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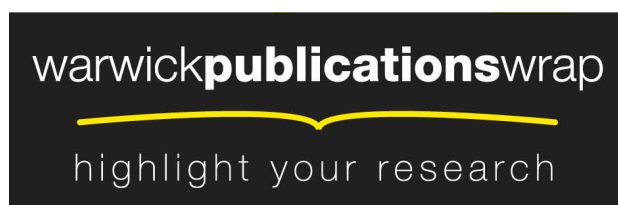
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## Multiple Meanings in the Sanctuary of the Magna Mater at Ostia\*

### Abstract

This paper explores how inscribed objects set up in the sanctuary of the Magna Mater at Ostia expressed the multiple meanings of the cult activities that took place there. It examines how this space hosted a variety of religious experiences that involved individuals, groups, the city, and the state, and how inscriptions can provide us with a glimpse of this complex shifting scene. Whilst some inscribed dedications expressed personal relationships between worshippers and deity, other inscriptions showed the involvement of the town's authorities in regulating the cult, and others again celebrated sacrifices made on behalf of the Roman state. The inscriptions associated with the sanctuary offer an unusual case study in allowing us to trace the multi-layered nature of the religious worship that took place in a single location.

**Keywords:** Ostia, Magna Mater, Attis, religious dedications, cult associations, taurobolium

### 1 Creating meaning(s) through religious dedications

This paper will focus upon three main themes: how inscriptions can enhance our appreciation of lived ancient religion; the different meanings which inscriptions give to individual objects; and the contribution which inscriptions make to the study of individual religious practices.<sup>1</sup> We often refer to 'religious dedications' as a particular genre of inscribed monument, but this category embraces a wide range of different types of object, including altars large and small; plaques; bases for statues and statuettes; and any object could become a religious dedication by having an inscription added to it

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1 Rüpke 2013 on individual religious practices in non-Christian antiquity.

to this effect.<sup>2</sup> Dedications could also be made by different people, such as cult officials, magistrates and other public officials, private individuals, and associations.

The most distinctive type of dedication was an object set up following a vow, in which a worshipper acknowledged that his or her prayer had been fulfilled by a deity, and testified that the exchange had now been completed by setting up the promised gift.<sup>3</sup> A vow, when undertaken, was probably written down, most often on perishable materials, given its temporary and personal significance. Once the terms of the vow had been fulfilled, an inscription would commemorate the fulfilment of obligations by both individual and deity. These inscriptions might be on costly materials, and were intended both to publicise the fact that the individual who had undertaken the vow had duly completed the ritual act and to demonstrate the deity's capacity to grant requests.

Other religious dedications, however, might themselves be ritual acts, might monumentalise a ritual act such as a sacrifice, might be an act of thanksgiving or atonement, or might be set up on the instructions of a deity. Dedications might be made on a ritual festival day or on a day of private significance to an individual, such as a birthday. Such inscribed dedications might have different meanings to different viewers, and might encapsulate different ritual aspects of the worship of the same deity. Of course, inscribed words on their own are often of only limited use, but it is when they are analysed within their monumental and spatial contexts, and alongside archaeological evidence, that they can offer insights into individuals' engagement with a particular cult.

Our understanding of the role of inscribed objects within religion remains necessarily very partial because of the fragmented nature of our evidence, and so this paper aims merely to open up areas for debate by looking at one case study in detail: namely how inscribed objects set up in the sanctuary of the Magna Mater ('Great Goddess') at Ostia expressed the multiple meanings of the cult activities that took place there and how they illustrate the potential diversity of religious dedications. This paper will examine how this particular space on the fringes of Ostia hosted a variety of religious experiences that were relevant to individuals, groups, the city, and Rome, and how inscriptions provide us with a glimpse of this complex shifting scene.

2 Bodel 2009 discusses problems in defining 'sacred dedications'; cf. Cooley 2012, 178–85 for further discussion of the multifarious nature of 'religious inscriptions'.

3 Derks 1995 illustrates the ritual actions implicit in epigraphically-attested vows.

## 2 The sanctuary of the Magna Mater at Ostia

The cult of the goddess known as Magna Mater or Cybele was introduced to Rome from Phrygia in 205 BCE, and Ostia played an important role in the foundation history of the cult, as it was the location where the goddess was brought ashore before being shipped along the Tiber up to Rome, and where Claudia Quinta was able to disprove the allegations against her of sexual impropriety by miraculously hauling the ship ashore single-handedly (as recounted by Ovid, *Fasti* 4.291–348).<sup>4</sup> The sanctuary itself consists of a triangular area of around 4,500 m<sup>2</sup> to the south of the town, on the fringes of the city, tucked in alongside the town walls by the Laurentine Gate (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Its distinctive character is reflected in its being known as the *campus* ('field') of the *Magna Mater* or *Mater Deum* ('Mother of the gods'), and it was probably developed from the mid-first century CE.<sup>6</sup> The temple of the Magna Mater herself was located at the west end, on the other side of the unpaved open area for visitors entering the sanctuary from the main road, and opposite this temple were clustered a separate shrine to Attis, temple to Bellona with a *schola* ('meeting-place') of the *hastiferi* ('spear-carriers') opposite it, plus two unidentified shrines. The building-history of the various structures

