

**THE MOTHER OF GODS IN THE PONTIC REGIONS:
SYNCRETISM, LOCAL ADAPTATION,
AND RELIGIOUS INTERACTION**

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Abstract: *The cult of the Mother of the Gods, which spanned from the Late Iron Age to the Early Roman Period in the Pontic regions, reflects a complex and multilayered religious landscape deeply rooted in the practices of local communities. This cult was not limited by conventional boundaries but constituted a significant part of a broader network of religious interaction extending beyond the mentioned areas. Archaeological findings and epigraphic evidence point to various names attributed to the goddess, each having different regional interpretations and perceptions over time. The use of expressions such as "Mother of Pontos" highlights the goddess's strong geographical and cultural connection to the region, underscoring the integration of local traditions with wider religious practices. The incorporation of local deities into this cult reveals the syncretic and adaptable nature of regional belief systems, demonstrating their capacity to evolve and respond to changing circumstances. Such processes of religious interaction and adaptation illustrate the dynamic, flexible, and interconnected nature of ancient religious structures in the Pontic regions, contributing to a deeper understanding of the area's cultural and religious diversity.*

Keywords: *Pontic Regions, Mother of Gods, syncretism, religion, local characteristics*

Rezumat: *Mama Zeilor în regiunile pontice: sincretism, adaptare locală și interacțiune religioasă. Cultul Mamei Zeilor, care s-a extins de la sfârșitul epocii fierului până*

la începutul perioadei romane în regiunile pontice, reflectă un peisaj religios complex și multistratificat, adânc înrădăcinat în practicile comunităților locale. Acest cult nu era limitat de frontiere convenționale, ci constituia o parte semnificativă a unei rețele mai largi de interacțiune religioasă care trecea dincolo de arealele amintite. Descoperirile arheologice și dovezile epigrafice indică diverse nume atribuite zeiței, fiecare având interpretări și percepții regionale diferite de-a lungul timpului. Utilizarea unor sintagme precum „Mama Pontului” evidențiază puternica legătură geografică și culturală a zeiței cu regiunea, subliniind integrarea tradițiilor locale cu practici religioase mai ample. Aducerea zeităților locale în acest cult dezvăluie natura sincretică și adaptabilă a sistemelor regionale de credințe, demonstrând capacitatea lor de a evolua și de a răspunde circumstanțelor în schimbare. Astfel de procese de interacțiune și adaptare religioasă ilustrează natura dinamică, flexibilă și interconectată a structurilor religioase antice din regiunile pontice, contribuind la o înțelegere mai profundă a diversității culturale și religioase a zonei.

INTRODUCTION

The religious landscape of the Pontic region from the Late Iron Age (7th century BCE) to the Early Roman Period (2nd century CE) was characterised by a complex interplay of indigenous traditions, Greek colonial influences, and broader Anatolian and Near Eastern religious currents.¹ Among the most prominent deities in this region was the Mother of Gods, commonly identified with Cybele, whose cult originated in Phrygia and subsequently spread across Anatolia and the Greek world.² The integration of Cybele into the religious life of the Pontic communities reflects broader patterns of syncretism, where local traditions shaped the adaptation and expression of widespread cults.³ The Greek colonists in the

¹ Joanna Porucznik, *Heuresibios Son of Syriskos and the Question of Tyranny in Olbia Pontike (Fifth–Fourth Century BC)*, “The Annual of the British School at Athens”, Vol. 113, 2018, pp. 399-414. Alekseenko Nataliya, *A Seal of Leo Spelaiotis from the Crimea*, in “Antichnaya Drevnost’ I Sredniye Veka”, Vol. 50, 2022, pp. 123-136.

² Based on Matar-Kubileya, which was popular in the western half of Anatolia during the Phrygian period, Cybele spread rapidly throughout western Anatolia and Greece, particularly Ionia, in the first half of the 7th century BC (Fritz Graf, *Nordionische Kulte. Epigraphische und Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den Kulturen von Chios, Erythrai, Klazomenai und Phokaia*. Rome, Bibliotheca Helvetica Romana, Vol. 21, 1985, p. 120. Evgenia Vikela, *Bemerkungen zu Ikonographie und Bildtypologie der Meter-Cybele Reliefs. Vom phrygischer Vorbild zur Griechischen Eigenständigkeit*, “AM”, Vol. 116, 2001, pp. 67-123. Lynn E. Roller, *Ana Tanrıça’nın İzinde; Anadolu Kybele Kültü* [In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele], İstanbul, Alfa Yayınları, 2004, p. 127ff).

³ Yulia Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods of the Bosporan Kingdom: Celestial Aphrodite and the*

Black Sea region also incorporated other eastern deities, such as Attis, Mithras, and Mên, into their religious practices, demonstrating the fluidity of cultural and religious exchange in this contact zone.⁴ Moreover, during the Roman period, the revival of Aphrodite's cult in the Bosporus and Chersonesos, particularly in its chthonic aspects, further illustrates the evolving religious landscape of the region.⁵ This study examines the local characteristics of the Mother of Gods in the Pontic region, analysing how Cybele's cult assimilated and transformed within this diverse and dynamic religious environment.

ICONOGRAPHY, SANCTUARIES, AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF THE GODDESS

On the western, northern, and southern coasts of the Black Sea and in the immediate vicinity, the presence of Cybele is generally known from sculptural fragments and terracotta artefacts from the archaic period in the colonies. Temples and cult sites have rarely been identified. The depictions follow a common/traditional iconographic type, in accordance with the goddess's Hellenization. With the Hellenization of the Phrygian goddess, changes began to appear in her iconography. The main change was that the goddess was now seated. Such depictions of the goddess are based on the cult statue of Agorakritos of Paros for the Temple of Mêtêr in the Athenian Agora, dating to the end of the 5th century

Most High God, Leiden, Brill, 1999, p. 64; Yulia Ustinova, *Imaginary Phrygians: Cognitive Consonance and the Assumed Phrygian Origin of Greek Ecstatic Cults and Music*, "The Journal of Hellenic Studies", Vol. 141, 2021, pp. 54-73. Birgitte Bøgh, *The Phrygian Background of Cybele*, "Numen", Vol. 54, 2007, p. 307. Birgitte Bøgh, *Mother of the Gods: Goddess of Power and Protector of Cities*, "Numen", Vol. 59, 2012, pp. 32-67. Ghislaine van der Ploeg, *The Impact of the Roman Empire on the Cult of Asclepius*, Leiden, Brill, 2018, pp. 6-45. Marianna A. Kulkova, Maya T. Kashuba, Sergey M. Agulnikov, Alexander M. Kulkov, Mikhail, A. Streltsov, Maria N. Vetrova, Aurel Zanoci, *Impact of Paleoclimatic Changes on the Cultural and Historical Processes at the Turn of the Late Bronze-Early Iron Ages in the Northern Black Sea Region*, "Heritage", Vol. 5/3, 2022, pp. 2258-2281. 64. Vitalij Sinika, *Scythian Archaeological Culture of the 3rd-2nd Centuries BC in North-West Black Sea Region*, Chişinău, Tiraspol, 2023.

⁴ David Braund, *Greek Religion and Cults in the Black Sea Region: Goddesses in the Bosporan Kingdom from the Archaic Period to the Byzantine Era*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.

⁵ Sergey Vladimirovich Yartsev, Elena Shushunova, *On the Strengthening of the Chthonic Principle in the Revived Aphrodite Cult in the Northern Black Sea Region in the First Centuries a.d.*, in "Chelovek i kul'tura", Vol. 5, 2022, pp. 35-47.

BC.⁶ Accordingly, the goddess, wearing a chiton and himation, is depicted seated on a throne, holding a tympanon in her left hand and a libation pattern in her right. On her head is a polo. The lion, one of Cybele's iconographic features, is depicted sitting on the goddess's lap or on one side of her throne. Based on hundreds of surviving examples, the goddess's iconography has remained unchanged for nearly a thousand years.

Research has explored the evolution of Mêtêr's cult in the western Black Sea area from the archaic period onwards, shedding light on the characteristics of the goddess and reception of her cult.⁷ In the coastal region of Moesia Inferior on the western shores of the Black Sea, extending from Histria to the north and Odessos to the south, many finds relate to the cult of Cybele. In Dionysopolis, a significant settlement in the region, a temple dedicated to the goddess was built in the Early Hellenistic period.⁸ The temple was used from the Hellenistic Period until the end of the Late Roman Period (late 3rd-4th century BC) and reflects the religious and social lives of the people of Dionysopolis in the context of the Cybele cult.⁹ The sculptures and reliefs dating to the Early Roman Period (1st – mid-3rd century BC) depict the goddess in accordance with her typical iconography.¹⁰ On an island outside the colonial settlement of Kallatis, a sanctuary dedicated to Cybele appears to have been used from the late 4th century BC to the early 2nd century BC.¹¹ In this temple, there is a cave temple with an entrance, a porch, and a dromos, a cave temple with three halls, and a votive vessel carved into the rock inside the temple. A limestone votive stele was found in the stone setting of a medieval grave in the study area, which depicts Cybele seated on a throne.¹² In the sanctuary, rock-carved votive pits, which

⁶ Lynn E Roller, *In Search of God the Mother ...*, p. 151.

