

THE CULT OF MAGNA MATER IN THE REGION OF ISTRIA

Oriental cults in the region of Roman Empire appear in that historical period, that is caused and defined by essential social factors as well as by socially — political and phylosophically — religious conditions of life in the Roman State. To define correctly the origin of new religious and through them socially — political views incorporated in general functions of Cybele's cult, it is significant to survey that new ideas — in the very nature revolutionary and progressive — appear in countries in which the state as an institution of the highest rank, was incapable to overcome and hold back those social forces that were in the way to a normal and natural life development in such a society. The necessity for new deities of people's religion is based on ancient, autochthonic beliefs of conquered populations as an expression of evolving comprehensions, which were being gradually formed on transition from Republic to Empire.

In Europe, oriental cults appear on the territory of Roman State and newly invaded regions¹. The first divinities of these cults were introduced in Roman pantheon by the end of the III century B. C. It is known that Isis and Serapis were celebrated in 220 B. C., when the first temples were raised in their honour². The glorification of particular deities strengthened or weakened depending upon political events, social disturbances and affinities of individual Roman statesmen. At the same time gods' temples were built or destroyed. As it is known, the spreading of oriental cults reached its peak in the II and II centuries A. D. so that even Edict of Milan in 313 — when Christianity was officially proclaimed the state religion — was unable in a big degree to influence on prohibition in believing to oriental gods³.

¹ More extensive about oriental cults: CUMONT, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, Paris 1929.

² So quote: DURUY, *Histoire des Romaines*, II, p. 238; — about the position of Isis' and Serapis' temples in Rome see: ZAMAROVSKY, *Bohové a hrdičové antických báji*, Prag 1970, p. 275, where is said that the temples were built between Capitoline Hill and Mars' field and on Esquiline.

³ About this consult: NIESE, *Römische Geschichte*, München 1923, p. 407.

Besides the adoration of Serapis and Isis the cult of Cybele was being synchronously introduced. According to tradition this cult was inaugurated by the Romans at the end of the III century B. C. by recommendation of Sibylline books. Cybele's statue was brought to Rome by *Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica* in 204 B. C. and in 191 B. C. a temple was built to the Goddess on the Palatin, the architectural ruins of which have been preserved up today.

Pure cult of Cybele originated in Asia Minor. Cybele was considered to be the originator of everything in the world primarily of gods and then of people, animals and plants. In this essence is evident the ancient origin of the Goddess, originating from Neolithic cultures⁴. Her followers kept the belief that the life on the earth depended on her and that the infernal world was governed by her. Owing to these essential characteristic, the cult was gradually spread in Greece after Persian Wars.

The general opinion is that the Goddess was called after the mountain Cybele in Frigia, but is often named *Dindymene* after the mountain Dindymos and *Berekynthia* after Berekynthos. According to Strabo a large temple existed in Pessinus in which *Cybele* — *Agdistis* or *Angdistis* was adored. There were large sanctuaries in Smyrna, Efessos, Magnesia and Miletus.

The Romans identified Cybele with their autochthonous Sabine goddess Ops, in Rome she was also worshipped as Magna Mater or with specific attributes as *Mater deum magna Idaea*⁵.

Traditional Cybelian ceremonies — *megalesiae* — were held from the 4th to the 9th April, every year⁶, but, as they dealt with orgies of mysterious, in Rome that cult kept up a patrician character. Later, other celebrations in honour to Cybele were introduced and were celebrated from March the 15th to the 17th in the presence and participation of *collegium quindecimvirorum*. With Cybele's cult many legends from Asia Minor were spread in Greece and Rome. These legends are essential in understanding the cause of worship and popularity of Magna Mater and at the same time, according to them the iconographic treatment of the Goddess was

⁴ Precisely about Great Mother's cult in Neolithic see: VUKANOVIĆ, Cult of the goddess of gravidity in the neolithic society of the Balkan peninsula, *Vranjski glasnik*, VIII, Vranje 1972.