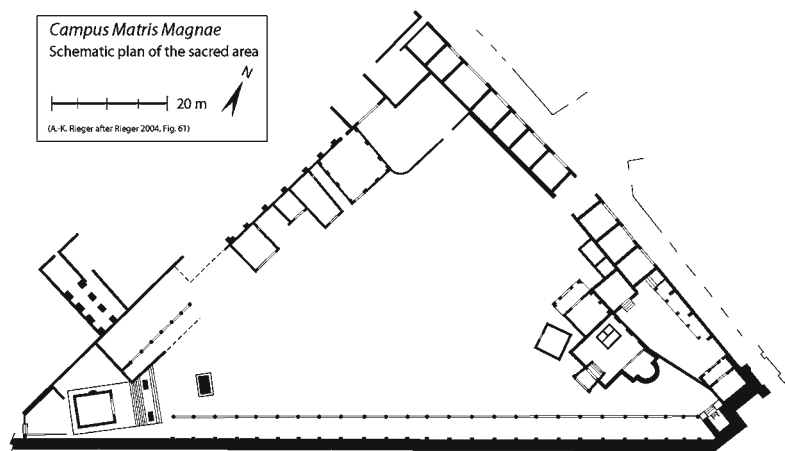


Fig. 1: Plan of the Campus of the Magna Mater, Ostia.

4 Borgeaud 2004, ch. 4.

5 G. Calza 1943. Map online at: <http://www.ostia-antica.org/regio4/1/1.htm>

6 Pavolini 2006, 208; contra Berlioz 1997, 98, who proposed an earlier dating, with the sanctuary complex beginning in 75–50 CE, and being monumentalised in the Augustan/Tiberian periods. Cf. Rieger 2004, 93–172.



Fig. 2: Apsidal room in the shrine of Attis.

within the sanctuary is much debated. The full results of Spanish excavations in the 1990s, which may clarify some of the phases, are still eagerly awaited,<sup>7</sup> but the general consensus is that the temple of the Magna Mater was built by the time of the Flavian era.<sup>8</sup> Unlike some other temples, such as those in the forum, the location of this temple meant that individuals had to choose to enter the area of the sanctuary, either from the main road or from a minor entrance behind the temple of Magna Mater to the west, and so those who were viewing the objects dedicated there might be supposed to have had an interest and personal involvement in the cult. This would be particularly true of the objects on display in the apsidal room at the rear of the shrine of Attis (fig. 2). It seems reasonable, therefore, to take as a starting-point the hypothesis that viewers of the objects dedicated in the sanctuary would themselves have been actively engaged in the cult.

The sanctuary is unusual inasmuch as it preserves within an urban framework the architecture of the sanctuary itself, inscriptions, and other votive objects.<sup>9</sup> Several clusters of inscriptions were found in the sanctuary, includ-

<sup>7</sup> Preliminary notice in Mar et al. 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Rieger 2004, 117.

<sup>9</sup> G. Calza 1943; R. Calza 1943; Squarciapino 1962; Rieger 2004, 93–172 and 281–300; Boin 2013.

ing a series of small bases within niches built into the podium of the temple of the Magna Mater; three objects in the portico flanking the south side of the sanctuary; larger bases in the open space in front of the temple of the Magna Mater; and several dedications in the shrine of Attis. Of these, only the objects in the shrine of Attis and those found in the *campus* itself are likely to have been found roughly in situ. The three objects found in the portico were in storage, covered by a cloth,<sup>10</sup> whilst the small bases found in niches in the rear wall of the temple podium may have been gathered together in one place so that their accompanying silver statuettes, of which no trace remains, could be recycled. Guido Calza reported that the podium's niches had been blocked up with earth.<sup>11</sup> In addition, because of the distinctive language used in the cult to refer to the cult's associations and adherents, there are several other inscriptions found reused elsewhere in the town which appear likely to have been originally on display in the sanctuary. There are over ninety entries in the catalogue of objects associated with the cult in Ostia and Portus assembled by Katharina Rieger.<sup>12</sup> The inscriptions and other finds range in date from the Augustan era down to the mid/late-fourth century CE, and so they track changes in ritual and dedicatory practices within the cult. The earliest objects, which include a round altar dedicated in Greek to the twelve gods, and neo-Attic candelabra,<sup>13</sup> may have been dedicated at a period later than that of their manufacture, as is clearly the case with a statuette of Dionysus, which can be dated stylistically to the early imperial period but which was dedicated in the sanctuary during the mid/late-fourth century CE by a *vir clarissimus* Volusianus, usually identified with C. Caecilius Rufius Volusianus Lampadius, the *praefectus urbi* of 365 CE.<sup>14</sup> It is possible, therefore, to track changes in dedicatory practice between the late first and late fourth centuries.

The Magna Mater cult offers rich possibilities for examining multiple meanings in objects because of the intrinsic ambivalence with which the cult itself was regarded by Romans. As Mary Beard has demonstrated, the idiosyncrasies of the cult of the Great Mother evoked strongly mixed reactions among ancient observers, and literary sources revelled in its more exotic features.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, worship of the Magna Mater was officially sanc-

<sup>10</sup> Rieger 2004, 282–83.

<sup>11</sup> G. Calza 1943, 188.

<sup>12</sup> Rieger 2004, 281–300.

<sup>13</sup> R. Calza 1943, nos 2,3a/b; Rieger 2004, MMA6–7 = MusOst inv. 120, 12–13.

<sup>14</sup> R. Calza 1943, no. 12; *AE* 1945, 55; Rieger 2004, MMA24 = MusOst inv. 165. *PLRE I* Volusianus 5; Rüpke 2008, no. 1130; Boin 2013, 260–61.

<sup>15</sup> Beard 1994, 1998a, 1998b, 83–88.

tioned, and the safety of the city of Rome itself depended upon it; on the other, its self-castrating adherents, or *galli*, were definitely non-Roman and exotic. What we see at Ostia is how both sides of the cult could be accommodated in the same sanctuary.

