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# The Castrated Gods and their Castration Cults: Revenge, Punishment, and Spiritual Supremacy

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Voluntary castration has existed as a religious practice up to the present day, openly in India and secretly in other parts of the world. Gods in a number of different cultures were castrated, a mutilation that paradoxically tended to increase rather than diminish their powers. This cross-cultural examination of the eunuch gods examines the meaning associated with divine emasculation in Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, the Roman Empire, India, and northern Europe to the degree that these meanings can be read from the wording of myths, early accounts, and the castration cults for some of these gods. Three distinct patterns of godly castration emerge: divine dynastic conflicts involving castration; a powerful goddess paired with a weaker male devotee castrated because of his relationship with her; and *magus* gods whose castration demonstrates their superiority. Castration cults associated with some of these gods—and other gods whose sexuality was ambiguous, such as Jesus—some of them existing up to the present day, illuminate the spiritual powers associated with castration for gods and mortals.

**Keywords:** *castration, eunuch, Osiris, Kumarbi, Ouranos, Cybele, Attis, Adonis, Combabus, Indra, Shiva, Odin, Hijra, Skoptsky*

Castration traditionally refers to the removal of a male's testicles (orchiectomy), and for humans may include the removal of the penis (penectomy). Currently about 600,000 men have been medically castrated for prostate, testicular, or penile cancers, exclusive of sex-reassignment (e.g., Wibowo, Johnson, & Wassersug, 2016). Historically human castration was a social tool (e.g., Bullough, 2002) to enfeeble captive enemies and criminals by reducing androgen production, strongly associated with aggression, eliminate their ability to reproduce, and humiliate them by neutering their masculinity in highly gendered societies. It was also forced on prepubescent boys to prevent sexual maturity in order to produce a specialized labor force for positions of trust that did not require brute labor, such as: courtiers, government officials, and civil servants; guardians of elite women, especially in royal harems; upper servants in wealthy households; military officers; and singers. The castration industry was profitable, despite low survival rates (e.g.,

Mack, 1964; Wilson & Roehrborn, 1999). These two emasculated groups were a stark contrast to self-made eunuchs—adult males who voluntarily cut off their genitals to serve the object of their worship. Religious *castrati* continue to exist up to the present day, openly in India (e.g., Nanda, 1999; Sharma, 1989) and secretly elsewhere (e.g., Johnson, Brett, Roberts, & Wassersug, 2007; Wassersug, Zelenietz, & Squire, 2004).

Moreover, a surprising number of gods in different cultures were castrated, a mutilation that paradoxically tended to increase rather than diminish their powers. To date no cross-cultural comparisons exist for the eunuch gods or their cults, despite textual records stretching from the present day back to the beginning of civilization. What meanings were associated with divine emasculation in archaic contexts? Although the diversity of the range of societies in which such stories appear is far too vast to contextualize each one in an article—and most of the cults associated with these gods existed

in oral traditions for centuries in various localities—the storylines themselves indicate what the transition from whole-bodied male to something different represented in the plot of the myth. Thus, even if the nuances and encultured understandings of such transitions cannot be fathomed from this distance, the myths are explicit about what happened to these emasculated gods and how their powers changed. Often the recorders (frequently cultural outsiders themselves) provide their own understanding of the symbolism, which may or may not be accurate, and, in any case, is a snapshot of a widespread tradition enduring for generations. Critics, with reason, object to bringing together mythical themes or symbols from diverse chronologies and civilizations as doing violence to their various contexts, their historiography, and the like—especially, in this case, since castration myths extend from ancient times to the present day and touch such complex issues as sexual preference and identity and gender presentation, an area of emergent Western research and attitudes quite different from those of the cultures that produced such myths. Instead, the approach taken here is that common to comparative mythology, which examines such tropes cross-culturally over vast periods of time and local variations for an overview of common symbolism, much the way seminal comparative or thematic studies have done (e.g., Bierlein, 1994; Campbell, 2008/1949, 1968; Dumézil, 1970a, 1973; Frazer, 1951; Perry, 1991; Puhvel, 1987).