⁷ Birgitte Bøgh, *Mother of the Gods ...*, pp. 32-67. Bøgh presents research on the cult of Cybele, highlighting its Phrygian origins, iconography, roles, and worship practices, and suggests that the Black Sea area played a role in the development and dissemination of the cult (Birgitte Bøgh, *The Phrygian Background of Cybele ...*, pp. 304-339).

⁸ Igor Lazarenko, Elina Mircheva, Radostina Encheva, Daniela Stoyanova, Nicolay Sharankov, *The Temple of the Pontic Mother of Gods in Dionysopolis*, Varna, Slavena Publishing House, 2013. pp. 13-44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34-46. Sophia Petrogianni, *The Cult of Deities of the Eastern Origin in the Black Sea Region*, MA. Thesis School of Humanities, Thessaloniki, International Hellenic University, 2011, p. 19.

¹¹ Henrieta Todorova, *Durankulak: A territorium sacrum of the Goddess Cybele*, in "Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea", Vol. I, Oxford, Archaeopress, 2007, pp. 175-235.

¹² Ivan Vajsov, Georgi Mavrov, Henrieta Todorova, *Das hellenistische Höhlenheiligtum der Gottheit Cybele*, in "Durankulak, Band III, Die Hellenistische Befunde", Rahden, Verlag

are part of the cult of the goddess, and terracotta figures of Cybele were unearthed. This indicates that the sacrificial practices here were dedicated to this goddess and shows that some of the arrangements in rocky areas encountered in Anatolia's goddess rituals also reached the region. The fact that *amphorae* were found in many of the pits suggests that the offerings were carried in them.¹³ Marble and terracotta sculptures, statuettes, coins, some monuments, and epigraphic data from the Roman period in Kallatis attest to the continued cult of the goddess.¹⁴ On a relief dating to the 2nd-3rd century AD, a Thracian horseman is depicted with his dog and a wild boar. On the right, a goddess, possibly Cybele, is depicted in traditional attire. The goddess faces the horseman and is probably pouring an altar offering with her right hand. The background of the figures consists of a tree climbed by a snake.¹⁵ This association between the goddess and the horseman probably indicates that local communities in the region were aware of the Cybele cult and incorporated it into their religious beliefs. It has been suggested that the horseman depicted here with Cybele may have been a Thracian horseman, a Thracian god who fought against evil forces east of the Danube and was often seen as a sun god.¹⁶ In the coastal town of Limanu, south of Kallatis, another relief from the 3rd century AD depicts a Thracian horseman and Cybele seated together.¹⁷ Arnautcuius, in the interior of the region, has a similar example dating to the 2nd century AD.¹⁸

Terracotta figurines, marble statues, and reliefs from the 5th-4th century BC in Histria point to the cult of Cybele. A relief from Fintinele in the vicinity of the city, dating to the 2nd-3rd century, similar to the examples found at Kallatis and Limanu, depicts a Thracian horseman with his dog, accompanied by Cybele seated

Marie Leindorf, 2016. p. 46.

¹³ Henrieta Todorova, *Durankulak: A territorium sacrum ...*, p. 175-235.

¹⁴ Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque: CCCA. VI, Graecia atque insulae, Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales dans l'Empire Romain*, Leiden, Brill 1989, p. 124, fig: 418. Alexandru Avram, *Inscriptiones Daciae et Scythiae Minoris antiquae. Series altera: Inscriptiones Scythiae Minoris graecae et latinae. Vol. 3. Callatis et territorium*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, Paris, Diffusion De Boccard, 2000, p. 247.

¹⁵ Margarita Tacheva-Hitova, *Eastern Cults in Moesia Inferior and Thracia (EPRO 95)*, Leiden, Brill, 1983, p. 89, no:39 and Pl:XXX; Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, pp. 121-122.

¹⁶ Maarten Josef Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis: The Myth and the Cult*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1977, p. 142.

¹⁷ Margarita Tacheva-Hitova, *Eastern Cults in Moesia Inferior and Thracia ...*, p. 89 f., no: 40. Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 126.

¹⁸ Margarita Tacheva-Hitova, *Eastern Cults in Moesia Inferior and Thracia ...*, p. 107, no:75. Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 127.

on her throne and dressed in traditional attire.¹⁹ The importance of the goddess in Histria increased during the Roman period, and she was also depicted in votive inscriptions and coins.²⁰ In Apollonia, a relief dating to the late 6th century BC depicts a female figure identified as Cybele, while in Odessos, the cult of Cybele, which began in the Early Hellenistic Period, is also documented in statues and monuments from the Hellenistic and Roman periods.²¹ In Tomis, the Cybele figure in a *naiskos* dating to the 4th century BC displays the goddess's typical appearance.²² A Hellenistic inscription associated with the goddess in the city depicts a Thracian horseman with the goddess, similar to the example of Kallatis. Below the horseman is a bow and a dog. The left side of the scene depicts a partial tree surrounded by a serpent. To the right is Cybele in a traditional dress, seated on a throne with lions on either side.²³ The Mesembria settlement reflects the cult of Cybele, as evidenced by a Hellenistic-period marble statuette.²⁴ The colony of Bizone, founded at the end of the 5th century BC, yielded an inscription believed to be dedicated to the goddess.²⁵

On the northern coast of the Black Sea, the city of Nikonion in the Lower Dniester region provides evidence for the cult of Cybele in the form of a terracotta relief dated to the 5th century BC, which is consistent with similar figurines from Ionia and other Greek regions.²⁶ At Tyras in the same region, there are terracotta figurines depicting Cybele as well as the agricultural goddesses Demeter and Kore-Persephone. The cult of the goddess is thought to have been important in the Roman period as well, since Tyras coins depict her seated, wearing a *polos*, and holding a wreath or a Nike figurine.²⁷ In Pontic Olbia, votive stelae with naiskos,

¹⁹ Nubar Hampartumian, *Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii-Ccet: Moesia Inferio-Romanian Section and Dacia (Études Préliminaires Aux Religions Orientales Dans l'Empire)*, Leiden, Brill, 1979, pp. 56 no 53. Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 106, no:74 with Pl. XXXIV.

²⁰ Dobrinka Chiekova, *Cultes et vie religieuse des cités grecques du Pont Gauche (VIIIer siècle avant J. C.)*, Bern, Verlag Peter Lang, 2008 pp. 128. 57. Sophia Petrogianni, *The Cult of Deities of the Eastern Origin in the Black Sea Region ...*, pp. 35-37.

²¹ Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 82.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 130, fig: 441.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²⁴ Sophia Petrogianni, *The Cult of Deities of the Eastern Origin ...*, p. 45.

²⁵ Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, fig: 404.

²⁶ Natalya Michaylovna Sekerskaya, *The Ancient city of Nikonion*, in "Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea", Vol. I, Oxford, BAR Publishing, 2007, p. 500.

²⁷ Tatyana Lvovna Samoylova, *Tyras: The Greek city on the River Tyras*, in "Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea", Vol. I, Oxford, BAR Publishing, 2007, pp. 446-447, 457.

dated to the 6th century BC, depict the goddess in a seated pose.²⁸ The terracotta artefacts, dated to the 4th century BC - 2nd century AD, show that the cult supported individual worship during this period.²⁹ Excavations in the Western Temenos of Olbia also uncovered locally produced marble relief from Cybele dating to the 3rd century.³⁰ Further east, at Chersonesos on the western coast of the Crimean Peninsula, Cybele depictions show diversity spanning the period from the 5th century BC to the 2nd century AD. A statue head with polos, dated to the late 5th century BC, was associated with Cybele. From the early 3rd century BC to the 2nd century AD, stelae and reliefs depicting Cybele seated on a throne, wearing traditional dress, attest to the cult's continuity.³¹

In the northern region known as *Regnum Bosphori*, Cybele was popular during the Classical and Hellenistic periods.³² The area contains wall inscriptions bearing Cybele's name from the 5th to the 2nd centuries BC, as well as dedicatory inscriptions and several votive limestone reliefs depicting her. Terracotta figurines of Cybele began to appear in the 5th century BC and by the 3rd century BC formed the largest group. Early evidence for the cult of Cybele around the Kerch Gulf includes a terracotta mould from Nymphaion³³ dating to the 5th century BC

²⁸ Anna S. Rousyaeva, *Sanctuaries in the Context of the cultural and historical development of Olbia Pontica*, in "Ancient Sacral Monuments in the Black Sea", Thessaloniki, Kriakidis Brothers, 2010, pp. 63-92.

