Beggars at the Feast: Problematizing the Roman Attitude toward the Galli

Modern scholarly discourse on the Roman reaction to the eunuch priests of the Magna Mater, the Galli, takes the stance that the average Roman citizen feared and hated them. According to current scholarship, because the galli castrated themselves the Romans viewed them as dangerous liminal figures that blurred the natural line between male and female. Although the last thirty years has seen a sea change in the scholarly interpretation of gender and gender relations in the ancient world, this idea has persisted. While there is no denying that the Galli were associated with marginalized sexual practices, to assume that their story ends there is far too simplistic. The galli had a larger role in Roman society and as such it must be assumed that the Romans saw them as more than boogiemen bent on sexual corruption. This paper seeks to complicate our modern idea of the public perception of the Galli in Rome by reconsidering the Galli in the light of the most recent scholarship on Roman gender construction. Some literary depictions of the Galli are highly derogatory and associate the Galli with cinaedi, but historical authors, such as Livy and Polybius, describe them as respected political and religious figures. Likewise, epigraphical evidence shows that Roman citizens did participate in private worship of the Magna Mater in ceremonies presided over by the galli. Attis, who mythically established the practice of auto-castration, was venerated along with the Magna Mater for the cult’s entire Roman history. Taken together, this evidence suggests that the Galli had a much broader role in Roman thought than they are allowed today. Certainly the mainstream Roman public saw them as sexually divergent, but they were also respected as religious figures and an acknowledged part of Roman society.

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