The myths can be examined for what they seem to say to now to contemporary readers, and like most myths, they will say different things to different people, even now, hence the proliferation of religious sects. Taking them at face value, albeit from a modern Western perspective focused on the plot of the myths, as documented, reveals three distinct, explicit patterns of godly emasculation: divine dynastic conflicts involving castration; a powerful goddess paired with a weaker male devotee castrated because of his relationship with her; and *magus* gods whose castration demonstrates their superiority. In addition to the myths of castrated gods, some had castration cults that may reveal different facets of the meaning of emasculation for initiates. With the emergence of voluntary body modification and increasing acceptance of anatomical, sexual, and

gendered expression beyond sexual dimorphism in certain modern Western cultures, these venerable religions warrant examination for their application to contemporary spirituality separate from any claims—most of them highly speculative indeed—that could be made about the historical regard for castrated gods. As will be shown, castrating a god seemed to have less to do with transcending sexual dimorphism and gendered polarities and more to do with transcending limitations associated with physicality for greater and more sublime divine powers. These traditions are presented in roughly chronological order by thematic grouping.

### Divine Dynastic Castrations

The earliest textual evidence of a castrated god refers to Osiris whose central role in Egyptian religion dates back to the Old Kingdom *Pyramid Texts* (third millennium BCE) from beginnings lost in prehistory (e.g., Mackenzie, 1994; Quirke & Spencer, 1992). His cult lasted until about the fifth century CE and covered a geographic range extended by the Roman Empire. As with any such hardy tradition, versions of the Osiris myth proliferated over time and locality, but the core castration myth is consistent.

The earth-god Geb and the sky-goddess Nut have four children, sons Osiris and Set and daughters Isis and Nephthys. Isis marries Osiris, and Nephthys marries Set. Osiris and Isis rule Egypt as its first divine pharaonic ruling couple. Set murders Osiris, for motives and by means absent from early sources, but by about the XXth Dynasty (1200 BCE; Mackenzie, 1994; Quirke & Spencer, 1992), tradition has it that Set dismembers Osiris's body after killing him, scattering the pieces all over Egypt, which prevents Osiris from being revived by destroying his body's integrity. Although not mentioned in Egyptian sources, Osiris's penis (without reference to testicles) is one of the separated parts, and in some versions, it is completely destroyed (e.g., Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*, *Moralia*, 5.18; Diodorus, *Library*, 1.2.1, 1.22.6, 4.6.3). Isis and Nephthys change themselves into birds to fly far and wide searching for Osiris's remains in order to reconstitute his body. They succeed, and with the help of Thoth, god of healing magic, and Anubis, psychopomp and lord of funerary preparations, Osiris is sufficiently revived

that Isis can copulate with his magically regenerated penis. "Your sister Isis has come to you, aroused [for] love of you. You have [sat] her on your phallus so that your seed might emerge into her" (*Pyramid Texts*, Teti, antechamber, west-south walls, 198). To celebrate, Isis causes a likeness of Osiris's member to be set up in the temples as an object of reverence (Diodorus, *Library*, 4.6.3). But the magic that restored Osiris is temporary, so he passes into the afterlife to become the god of resurrection.

Isis bears Osiris's posthumous son, the sky-god Horus, who traditionally avenges his father's murder through a series of battles with his uncle Set (recent scholarship indicates that their battles were originally unconnected to Osiris's murder, and that the two threads were brought together before the Pyramid Texts were recorded; e.g., Griffiths, 1960, 1980). In one of their fights, Horus castrates Set, who was perceived to be a god of chaotic sexual power and indiscriminate desire, thus negating much of his force. Ultimately the tribunal of gods rule in Horus's favor because of his string of triumphs over his uncle, so Horus becomes the tutelary god of Egypt in his father's place. Despite his role in Osiris's death, Set did not become the personification of evil in Egyptian culture for many more centuries (e.g., Griffiths, 1960, 1980; James, 1960; Shaw, 2000; te Velde, 1967), nor is there evidence that his castration had any effect on his worship, which waxed and waned in popularity over the centuries.

Returning to Osiris, his total dismemberment, rather than the loss of his penis per se, destroyed his ability to live on earth, but his reconstituted organ produced a successor strong enough to vanquish and castrate the castrator. Furthermore, Osiris became god of resurrection, specifically connected to the vegetative renewal of Egypt. His cult featured annual celebrations linking the pharaoh's power to the inundation of the Nile, Osiris's bodily destruction and resurrection, and renewal of plant growth (e.g., McCabe, 2008). *Khoiakh*, a seed-planting festival, re-enacted the reconstitution of Osiris's body, including restoration of his phallus, although it was apparently not given special treatment compared to his other body parts (Bleeker, 1967; University College London, 2003). Phalli were cult objects in the major Osiris temples, but only priests had access to the

inner precincts where such objects were kept, and (oddly) no evidence indicates that women's private fertility magic involved phalli (e.g., Pinch, 1994; Robbins, 1993; Tyldesley, 1995). Furthermore, no evidence exists for eunuchism in Egyptian religions, even though secular eunuchs were common (e.g., Jonckheere, 1954). Even when the Isis cult later became a mystery religion in which initiates underwent a typical death-and-rebirth-as-a-better-person rite (Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 11; McCabe, 2008), this transformational process had little to do with Osiris's castration, revival, and transformation, and the Osiris cult was never a mystery religion.