⁵ Because many temples were built on the Ida mountain in Asia Minor, she was called *Idaea* and was served in sanctuaries by *Dactili Idae*. About the origin and significance of dactili see: SCHMIDT, *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine*, Paris 1965, p. 89.

⁶ So quote: PRAMPOLINI, *La mitologia nella vita dei popoli*, II, Milano 1942, p. 196.

defined.⁷. In the legend about Cybele and Atys incestuous Edip's complex is evident resulting in selfpunishment — castration. This motive in the form of a mythologic tale is the basic frame at which, later, the whole rite of Cybelian cult will be treated⁸.

In the regions of Balkan countries, in complex with Roman provinces of Moesia, Pannonia and Dalmatia, Cybelian cult or the cult of Magna Mater is one of rare Asiatic cults mentioned on epigraphic monuments and also expressed in sculpture. Votive epigraphes from Dalmatia, Slovenia and Serbia mention Cybele⁹ but still more frequent titles of *Magna Mater*¹⁰, *Mater Deorum*¹¹ are found, while in Istria *Mater deorum magna Idaea*¹² can be seen.

In Yugoslavia the sculpture as well as relief interpretations of Goddess are known from Kostolac, Senj, Ptuj and Stobi.

In the regions of Roman provinces inside the borders of Yugoslavia several inscriptions were found saying of the existence of Magna Mater's temples: Salona¹³, Klis¹⁴, Trogir¹⁵, Rab¹⁶. It is supposed that shrines of this Goddess existed in Barnum¹⁷ and in Ptuj¹⁸.

⁷ In Pessinuntos it was said that *Cybele Agdistis* had born a son who was mutilated by gods who were scared of this supernatural power. From his blood almond-tree grew. Nana, the daughter of the river Sangaria ate the almond. Being fecundated in that way, she gave birth to Atys. Cybele fell in love with Atys, not being aware of his origin. Atys refused her affection and was submitted to gods' revenge. Getting out of his maid, he castrated himself under a pine-wood that became his holy tree. From Atys' blood violets germinated.

⁸ In Greece Atys was considered a legendary shepherd that refused Cybele's wooing. He pretended purity but he didn't kept his vow. According an other legend he was a priest that was in love with Cybele and in that way he broke off the rule of faith. One legend not so popular, as previous one narrates, that Atys was a victim of Zeus' jealousy so that he was sent to battle with a wild boar by the supreme deity. It is said too, that Cybele was a wife of the first Phrygian king Gordius who tied a hard knot about the yoke of his chariot. Their son was a king Midas.

⁹ All epigraphes that mention Cybele found in Dalmatia until 1896 published KUBITCHEK, Il Culto della Magna Mater in Salona, *Bullettino di archeologia e storia dalmata*, XIX, 1896, p. 87. See too: CIL, III, 1953, 1954, 2676, 2755, 3115, 5196, 8544, 12814, 13972, 14354/8, 14674 and 14675.

¹⁰ See inscriptions: CIL, III, 1952, 2676, 5194, 12814, 13972, 14675.

¹¹ Compare: CIL, III, 2755, 3115, 5103, 14353/8.

¹² See about this more in: I.I., X/I, 155; CIL, V, 81.

¹³ See more: CIL, III, 1954, 14674, 14675.

¹⁴ Consult: CIL, III, 1952.

¹⁵ See more: CIL, III, 2676.

¹⁶ See more: CIL, III, 3115.

¹⁷ Compare: *Jahreshefte des österreichischen archäologischen Institutes*, XVI, 1913, Beibl. 119.

¹⁸ See: *Jahreshefte des österreichischen archäologischen Institutes*, XVI, 1913, Beibl. 104.

Since a greater part of Istria had a specific historical development, it was included to *Regio X Italica Venetia et Histria* from Augustus on (16 or 12 B.C.) it is important to find out the adoration of Magna Mater's cult in that Region.

After the Second World War, two new findings, the sculpture of Atys from Pula (Fig. 2) and a beautiful statue of a woman sitting on a throne found in Nesactium (Fig. 3) proved once more the presence of this cult on the Istrian peninsula.