### 3 Individuals and their gods

Some inscribed dedications set up in the sanctuary reflected personal relationships between worshippers and deities, and represented important lines of communication between worshipper and deity, as well as between individual worshippers.<sup>16</sup> As was usually the case in Roman sacred spaces, a whole range of objects was dedicated, not just reliefs and statuettes directly relating to the Magna Mater herself. It may be unnecessary, therefore, to try to uncover potential links between all the dedicated objects and this particular goddess, although of course it is possible in this particular case to claim that her role as ‘great mother of the gods’ could be used to justify including any deity within her sanctuary. Not all objects still bear inscriptions, and some may never have done so in the first place, but it is worth considering what difference inscriptions made to the meaning of dedicated objects. Twenty-two dedications were uncovered in the shrine of Attis, seven of which were dedicated by a single individual, C. Cartilius Euplus.<sup>17</sup> To these can also be added the large statue of a reclining Attis found in the sanctuary’s south portico, and at least two more dedications known only from fragmentary inscriptions.<sup>18</sup> Although these are generally thought not to be datable with any precision, beyond suggesting a mid-second century context, it seems plausible to suggest that they belong to the latter half of the second century, given that the period after 160 CE seems to have heralded fundamental changes in the myth and rituals associated with the cult of the Magna Mater, which are echoed in these dedications.<sup>19</sup> There is a temptation to suggest that Euplus added the niched room to the shrine as a space within which to display his dedications, and that this might therefore explain why

<sup>16</sup> For religious action as symbolic communication, see Rüpke 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Rieger 2004, MMA6–24; Rieger 2011.

<sup>18</sup> A fragmentary marble tablet found reused in the Forum Baths (inv. 12260) is also perhaps to be counted in this series of dedications by Euplus – *CIL XIV 5385 [C. Car]tilius Euplus / [d] d.* – as is inv. 9245, an unpublished inscription found in 1940.

<sup>19</sup> Fundamental changes to the Magna Mater rituals in Rome from 160 CE have been traced by Rutter 1968, 233–38; Schillinger 1979, 352–68; Borgeaud 2004, ch. 6.

he was able to set up so many dedications in a single space, but there is no evidence that he did indeed do so.

Dedications made by Cartilius Euplus:

- Sculpture of a fruitful pine tree, covered in pine cones and decorated with ribbons, with a snake entwining itself up its trunk: *Atti sacrum C. Cartilius Euplus ex monitu deae*. ('Sacred to Attis. Gaius Cartilius Euplus, on the goddess' instructions')<sup>20</sup>
- Bull with a star on a disc between its horns: *Cartilius Euplus d.d.* ('Cartilius Euplus gave as a gift')<sup>21</sup>
- Relief of animals, including a leopard, stag, two lions, and a bear: *numini Attis C. Cartilius Euplus ex monitu deae e[---]*. ('To the divine power of Attis. Gaius Cartilius Euplus on the goddess' instructions')<sup>22</sup>
- Attis-Dionysus sitting on a lion: *C. Cartilius Euplus ex monitu deae d.d.* ('Gaius Cartilius Euplus on the goddess' instructions, gave as a gift')<sup>23</sup>
- Apollo-Attis, with *omphalos* and tripod: *C. Carti[li]us Euplu[s] ex monitu deae d.d.* ('Gaius Cartilius Euplus on the goddess' instructions, gave as a gift')<sup>24</sup>
- ?Corybant: *C. Cartiliu[---]*<sup>25</sup>
- Venus: *C. Cartilius Euplus d.d.* ('Gaius Cartilius Euplus gave as a gift')<sup>26</sup>
- Statue of a reclining Attis: *numini Attis C. Cartilius Euplus ex monitu deae*. ('To the divine power of Attis. Gaius Cartilius Euplus on the goddess' instructions').<sup>27</sup> Attis is represented as shepherd, holding his crook in his left hand; as sun-god, with rays emanating from his head; as both lunar-god and agricultural deity via the crescent moon and its ears of corn. All in all, the statue confirms the effectiveness of Attis' drastic act of self-castration in securing his apotheosis (fig. 3).

This collection of objects all dedicated by a single individual offers a striking picture of how one man used his dedications to develop his own vision of Magna Mater and Attis, and to assert the validity of this vision, perhaps in competition with other worshippers who saw the cult in a slightly different way. Given that the second half of the second century CE appears to have been a period when the ways in which the cult of the Magna Mater was being celebrated in Rome were being transformed and a new place for Attis within the cult was being developed, it is possible that Euplus was actively participating in this moment of transition within the cult by offering his own interpretation of the myths and rituals surrounding it.