Certain themes in the Osiris story appear in the castration myths of later cultures (tracing the diffusion among castration myths is beyond the scope of this paper). The Hurrian castration myths and their offshoots include the same notion that one god's severed parts may produce a scion capable of exacting vengeance on the castrator.

The Hurrians of Anatolia, most notably associated with the kingdom of Mittani, influenced the better-known Hittites, among other Mesopotamian and Semitic peoples (e.g., Burkert, 2005; Jacob, 1999; Puhvel, 1987). In the Bronze Age Hurrian pantheon, whose origins are obscure, Alalu is the king of heaven served by Anu, the sky-god who is his cup-bearer (Goetze, 1969; *Kingship in Heaven, Song of Kumarbi* CTH 344). After nine years, Anu overthrows Alalu, banishing him to the earth. Then after Anu reigns for nine years, his son Kumarbi challenges him, catches him by the feet, drags him down from the sky, bites off his genitals and swallows them. Anu taunts Kumarbi, saying:

Thou rejoicest...because thou hast swallowed my manhood....In thine inside I have planted a heavy burden. Firstly [sic], I have impregnated thee with the noble storm-god [Teshub]. Secondly [sic], I have impregnated thee with the river Aranzahas [Tigris], not to be endured. Thirdly [sic], I have impregnated thee with the noble Tasmisus [attendant of the Storm-God]. Three dreadful gods have I planted in thy belly as seed. (Goetze, 1969, p. 120).

Kumarbi tries to avoid his fate by spitting the semen onto the ground, which impregnates the

earth with two children (Goetze, 1969; Leick, 1991). He banishes Anu and his allies to the underworld. Kumarbi waits out the months of his pregnancy and finally is cut open to deliver Teshub. Kumarbi tries to devour his offspring but is thwarted. Teshub conspires with his grandfather Anu to depose Kumarbi. Kumarbi mates with a rock and produces a monster named Ullikummi who battles Teshub and the other gods but is ultimately defeated.

Anu's vengeance explicitly comes through the supernatural power of his devoured parts that impregnate his son, and his semen is so potent that it creates progeny upon contact with the earth and offspring who ultimately triumph over his castrator-son. Thus, the emasculated Anu has the last laugh. Ayali-Darshan (2013) argued that Teshub has double paternity since he was conceived from a union between his grandfather and father, and though that may be literally true, a Hurrian psalm to Teshub of Aleppo specifically calls Kumarbi Teshub's "mother" and Anu, his father (p. 65). The castrated "penetrator" is seen as more masculine than the castrating receiver, a common attitude toward male-male sex in the ancient world. Kumarbi's pregnancy also feminizes him in a way Anu's castration does not. Supporting this interpretation, as Hurrian mythology diffused, Anu was retained as the god of heaven in Mesopotamian cosmology, but Kumarbi was replaced by Mesopotamian and Hittite grain-goddesses (Puhvel, 1987).

The Hurrian-Hittite myth is widely recognized as the basis for Hesiod's seventh-century BCE genealogy of the Greek pantheon, the *Theogony* (e.g., Burkert, 2005; Puhvel, 1987). In the *Theogony* (ll. 116–200), the sky-god Ouranos (Uranus) mates with the earth-goddess Gaia each night, and she bears him progressively monstrous children: first the twelve Titans; next the three one-eyed Cyclopes; and finally the three hundred-handed Hecatoncheires. Ouranos hates his offspring and imprisons the youngest deep underground, which hurts Gaia. She forms a sickle with a flint blade and begs her sons to avenge her by castrating their father. Only Kronos (Saturn), the youngest Titan, agrees. He ambushes Ouranos on his way to Gaia's bed, cutting off his genitals with the sickle. Where Ouranos's blood splashes to the earth up

spring the race of Giants, the Erinyes (Furies), and the Meliae (ash-tree nymphs). Kronos tosses his father's testicles into the sea, which foams around them to produce the goddess of beauty and sexual love, Aphrodite (Venus; ll. 190–200; Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 7.222). With this act, Kronos becomes king of the Titans, but Ouranos curses him, predicting that just as Kronos rebelled against his father, so Kronos's children will overthrow him. Ouranos does not die, but he ceases to visit Gaia and indeed seems to lose his anthropomorphism and agency, becoming the impersonal vault of the sky (Sale, 1984).