The older findings that point to the presence of this cult must also be taken into consideration. Those findings were not results of a systematic archeological digging, but were only casual discoveries. The digged monuments were epigraphes, votive altars and a few sculptures. With regard to the topographic distribution of the archeological findings in Istria, in the direction from Trieste towards Pula there are the following: Trieste or *Colonia Julia Tergeste*, Koper or *Capris* and Pula or *Colonia Iulia Pola Pollentia Herculanæa*. Turning to the east part of Istria, we must take into consideration *Nesactium* and the valley of the river Raša or the Roman *Arsa*, that was the frontier towards Liburnia.

In Trieste, that was certainly under strong influence exercised by the near-by Aquileia, a votive altar hexagonally shaped, dedicated to the Goddess by the *sacerdos Caius Publicius Charito, aeditus Caius Publicius Hermes* and *cymbalista Secunda*, prove the presence of Great Mother's cult¹⁹. Another monument, which is a witness to this cult, is a votive inscription dedicated to the Goddess. It was erected „*in memory*” of *Usia Tertullina*, a priestess of the Deity, by her son *Sextus Appuleius Marcellus*²⁰. This votive epigraph probably belonged to the temple of the Goddess, that had been erected „*ex imperio*” as appears from the inscription that had been reconstructed and interpreted by Pietro Sticotti. The fragment can be read: *ex imperio Matris Magnae deorum*²¹.

In Roman *Capris*, today called Koper, according to the old written documents, there existed a sepulchral inscription of *Lucius Publicius Syntropus, archvallus* (the supreme priest), built in the door of Koper's cathedral²². This archvallus is considered by Pietro Sticotti to have been the su-

¹⁹ Compare: I.I., X/IV, 11; CIL V, 519. More about the circumstances of findings: STICOTTI, Archeogr. Triestino, ser. III, vol. III, 1906, p. 383, note 1.

²⁰ Compare: I.I., X/IV, 10; CIL, V, 520.

²¹ The scheme of a reconstruction and more detailed about the phases of five fragments of this architrave, interpreted by Pietro Sticotti, see in: I.I., X/IV, 12

²² More detailed about this: I.I., X/III, 8; CIL, V, 448; and in a commentary: I.I., X/IV, 11.

preme priest of the temple in Trieste. The proof is, according to Attilio Degrassi, the family name (*gentilicius*) *Publicius* — that is one of the family names of freedmen (*liberti*) in the Roman *Colonia Tergeste*²³.

This hypothesis accepted, it can be concluded that the observation of the cult was spread not only in Trieste but also in the larger area of the most western part of Istria.

On the western part of our peninsula, from Trieste to Pula, no sign of the adoration of Cybele has been found. In Pula there has been dug up an inscription in which there is mentioned the permission for a burial granted by *Caius Laecanius Theodorus*, a *sacerdos* (priest) of Magna Mater to the *collegium of dendrophoroi*²⁴. It runs as follows:

DENDROPHORIS
POLENSIVM
C(aius) LAECANIVS
THEODORVS
SACER[d]OS M(atris) D(eorum) M(agna) I(daeae)
LO[cu]M CVM
SEPVLTVRA DEDIT . . .

The votive inscriptions have not been found yet in Pula, but the existence of the *collegium of dendrophoroi* points to the observance of that cult.

In the ritual of Cybele's Great Celebration, as it has already been known, the *dendrophoroi*²⁵ were an important part of the Goddess' rites, taking place on the 22nd of March of every year, the day after the beginning of spring, when the Great Celebration of Cybele began. They would cut down a tree in the Goddess'grove, decorate it with violets and wrap it up in wool. So arranged the tree would be carried in a solemn procession to the town, where they mourned after dead Atys.

