



Galli: Ancient Roman Priests

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In ancient Rome, the *galli* (*galloi* in Greek, Latin singular *gallus*), translated as both "cocks" and "Galatians," were castrated priests of Cybele, the Asian Mother Goddess, and of the Syrian goddess Atagartis. They were named after the river Gallus, whose waters supposedly drove people crazy but also helped purge them. The cult of Cybele was widespread, like that of Dionysus. People other than the *galli*, such as priestesses and musicians and other adherents, participated in the mystery rituals of the cult, which included role-playing and inducing states of ecstasy, but only the *galli* were officiants.

The many-faceted literary evidence presents the *galli* as figures of unmanliness for having abdicated male cultural responsibility. As Craig Williams notes, "Castration is an extreme instance of a conceptual all-or-nothing tendency that pervades Roman texts: softening a male constitutes a direct infringement upon his masculine identity." Moreover, since they adopted women's clothing and seemed to prefer the receptive role in anal intercourse (in violation of the rigid Roman gender system), the *galli* are an important factor in the history of gender and sexuality as well.

Cult and Castration

As priests of Cybele, the *galli* devoted themselves to their goddess by castrating themselves (apparently removing both the testicles and the penis), cross-dressing, and, in some cases, offering themselves to other men for sex. A tax may even have been levied on them as prostitutes.

Cybele was accepted into the state cult in 204 B.C.E., and she thus became an official goddess of the Roman state. From that point, the religion was funded by public money, but also placed under stricter control of the state.

Although Cybele was an official goddess, the Senate refused Roman citizens the right to participate in her rites as priests, reflecting the Roman distrust and fear of the *galli*, for both their infertility and their rejection of masculinity. The *galli* not only deliberately made themselves unable to produce offspring, but they served as bad examples to others, tempting young men to join their ranks. Because of their effeminate nature, the *galli* flouted Roman exhortations toward *virtus*, the ideal of manliness. In brief, the Roman reverence for paternity and masculinity made castration a highly stigmatized activity, especially for Roman citizens, and made the *galli* a distinctly marginalized community.

The *galli* were often described in derogatory terms such as *pathicus* ("faggot"), *mollis* ("softie"), or *cinaedus* (originally an Eastern dancer, but later a term for a grown man who displayed effeminate behavior and/or desired to be penetrated). Being a *gallus* was deemed the ultimate in unmanliness.

Because of wide-spread castration anxiety, the emperor Domitian (81 to 96 C.E.) declared genital mutilation illegal. Once Christianity triumphed over paganism and became the state religion, the highly institutionalized Greek and Roman mystery cults finally disappeared, although some *galli* may have plied



A sculpture of the Roman goddess Cybele in Madrid, Spain. Photograph by Miguel A. Monjas. The photograph of the goddess Cybele appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 License.

their trade as late as the fifth century.

Contenance and Castration

Why castration? Eugene Rice explains the self-castration of the *galli* as a failure to reconcile two crucial beliefs in the ancient world. Only people of perfect continence may perform sacred functions, and voluntary continence is impossible for a male. As a result, the enthusiast is left "no alternative but chastity by the knife."

Rabun Taylor argues that some of the *galli* may have had strong "gynemimetic" urges and so, in effect, gave themselves a partial sex change because of transgender tendencies and in order to identify more closely with the mother goddess.

It may be that castration was a sign of reverence for the goddess; in mutilating themselves, the *galli* gave up something that was important to them. From this perspective, castration functioned to indicate the *galli's* devotion to their deity.

Certainly, a radical practice such as castration must have been motivated by complex psychological reasons, and may have originated in ideas of ritual purity and sexual continence. What we know is that, in the eyes of most Romans, the *galli* failed miserably to live up to their ideals. According to the literary testimony, at any rate, the *galli* were perfectly *incontinent*, eagerly profaned their religious services, and devoted themselves to money-making.

Literature and Lamponing

To the point of caricature, the literary evidence concerning the *galli* focuses on physical emasculation, effeminacy of manner and dress, sterile lasciviousness, religious mockery, and materialistic greed. Roman authors often use feminine nouns and pronouns to denounce the *galli*.

Catullus, in poem 63, describes how Attis, a *pais kalos* ("lovely boy"), was swept away by *galli* and finally joined their ranks. Attis castrates himself and thereby abdicates his manhood. Catullus refers to the *galli* as *gallae* (feminine plural), suggesting that the loss of their private parts has in fact perversely changed their gender, just as Attis has become a *notha mulier*, a "fake woman."