²⁹ Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, pp. 147-155.

³⁰ Sergey D. Kryzhytskiy, Valentina V. Krapivina, Nina A. Lejpunskaja, Vladimir V. Nazarov. *Olbia-Berezan*, in "Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea", Vol. I, Thessaloniki, Publications of the Archaeological Institute of Northern Greece, Nr. 4, 2003, p. 497.

³¹ Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, pp. 155-160.

³² The presence of Cybele in the Bosphorus region is discussed in the paper by Goroncharovskiy. The author analyzes sculptural images of Cybele found in the region and concludes that they originate from the prototype of Asia Minor. However, the cult of Cybele did not have widespread influence in the Bosphorus, as her image merged with those of Aphrodite, Demeter, and Artemis to form a single female deity known as the Great Mother. This syncretism of different divine beings was a common trend in the ancient world (V. A. Goroncharovskiy, *K voprosu o kulte Kibely na Bospore v pervye veka n. e.* [On the issue of the Cybele Cult in the Bosphorus during first centuries AD]. "Stratum plus. Arkheologiya i kulturnaya antropologiya [Stratum plus. Archaeology and Cultural Anthropology]", Vol. 3, 1999, pp. 224-227, pp. 224-227). Baslez mentions the cult of Cybele in its local form and its connection to the montanist movement in the Phrygian region (Marie-Françoise Baslez, *Vom Kult der Kybele zum phrygischen Christentum: Ausblicke auf eine Regionale religiöse Identität*, "Trivium", Vol. 4, 2009, pp. 1-21).

³³ Yulia Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods of the Bosporan Kingdom ...*, p. 63.

and a locally produced figurine from Phanagoria. At Myrmekion, terracotta figurines of the goddess were found, dating to the 2nd to 1st century BC.³⁴ At Phanagoria on the Taman Peninsula, a terracotta figurine depicting Cybele seated and in her usual appearance, holding a lion in her lap, and terracotta figurines found at Gorgippia indicate the existence of Cybele worship between the 4th and 1st centuries BC.³⁵ A votive stele dated to 284/3–245 BC, dedicated to the goddess, was found on the city's acropolis, called Mithridates Hill, where a temple of Cybele is thought to have existed in Pantikapaion.³⁶ Below the temple area is a cave that is used for ritual purposes.³⁷ The settlement also yielded stelae, terracotta figurines, and statues dating from the 1st to the 2nd/3rd century BC.³⁸ In addition to two votive monuments dating to the 1st century BC unearthed at Tanais, there is also a relief depicting the same goddess in a seated position and a terracotta figurine.³⁹ In a naiskos from the Nymphaion dating to the same period, the goddess is seated on her throne, dressed in traditional attire and paraphernalia, with a lion cub lying in her lap, facing left. To her left stands Hecate with long, flaming torches, while on the other side is Hermes in a tunic and petasos.⁴⁰ To the east of Regnum Bosphori, there is no archaeological evidence of the goddess's cult. Written documents, which will be discussed below and provide information about the Colchis region, indicate the existence of the cult, at least in the southeast region.

On the southern coast of the Black Sea, Cybele cult finds are concentrated in Bithynia and Paphlagonia to the east. In the Bithynian region, the goddess is depicted seated on a throne in traditional attire, holding a tympanon. However, in the Roman Imperial Period, the depictions changed, and the tympanon held in Cybele's left hand was replaced by a sceptre; in some examples, the goddess wore a rampart crown.⁴¹ In Kandira, a cave was organised for the worship of Cybele on

³⁴ Marija Michailowna Kobylina, *Divinités Orientales sur le Littoral Nord de la Mer Noire*, Leiden, Brill, 1976, p. 32.

³⁵ Ekaterina M. Alekseeva, *Gorgippia*, in "Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea", Vol. I, Thessaloniki, 2003, pp. 972, 984.

³⁶ Viktor F. Gajdukevic, *Das Bosporanische Reich*, Amsterdam, Akademie-Verlag, 1971, p. 175. Yulia Ustinova, *The Supreme Gods of the Bosporan Kingdom ...*, p. 63.

³⁷ Viktor F. Gajdukevic, *Das Bosporanische Reich ...*, pp. 71. It has been suggested that the temple may have been a place of worship of a local goddess before the colonisation: *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³⁸ Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, pp. 161-166.

³⁹ Tatyana M. Arsenyeva, *Tanais*, in "Ancient Greek Colonies in the Black Sea", Vol. II Thessaloniki, 2003, pp. 1047, 1078.

⁴⁰ Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, pp. 161.

⁴¹ Onur Girgin, *Kocaeli ve Çevresinde Bulunmuş Eserler Üzerinden Nikomedia Heykeltıraşlık*

the Black Sea coast of the region. Inside, an inscribed altar dating to the 1st century AD and two statues of Cybele in the goddess's traditional form, the so-called Bithynian Type, were found.⁴²

Archaeological remains of the Phrygian culture dating to the 7th-4th centuries BC have been discovered in the Paflagonian Region, especially in and around the provincial centre of Kastamonu. The rock tombs in Amnias Valley, especially the Evkaya and Terelek tombs, are essential for their iconographic features on their facades. The clothed figure standing between two sphinxes on the pediment of the Evkaya Rock Tomb does not present an iconographic image distinct from depictions of Cybele in Phrygian art.⁴³ Two rock bowls set into the rocky surface are known to have been used in ceremonies of the Cybele cult.⁴⁴ The grave is dated to the 8th-7th centuries BC based on a comparison with Phrygian examples.⁴⁵ A stepped formation in the castle of Kastamonu is also similar to the stepped horses of the cult of the mother goddess observed in Phrygia.⁴⁶ On the pediment of Terelek Rock Tomb in Boyabat District, a Cybele with a polo on her head was carved on the facade.⁴⁷ The Şehinşah Rock Facade in Kastamonu Province is an example of a Cybele rock façade with a low gable roof and a wing-shaped apex acroter. Compared to similar examples, it is hypothesised that the Cybele idol may

Üslubunun İncelenmesi [An Examination of the Nikomedia Sculptural Style Based on Works Found in Kocaeli and Its Surroundings], Phd Thesis, İstanbul, İstanbul University, 2023, pp. 158-196.

⁴² Serkan Gedük, Günay Karahan, Aysin Konak, *Cybele of Kandıra: An Iconographic and Stylistic Evaluation*, "Türkiye Bilimler Akademisi Kültür Envanteri Dergisi", 2022, pp. 167-184.

⁴³ Murat Karasalihoğlu, *Kastamonu Kent Merkezinde Yer Alan Dinsel Kaya Mimarisi Üzerine Bir İnceleme* [A Study on Religious Rock Architecture in Kastamonu City Center], "İkinci Kastamonu Kültür Sempozyumu Bildirileri (18-20 Eylül 2003)", Ankara, Gazi Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Basımevi, 2005, p. 131. Murat Karasalihoğlu, *Paphlagonia Kaya Mezarları* [Rock Tombs of Paphlagonia], in *Üsküdar'a Kadar Kastamonu*, İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2009, p. 64. Murat Karasalihoğlu, *Prehistorik Çağlardan Doğu Roma Dönemi Sonuna Kadar Kastamonu Kentinin Kültürel Tabakalaşması* [The Cultural Stratification of Kastamonu City from Prehistoric Times to the End of the Eastern Roman Period], "Mediterranean Journal of Humanities", Vol. 10, 2020, p. 283.

⁴⁴ Murat Karasalihoğlu, *Kastamonu Kent Merkezinde Yer Alan Dinsel Kaya Mimarisi Üzerine Bir İnceleme ...*, p. 130.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁴⁷ Ahmet Gökoğlu, *Paphlagonia*, Kastamonu, Doğrusöz Matbaası, 1952, pp. 58, 60. F. Eray Dökü, *Paphlagonia Bölgesi Kaya Mezarları ve Kaya Tapınakları* [Rock Tombs and Rock Temples of the Paphlagonia Region], Phd Thesis. Antalya, Akdeniz University, 2008, p. 64.

have been located within the facade. This structure, together with the two adjacent rock tombs, represents an open-air worship site. When compared typologically with Phrygian examples, the latter part of the 4th century BC is suggested.⁴⁸ Another noteworthy site associated with the cult of Cybele in Kastamonu is the open-air sacred water complex in Pinarbasi, dated to the 5th-4th century BC. The niches, platforms, and stepped stair systems in rocky areas associated with sanctuaries are the standard arrangements encountered in rocky areas related to goddesses.⁴⁹ A naiskos votive stele⁵⁰ from the Selmanlı Tumulus, depicting Cybele surrounded by two lions and probably belonging to Cybele, and another similar artefact in the Kastamonu Museum are dated to the 6th-4th centuries BC.⁵¹ In both examples, the goddess is depicted sitting on a chariot, wearing a veil and a long dress. The stele, found in Karlı, Karabük, but housed in the Kastamonu Museum, depicts a standing goddess that may be related to Cybele and dates to the 6th century BC.⁵² Another artefact in the Kastamonu Museum is a naiskos from Zonguldak depicting Cybele seated on a throne, dating back to the 6th century BC.⁵³ A partially preserved statue of Cybele, probably standing, with a high polo on her head, found in Alaplı near Heracleia Pontica, dates to the 9th-8th century BC.⁵⁴ In the Paphlagonian region, excluding some coastal colonial settlements, the cult of Cybele can be said to have direct Phrygian influence. It is possible that the cult entered the region via Bithynia and/or Phrygia, where the goddess was widely recognised, spreading to the rural areas of southern, western, and eastern Paphlagonia.⁵⁵

Data on the existence of goddesses in the Pontic region are relatively scarce.