²³ According to P. Sticotti's hypothesis, *archigallus L. Publicius, Syntropus* was a prime priest in the *metroon* in *Tergeste*. This is proved by a *gentilicius Publicius* characteristic for *liberti* in *Colonia Tergeste*. Commentary in: I.I., X/IV, 11. In recent times about this see the opinion of: DEGRASSI, Culti dell'Istria Preromana e Romana, Adriatica Praehistorica et Antiqua — Miscellanea Gregorio Novak, Zagreb 1970, p. 625.

²⁴ About this see: I.I., X/I, 155; CIL, V, 81 — and in recent times: DEGRASSI, op. cit., p. 625; JURKIC, The cult of Magna Mater in the region of Istria, Actes du XIIIe Congrès international du Comité „Eirene“, (Dubrovnik 1974), JURKIC, Arte plastica del culto determinante l'esistenza dei culti Romani e sincretici nel territorio istriano, ATTI del Centro di ricerche storiche, V, Trieste-Rovigno 1974.

²⁵ About the social structure of *dendrophoroi* see more: CUMONT, op. cit., pp. 52, 55, 57; PETTAZZONI, I misteri, p. 127 and so on.



Fig. 1.

From the aesthetic as well as the iconographic point of view, the sepulchral monument of *Obellia Maxuma* is very interesting²⁶. The main characteristic of this stele is the representation of Atys at both sides of a niche with a portrait of the dead. Considering this and according to the opinion of Giovanni Brusin²⁷ as well as of the present author who expressed it in a previously published paper²⁸, this person was a priestess or a worshiper of the Great Mother or of another Oriental goddess.

Another interesting monument, found not far from the temple of Augustus and Romae in Pula, is a votive altar adorned by a relief, representing a priest engaged in a sacrifice (Fig. 1). This altar is important because of the inscription²⁹ that points out *dendrophoroi*'s competence of giving *Quinto Mursio Plinio Minerviano* the place for erecting the statue and stresses the merits he had been rewarded for. It runs as follows:

Q(uinto) MVR(S)IO Q(uinti) [f(ilio) Vel(ina)]
 PLINIO MINER[viano]
 (duo)VIR(o) PATRO(no) C[ol(oniae)]
 COLL(egium) DENDROPH[orum]
 OB MERITA EIVS E[x aere]
 CONLAT(O) L(oco) D(ato) [d(ecreto) d(ecurionum)] ...

The research work during the last ten years has brought to light a valuable finding which is an important contribution to the study of Cybele's cult. It is a realistically sculptured head of Atys (Fig. 2), the mythical lover and priest of Magna Mater, which once more proves the existence of this cult in Pula³⁰. The same is witnessed by two archi-

²⁶ See: I.I., X/I, 335; CIL, V, 203.

²⁷ BRUSSIN G., Atti dell' Istituto Veneto, CVI, Venezia 1947/48, p. 171.

²⁸ In recent times see more about stele: JURKIĆ, Portreti na nadgrobnim stelama Zbirke antičkog odjela Arheološkog muzeja Istre u Puli, Jadranski zbornik, VIII, Rijeka—Pula 1972, p. 362. and so on, = Gradje i rasprave AMI Pula, V, Pula 1974.

²⁹ The interpretation of a text according B. F. TAMARO see: I.I., X/I, 84.

³⁰ The limestone head of Atys found ... in 1957. at Monte Cappelletto south-east from the factory of glass production „Boris Kidrič“—Pula, when digging military trenches (dim. 0,32 x 0,21 x 0,245 m). Inv. n. 4570/A. It is exhibited in the temple of Augustus and Roma in Pula. In comparison with the Antoninian sculptures it can be dated in II/III C. A. D. Compare: HORDE-NACHE G., Sculptura Greaca și Romana, București 1969, T. LXXVII — LXXXVII. See: JURKIĆ, Arte plastica..., ATTI, V, Trieste—Rovigno 1974.



