspell and Olaf Blanke, “Understanding the Out-of-Body Experience from a Neuro-Scientific Perspective.” in *Psychological Scientific Perspectives on Out of Body and Near Death Experiences*, ed. Craig Murray, (Nova Science Publishers, 2009), 73ff.

where the disembodied souls of the dead are sent to dwell.²³⁰ The similarity between death and ecstasy was not lost on the ancients: heroes such as Aeneas, Orpheus and Odysseus performed *κατάβασεις*, or ‘descents,’ wherein heroes communed with the earth or the plant world (i.e. the golden bough) and, on account of their virtue, were given the power to transect worlds with the risk of never returning. This *κατάβασις* rite was in all probability a poetic way to render the practice of incubation in a cave to produce out-of-body experiences and inward journeys to the lands of the dead.

A wealth of iconography suggests a deep association between ecstasy, drugs, immortality and death in ancient consciousness. We have already seen how among the Thracio-Phrygian cult of the Great Mother, the coniferous trees were most sacred as they were host to a regionally available hallucinogen, the mycorrhizally symbiotic *Amanita muscaria*. It was upon this tree that Dionysus was manifest to his maenads for consumption or where the phallus of a dismembered Attis was annually permitted to be reborn by a concession of Fate.²³¹ Eventually these literal trees were abstracted by the more civilized (that is, city-bound) Mediterranean cults into ladders, pillars, and columns central to mystery initiation since it was upon these that soul could ascend to the gods. These images of sacred trees were never complete without their guardian serpent spiraling around the axis which transects the world. These trees became very popular in the ‘Thracian Horseman’ funerary iconography and votive inscriptions which tended to be dedicated on behalf of the deceased, to oracular, ecstatic or chthonic gods such as Sabazios, Apollo, Asklepios, Hades, or Silvanus. Several votive tablets from Thrace, each dedicated to a variety of arguably ‘shamanic,’ ‘visionary’ or ‘oracular’ gods, depict a mounted hero riding toward this Tree of Life and its serpent in preparation for his descent into the underworld.²³² One marble relief from Tomis (modern Constanța) depicts the ‘Thracian Horseman’ (an archetypal hero figure) and the Goddess flanking a serpent-entwined pine.²³³ A silver dish from Parabiago in northern Italy displays Attis and Cybele riding together in her lion-drawn chariot, surrounded

²³⁰ Pl. *Resp.* 620d ff.

²³¹ Arnob. *Ad. gen.*, 5.14.6.

²³² Nora Dimitrova. “Inscriptions and Iconography in the Monuments of the Thracian Rider.” *Hesperia* 71, 2 (2002): 211.

²³³ Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 175.

by dancing Kabeiroi, charging in frenzy toward the tree of life which stands behind the ring of the Zodiac.²³⁴ In most instances, this serpent represented the soul disembodied in either ecstasy or death, descending to the underworld or ascending to the heavens upon the World Tree to a metaphysical dimension bisecting the here and now.

In the mythical literature, this serpent-to-axis motif is ever near when drugs or poisons, magic, and supernatural gnosis is afoot. This serpent is imbedded in a wide range of Indo-European mythology, guarding the Tree of Life *Yggdrasil*, the *ὄμφαλός* of Delphi, the Golden Fleece in Colchis, and the tree in the garden of Hesperides among many other examples.²³⁵ Hindu cosmology tells us of a millennium when the gods and demons came together to produce *Amṛta/Soma*, the nectar of immortality, by using a serpent wrapped around an axis as a churning rope for frothing the milky ocean.²³⁶ The symbolism also manifested itself among the late iconography of the Mithraic, Isiac and Eleusinian mysteries. Moments before Lucius shed his theriomorphic form and is initiated into the mysteries of Isis, whom he envisioned to be the one true form of all the goddesses, Apuleius describes the procession of sacred vessels and objects in which one member: “walked bearing a palm-tree whose leaves were cunningly wrought of gold, and therewith also the herald’s staff of Mercury,” which stood as catch-all symbol in the Greco-Roman mysteries for direct revelation and communication with the gods.²³⁷

From the literature concerning the mysteries, we get a sense that the serpent additionally played a role in the mysteries as an animal symbol consubstantial with the vegetable god himself. Though the serpent has been more conventionally recognized as a symbol of regeneration and rebirth due to the fact that it lives on after shedding its skin, John Allegro saw a connection between the mushroom of Siberian shamanism and the serpent and explained why its role in herbal folklore and mythology is clear: “Both emerged from holes in the ground in a manner reminiscent of the erection of the sexually awakened penis, and both bore in their heads a fiery poison which the ancients believed could be transferred from

²³⁴ Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis*, 72, 166.