⁴⁸ Murat Karasalihoğlu, *Prehistorik Çağlardan Doğu ...*, pp. 282-283

⁴⁹ Murat Karasalihoğlu, *Paphlagonia'dan Kybele Açık Hava Kutsal Su Kompleksi [The Open-Air Holy Water Complex of Cybele in Paphlagonia]*, "Arkeoloji ve Sanat", Vol. 149, 2015, p. 57ff.

⁵⁰ Şahin Yıldırım, *The Rescue Excavation of the Selmanlı Tumulus in Kastamonu*, in "The Danubian Lands Between the Black, Aegean and Adriatic Seas (7th Century BC – 10th Century AD) Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress on Black Sea Antiquities (Belgrade – 17-21 September 2013)" Oxford Archaeopress Publishing LTD, 2015, pp. 449-450, fig:10.

⁵¹ Şahin Yıldırım, *Paphlagonia Tümülüsleri [Paphlagonian Tumuli]*, "BYZAS", Vol. 26, 2021a, p. 147.

⁵² Friederike Naumann, *Die Ikonographie der Cybele in der Phrygischen und der Griechischen Kunst*, Tübingen, E. Wasmuth, 1983, pp. 84-85

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 121-122. Murat Karasalihoğlu. *Paphlagonia'dan Kybele Açık...*, pp. 55-76.

⁵⁴ Şahin Yıldırım, *Tieion Akropolisini [Acropolis in Tieion]*, "Belleten", Vol. 85/303, 2021b, p. 402, fig:18.

⁵⁵ Sergej Ju Saprykin, *The Religion and Cults of the Pontic Kingdom ...*, p. 227; F. Eray Dökü, *Paphlagonia Bölgesi Kaya Mezarları ve Kaya Tapınakları ...*, p. 64ff.

This lack of information increases towards the eastern coast of the area. Archaeological findings in Sinop (Sinope), on the western coast of the region, indicate the existence of Cybele's cult in and around the city. The two statuettes on display at the Sinop Archaeological Museum belong to the goddess. One of the statuettes depicts Cybele seated on a low-backed throne, wearing her traditional attire. Her right hand was on the head of a lion sitting near the throne. The statuette cannot be dated with certainty because of its poor preservation and lack of archaeological context. The second figurine dates to the 1st-2nd century BC. The goddess is seated on a throne with a high back flanked on either side by two half-sitting lions. The inscription on the statuette's base identifies the seated figure as *the Mother of the Gods*.⁵⁶ A naiskos offering from the Archaeological Museum of Sinop depicts Cybele sitting in a niche. She is dressed in traditional attire, holding a tympanom in her left hand and possibly a pattern on her right. Although the niche offering is poorly preserved, the depiction of Cybele seated reflects the Hellenized image in which the goddess is typically identified.⁵⁷ The rock-cut tomb of Terelikkayasi in the Duragan district of Sinop depicts Cybele as an idol on its pediment.⁵⁸ The representations of the goddess in Sinop align with the Hellenization of the goddess that emerged in western Anatolia in the mid-6th century BC and continued into late antiquity.

The terracotta female statuettes unearthed at the Çakalca-Karadoğan Mound in Samsun (Amisos), dated to the mid-6th century BC and depicted in a seated position, wearing high polos and dressed in terracotta, are associated with Cybele.⁵⁹ There are also votive inscriptions in the form of graffiti on various ceramic sherds.⁶⁰

Kurul Castle in Ordu (Kotyora) has military and cultural functions. In the natural area of a rocky summit, there are several arrangements related to the cult of the mother goddess. At the Altar Rock, located at the southeastern end of the Inner Fortress of the Kurul Fortress, rock channels, a collecting trough, and rock bowls carved into natural rock are associated with libation practices related to the worship of Cybele. The rock steps in the rocky area resemble those of Phrygia.⁶¹ A

⁵⁶ Eleni T. Mentessidou, *Religion and Cultural Interactions in the Black Sea: The Cult of the mother of gods or Cybele/Cybele in Sinope*, in "International Symposium on Sinope and Black Sea Archaeology Ancient Sinope and the Black Sea", Sinop, Şimal Ajans, 2019, pp. 53-63.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56-58.

⁵⁸ Murat Karasalihoğlu, *Paphlagonia'dan Kybele Açık ...*, p. 66.

⁵⁹ Orhan Alper Şirin, Mustafa Kolağasıoğlu, *Çakalca-Karadoğan Höyüğü: Arkaik Dönemde Amisos ve Kybele Kültü* [Çakalca-Karadoğan Mound: Amisos and the Cult of Cybele in the Archaic Period], Samsun, SAMTAB Yayınları-1, 2016, p. 20ff.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32ff.

⁶¹ Atakan Akçay, Bulut Ahmet Emirhan, *Kurul Kalesi'nde Mekânsal Organizasyon, Mimari*

statue representing Cybele in a seated position was found in a niche at the main entrance of the fortress, dating back to the mid-2nd century BC.⁶²

There is no direct evidence of Cybele worship at Giresun (Kerasos). However, during the surveys, open-air cult sites were found on rocky hills and forested areas, usually near the coast or on the seaside. These sites are often associated with tombs, votive pits, channels, stepped altars, and rock-carved niches, indicating they were part of religious rituals. The similarity of these areas with Cybele sanctuaries in Central and Western Anatolia is remarkable.⁶³

A group of sculptures and terracotta figurines at the Tokat Museum depicts Roman worship of Cybele in the region. All figures reflect the goddess's traditional iconography in the seated position.⁶⁴

EPIGRAPHIC AND LITERARY EVIDENCE FOR THE RELIGIOUS CONTINUITY AND SYNCRETISM OF THE GODDESS

The epigraphic and written documents related to Cybele, or the Mother of the Gods as she is more commonly known in the region, are fewer in number than the archaeological findings. As mentioned above, archaeological findings related to the goddess are scattered throughout the region, except in the eastern part. However, epigraphic data were found only in some of these settlements. Greek and Latin written sources, which provide information about the region from the second half of the 1st millennium BC onwards, also attest to the existence of the Cybele cult in the area.

Several settlements in the coastal part of Moesia, west of the Pontic region, contain epigraphic material from the Late Iron Age to the end of the Early Roman period. At Messambria, a Doric colony in the region, a short votive inscription on a slab dating to the 4th century BC calls the goddess Mother Cybele "Matri Cybeleia"

Malzeme ve Yapı Fonksiyonları Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme [An Evaluation of Spatial Organization, Architectural Materials, and Building Functions at Kurul Castle], "Anadolu Araştırmaları", Vol. 27, 2023, pp. 15-17.

⁶² S. Yücel Şenyurt, Serra Durugönül, *Kurul (Ordu) Kalesi'nde Bir Kybele Heykeli* [A Cybele Statue at Kurul (Ordu) Castle], "Olba", Vol. 26, 2018, pp. 305-344. S. Yücel Şenyurt, Atakan Akçay, *The Kurul Fortress and the Cult of Cybele as a City Protector*, "Colloquium Anatolicum", Vol. 16, 2017, pp. 188-194.

⁶³ M. Ertekin Doksanaltı, *Open air Cult Sites in Eastern Pontus Region*, "ANADOS", Vol. 12 2012, pp. 62-78.

⁶⁴ Salih Kaymakçı. *Antik Çağ'da Kelkit Vadisi'ndeki İnanç ve Tapınımlar-Kültler* [Beliefs and Worship in the Kelkit Valley in Antiquity – Cults], "TÜBA-AR", Vol. 15, 2012, pp. 87-88.

(Ματρὶ Κυβελείαι).⁶⁵ This is the only example of the name Cybele used for the goddess in the Pontic regions. The adjective Kubeleya is used for the goddess only three times in the western part of the Phrygian cultural region.⁶⁶ The most common Greek adaptation by Kubeleya is Κυβέλη. Outside Phrygia, this name appears only in a votive inscription on the island of Chios, along with the Messambria example.⁶⁷ "Ματρὶ" in the Messambria example is read as "Mother", which is derived from the Phrygian name for the goddess, Matar, meaning "Mother." In other examples from the region, this word appears as "Μήτηρ" (Mētēr), the Greekized form of Matar.