Fig. 2.

tectural monuments (orthostati)³¹ with identical representation of Atys in a splendid hellenistic style. These two monuments represent a harmonious unity and are supposed to be placed in the grove of the Goddess or in front of her temple. They point to a rather significant role this cult played in Pula and the nearby countryside. Only a politically and materially strong priesthood could have ordered such luxurious monuments which are a firm proof of this cult in a social community. As is known, Atys was inconographically connected with Cybele's cult and he was never worshipped without her³². That is the reason why these beautiful reliefs are firm evidence of the observance of the Great Mother's cult in Pula.

At a distance of ten miles from Pula there is another centre of the Cybele's worship — Nesactium. This place was an organized and fortified settlement in the Bronze Age, the capital of Histri in the Iron Age and a municipium in Roman times. Nesactium is the place with the oldest and longest cultural and art tradition in Istria. At the beginning of this century an exceptionally monumental sculpture of a woman delivering a child, a symbol of gravidity, but actually a symbol of regeneration of Nature and mankind, was found there³³. The relief of this principal deity of gravidity, a Nature Goddess, is one of the most realistic representations of this phenomenon in the art of autochthonic inhabitants of Nesactium and of the whole Istria as well as of all Illyrians.

That is why, the oriental cult of Great Mother when introduced to Nesactium, found in Istria a fruitful ground for its spreading³⁴. It is well known that during Roman times the autochthonic cults remained and were celebrated

³¹ Two limestone orthostati (dim. 0,119 × 0,59 × 0,59 m) at the front parts decorated with a relief representation of Atys. At one lateral side a groove can be seen, while at the other side a relief decoration of a vine and birds is visible. The finding place is unknown, perhaps the surroundings of Pula. Until 1929 exhibited in Temple of Augustus and Roma, now in Archeological Museum of Istria in Pula. Inv. n. 253/A and n. 261/A. See: GNIRS, Pola — ein Führer durch Antiken Baudenkmäler und Sammlungen, Wien 1915, p. 91, nn. 326, 327; JURKIĆ, op. cit.

³² Very detailed: GRAILLOT, *Le culte de Cybèle, mère des dieux à Rome et dans l'Empire romain*, Bibliothèque des Ecoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 107, Paris 1912.

³³ PUSCHI, *La necropoli preromana di Nesazio, relazioni degli scavi, Atti e memorie della Società istriana di archeologia e storia patria*, volume unico, XXII, Parenzo 1905, p. 51; MLADIN, *Umrjetnički spomenici prahistorijskog Nezakcija, Kulturnopovijesni spomenici Istre*, V, Pula 1966.

³⁴ About this written by: VUKANOVIC, op. cit.; JURKIĆ, op. cit. JURKIĆ, *Izbor antičke kultne plastike na području Istre, Materijali Kongresa ADJ*, Zadar 1972 (in the print).

in their pure form or in the so called „*interpretatio Romana*” similarly to the official Roman cults.

The same happened in Istria. Besides many pure autochthonic female deities like: Eia, Trita, Sentona, Boria, Ika, Iutosica, Seixomnia Leucitica, there existed several syncretistic deities like Iria Venus, Minerva Flanatica, Minerva Polatica, Trita Augusta, Terra Histria and Terra Mater³⁵. That is why, we may expect an autochthonic female cult of mysterious in Natura and of civilisation, that is very near in its essence and characteristic to the new oriental cult, involved in the cult of Magna Mater.

The finding of Atys' statue in Nesactium, was the proof of Cybele's adoration at that locality during Roman times³⁶. The accidental finding of the female statue in Nesactium after Second World War is the main evidence of Great Mother's cult at that place³⁷.

This is a marvellous marble statue of a woman sitting on a throne (Fig. 3). Unfortunately we got the statue without a head and hands. According to some visible symbols it can be proved that it ought to be Cybele. The throne is decorated at both handles with lions' heads, the iconographical characteristic of the Goddess. A snake, the symbol of the earth appears near her right foot. This snake can even be connected with Terra Mater, whose inscriptions were found on the island S. Catharina in the bay of Pula³⁸ and at the locality of villa Modrušani³⁹. It is very significant that the position of the body, legs and the adornment of the woman statue from Nesactium are identical with those of the Cybele' statue from „Museo nazionale” of Naples. The difference is that lions accompanying Cybele on the composition from the Museum of Naples are represented in all their majesty, while their lineaments on the sculpture from Nesactium appear like symbols, shaped as lions' heads in very flat relief. It is supposed that so perfectly elaborated statue was placed in a niche. This is evident because the back part of the

³⁵ See more: JURKIĆ, op. cit.; JURKIĆ, Arte plastica..., ATTI, V, Trieste-Rovigno 1974.