20 R. Calza 1943, no. 4; *AE* 1948, no. 32; Rieger 2004, MMA20 = MusOst inv.172.

21 R. Calza 1943, no. 5; Rieger 2004, MMA22 = MusOst inv.164.

22 R. Calza 1943, no. 6; Rieger 2004, MMA21 = MusOst inv.162.

23 R. Calza 1943, no. 11; Rieger 2004, MMA10 = MusOst inv.161.

24 R. Calza 1943, no. 13; *AE* 1948, no. 34; Rieger 2004, MMA13 = MusOst inv.168.

25 R. Calza 1943, no. 10; *AE* 1948, no. 33; Rieger 2004, MMA14 = MusOst inv.167.

26 R. Calza 1943, no. 18; Rieger 2004, MMA15 = MusOst inv.166.

27 R. Calza 1943, no. 8; *CIL* XIV 38; Squarciapino 1962, 10; Bricault 1998; Rieger 2004, MM3 = VatMusMGP. inv. 10785. Image online: [http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=\\$CCCA-03\\_00394.jpg](http://db.edcs.eu/epigr/bilder.php?bild=$CCCA-03_00394.jpg)



In his dedicatory inscriptions, Cartilius Euplus reveals nothing about his social status or his standing within the cult, but it may be the case that he was not himself a priest or cult official. We do not know whether these dedications were set up all together at a single moment, or whether Euplus set them up piecemeal over a period of time. These two scenarios would give different meanings to his involvement in the cult. Five of Cartilius Euplus' dedicatory inscriptions state that he had given the gifts *ex monitu deae* ('on the goddess' instructions'), whereas the others simply include the formula *dono dedit* ('gave as a gift'). This variation perhaps suggests that Euplus did not set up all of his dedications at the same time, since we might have expected more homogeneity if that were the case, and so we should perhaps consider the potential significance of repeated interventions in the shrine by Euplus, as he added his statuettes and reliefs in piecemeal fashion. Three of his dedications were specifically set up for Attis, whilst five of his chosen iconographic themes were also clearly related to Attis. In addition to depictions of the god himself, for instance, the pine tree was a symbol of the ritual procession which took place annually on 24<sup>th</sup> March to re-enact Attis' funerary procession, with pines being carried in procession by the *dendrophori* ('tree-carriers').<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the bull may be interpreted as the zodiacal sign marking the middle of spring, and so as an allusion to the myth of Attis' rebirth, but the solar disk between the bull's horns was more commonly associated with the Apis-bull rather than with the Magna Mater, and so with the Egyptian deities, specifically Osiris.<sup>29</sup> What is striking, though, is that Euplus' interpretation of the figure of Attis was peculiarly fluid, assimilating him to other gods such as Dionysus and Apollo and incorporating Egyptian features in the depictions of the bull, and in the complex of multiple associations to be seen in the reclining statue of Attis (fig. 3). As Bricault has pointed out, this reclining Attis alluded not just to Attis' origins as a Phrygian shepherd but also included iconographical features more usually associated with Dionysus, sun- and moon-deities (solar rays and crescent moon), and gods of agriculture (corn ear). He argued further that the Egyptian god Serapis was evoked by the unusual combination of features on Attis' head.<sup>30</sup> Euplus' conception of Attis, then, appears to have been particularly open to being influenced by attributes more usually associated with other deities, and it is possible that his vision of the cult developed over time, as he perhaps set up his dedications over some years.

<sup>28</sup> Rieger 2004, 154–59 on the festivals of Magna Mater.

<sup>29</sup> Rieger 2004, 132.

<sup>30</sup> Bricault 1998; cf. Rieger 2004, 139.



Fig. 3: Statue of Attis reclining.

On one reading of the evidence, then, we may be dealing with an individual, Euplus, who had no official role in the cult, but who repeatedly set up dedications depicting somewhat idiosyncratic interpretations of Attis in particular. It is in this context that the repeated phrase *ex monitu deae* ('on the goddess' instructions'), becomes important, and could take on different meanings. On the one hand, it asserted Euplus' acknowledgement of Magna Mater's power and authority, especially if he was responding to messages from the goddess on more than one occasion.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, it also potentially lent authority to Euplus himself, as one who had received a communication from the goddess herself. In this way, another significance of the phrase *ex monitu* might be to assert the acceptability of what might otherwise have been contested images. It is perhaps no coincidence that the three idiosyncratic representations of Attis as Apollo, Attis as Dionysus, and Attis as polysemic deity with Serapic elements were all described as having been set up on the goddess' instruction. In these cases, the inscriptions made an important contribution to the multiple meanings of the objects, in validating Euplus' vision of the deities concerned, in asserting his line of communication to the goddess, in identifying him as the donor of these gifts, in demon-

<sup>31</sup> The same might apply if, as suggested in discussion at the conference, *dea* might also be taken as referring to Attis rather than Magna Mater.

strating her power, and in illustrating aspects of the rituals carried out each spring to celebrate Attis' self-sacrifice.

Other worshippers, it seems, however, chose to emphasise different characteristics of Attis. The possibility of divergent images of Attis emerges from other pieces of sculpture found in the same building, whose dedicatory inscriptions do not survive. Other reliefs and statuettes focus upon Attis' identity as simple shepherd, with his crook, sheep, and dog;<sup>32</sup> and even upon the moment of Attis' death, depicting him lying beneath a pine tree.<sup>33</sup> A similar contestation of how best to represent elements of the cult may perhaps emerge from depictions of the initial arrival of the Magna Mater in Italy. Whereas in some accounts it was stated that the Magna Mater arrived in Italy in the form of an aniconic black stone, for example, there is also a series of terracotta antefixes from different locations at Ostia that instead depict her arrival in the form of the more readily recognizable cult statue,<sup>34</sup> known from her Palatine temple. It seems to be the case, then, that the iconography of the cult was not at all rigidly fixed.

The hypothesis that individual worshippers might actively be engaged in responding in their own individual ways to the cult is supported by the context of these dedications. It is important to appreciate that the apsed room in the Attis shrine where these dedications were probably on display was not some sort of art gallery, but was part of a space where rituals were performed, as revealed by excavations by the Spanish team led by Mar.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the shrine itself could only have accommodated a few worshippers at a time, and would only have been visited by individuals who were interested in the cult in the first place. Taken together, the images of Attis in the shrine offered competing images of him, dead, alive, and as a deity. They show that the worshippers dedicating their offerings here could develop their own engagement with the cult, and that no authorisation was needed to set up original or unusual votives.