Excavations at Dionysopolis, south of Messambria, uncovered temples dating to the 4th century BC. Two honouring inscriptions indicate that the temple was named Metroon (Μητροῶιον) and that the offerings in the temple were dedicated to the Pontic Mother of the Gods (Μήτηρ θεῶν Ποντίας), or simply to the Pontic Mother (Μήτηρ Ποντίας).⁶⁸ On the reverse side of an inscription found in the temple area and dated to the 3rd century BC, belonging to the temple servants of the goddess called Attises/Attiastai, the goddess is called the Pontic Mother of the Gods (Μητρος θεῶν Ποντίας).⁶⁹

The only Latin inscription in the temple at Dionysopolis dates back to the early 3rd century AD and calls the goddess the Mother of the Gods (Mater Deum).⁷⁰ An inscription from the first half of the 3rd century AD, belonging to two cult units, calls the goddess by the same name.⁷¹ In both Hellenistic and Roman

⁶⁵ "Κλεῦσις Ἀθαναίωνος Ματρὶ Κυβελείαι" [Kleusis, son of Athanaios, to the Mother Kybele] (Velizar Velkov, *Inscriptions antiques de Messambria (1964-1984)*, in "Nessèbre III, In memoriam Jeannae Čimbuleva", Burgas, Spring Ltd, no. 28, 2005, pp. 176-177.

⁶⁶ Bartomeu Obrador-Cursach, *The gods of the Phrygian inscriptions*, in "Steps into Phrygia: language and epigraphy", Barcelona, Edicions de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2022, pp. 103-154.

⁶⁷ Louis Robert, *Inscriptions d'Érythrai*, "Bulletin de correspondance hellénique", Vol. 57, 1933, pp. 483-484, fig. 2.

⁶⁸ "[Δη]μοφῶν Μυδὸς ἱερώμενος διὰ βίου Μητρὶ θεῶν Ποντίαι χαριστήριον" [Demophon, son of Myon, serving as priest for life, a thank-offering to the Mother of the Gods of Pontos], Igor Lazarenko et al. *The Temple of the Pontic Mother of Gods in Dionysopolis ...*, pp. 13-44.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57.

⁷⁰ "Matri deum / dominus noster / Licinius invict(us) Aug(ustus) / quod ex donariis / in templo eius reper/tum est simulacrum / argenteum numini / eius in libris septem / et unciis octo fieri / iussit et consecrari // per Aurel(ium) Speratianum / v(irum) p(erfectissimum) praes(idem) prov(inciae) Scyt(hiae)" (Igor Lazarenko et al. *The Temple of the Pontic Mother of Gods in Dionysopolis ...*, pp. 53).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 55ff.

examples, the name Mother of the Gods for the goddess is nothing but an extension of a name already used for the goddess in Anatolia and Greece.⁷² However, from the Late Iron Age to the end of the Early Roman Period, there was no change in the goddess's name, except for some local elements added to it. This is also consistent with archaeological findings. In fact, there was no significant change in the traditional appearance of the goddess in the region during these periods.

At Marcianopolis, on the southern coast of Moesia, an altar dating to the 2nd century AD bears the inscription "Mother of the Gods" (Μητρι Θεᾶ).⁷³ On another altar dating to the same period, the adjective Urania/Sky is used for the goddess, and she is called the Celestial Mother of the Gods (Οὐρανία Μητρι Θεῶν).⁷⁴ At Odessos, a coastal city in the southern part of Moesia, near the border with the province of Thrace, a relief of Heracles and the goddess, dated to the 3rd century AD, has a short dedicatory inscription at the bottom of the bas-relief, in which the goddess is called simply Mother (Μητρι).⁷⁵ At Bizone, on the northern coast of the region, the Goddess is called Mother of the Gods (Μητρος Θεῶν)⁷⁶ in a dedicatory inscription on an altar dedicated to the goddess, dating to the 2nd-3rd century AD, and in an honouring inscription, dating to the 2nd century AD.⁷⁷ Epigraphic material from the Roman period attests to the goddess's esteemed position in the Black Sea colonies at that time.

Further north at Tomis, the inscription at the bottom of a relief⁷⁸ dating to

⁷² Lynn E Roller, *In Search of God the Mother ...*, p. 127ff.

⁷³ "Αγαθῆ [Τύχη] / Μητρι Θεᾶ ε[ύχην] ..." [To Good Fortune / to the Mother Goddess (as) a vow ...] (Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 119).

⁷⁴ "Αγα Τύχη. / Οὐρανία Μητρι Θεῶν / Παυλεῖνα / εὐχαριστήριον / ἀνέθηχεν / εὐτυχῶς" [To Good Fortune. To the Heavenly Mother of the Gods, Pauleina dedicated this thank-offering successfully] (IGBulg II 805).

⁷⁵ "Πρώτος γενόμενος / εὐχαριστήριον Μητρι [χαί Ἡ]/ ραχλεῖ" [Having come first a thank-offering to the Mother [and to Hē]/rakleēs] (IGBulg I², No. 81).

⁷⁶ "ἀγαθῆι τύχηι / Μητρι Θεῶν / Λεωνᾶς ανε / θηκεν ὑ]πέ[ρ] [...]πε [...]" [To Good Fortune. To the Mother of the Gods, Leōnas dedicated on behalf of [...]] (IGBulg I², No. 8).

⁷⁷ "[πρὸς τὸ]ν δ[ῆμον] εὐποιᾶς προσκτήσαιο δόξαν, [καὶ δ]ιὰ τοῦτο ἱερ[ωσὺ]νην Μητρος Θεῶν ἀτεπάγγελ[τος ἀν]αλαβοῦσα, οὐ μό[v]ον ὅσα σεμνῶν γυναικῶν χαὶ [ιεριῶ]ν χαὶ τοῦ παλαιο[ῦ αἰῶν]ος ἦν ἴδια {v} μεγαλοφρόνως καὶ εὐγενῶς καὶ ε[ῦ]σ[εβῶ]ς ἐτέλεσεν" [... in order to acquire a reputation for beneficence towards the people, and for this reason, having of her own accord undertaken the priesthood of the Mother of the Gods, she fulfilled not only those duties which were traditionally incumbent upon noble women and priestesses of old, but she accomplished them with magnanimity, nobility, and piety] (IScM I, No. 57).

⁷⁸ Michael Ivanovitch Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World II*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1941, p. 765ff.

the end of the 2nd century BC⁷⁹ or the 1st century BC, depicting the goddess with a Thracian horseman, states that annual sacrifices were offered to the Mother of the Gods (Μητρι θεῶν) and the Dioskuris for the welfare of the people.⁸⁰ A short inscription on a naiskos of the goddess refers to her as the Mother (Μητρι) and characterises her as the mother of everything/everyone.⁸¹ A Latin inscription from the 2nd century AD refers to the goddess as the Great Mother of the Gods (Matri Deum/Magnae).⁸² In a consecration inscription of a priestess from the same period, which states that she has dedicated herself to the Mother of the Gods (Μητρι θεῶν), the priestess goes beyond what all previous priestesses have done. She adorns the goddess with gifts of gold.⁸³

A votive inscription to the Mother of the Gods (Μητρι θεῶν) was found on a statue pedestal dating to the 1st/2nd century AD in Histria.⁸⁴ A 2nd-century honouring inscription on a slab depicting Cybele indicates that Aba, daughter of Hekataios and wife of Herakont (son of Aristomachus), was a member of the upper class and also a priestess of the Mother of the Gods (Μητρος Θεῶν).⁸⁵ There is a

⁷⁹ Dionisie M. Pippidi, *Contribuții la istoria veche a României* [Contributions to the ancient history of Romania], București, Editura Științifică, 1967, p. 108.

⁸⁰ “χαθ’ ἕξα[σ]τον ἑνιαυτὸν θύουσιν ὑπὲρ τῆ[ς] τοῦ δήμου σωτηρία[ς] Μητρι θεῶν καὶ Διοσκόροις” [Each year they offer sacrifices for the salvation of the people to the Mother of the Gods and to the] (IScM II, No. 72).

⁸¹ “[? Μητρι] Ἐπιρκόω κοι / [πάν]των Δεσπο[ίνα]” “[to the Mother, the Hearer, the Mistress of All] (Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 128).

⁸² “Matri Deum / Magnae / pro salute adq(ue) sic / incolumitate / D(ominorum) n(ostro- rum) Aug(ustorum) / et Caes(arum) / Aur(elius) Firminianus / v(ir) p(erfectissimus) dux / limit(is) prov(inciae) Scyt(hicae) / bonis auspiciis / consecravit” (Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, pp. 128).