³⁶ The finding of fragmentary Atys' statue in 1922. mentioned P. Sticotti at the XXth Congress of SIASP, Pazin the 1st July, 1923, and published in: AMSI, XXXV, Parenzo 1929.

³⁷ The marble statue of the Goddess (dim. 0,55 × 0,30 × 0,30 m) found in 1942 in a course of ploughing the field nearby the archeological site. It is bought from Miro Ušić, living near Valtur on the 23rd August, 1967. It is exhibited in Archeological Museum of Istria in Pula. Inv. n. 5748/A. According to its classical elaboration it is dated in the second half of the I C. A.D.

³⁸ A fragment is dedicated to *Terrae Matri*. See.: I.I., X/I, 23.

³⁹ *Terra* or *Tellus Mater* is mentioned in: I.I., X/I, 653.



Fig. 3.

statue is not so accurately sculptured. The statue was not discovered „*in situ*”. Perhaps, during the next exploration in Nesactium this problem will be better revealed.

The cult of Magna Mater was venerated at the frontier towards Liburnia. This is proved by the dedicative inscription to *Matri Magnae deorum* from Jesenovik (Fig. 4) at the upper part of the Raša (*Arsa*) valley⁴⁰.

After this brief survey of localities where the cult of Great Mother was worshipped, it can be noticed that this cult was strongly observed in all larger urban centres of Istria and not so extensively in *villae rusticae* inland.

Temples of Magna Mater surely existed in Trieste, while the *collegium dendroforum, aeditorum, cymbalistarum* and over all the *archygallius* point to a strong association. The importance of *colegium dendroforum* can be concluded after the inscriptions from Pula that point to the existence of the Goddess' temple in this Roman *Colonia*.

We can't speak about the temple of Cybele in Nesactium although we have two sculptures — Atys and Magna Mater — from this locality. Nevertheless, Great Mother's worship place can be proved by the existence of Goddess' statue. On the other side, the archeological finds show us evidently the adoration of this cult at the place where the oldest tradition of Nature veneration existed. The isolated votive inscription from Jesenovik can not point to the existence of Cybele's sanctuary, but from the other point of view it can be the clear evidence that Cybele was worshipped in central Istria at the frontier towards Liburnia.

It can be noticed that the names of dedicators are usually oriental in form, as for instance are the *sacerdos Charrito, aeditus Hermes, archygallus Syntropus* from Trieste and the *sacerdos Theodorus* from Pula. All these names show once more the main worshippers of this cult, who among the others were mostly orientals.

The only testimony that points to the existence of the female priesthood of Cybele is the isolated sign from Trieste where *Usia Tertullina*, the priestess of Magna Mater, is mentioned. Perhaps, the funeral monument of *Obellia Maxuma* from Pula shows us the name of another priestess of Great Mother.

⁴⁰ A small votive altar (dim. 0,42 × 0,15 + 0,19 m/) with the name of a dedicatory *Felicula*. The monument is exhibited in Archeological Museum of Istria in Pula. Inv. n. 19/A (ex 1323). See more: I.I., X/III, 198; DEGRASSI, Notizie degli Scavi, 1933, pp. 381—383 = Scritti vari di Antichità, II, Roma 1962, pp. 887—889; DEGRASSI, Culti dell'Istria..., Adriatica, Zagreb 1970, p. 625; JURKIĆ, op. cit.; JURKIĆ, Izbor antičke kultne plastike..., Zadar 1972 (in the print).