It is perhaps less surprising to find that the initiated devotees of the great mother, the *galli*, whose commitment to her cult took the most extreme form of self-castration, developed a distinctive iconography that subsumed their personal identity within the symbols of the cult. This would fit neatly with the contention that these individuals were not official priests in charge of

32 R. Calza 1943, no. 15; Rieger 2004, MMA 11 = MusOst inv. 170 (no. 15).

33 R. Calza 1943, no. 16; Rieger 2004, MMA 9 = MusOst inv. 163.

34 Ostia Antiq. inv. 3423 from Piazzale delle corporazioni. Rieger 2009, 17.

35 Mar et al. 1999, 21, summarising a paper presented at 2<sup>nd</sup> International Ostia Colloquium in 1998.



Fig. 4: CIL XIV 385, M. Modius Maxximus, *archigallus*.

the cult of the Great Mother, but marginal individuals devoted to her cult.<sup>36</sup> Another dedication found in the southern portico of the sanctuary shows how the *archigallus* (chief *gallus*) of the colony of Ostia, M. Modius Maxximus, set up a monument that visually punned both upon his name and his position within the cult: *M. Modius Maxximus archigallus coloniae Ostiensis* ('Marcus Modius Maxximus, chief *gallus* of the colony of Ostia', fig. 4).<sup>37</sup> Thus we find a *modius* (corn-measure) surmounted by a cockerel (*gallus*), and many other pictorial allusions to other aspects of the cult, with the cockerel's tail ending in ears of corn, which also cover the top of the *modius*, the river-god Gallus (or possibly the head of Jupiter Ideus), a lion's head, shepherd's crook, and the drum, cymbal, and pan pipes whose music must have accompanied many of the rituals. This monument has already been brilliantly discussed by Mary Beard,<sup>38</sup> but I would add a further observation about one particular feature of the inscription, namely its use of the nominative case. In contrast to the dedications made by Euplus whose status as dedications to Attis is made explicit, here there is no dedicatory formula. As

<sup>36</sup> Van Haepelen 2014, 474.

<sup>37</sup> R. Calza 1943, no. 7; CIL XIV 385; Rieger 2004, MM4 = VatMusMGP inv. 10745. Online image at: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:M.\\_Modius\\_Maximus,\\_Archigallus\\_Coloniae\\_Ostiensis.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:M._Modius_Maximus,_Archigallus_Coloniae_Ostiensis.jpg)

<sup>38</sup> Beard 1998b.



Fig. 5: Sarcophagus of a *gallus* from Isola Sacra.

well as interpreting this as ‘Modius Maxximus (gave this)’, we are perhaps invited to read it as ‘(This is) Modius Maxximus’, as an assertion of his own importance as *archigallus*. Modius Maxximus offers the supreme example of how an individual could appropriate the imagery usually associated with the cult for his own purposes, but the way in which the personal identity of a *gallus* might be subsumed within the cult is also reflected in a sarcophagus from Isola Sacra, where the exoticism of the deceased *gallus* is clearly portrayed (fig. 5), and is emphasised further by two reliefs showing him engaging in ritual actions.<sup>39</sup> Overall, then, what we see from inscribed dedications is how they could be used in very personal ways by individuals to express their relationship to and vision of the goddess and Attis.

#### 4 Commemorating rituals on the *campus Mater Deum*

The most distinctive spatial characteristic of the sanctuary is of course its triangular open space, known as the *campus*, but this space would not originally have been quite as uncluttered as it now appears, since it was used as a location for setting up large statues and altars. It must, however, have been designed to accommodate the processions which were an important part of the goddess’ festivals in March, with the *dendrophori* (‘tree-carriers’), and *cannophori* (‘reed-carriers’) marking different stages in the death and apoth-

<sup>39</sup> Isola Sacra necropolis, near tomb 75: MusOst. inv. 158–60: online images at [http://www.ostia-antica.org/vmuseum/marble\\_4.htm](http://www.ostia-antica.org/vmuseum/marble_4.htm)

osis of Attis. During the Antonine period, a new feature emerged in the cult of the Magna Mater, namely the performance of a special bull-sacrifice, the *taurobolium*, and it seems likely that this sacrifice too was offered in the open space around the temple.<sup>40</sup> It has been observed that the surface of the campus was unpaved and sandy, which might have made it suitable for bull sacrifices,<sup>41</sup> but this seems a slightly odd suggestion given that bull sacrifices routinely occurred in other cults in other public spaces that were not sandy. Perhaps more attractive is the suggestion that pine trees were planted in the *campus*, whilst the podium of the Magna Mater temple itself may also have included planting-beds, perhaps for growing the flowers used in the rituals.