Kronos fears the curse will come true (Hesiod, *Theogony*, ll. 453–506). To secure his rule, he does what his father did: he imprisons his younger siblings, the Hecatonochieres and Cyclopes, and, as his wife Rhea bears him children, he devours them. But she hides his youngest, Zeus, who, when he reaches maturity comes in disguise to Kronos's court and becomes his cup-bearer. Zeus drugs his father with a potion that causes him to vomit up all the children he had swallowed magically restored to life. Zeus frees his imprisoned relatives, and together they wage the epic battle of the younger Olympians against the Titans (ll. 623–885). The gods prevail, and Zeus becomes the king of heaven and thunder-god.

The intergenerational themes of the Hurrian myth are easy to discern, but with the difference that the castration itself is a procreative act since the bleeding wound and severed genitals produce a host of new beings on contact with an inert (non-anthropomorphic) earth and sea. Ouranos's curse also retains its power in the instants before he loses agency.

Nothing is known about the Hurrian castrated god cults until after they became syncretized with those of El, Enlil, and Inanna-Ishtar and lost those themes (e.g., James, 1960; Krul, 2018; Leick, 1991), although Ishtar's cult involved what appear to be androgynous, hermaphroditic, and/or homosexual priests, though not necessarily castrated ones (e.g., Greenberg, 1988; Leick, 1991; Townsley, 2011) for reasons that have remained obscure. The scant sources on the Kronos/Saturn cults say nothing about castration (e.g., Bremmer, 2008a,b; Miller, 2010).

The Osiris, Hurrian-Hittite, and Greek castration myths share themes of dynastic, intergenerational conflict summarized in Table 1. The castrators' victims survive but are unable to remain on earth, according to the myths; nevertheless, their severed parts accomplish feats of virility the victims were unable to perform when they were whole, including setting in motion the castrator's downfall and producing new supernatural beings who succeed the victim dynastically and go on to establish a new order associated with a sky- or storm-god.

**The Anatolian Goddess and her Boys**

Anatolia (Asia Minor, Asian Turkey) produced the majority of the castrated god myths, including the Hurrian-Hittite cycle previously noted, which diffused with successive Semitic empire mythologies, and then were Hellenized and later spread to the Roman Empire. The best attested involve a great Mother Goddess and her

young consort, though likely few, if any of them, started out that way. Without attempting to trace their evolution and diffusion (an ongoing debate among scholars, e.g., Budin, 2004; Roller, 1999), they are presented more or less chronologically to aid comprehension.

Cybele (Kybele, Meter Oreia, Meter Theon, Mater Deum Magna Idaea, Mother of the Gods, the Great Mother, etc.) originated in Phrygian Anatolia, where her name was simply Matar (Mother), and some information about her origins is an important corrective to the changes that occurred with Hellenization and her present-day appropriation by the "Goddess Movement." The primary sources for the rehabilitation of Matar and her cult in Phrygia are Roller's *In Search of God the Mother* (1999) and Bøgh's (2007) analysis of material finds. Roller (1999) has overwhelmingly demonstrated that the earliest evidence of Matar only goes back to the first millennium BCE, despite Goddess Movement proponents, including some scholars

	Osiris/Set/Horus	Anu/Kumarbi/Teshub	Ouranos/Kronos/Zeus
<b>Reason for castration</b>	Unknown; rivalry for power?	Unknown; rivalry for power?	Avenge mother at her request
<b>Act of castration</b>	Cut off penis Destroyed	Eat testicles Victim curses castrator	Cut off testicles Victim curses castrator
<b>Severed parts</b>	Magically restored to body Impregnate wife Produce sky-god	Ejected semen produces 2 offspring Impregnate castrator Produce 3 deities including storm-god	Blood produces 3 supernatural races Testicles produce goddess of love and beauty
<b>Victim's offspring</b>	Conquer castrator Succeed victim Establish new order	Conquer castrator Succeed castrator Establish new order	Conquer castrator Succeed castrator Establish new order
<b>Fate of victim</b>	Dies to earth Becomes god of resurrection in the afterlife	Banished to underworld	Loses anthropomorphic qualities Becomes inert sky
<b>Fate of castrator</b>	Castrated Loses succession	Conquered Loses succession and manliness	Succeeds victim Conquered by son like victim Loses succession