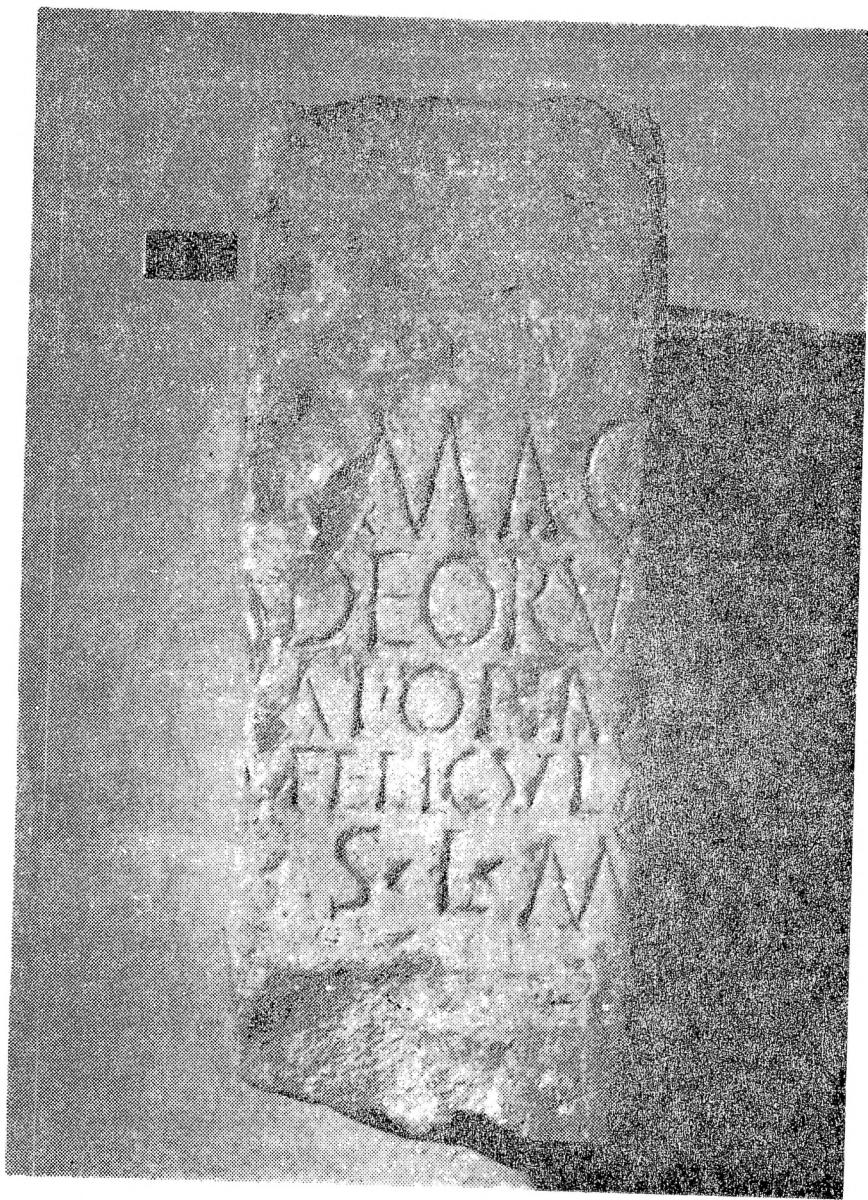


Fig. 4.

Until now, mostly the male dedicators are known in Istria. *Felicula* from Jesenovik has been the only known female dedicatory, although analyses already made show us that in the other parts from Roman Empire and on the Balkans too, in the great number the dedicatory are women. On the contrary to this, only a few votive inscriptions that could be a base for a study and more exact analyses of this problem are found in Istria.

It is very important to state that this oriental cult primeval in origin, was founded on the creeds of autochthonic inhabitants.

The problem of Magna Mater in science has recently been discussed by Branko Gavella who in the theoretical contemplation of this problem emphasized that Magna Mater was „as old as the mankind”.

Pula.

Vesna Jurkić.