The earliest *taurobolium* known at Ostia took place in 166/76 CE.<sup>42</sup> Inscriptions show that a *taurobolium* could have one of two significances: as a personal act by an individual to mark his or her engagement with the cult, or as a formal official act performed upon the *campus* for the benefit of Ostia and Rome.<sup>43</sup> A personal *taurobolium* performed at either Ostia or Portus by Aemilia Serapias on the ides of May in 199 CE was commemorated by her setting up a small altar, through the agency of the priest: *Aemilia Serapias taurobolium fecit et aram taurobolatam posuit per(mittente) sacerdote{s} Valerio Pancarpo idib(us) Mais Anullino ii et Frontone co(n)s(ulibus)*. ('Aemilia Serapias accomplished a bull-sacrifice and set up the altar that was used in the rite, through the permission of the priest Valerius Pancarpus, on the ides of May in the consulship of Anullinus for the second time and Fronto').<sup>44</sup> Both bull- and ram-sacrifices (*taurobolia*, *criobolia*) were performed in the Magna Mater sanctuary for the benefit of the emperor and his family (with individuals being mentioned by name), the Roman senate, college of *quindecimviri*, equestrian order, army, and navy (or shippers), and Ostia's town councillors, *dendrophori* and *cannophori*.<sup>45</sup> At Portus at least, it seems that individuals were encouraged to perform a *taurobolium*, under the supervision of the *archigallus*, and on behalf of the emperor, by being excused in

40 On *taurobolia* in general, see Rutter 1968; McLynn 1996; Borgeaud 2004, 110–19; Alvar Ezquerro 2008, 261–76.

41 Pavolini 2006, 208.

42 *CIL* XIV 40, 4301a/b – for members of the Antonine dynasty; Rieger 2004, MM62 = MagOst inv. 7955a/b.

43 See McLynn 1996, 323 on 'public' and 'private' types of *taurobolium*.

44 *CIL* XIV 39 = Vatican Gall.Lap. 39, inv. 9287; Squarciapino 1962, 15; Rieger 2004, MM85. The translation of this inscription presents difficulties: Meiggs 1973, 363 took *Valerio Pancarpo* to signify two priests presiding at the sacrifice. I am grateful to the peer reviewer who has suggested a solution to this conundrum, assuming a lapicide error in place of *per(mittente) sacerdote Valerio Pancarpo*.

45 *CIL* XIV 4303, possibly for Severus Alexander and Julia Mamaea; cf. *CIL* XIV 43. Also ram-sacrifices in honour of emperor: *CIL* XIV 41 = 4302, 4304(?).

return from having to undertake the duties of guardianship.<sup>46</sup> The sacrifices were then monumentalised in inscriptions, which were probably displayed afterwards on the *campus* of the Magna Mater, where one relevant fragment was found (others have come from secondary contexts, scattered around the town).<sup>47</sup> The inscriptions commemorating these sacrifices identified the goddess as *Mater Deum Magna Idaea* ('Great Idaean Mother of the Gods'),<sup>48</sup> which significantly alludes to Mount Ida near Troy, whose mythical ties to the origins of Rome via Aeneas were well known.<sup>49</sup> This cult title would consequently seem particularly appropriate to the context of sacrifices being made for the benefit of Rome and its rulers. It may well be the case that Ostia's importance as a harbour from which emperors might leave Italy made the town a particularly suitable location for undertaking sacrifices on behalf of the emperor's welfare and return.<sup>50</sup> Comparative material from Lugdunum (modern Lyons) makes it clear that such sacrifices could contain important political statements: at Lugdunum, for example, the town's shifting allegiance from Clodius Albinus to Septimius Severus can be tracked through its performance and commemoration of *taurobolia*.<sup>51</sup> It seems likely that such dedications were commonly dated in order to commemorate a specific occasion, and that the act of inscribing an altar or plaque and setting it up in the *campus* was intended to prolong the memory of the completed ritual action of bull-sacrifice.

Yet another type of inscribed dedication is represented by a series of small statue bases set up by the associations of *dendrophori* and *cannophori*, who had special roles in the annual festival of the Magna Mater, and by individuals belonging to those associations (see the summary list below). The inscribed bases themselves are unprepossessing, with relatively brief dedicatory inscriptions, but their texts reveal that they originally supported silver statuettes or portrait busts roughly 20 cm tall, and between one and three pounds in weight. A fair number of these bases was found together in the niches of the podium of the Magna Mater temple, but this does not really help us to trace their original locations with any exactitude. Given that the statuettes were of silver, though, it would seem unlikely that they would originally have been left on display in the *campus* itself, where they might

46 Ulpian, *Fragmenta Vaticana* section 148: *de excusatione: [is] qui in Portu pro salute imperatoris sacrum facit ex vaticinatione archigalli, a tutelis excus[a]tur.*

47 *CIL* XIV 4301a.

48 *CIL* XIV 41/4302, 42, 43, 4303.

49 Rieger 2009, 5.

50 Squarciapino 1962, 16; cf. *CIL* XIV 43, *taurobolium factum Matr(i) deum Magn(ae) Idaeae pro salut(e) et redit(u) et victor(ia) Imp(eratoris)*; *CIL* XIV 4303.

51 Spickermann 2013, 151–53.

have been liable to theft, and it is reasonable to suggest that they were displayed inside the meeting-places (*scholae*) of the *dendrophori* (identified as the room behind the temple of the Magna Mater) and of the *cannophori*.<sup>52</sup> Given the consistent monumental and textual format of these bases, it is also a reasonable guess that similar bases which have been found in reused contexts were also originally displayed in *scholae* in the sanctuary of the Magna Mater.