In his inability to make the transition from *eromenos* (beloved) or *puer delicatus* to *erastes* (lover) or husband, Attis represents in Roman eyes an appalling failure of culturally sanctioned masculinity.

Juvenal, in the Second Satire, compares hypocritical priests to *galli*: "Here is Cybele's crew, with their uninhibited babel / Of squeaky voices. A crazy old man with snow-white hair / Presides at the rites, a rare and truly remarkable case / Of voracious greed. He ought to be paid to give masters classes." Juvenal sarcastically adds: "It's time to follow the Phrygian mode: / Just take a knife, and sever the lump of useless meat."

In Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, a eunuch buys the ass Lucius. Lucius describes his new owner: "he was a real old queen, bald apart from a few grizzled ringlets, one of your street-corner scum, one of those who carry the Syrian Goddess around our towns to the sound of cymbals and castanets." The buyer takes Lucius home and introduces him to his cohorts (fellow priests and eunuchs): "Look, girls, at the pretty little slave I've bought." The "girls" at first think that their chief has brought them a handsome man, but, seeing the deception and disappointed that "this was not a case of a hind substituting for a maiden but an ass taking the place of a man," they sneer at their boss, saying that this was not a servant for them but "a husband for himself."

Later, they carry the Syrian Goddess in procession: "Next day they all put on tunics of various hues and

'beautified' themselves by smearing colored gunge on their faces and applying eye shadow. Then they set forth, dressed in turbans and robes, some saffron-colored, some of linen and some of gauze; some had white tunics embroidered with a pattern of purple stripes and girded at the waist; and on their feet were yellow slippers." They eventually repair to the baths, where they pick up "a robust young peasant, finely equipped in loin and groin," on whom they perform oral services.

Tibullus, in his book of elegiac poems, asks the god Priapus for advice on dealing with boys, especially his favorite Marathus. Boys should value the gift of poetry rather than cheap tokens of love, which is something the followers of Cybele on Mount Ida cherish in particular: "But the one deaf to the Muses, who sells his love, / Let him follow after Luxury's / Idaean Chariot, fill three hundred cities / With his vain footsteps, hack his worthless flesh / As Phrygian music blares."

Virgil, in the *Aeneid*, contrasts decadent/effeminate Easterners and strong/manly Italians; Numanus insults the Trojans by calling them *Phrygiae* (feminine plural) rather than *Phryges*; and Turnus offends Aeneas with the term *semivir Phryx* ("half-male Phrygian"), which alludes to the Phrygian cult of Cybele and her "half-male" priests.

The high and mighty were also not exempt from suspicion and ridicule. For example, Suetonius, in *The Twelve Caesars*, compares the emperor Augustus, who reputedly enjoyed passive intercourse in his youth, to a *gallus* on a Roman stage.

Even Christian writers were concerned with the *galli*. St. Augustine, in *City of God*, uses the rites of Cybele as examples of pagan atrocities, religious prostitution, and same-sex promiscuity. Anna Klosowska explains: "For Augustine, Cybele is a paradox: a fertility goddess who requires infertility from her castrated priests." (But do not the Roman Catholic Church and some other Christian denominations require from their priests a similar sacrifice, a life of sexual renunciation? To be sure, celibacy is not equivalent to sexual mutilation, but modern religions are no less paradoxical than Cybele in their expectations of priests and their attitudes toward sex.)

Sex and Sexuality

For embracing a permanent state of feminine subjugation, the *galli* were marginalized to the fringes of Roman society. They seem to have converged in a subculture that protected them from the enmity of the majority. In the cult of Cybele, they were able to pursue their minority sexual interests without the ostracism that they experienced in the larger society.

There exists in the *galli* a fascinating interplay of nature and nurture. Walter Stevenson, who claims that eunuchs became more prevalent in the Greco-Roman world, writes: "Though it is helpful to separate discussion of sexuality from evocations of 'nature' and to use the more versatile concept of 'construction of sexuality,' in the case of eunuchs we are forced to face the interaction of these two forces: most often the eunuch's sexuality is first created by a surgical procedure, then, once biology has altered the individual's sexuality, the society creates roles and a 'construction' for him."

Studying the *galli* and eunuchs in general (cultural phenomena that no longer exist in the modern world) thus complicates our understanding of ancient sexuality and puts in question the rigid Foucauldian dichotomy of essential and constructed sexualities. The *galli* are neither masculine nor feminine but almost a third sex, a neuter(ed) category.

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Nikolai Endres received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.