²³⁵ Wasson, “The Soma of the Rig Veda: What Was It?”, 186.

²³⁶ *Ramayana*, Canto 45.

²³⁷ Apul. *Met.* 11.10: “ibat tertius attollens palmam auro subtiliter foliatam necnon Mercuriale etiam caduceum.”

one to the other.”²³⁸ The image of a mushroom sprouting like a snake shedding its skin is also reasonable since the mushroom must first emerge from its own egg-like (or vulva-like) shell before burrowing upward through the earth. This motif floods the extant literature though its source is unknown and seemingly far more ancient.²³⁹ Pliny tells us about a certain poisonous speckled red mushroom:

Among those vegetable productions which are eaten with risk, I shall, with good reason, include mushrooms... Some of the poisonous mushrooms are easily known, being of a rank, unwholesome look, light red without and livid within, with the clefts considerably enlarged, and a pale, sickly margin to the head. These characteristics, however, are not presented by others of the poisonous kinds; but being dry to all appearance and strongly resembling the genuine ones, they present white spots upon the head, on the surface of the outer coat... The first origin and cause of mushrooms is the slime and the souring juice of the damp ground, or often of the root of acorn-bearing trees... if the hole of a serpent has been near the mushroom, or should a serpent have breathed on it as it first opened, its kinship to poisons makes it capable of absorbing the venom. So it would not be well to eat mushrooms until the serpent has begun to hibernate. Indications of this will be given by the many plants, trees, and shrubs that are always green from the time that the serpent comes out from his hole to the time that he buries himself in it... And of mushrooms indeed the whole life from beginning to end is not more than seven days.²⁴⁰

Here Pliny reveals to us his awareness of the mycorrhizal relationship between mushrooms and the root systems of trees; the dampness of the earth required for the mushroom’s ascent to the surface; its kinship to poison and the snake; and the very transient nature of their

²³⁸ Allegro, *Mushroom and Cross*, 79-80.

²³⁹ For more examples of the links between poisonous herbs and serpents, see Stat. *Theb.* 88-91; Ov. *Met.* 7.236; Val. Flacc. 1.63; Gal. *Nat. Fac.* 1.14; *Rigveda*, 9.96.44; and Verg. *A.* 2.471, for example: “Pyrrhus exults... like a snake, fed on poisonous herbs, in the light, that cold winter has held, swollen, under the ground;” “Pyrrhus exultat... qualis ubi in lucem coluber mala gramina pastus frigida sub terra tumidum quem bruma tegebat...”

²⁴⁰ Plin. *HN* 22.46 (trans. J. Bostock); as this is one of the most detailed pieces of extant literature concerning mushrooms, I shall include the passage here in full despite its length: “inter ea, quae temere manduntur, et boletos merito posuerim, opimi quidem hos cibi, sed inmenso exemplo in crimen adductos, veneno Tiberio Claudio principi per hanc occasionem ab coniuge Agrippina dato, quo facto illa terris venenum alterum sibi ante omnes neronem suum dedit. quorundam ex iis facile noscuntur venena diluto rubore, rancido aspectu, livido intus colore, rimosa stria, pallido per ambitum labro. non sunt haec in quibusdam, sicquae et veris similes, veluti guttas in vertice albas ex tunica sua gerunt. vulvam enim terra ob hoc prius gignit, ipsum postea in vulva, ceu in ovo est luteum. nec tunicae minor gratia in cibo infantis boleti. rumpitur haec primo nascente, mox increscente in pediculi corpus absumitur, rarumque ut geminus ex uno pede. origo prima causaque e limo et acescente suco madentis terrae aut radicis fere glandiferae, initioque spuma lentior, dein corpus membranae simile, mox partus, ut diximus. illa pernicialia quot probandi alia aliis signa! si caligaris clavus ferrive aliqua robigo aut panni marcor adfuerit nascenti, omnem ilico sucum alienum saporemque in venenum concoqui deprehendisse qui nisi agrestes possunt atque qui colligunt ipsi alia vitia ne hi quidem, si serpentis caverna iuxta fuerit, si patescentem primo adhalaverit, capaci venenorum cognatione ad virus accipiendum. itaque caveri conveniat prius, quam se condant serpentes. signa erunt tot herbae, tot arbores fruticesque ab emersu earum ad latebram usque vernantes et vel fraxini tantum folia nec postea nascentia nec ante decidentia. et boletis quidem ortus occasusque omnis intra dies septem est.”