What is particularly interesting about these dedications is the parallel treatment of gods on the one hand and members of the imperial family on the other. By setting up statuettes or portraits of similar size and precious-metal material representing both deities and members of the imperial family, these dedications, as well as the bull- and ram-sacrifices discussed earlier, made clear that the corporations and individuals alike viewed their participation in the cult as a way of invoking the gods' protection for the imperial family. This was explicit in the fact that some of the statuettes of deities were also dedicated on behalf of the welfare of the emperor. Given the general tendency for the emperor and the imperial family to become more visible in inscriptions,<sup>53</sup> it is not surprising to find that a re-building-inscription recording the repair of the *schola* of the *dendrophori* (?) in the third century CE opens with the words *numini domus Aug.* ('to the divine power of the Augustan household').<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the dedications were a means whereby the associations could develop their own group identity, as loyal supporters of the emperor and as devout worshippers of the Mater Magna, whilst the individuals who paid for these expensive dedications typically alluded to their status within the cult, whether as *quinquennialis* ('president'), *archigallus* ('chief *gallus*'), *patronus* ('patron'), *pater* ('father'), or *mater* ('mother'). The dedicators' frequent reference to their official positions within the cult, and their recording exactly what weight of silver was contained in the image dedicated by each of them suggests an element of competition between those setting up the images.<sup>55</sup> The moment when the statuettes were first dedicated was often also marked by a feast or cash-distribution for members of the association, which would have ensured that they were all aware of the generous new gift being presented to them. At the same time, of course, it may well have been an expectation on the part of the corporation that their office-holders and *patroni* should make such

52 As surmised already by Visconti 1877, 59–60.

53 Cooley 2012, 46–49.

54 *CIL* XIV 45; Rieger 2004, MMD 49 = MagOst inv. 7957.

55 Contra van Haepelen 2014, 137–38 who sees no sign of competition in these dedications, whilst acknowledging the likelihood of "some emulation".



dedications; what is interesting is that, even so, there appears to be variation in the amount of money expended by the donors and an element of personal choice in deciding which deity to depict.

Precious metal statuettes dedicated in the sanctuary of the Magna Mater

- T. Flavius Epigonus, *honoratus* by the *collegium* of *hastiferi*, 140 CE: statue of *Mater Deum* – AE 1967, no. 74
- Sex. Annius Merops, *honoratus*: statue of *Terra Mater*, for the *dendrophori*; 142 CE – CIL XIV 67
- T. Annius Lucullus, *quinquennalis honoratus*: statue of Mars, for the *dendrophori*, 143 CE – CIL XIV 33
- C. Atilius Felix, freedman of the priest Bassus, *apparator* ('cult official') of the *Mater Deum*: statue of Silvanus; for the *dendrophori* – CIL XIV 53
- ?, [*quinquennalis*] for the second time, *patronus*, 3 pounds of silver, for the *dendrophori*, 196 CE – CIL XIV 71
- Iunia Zosime, *mater*: statue of *Virtus*, for the *dendrophori*, two pounds of silver – CIL XIV 69 (small column rather than a base)
- Q.(?) Fabius Honoratus, *immunitas*: L. Verus, for the *dendrophori*, 161/69 CE – CIL XIV 107
- Q. Caecilius Fuscus, *archigallus*: statue of the *Mater Deum*, one pound of silver + Nemesiis; *pro salute* ('for the welfare') of an emperor whose name has been erased (following Visconti's conjecture in CIL); for the *cannophori*, ?169–76 CE – CIL XIV 34
- Q. Caecilius Fuscus, *archigallus*: statue of Attis, one pound of silver + bronze pine cone (*frux*); for the *cannophori* – CIL XIV 35
- Calpurnia Chelido: statue of *Mater Deum*, two pounds of silver, for the *cannophori* – CIL XIV 36
- Q. Domitius Aterianus *pater*, Domitia Civitas *mater*: statue of Attis, for the *cannophori* – CIL XIV 37
- *Corpus cannophorum*: Septimius Severus, one pound of silver, 195 CE – CIL XIV 116
- *Corpus cannophorum*: Caracalla as Caesar, one pound of silver, ?198 CE – CIL XIV 117
- A senatorial individual, *dendrophorus*: Crispina, three pounds of silver + shield + statuette, 178–92 CE – Rieger 2004, MM54 = MagOst inv. 6722 = AE 1948, no. 24
- C. Iulius Cocilius Hermes, *patronus* and *quinquennalis perpetuus* of the *dendrophori*, 256 CE: statue of *Mater Magna*, more than three pounds of silver – AE 1987, no. 198

My final example of what might be labelled a religious dedication in the sanctuary offers yet another new perspective on how an individual might engage with the cult, this time in a very personal way. P. Claudius Abascantus had twice held the office of *quinquennalis* of the *corpus dendrophorum*, despite his humble beginnings as a slave of *Tres Galliae*.<sup>56</sup> The earliest known inscribed monument which he set up in 177 CE was a funerary memorial to Modestia Epigone, described as his *anima dulcissima* ('sweetest life').<sup>57</sup> Although still a slave, he had the financial resources to commemorate the

<sup>56</sup> Herz 1989.

<sup>57</sup> CIL XIV 328.

deceased woman in some style, even including a consular dating formula on one side, which gave the epitaph a more formal tone than is usual for funerary inscriptions at this time. By the early 180s, we find that Abascantus has been freed, and has adopted a son, C. Modestius Theseus, his *alumnus dulcissimus* ('sweetest foster-child'), presumably the natural son of Modestia, only to have to bury him too, aged just eight.<sup>58</sup> Soon afterwards, Abascantus became the benefactor of a group, to be identified quite possibly with the *dendrophori*. He donated a large marble plaque on which was recorded a list of names and amounts of money donated to celebrate individuals' birthdays.<sup>59</sup> The words recording Abascantus' gift appear prominently on the plaque, extending across its entire width in letters significantly larger than those recording the donors' names on the list. The incompletely-preserved plaque records the names of fifteen donors, of whom three appear to be related to Abascantus, and the sums of money listed were probably invested so that the interest generated from them could be used to provide a feast for members of the association on each person's birthday.<sup>60</sup> A large marble base found in the *campus* in front of the stairs leading up into the temple of the Magna Mater, of 194 CE, contains only fragmentary inscribed texts on its front and side faces, and on its plinth, but appears to relate to this fund for birthday parties.<sup>61</sup>