⁸³ “Α(γαθη) Τ(ύχη). Ἡ βουλή καὶ ὁ δῆμος τῆς μητροπόλεως Τόμεως Σοσσίαν Ἀφρικανὰν γυναῖχα Κυήτου ἱερασαμένην Μητρι Θεῶν θυγατέρα Γ. Ἰουλίου Ἀφρικανοῦ, ὑπερβαλομένην τὰς πρὸ ἑαυτῆς καὶ ἐπιχοσμήσασαν τὴν θεὸν ἀναθήμασιν χρυσεῖς τεμιῆς χάριν” [“To Good Fortune. The council and the people of the metropolis of Tomis Sossia Africana, wife of Kyetos, who had served as priestess of the Mother of the Gods, daughter of Gaius Julius Africanus, who surpassed those before her and adorned the goddess with golden dedications, in recognition of her honor] (Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 129).

⁸⁴ “Ἀλέξανδρος Ἡγησαγό/ρου Μητρι Θεῶν χατ’ εὐ/χῆ(ς)” [Alexandros, son of Hegesagoras, to the Mother of the Gods in fulfillment of a vow] (IScM I 126).

⁸⁵ “... [πρὸς τὸ]ν δ[ῆμον] εὐποΐας προσκχτήσαιτο δόξαν, [καὶ δ]ιὰ τοῦτο ἱερ[ωσύ]νην Μητρος Θεῶν ἀτεπαγγέλ[τως ἀν]αλαβοῦσα, οὐ υό[ν]ον ὄσα σεμνῶν γυναικῶν καὶ [ἱερεῶν] καὶ τοῦ παλαιοῦ αἰῶνος ἦν ἰδίαν μεγαλοφρόνως καὶ εὐγενῶς καὶ ἐ[ό]σ[εβῶ]ς ἐτέλεσεν ...” [... in order to acquire a reputation for beneficence towards

consecration inscription⁸⁶ on an altar dating to the same period and a short dedicatory inscription⁸⁷ on a statue pedestal to the Mother of the Gods (Μητρι Θεῶν).

At Pontic Olbia, on the northern coast of the Black Sea, a sherd of pottery dating to the 3rd century BC bears the inscription "Mother Phrygian" (Μητρι Φρυγία).⁸⁸ At Pantikapaion in the same region, a stele dating to the 3rd century BC bears a short votive inscription dedicated to the Phrygian Mother (Μητρι Φρυγία).⁸⁹ At Pontic Olbia, a short votive inscription⁹⁰ on a stele dating to the 1st-2nd century BC and another votive inscription⁹¹ A depiction of the goddess from the same period depicts her as the Mother of the Gods (Μητρι Θεῶν). In Pantikapaion, the goddess is addressed as Mother (Μητρι) in a short text on a stele dedicated by Leōstratos on behalf of his brother.⁹² A black slipped vessel dating to the 6th century BC was found at Myrmekion, which was apparently dedicated to Mother (τή Ματρι).⁹³

the people, and for this reason, having of her own accord undertaken the priesthood of the Mother of the Gods, she fulfilled not only the duties which were proper to noble women and priestesses in former times, but she accomplished them with magnanimity, nobility, and piety ...] (Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, pp. 135-136).

⁸⁶ "...ς Φιλίνου / Μητρι Θεῶν / [χαριστήριον ἀνέθηκε]" [... son of Philinos ... to the Mother of the Gods ... dedicated (this) thank-offering] (IScM I 127).

⁸⁷ "Ἡλιος Μητρι Θεῶν / χαριστήριον" [Helios thank-offering to the Mother of the Gods] (IScM I 128).

⁸⁸ "[Μητρι]ι Φρυγία" [to the Phrygian Mother] (Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 151).

⁸⁹ "Βασιλεύοντος Παιρισάδου τοῦ Σπαρτόχου Ἑστιαία / Μηνωδώρου θυγάτηρ ἱερωμένη ἀνέθηκεν Μητρι Φρυγία" [During the reign of Pairisades, son of Spartokos, Hestiaia, daughter of Menodoros, having served as priestess, dedicated [this] to the Phrygian Mother] (Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 162).

⁹⁰ "[Ἡ δεῖνα]ωντος τοῦ Διονυσίου / [θυγά]τηρ Σωκρατίδου γυνή./ [Σ]ωκρατίδης Φιλίνου τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα / Μητρι Θεῶν ἱερησαμένην" "[So-and-so, during the reign of Dionysios, daughter of Sokratides, wife of Sokratides, son of Philinos, to the Mother of the Gods for his own wife, who had served as priestess] (IosPE I² 192).

⁹¹ "Αὐρ(ήλιος) Χρῦσιππος] / Μητρι Θεῶν ἀνέθηκεν]" [Aurelius Chrysippos dedicated to the Mother of the Gods] (IosPE I² 170).

⁹² "βασιλεύοντος Παιρισάδου τοῦ Σπαρτόκου Λεώστρατος Π[- -] ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἀδελφ[οῦ - -]τος ἀνέθη[κε] τ[ῆ]ι Μ[η]τ[ρι]ρι? [- -]" [During the reign of Pairisades, son of Spartokos, Leostratos P..., on behalf of his brother ..., dedicated [this] to the Mother?] (Maarten Jozef Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Cybelae Attidisque ...*, p. 162).

⁹³ Patricia A. Johnston, *Cybele and her Companions on the Northern Littoral of the Black Sea*, in "Cybele, Attis and Related Cults: Essays in Memory of M.J. Vermaseren", Leiden, Brill,

The only data on the goddess east of the Black Sea are based on Arrian's accounts, who visited the region in the 2nd century. Arrianus reports that while Entering Phasis by sea, he saw a statue that may have been a Rhea but could be considered a traditional statue of Cybele in a seated position: "Entering Phasis by ship, there is a statue of the Goddess of Phasis (Φασιανή θεός) on the left. Judging from its atrium, it could also be Rhea: *"because she holds a large tambourine in her hand and has lions on her throne; she is also seated, as in the Mother Goddess of Athēna by Phidias."*⁹⁴ The word Phasiane (Φασιανή), which the author uses to refer to the goddess, must be related to local acceptance of the goddess rather than to regional characteristics. The attributable features of the statue are familiar throughout the Black Sea and Anatolia. Arrian's conflation of Cybele with Rhea was already known in his time and is nothing more than an association of the goddess with Hellenic goddesses representing the productive forces of nature. Strabo reports that the Phrygians honoured and worshipped Rhea, calling her the Mother of the Gods, Agdistis, and the Great Goddess of Phrygia, as well as Idaea, Dindymene, Sipylene, Pessinuntis, Cybele, and Cybebe, by the names by which she was worshipped in the places where she was worshipped.⁹⁵

In the south of the Black Sea, written evidence of goddesses is scarce. On a figurine found in Sinop and dated to the 1-2 century AD, there is a short votive inscription by Priskos Savinos dedicated to the Mother of the Gods (Μητρί Θεῶν).⁹⁶ Dedicatory inscriptions to the Mother of the Gods were also found in Hadrianopolis⁹⁷ and Tieion.⁹⁸

The graffiti inscriptions on various ceramics unearthed at the Samsun

1996, p. 103.

⁹⁴ "εἰσβαλλόντων δὲ εἰς τὸν Φᾶσιν ἐν ἀριστερᾷ ἴδρυνται ἡ Φασιανὴ θεός. εἴη δ' ἂν ἀπὸ τοῦ σχήματος τεχμαυρομένῳ ἢ 'Ρέα' καὶ γὰρ χύμβαλον μετὰ χειρᾶς ἔχει, καὶ λέοντας ὑπὸ τῷ θρόνῳ, καὶ χάθηται ὡσπερ ἐν τῷ Μητρῶν 'Αθήνησιν ἢ τοῦ Φειδίου" [As one enters the Phasis, on the left stands the Phasian goddess. From her form one might infer that she is Rhea: for she holds a cymbal in her hands, lions are beneath her throne, and she is seated just like the statue of Phidias in the Metroon at Athens] (Arr. 11).

⁹⁵ Strab. 10.3.12.

⁹⁶ "μητρί θεῶν κατ' εὐχὴν Πρεῖσκος Καβεῖνος ἀνέθηκεν" [Priscus Sabennus dedicated (this) to the Mother of the Gods in fulfillment of a vow] (IK Sinope 113).

⁹⁷ "ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ· Μητρί Θεῶν Νεικομήδης Νεανίκκου εὐχῆς χάριν ἀνέστησα" [With good fortune! Nicomedes son of Neanikcus set this up to the Mother of the Gods as a thank-offering for a vow] (Marek, Kat. Kaisareia Hadrianop. 22).