existence on the surface. In the 2nd century BC, the renowned specialist in poisons Nicander of Colophon described the mushroom as an “evil ferment of the soil” (ζύμωμα κακόν χθονός) that received its powers by drawing up the venom of nearby serpents coiled within their lairs underground.²⁴¹ Moreover, the English folk designation ‘toadstool’ and the French ‘crapaudin’ harken back to this very tradition of associating the mushroom’s poison with that of a slithering amphibian. A pleasant coincidence in support of this etymology known only to the modern world is that *Amanita muscaria* contains bufotenin (N,N-dimethyl-5-hydroxytryptamine), the hallucinogen aptly named for its role as an endogenous defense mechanism for toads.²⁴²

The theme of the venomous serpent is ubiquitous in the cult of the Divine Bridegroom. Dionysus is often manifesting as a theriomorphic god: he is a lion, a bull, and a stag, but most importantly, he is a serpent. Euripides writes that Dionysus “the bull-horned god was born of Zeus; in joy he crowned his son, set serpents on his head.”²⁴³ This is to stress the dual-nature of the god as both chthonic and Olympian. In the Rigveda, Soma is similarly “as a serpent, [for] he creeps out of his skin.”²⁴⁴ One Theban epithet attested for Dionysos as preserved by Mnaseas of Patrae was περικτιονις, meaning “Dionysus who twines himself around the column,” a name which is just as indicative of a serpent as it is of ivy or grapevine.²⁴⁵ The very word for serpent in Greek, δράκων, is linked with the verb δέρκομαι, ‘I see clearly,’ the noun δράκος, ‘eye,’ and δέρξις (sense of sight) which happens on account of serpents being explicitly associated with divinatory powers and visionary experiences. In his exhortations against the mysteries, Arnobius explains how the wild Bacchanalia, or Greek ‘omophagia,’ are rites “in which with seeming frenzy and the loss of your senses you twine snakes about you; and, to show yourselves full of the divinity and majesty of the god, [you]

²⁴¹ Nican. *Alexiphar.* 521.

²⁴² Tsujikawa et al., “Hallucinogenic Constituents in *Amanita*,” 172ff.

²⁴³ Eur. *Bacch.* 100-103 (trans. D. Grene and R. Lattimore).

²⁴⁴ *Rigveda* 9.96.44.

²⁴⁵ Kerényi, *Dionysus*, 196 cf. Mnaseas, Scholia on Euripides’ *Phoenissae*, 651. See also Orph. hy. 47 to Bacchus Periclionius: “Κικλήσκω Βάκχον περικτιόνιον, μεθιδώτην, Καδμείοισι δόμοις ὅς ἐλισσόμενος πέρι πάντη ἔστησε κρατερῶς βρασμούς γαίης ἀποπέμψας, ἥνικα πυρφόρος ἀγῆ ἐκίνησε χθόνα πᾶσαν πρησιτήρος ροίσις· ὁ δ’ ἀνέδραμε δεσμὸς ἀπάντων. ἔλθέ, μάκαρ, βακχευτά, γεγηθυίαις πραπίδεσσιν.”

tear in pieces with gory mouths the flesh of loudly-bleating goats.”²⁴⁶ The *cista mystica* in which are contained the very mysteries is always depicted with a serpent. One fragmentary Orphic source tells how Dionysus was given over to the goddess Hipta (the Great Mother) who carried him on her head in a λίκνον, or winnowing basket, around which she allowed a snake to entwine itself.²⁴⁷ Clement of Alexandria likewise reports that the mysteries of Sabazios involved a serpent: “‘God in bosom’ is a countersign of the mysteries of Sabazius to initiates – the god being this serpent passed through the bosom of the initiated.”²⁴⁸ This passing through the bosom surely suggests ingestion, though it is doubtful the initiates of the mysteries were feasting on actual snakes.