From another inscription, however, we can track Abascantus' subsequent actions in response to further personal loss. Another marble base, likewise found in the *campus*, from 203 CE states: *P(ublio) Cl(audio) P(ubli) f(ilio) Horat(ia) Abascantiano fil(io) dulcissimo P(ublius) Cl(audius) Abascantus pater q(uin)q(uennalis) II corp(or)is dendrophorum Ostiens(ium)* ('To Publius Claudius Abascantianus, son of Publius, of the Horatian voting-tribe, sweetest son. Publius Claudius Abascantus, father, president for the second time of the corporation of tree-carriers of Ostia').<sup>62</sup> Its dedicatory text is well preserved, and reveals Abascantus as father making a dedication to his son P. Claudius Abascantianus, described as *filius dulcissimus*, a phrase often found in funerary commemorations, and, as we have already seen, the expression used previously by Abascantus to describe his loved ones in death. Abascantianus' full citizen status is emphasised by including his citizen voting-tribe alongside his filiation. An inscription on the base's right side shows that a statue of the child was permitted to be set up on the *campus*

<sup>58</sup> *CIL* XIV 327.

<sup>59</sup> *CIL* XIV 326.

<sup>60</sup> Herz 1989, 170–71; Meiggs 1973, 326–27.

<sup>61</sup> *CIL* XIV 325 = MagOst inv. 19868.

<sup>62</sup> *CIL* XIV 324.

by express permission of the priest of Vulcan: *M(arcus) Antius Crescens Calpurnianus pontif(ex) Volk(ani) et aedium sacror(um) statuam poni in campo Matris deum infantilem permisi VIII Kal(endas) April(es) / [Plautiano] II et Geta co(n)s(ulibus)* ('I, Marcus Antius Crescens Calpurnianus, priest of Vulcan and of sacred buildings, have permitted the infant's statue to be set up in the *campus* of the Mother of the Gods, 25<sup>th</sup> March in the consulship of Plautianus for the second time and Geta'). The exceptional nature of this permission is intimated by the unusual use of a verb in the first person by the *pontifex* in granting the permission. The dedication was made on 24<sup>th</sup> March, the day of deepest grief in the ritual calendar for mourning the death of Attis, the day before the god's rebirth was then celebrated at the festival of the *Hilaria*.<sup>63</sup> It may not be too fanciful to suggest that we may here gain some hint of a father's grief and of his turning to his religious beliefs to help him come to terms with the death of his son. The statue would have been dedicated amidst the rituals being performed around it in the *campus* of the Magna Mater, and we may perhaps just hope that Abascantus may have derived some comfort from the rituals performed the next day when mourning for Attis gave way to joy at his rebirth. It is also worth reflecting on the possibility that Abascantianus' statue may even have taken the guise of Attis. Here the context of the statues in the *campus* is the decisive factor in suggesting this interpretation; it is also likely that Abascantus would not have been of sufficient status to be able to set up a statue to his son in the forum or other prominent public space, and so used his influence as a leading official within the corpus of the *dendrophori* to involve the *pontifex Volkani* in sanctioning his son to be commemorated within the *campus* instead.

## 5 Conclusions

The inscriptions associated with the sanctuary offer an unusual case study in allowing us to trace the multi-layered nature of the religious worship that took place in a single location. Worship of the Magna Mater was conducted both at a civic level and for individual or personal ends. From the inscriptions found in the different spaces of the sanctuary, we can trace the activities of different groups and individuals, and the multifaceted character of the cult's rituals. The *taurobolium* was not always a civic sacrifice, but

<sup>63</sup> There is no clear evidence for when the *Hilaria* festival became part of the Magna Mater's rituals, but it is possible that the *Hilaria* was incorporated into the rites during the second half of the second century: compare Rutter 1968, 240; Schillinger 1979, 352; Borgeaud 2004, 93.

could also be a personal ritual act, even if not performed quite in the manner described so vividly by Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 10.1006–50.<sup>64</sup> Setting up statuettes and reliefs inscribed with dedicatory formulae was one way in which an individual could both interpret and engage with the cult, and the choice of images included upon the objects being dedicated can give some insight into individuals' conception of the divine. Other dedicatory objects illustrate both one way in which cult-associations could consolidate their sense of group identity and the increased tendency in a variety of epigraphic monuments from the late second century CE onwards to incorporate references to the imperial house. At Ostia, the impression is given that the civic authorities kept an eye on the type of monuments set up on the *campus* itself, and that this area of the sanctuary represented the official face of the cult, as it related to public interests. Elsewhere, however, in the more 'private' areas, particularly the shrine of Attis, there seems to have been more freedom for individuals to explore personal interpretations of the deities whom they were worshipping. In short, what we can trace in the sanctuary of the Magna Mater at Ostia is the way in which inscriptions might express different aspects of engagement in the cult, and how their monumental and spatial context might contribute to their meanings. The phrase 'religious dedications' may be a convenient shorthand for referring to the inscriptions found in the sanctuary, but it obscures the rich diversity of meanings created by inscriptions in different contexts.

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<sup>64</sup> See the convincing refutation of the identification of a *fossa sanguinis* in the *campus* by Rieger 2004, 110–12. Cf. McLynn 1996.

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# Religion in the Roman Empire

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