⁹⁸ "[...]Η[...] Βαλεντίων ὑπὲρ τῶν τέκνων εὐχαριστῶ Μητρί Θεῶν: [...]" [... Valentinus (?), in gratitude for his children, gives thanks to the Mother of the Gods: ...] (Robert, Et. anat. 286, 11).

(Amisos) Çakalca-Karadoğan Mound, dated to the mid-6th century BC, include short votive inscriptions to the goddess called Kybebos (Κυβηβωι).⁹⁹ In one example, the traditional name of the goddess, Mother, is combined with this name (Μητρὸς - Κυβηβωι).¹⁰⁰ The name Kybebe (Κυβήβη) appears in early written sources dating back to the 6th century BC. This name is a Greekized form of the Late Hittite goddess Kubaba, who was linked to the cult of the Phrygian Mother Goddess.¹⁰¹

Some information on the cult of Cybele in the Pontic region can be obtained from written documents. According to Strabo, a temple consecrated to the same goddess, bearing the same name as Komana in Greater Cappadocia, is located in Komana Pontika (Gümenek Village, Tokat). Here, ceremonies (exodos) were held twice a year in the name of the goddess¹⁰² with the participation of people from the cities and towns in the surrounding settlements. The priest wore a diadem as a sign of nobility and was second only to the king in the order of honour.¹⁰³ The temple was enlarged during Roman rule and had around 6 thousand temple officials.¹⁰⁴ Probably, the goddess whose cult Strabo described in Komana Pontika is Ma, who also had a temple at Komana in Cappadocia. According to Strabo's account, the local population attributes the name Ma to Enyo, the goddess of war.¹⁰⁵ The term bears similarities to other goddesses associated with war and fertility¹⁰⁶ in the classical

⁹⁹ Orhan Alper Şirin, Mustafa Kolağasıoğlu, *Çakalca-Karadoğan Höyüğü*, p. 32ff.

¹⁰⁰ For different evaluations of the names, see, Orhan Alper Şirin, Mustafa Kolağasıoğlu, *Çakalca-Karadoğan Höyüğü ...*, p. 34.

¹⁰¹ Lynn E Roller, *In Search of God the Mother ...*, p. 82; Also see Latife Summerer, *Topographies of Worship in Northern Anatolia*, in "Space, Place and Identity in Northern Anatolia", Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014, pp. 189-213. On the equality of Kubaba and Cybebe, see Heinrich Otten. *Zur Kontinuität eines altanatolischen Kultes*, "ZA" Vol. 53, "NF" Vol. 19, 1959, 174-184. 13. Claude Brixhe, *Le nom de Cybèle: l'antiquité avait-elle raison?*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1979, pp. 40-41. Also see Edwin Oliver James, *The Cult of the Mother Goddess: An Archaeological and Documentary Study*, New York, Frederick A. Praeger, 1959. Mark H. Munn, *The mother of gods, Athens, and the Tyranny of Asia: A Study of Sovereignty in Ancient Religion*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006, pp. 1-12. Roller thinks that the Phrygians only emulated the depictions of Kubaba in their depictions of Cybele, and that it would not be correct to say that there is a connection between these two goddesses based on artworks (Lynn E Roller, *In Search of God the Mother ...*, pp. 68-69).

¹⁰² Strab. 12.3.36.

¹⁰³ Strab. 12.3.32

¹⁰⁴ Strab. 12.3.34

¹⁰⁵ Strab. 12. 2. 3

¹⁰⁶ Franz Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, Paris, Librairie Orien-

period, such as the goddesses Athena, Enyo, Bellona, Cybele, and Rhea. In an inscription dating to the Roman Imperial Period, the goddess Ma is referred to as the "Great Goddess" (Θέα Μεγίστη).¹⁰⁷ This term is typically associated with Cybele or Anahita. This indicates a growing tendency for the cult of Ma to synchronise with other cults during the Roman Empire.¹⁰⁸ The increasing syncretism after the 2nd-3rd century BC makes it challenging to identify some of the traditional features of the cult of Cybele and the depictions of the goddess. In the city of Zela, in the same region, there is a sanctuary of Anaitis, also venerated by the Armenians and associated with the cult of Cybele, where more sacred rites were held than in Komana Pontika. All Pontic people swore oaths on their most important matters. Because of the sanctuary, the city of Zela was ruled by priests in early times, not as a city, but as a sacred precinct of the Persians. However, many people have abused and diminished the sanctuary's resources.¹⁰⁹ Strabo also mentioned the construction of this sanctuary. The Persian generals, having eliminated the Sakas who had raided the area, piled up a heap of earth on a certain rock in the plain, formed it into a hill and erected a wall on it, where the Persian gods Omanus and Anadatus shared the sanctuary of Anaitis and her altar, along with the sanctuary of the Persian gods Omanus and Anadatus. They instituted Sacaea, an annual sacred festival that the inhabitants of Zela continue to celebrate to this day.¹¹⁰

DISCUSSION

The study of epigraphic data, written documents, and archaeological findings on the cult of the Mother of the Gods in the Pontic regions from the Late Iron Age to the end of the Early Roman Period provides essential insights into the spread of the cult of the goddess. Diverse manifestations, geographical spread, and cultural adaptations characterise the cult of the Mother of the Gods in the Pontic region. Through archaeological evidence, historical interpretations, and cultural interactions, the cult has significantly impacted the religious landscape of the Pontic region, reflecting the complex tapestry of beliefs and practices in the ancient

taliste, 1929, p. 67; Albert Hartmann. *Ma. Kleinasiatische Göttin*, "Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumwissenschaft", Vol. 14, 1928, p. 89.

¹⁰⁷ Baz Ferit, *Die Inschriften von Komana (Hierapolis) in Kappadokien*, İstanbul, Arı Matbaacılık, 2007, pp. 146-149, no. 96.

¹⁰⁸ Serdal Mutlu, *Tanrıça Ma (Mā) ve Kappadokia Komana'sı [The goddess Ma (Mā) and Komana of Cappadocia]*, "Phaselis", Vol. 2, 2016, p. 314.

¹⁰⁹ Strab. 12.3.37

¹¹⁰ Strab. 11.8.4

world. The cult persisted in the area for nearly a thousand years, beginning in the 7th century BC. This extended period underscores the cult's impact and importance to people in the region.

The presence of the goddess in the Black Sea region is important for the cult's indigenisation and adaptation. As mentioned, from the Late Iron Age through the Hellenistic and Roman periods, there are no notable local characters depicted in the region's goddess imagery. Although there are stylistic differences between the periods, the issue is irrelevant to this study and has not been addressed. The depictions of the goddess in the Pontic regions have the traditional appearance we encounter in Western Anatolia, Greece, and elsewhere in Roman geography during the periods in question. However, in some examples in the region, in addition to the traditional iconography of the goddess in a seated position, regional and local elements were added. The most prominent examples of this are the reliefs from Kallatis, Limanu, Arnautcuius, Fântânele, and Tomis, dating to the 2nd to 3rd centuries AD, in which the goddess is depicted together with a Thracian horseman/god. These examples demonstrate the goddess's influence on local beliefs and culture in the region. As an example, it would not be correct to state that there is a syncretic relationship between the two cults. It can be concluded that the Cult of Cybele exists not only as a religious belief system but also as an indicator of cultural interaction and integration in the local religions in the region, and that it has gained a place in beliefs and rituals.

The depictions of the goddess share the aforementioned common typology of colonial settlements along the Black Sea coast. However, there are two exceptions. The first exception is found in the interior of Paflagonia, which is within the cultural area of Phrygia. Until the beginning of the Roman period, it is possible to find standing depictions of the goddess in the region, faithfully depicting her Phrygian features.¹¹¹ The second exception is the Roman period and the inland areas of the western and southern coasts of the Black Sea, where there are more realistic depictions of the goddess, emphasising Anatolian traits and symbolising fertility.¹¹² Neither exception should be considered in the context of the local characteristics.

¹¹¹ Fahri Işık, *Batı Uygarlığının Kökeni-Erken Demir Çağ Doğu-Batı Kültür Sanat İlişkilerinde Anadolu* [The Origins of Western Civilization: Anatolia in East-West Cultural and Artistic Relations in the Early Iron Age], "Türk Arkeoloji Dergisi", Vol. 28, 1989, p. 21; Lynn E Roller, *In Search of God the Mother ...*, p. 95. F. Eray Dökü, *Paphlagonia Bölgesi Kaya Mezarları ve Kaya Tapınakları ...*, pp. 65, 68. Maya Vassileva, *The Rock-Cut Monuments of Phrygia, Paphlagonia and Thrace: A Comparative Overview*, in "The Black Sea, Paphlagonia, Pontus and Phrygia in Antiquity", Oxford, BAR International Series 2012, pp. 243-252.

¹¹² F. Eray Dökü, *Paphlagonia Bölgesi Kaya Mezarları ve Kaya Tapınakları ...*, pp. 125-126.