If we look back to the etiological myth of Eden from the Book of Genesis, written down sometime during the Iron Age to explain mankind’s fall out of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle into agricultural society, another clear example is preserved of the mythical relationship between serpent, woman, sacred tree, and an entheogenic fruit which makes humans “as gods, knowing good and evil.”²⁴⁹ Myths of plant-inspired *gnosis* from all over appear to converge upon this archetype. The Hebrews probably borrowed this portion of their creation myth from the cults of the Canaanites, a people who shared a substrate of Mediterranean culture with the Indo-Europeans settled around the Near East.²⁵⁰ Once the Israelite religion was centralized in Jerusalem and mountaintop sanctuaries were declared illegal, fashioning a sacred goddess-tree (*asherah*, אֲשֶׁרָה) or surrogate stone column was strictly prohibited.²⁵¹ Earlier still than the accounts in Genesis is Gilgamesh’s quest for immortality which was cut short by the serpent that sensed the sweetness of his prized ‘*Marvellous Plant*’ and rose out of his subterranean dwelling to snatch it away before shedding its skin and returning to the underworld.²⁵²

²⁴⁶ Arnob. *Ad. gen.* 5.19 (trans. H. Bryce and H. Campbell).

²⁴⁷ Kerényi, *Dionysus*, 274-275.

²⁴⁸ Clem. Al. *Protr.* 1.2.16; cf. Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*, 293 for more information concerning the link between the Thracian Sabazios and the Greek Dionysus.

²⁴⁹ *Gen.* 3:4; Allegro, *Mushroom and Cross*, 80.

²⁵⁰ George Lechler, “The Tree of Life in Indo-European and Islamic Cultures.” *Ars Islamica* 4, (1937): 388.

²⁵¹ *Deut.* 16:21.

²⁵² Wasson, “Soma of Rigveda,” 186.

The cluster of meanings attached to this icon is suggestive of an original ‘shamanic’ source formulated before the ingression of agrarian society, in a time when religion was more geared toward the immediate and experiential nature of the sacred. In the eastern Mediterranean, the first known non-Egyptian depiction of a snake (or snakes) wound around a tree or a surrogate axis was that of the Mesopotamian Ningizzida, a Bronze Age fertility god who later became a god of magic, exorcism, and healing akin to Asclepius. On a green soapstone vase carved for Gudea of Lagash dated between 2065 and 1955 BC, there is an inscription dedicated to Ningizzida as the mother of Dumuzi/Tammuz, the Semitic bridegroom of the Goddess. A. J. Frothingham noted that this Ningizzida took the form of an axis-coiling serpent and was called the “Herald of the Earth” and “Messenger of the Earth Mother” in one of his incantations. In the myth of Adapa, Ningizzida plays the role of divine mediator as the guardian to the gates of Anu, the Sky Father.²⁵³ In Sumerian his name means the “Lord of the Good Tree.”²⁵⁴ When this symbol was used in the Near East, it was most often associated with the mother goddess Inanna/Ishtar.²⁵⁵

Although elaborated by millennia of local mythical accretions, the serpent-coiled axis was solidified in Near Eastern consciousness as the symbolic guardian of the ladder on which one journeyed to the heavens and the underworld; more broadly, it was adapted as a catch-all symbol for initiation, magic, prophecy, divine healing, ecstasy, and mystic revelation and would endure for centuries imbedded in myth and ritual. If the root for this symbol stretches as far back as the Paleolithic, it was certainly a symbol produced by parties of women out gathering roots and berries on forest floors who came upon the serpent-like mushrooms at the base sacred trees. In the same season, year after year, these women could visit the same site to find that the mushroom had regrown despite having been torn apart and eaten in prior rites. Having consumed and been consumed by such a seemingly magical food off in their mountain sanctuaries, how could they not have come to worship the tree itself as a ‘herald of the earth’ or a ‘messenger of the earth mother’?

²⁵³ Walter J. Friedlander, *The Golden Wand of Medicine: a History of the Caduceus Symbol in Medicine*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 20-22.

²⁵⁴ Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2002), 270ff.

²⁵⁵ Friedlander, *History of Caduceus*, 18.

Let us not overlook how many Indo-European and Semitic civilizations near the Mediterranean shared one foundational cultural substrate and, despite their linguistic differences, they were all heavily influenced by their interactions with one another, including the mutual development of small-scale agriculture which preceded the development of the great Bronze Age cities.²⁵⁶ Despite local permutations, countless mythological and ritual parallels are still observable among the records of the disparate branches of Indo-European and Semitic culture. If the influence of Indo-European language proliferated out from Anatolia starting at the close of the Neolithic, this would have given thousands of years for cultural development prior to the rise of linguistic isolates such as Sumerian or the Semitic Akkadian. Many of these cultures inherited the myths of their neighbours or predecessors which include the cosmic tree, the ‘marvellous plant of immortality,’ and the guardian serpent. Such myths were not fired onto tablets until long after the development of an elaborate writing and a scribal class, and if post-agricultural Sumerian civilization first fired Gilgamesh’s quest for the ‘marvellous herb of immortality’ onto clay, it does not mean we must attribute its origins to this linguistic isolate. The herbalists of hunter-gatherer societies with their hidden lore preceded all of these civilizations, and it is from their cache of ecstatic techniques whence these motifs arose.