Looking at the distribution of archaeological and epigraphic data on the cult of the Mother of the Gods in the Pontic regions, the data were more concentrated in the western parts of the Black Sea. Several sites provide important information, particularly along the coast of Moesia. Most of the information included the names of the goddess and offerings to her cult. An important point to note is the variety of names and adjectives given to Cybele. For example, *Cybele Mother* (Ματρὶ Κυβελείαι), *Phrygian Mother* (Μητρὶ Φρυγία), *Kybebos* (Κυβηβωι), *Pontian Mother of the Gods* (Μήτηρ Θεῶν Ποντία), *Pontian Mother* (Μήτηρ Ποντία), *Mother of the Gods* (Μήτηρ Θεῶν/Μητρὶ Θεῶν/Mater Deum), *Heavenly Mother of the Gods* (Οὐρανία Μητρὶ Θεῶν), *The Mother* (Μητρὶ), *the Goddess of Phasis* (Φασιανὴ Θεός), *the Great Goddess* (Θέα Μεγίστη) are among the names used for the goddess. These differences show how the cult of the goddess was perceived and interpreted across different periods and regions.

The names used for the goddess show that traditional nomenclature continues to be used in the region, but that the names have also been indigenized with some additions. The *Pontian Mother of the Gods*, to whom a temple in Dionysopolis is dedicated, or simply *the Pontian Mother*, is identified with an adjective associated with the sea, such as Pontos. The first and only example of the goddess being equated with a nautical adjective, such as Pontos, comes from Dionysopolis, and the adjective Pontia ("Ποντία" or its genitive form "Ποντίας") indicates that the goddess was associated with the Pontic region. This adjective may be a geographical appellation of the goddess. However, it may also indicate the goddess's protective function (perhaps for sailors).¹¹³ *Aphrodite*, who is also associated with Pontos and is mainly the protector of sailors, can be compared with *Pontia*.¹¹⁴ In Herodotus' narrative, it is stated that the Scythian prince Anarkharsis, on his way back to his father's homeland, docked at Kyzikos while crossing the Hellespontos. On that day, the people of Kyzikos held a feast in honour of the Mother of the Gods, and Anarkharsis made an offering to the goddess during this feast and stated that if he returned home safely, he would make a sacrifice to the *Mother* in the manner of Kyzikos and hold a night festival.¹¹⁵ This information may indicate that the goddess had a protective quality for sailors, and the addition of the word *pontos* to the goddess's name may have contributed to the interpretation that the goddess emerged

Murat Karasalihoğlu, *Kastamonu Kent Merkezinde Yer Alan Dinsel Kaya Mimarisi Üzerine Bir İnceleme ...*, p. 136.

¹¹³ Igor Lazarenko et al. *The Temple of the Pontic Mother of Gods in Dionysopolis ...*, pp. 47-50.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

¹¹⁵ Hdt. IV/76.

through the indigenisation of the goddess in the region. In Apollonius Rhodius' narrative, after the Argonauts landed in Kyzikos, foul weather persisted for twelve days, keeping them ashore. However, during the night, a halcyon bird signalled an end to the storms by hovering over Jason and then perching on the ship's mascot. Mopsos, interpreting the omen, urged Jason to climb a sacred peak to appease Rhea, mother of the gods, and thus calm the seas, because Rhea's dominion encompassed the winds, the sea, and the whole earth.¹¹⁶ In this case, it is conceivable that the goddess acquired a region-specific identity and became integrated into the local society's beliefs and culture. This should be considered a kind of regional character and a result of the processes of interaction and adaptation between cultures.

Some Scythian traditions along the region's northern coast can be seen as similar adaptations of the goddess into local cults. The population of the Belinskoye settlement in the Bosporan Kingdom preserved the ancient Scythian tradition of glorifying the deceased through ritual actions performed in a special pit in the ash sanctuary. The ritual actions performed in the special pit within the ashy sanctuary served to connect with the spiritual realm and pay homage to deceased community members. These rituals likely involved offerings, ceremonies, and symbolic gestures to honour and remember ancestors, reinforcing the social and spiritual bonds within the settlement.¹¹⁷ The connection between the tradition of glorifying the deceased through ritual actions in a special pit in the ashy sanctuary at Belinskoye and the Mother of Gods can be inferred through a broader understanding of ancient religious practices and cultural contexts. The ritual actions performed in the special pit within the ashy sanctuary at Belinskoye, intended to honour and commemorate deceased ancestors, likely included elements of ancestral veneration and spiritual significance. These rituals, rooted in reverence for the deceased and the continuity of life beyond death, may have shared themes with the worship of the Mother of Gods, a prominent mother goddess associated with fertility, protection, and nature. The Cybele/mother of the gods, as a mother goddess figure, symbolises life-giving and nurturing qualities, embodying the essence of fertility and the cycle of life and death. The ritual actions performed in the ashy sanctuary at Belinskoye, which honoured the deceased and connected with the spiritual realm, could be seen as a form of ancestral worship that resonates with the themes of life, death, and regeneration

¹¹⁶ Ap. Rh. 1.1076-1152.

¹¹⁷ Sergey Vladimirovich Yartsev, Victor G. Zubarev, Elena V. Shushunova, *Features of the Cult of Ancestors in the Northern Black Sea region of the late Classical time (based on the materials of the settlement "Belinskoye")*, Slavyanskiy Dvor, Nizhnevartovsk State University, 2021, pp. 578-602.

associated with the goddess.

The spread of Pontic cults in the Bosphorus and other regions is still not fully understood, as local Greeks and local people had their own cults and religious traditions.¹¹⁸ The cult of Ma, a female deity with Hellenic, Iranian, and Anatolian origins, was particularly prevalent in the Bosphorus, indicating the influence of Pontic religious policy from the 1st century BCE to the 1st century AD.¹¹⁹ Within the same religious policy, the cults of Ma and Anaitis in the cities of Komana Pontika and Zela were important during this period. These cults have important connections with the cults of Cybele. Although the references provided do not directly address the relationship between these specific cults, scholarly research on ancient Anatolian and Black Sea region cults can offer insights into their interconnectedness. Studies on the cult of Cybele, a prominent Phrygian mother goddess associated with fertility and nature, revealed her widespread worship throughout Anatolia and the Black Sea region. The cult of Cybele often assimilated local deities and cult practices, leading to syncretism with existing mother goddess cults, such as Ma and Anaitis.¹²⁰ Moreover, investigations into the religious landscape of ancient Anatolia highlight the fluidity and adaptability of cults, in which deities can be identified with or absorbed into other divine figures, depending on local beliefs and practices. This phenomenon likely facilitated interaction and mutual influence among the Ma, Anaitis, and Cybele cults in Komana Pontika and Zela.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Pontic regions, the cult of the Mother of Gods played an important role for nearly a thousand years, from the Late Iron Age to the end of the Early Roman Period. During this time, the cult diversified and spread with different interpretations and adaptations among the various communities in the region. Archaeological and epigraphic data, particularly concentrated in the western parts,

¹¹⁸ Sergej Ju Saprykin, *The Religion and Cults of the Pontic Kingdom: Political Aspects*, in "Mithridates VI and the Pontic Kingdom", Århus, Aarhus University Press, 2009, pp. 249-275.

¹¹⁹ Ihor A. Hotun, Oleksandr M. Kazymir, Andrii M. Sukhonos, *Mother of God from Khodosivka*, "Archaeologia", Vol. 1, 2019, pp. 42-58. Natal'ja Gennad'evna Suvorova, *To the Question of Expansion of the Pontic Syncretic Cult of Mēn-Mithra-Attis in Bosphorus*, "Proceedings in Archaeology and History of the Antique and Medieval Black Sea Region, S1", 2023, pp. 715-729.

¹²⁰ Indicators such as the transformation of a rock considered sacred by the Goddess in Zela into a temple also bring to mind the arrangements in Cybele cult sites. Strab. 11.8.4.

show that the cult is particularly prominent in these regions. Data such as the names of the goddess and the offerings made to her cult emphasise the cult's influence and importance to the people of the region.

The presence of the goddess in the Black Sea region is important for the cult's indigenisation and adaptation. Compared to depictions in other areas, such as Western Anatolia and Greece, the goddesses of the Black Sea region generally share a traditional appearance, with regional and local elements added. This reflects the influence of goddesses on local beliefs and cultural practices in the area. Moreover, the variety of names and adjectives given to the goddess shows how the cult was perceived and interpreted by the different communities. For example, epithets such as the Mother of Pontos reinforce the goddess's association with the region and her local identity.

In conclusion, the cult of the Mother of the Gods in the Pontic region holds an important place in the region's religious and cultural landscape. Spreading and diversifying among different communities, this cult is an example of cultural interaction and adaptation.

Map of the sites mentioned in the text



Map prepared by the S. Demirel

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