²⁵⁶ Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language*, 72; Mallory, *Search of Indo-Europeans*, 37.

Conclusion

As it was the duty of the 20th century religious scholar to amass the details concerning the timeless and global phenomenon of shamanism, it is the obligation of the 21st century's minds to use such vast bodies of research to cast new light on the clandestine ecstatic religions of the Near Eastern and Greco-Roman world. The mystery schools dotting the cities and countryside of the ancient Mediterranean were as integral to its religious landscape as are the huts of shaman in the Amazonian basin or their yurts on Russian steppes today. The administration of initiation rites by a local ecstatic has proven to be not only one of humanity's oldest spiritual traditions, but also one of its most widespread and consistent. Each culture's respective trance specialists work with a repertoire of regionally acquirable instruments, costumes, dances, myths, and ecstasy-inducing substances. Combining these elements together at the heart of their initiatory rites, the shaman himself endured and initiated others into ordeals which often took the form of a physical trial combined with the psychological challenge of a hallucinogenic drug experience, ultimately producing a profound metaphysical journey in the mind of the initiated.

Behind closed eyes, initiates of the mysteries beheld awe-striking visions, theriomorphic transformations, and inconceivable phantasmagoria; on the outside, however, initiates were pulled through a hallucinatory ritual drama by priests and former initiates. At the root of many of these initiatory circles there endured a number of ritual practices stretching back to the Neolithic period whereby intoxicated initiates re-enacted the drama of an androgynous dying god being united with his mistress. The actors in this drama, chiefly women or eunuchs playing the role of 'sacred prostitutes,' ritualistically hung their god upon a tree before his fated dismemberment. This prehistoric ritual was once practiced on the forest floors of the Near East and ultimately disseminated across Eurasia sometime between 7,800 and 5,800 BC on the backs of Europe's earliest agriculturalists. Like the mushroom-eating Eurasian shaman of today, those once inhabiting the lush mountainsides of the Near East, must have possessed awareness of *Amanita muscaria*'s entheogenic potential, its mycorrhizal relationship with sacred trees, and its pattern of cyclical rebirth. Special trees in remote mountain sanctuaries were selected to be the centerpiece of the Goddess' intoxication

rites. These sacred trees were selected in the Near East just as the trees sacred to the shaman are selected in the steppes of Russia today, that is, by virtue of their mycorrhizal relationship with the hallucinogenic mushroom *Amanita muscaria*. This symbiotic relationship between sacred tree and sacramental mushroom sits at the foundation of an oft-used mythic trope: that of the serpent guarding the Tree of Life. Because of the mysteries' associations with flights of the soul, near death experiences and descents into the underworld, this motif finds itself later propagated in Roman era funerary monuments, particularly in Thrace.

This mushroom was mythologized as the castrated phallus of a deity which resided within a host tree. This god was manifest in the historical period as the Divine Bridegroom of the Anatolian Mother Goddess and lay at the root for the development of such soteriological and ecstatic gods as Attis, Dionysus, and Sabazios among many other local variants. The myth of Attis' death, so central to the cult of Cybele in Rome, gives us our most important clues concerning the god's botanical identity by concluding with the transfiguration of a shepherd boy's body into the shaft of a pine where, by a concession of fate from Zeus, his foliage and his castrated member were permitted to regrow eternally. This Attis, a mysterious god who had not arisen until the 4th century BC, was no more than a Greco-Phrygian syncretism of the Divine Bridegroom archetype, stripped of his more recently acquired associations with viticulture. It is the overtly phallic appearance of the hallucinogenic *Amanita muscaria* sitting at the foot of a tree which I suggested lies at the root of Attis' myth of castration and eternal regeneration in the writings of Arnobius. Like many gods, the Divine Bridegroom had a highly complex and multifaceted nature, being both vegetable god and euhemerized shaman – intoxicant and intoxicated. In his frenzied wanderings across Eurasia he was worshiped for delivering the evangel of his Mother in heaven, namely, that one must first lose his senses before coming to them.

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