**Table 1.** Themes in Intergenerational Dynastic Conflict Involving Castration

(e.g., Gimbutas, 1982, 1989, 1991, 2001; James, 1960; Neumann, 1973; Robertson, 1996; Wilber, 1986), feminists, and popularizers (e.g., Eisler, 1987, 1995; Roscoe, 1996; Walker, 1983), who have touted Cybele as a prime example of a single, prehistoric goddess representing Mother Earth, allegedly the first divinity humans worshipped and of whom virtually all goddesses are but different manifestations. Goddess Movement theory can be summarized as follows: 1) Early people did not understand the role of males in sexual reproduction, so the Mother (Earth) Goddess was an unpaired, parthenogenic mother believed to produce and sustain life in hunter-gatherer societies. 2) With the rise of agriculture, people became aware of the necessity of both sexes for reproduction, which created a sense of dimorphic dualities. 3) Consequently, the Mother became associated with a virile young god who was her son/lover (sometimes killed and replaced by a younger rival while the Mother remained the same). 4) As gender roles became more differentiated and control over the environment became more necessary in agrarian societies, the Mother began to represent the wild, chaotic forces of nature that had to be domesticated, and the son/lover was replaced by a warlike Father Sky-God, who defeated the wild Mother and gained ascendancy. 5) This change led to institutionalized sex and gender inequality, war, and slavery, among other evils. Popular as this view is with some audiences, it does not hold water: the historical, iconographic, and material record does not support it (e.g., Hutton, 1991, 1997; Bøgh, 2007; Roller, 1999).

Regarding the case in point, the pre-Hellenic Phrygian evidence for Matar is limited to iconography and material finds, and strikingly she is the only Anatolian divinity to be graphically represented before Hellenic times (Roller, 1999). She is always shown in the doorway of her house, accompanied by a bird of prey, signifying hunting (Bøgh, 2007; Roller, 1999), and her local names stressed her connection with nearby mountains (not one mountain in particular). When Matar was depicted with other animals, they tended to be predators, especially lions, suggesting nature in the wild, not fructification. Centuries later Diodorus

Siculus in 49 BCE said that Matar was suckled by leopards and other “especially ferocious wild beasts” (*Library*, 3.58.1.) Though known as Mother, she was rarely depicted with children, grain, or traditional signs of fertility, but rather with symbols of royalty, city gates and towers, suggesting that she was mother of the state and ruling power, an association that lasted through the Roman Empire. However, some research (summarized in Bøgh, 2007, pp. 320–322) indicates that Phrygian Matar may *previously* have had a counterpart Father-God called Ata, a name or title associated with royalty and high priests, used to designate successive incumbents rather than a personal name. Bøgh concluded that the archeological evidence “seems to show a development from a pair of gods, a Mother and a Father, in Phrygia ... to a prominent, even singular female goddess as an object of worship... . Moreover, the strong connections with fertility were not evident until Roman times” (p. 334).

With that preamble, Matar’s evolution into the Great Mother Cybele of the Attis castration myths can be considered. Matar’s worship as Cybele spread to Greece in the late fourth century BCE, and from thence to imperial Rome. She became syncretized with many other goddesses, some of fertility and sexual love, including Kubaba, a Hittite goddess of fertility and beauty; Rhea, originally a Cretan goddess who became “mother of the gods” through her marriage to Zeus in the Greek system; and Demeter, a Greek earth and fertility goddess (Roller, 1999). She was also syncretized with virgin-huntress goddesses, like Artemis and Diana. Cybele’s invention of the pan-pipes, cymbals, and kettledrums (Diodorus, *Library*, 3.58) associated her with Dionysus and his orgiastic rites featuring music and wild dancing. It is Hellenized Cybele, rather than Phrygian Matar, whose myths involve castration of her male companion Attis.

First-hand information about Cybele and Attis is very late; most comes from Pausanias, a Greek living in the second-century CE Roman empire, relating diverse accounts he came across during his travels. In the simplest, Attis is a human who “was a eunuch from birth” (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 7.19.9–10) who goes to

Lydia in Anatolia, where he becomes such a pious devotee of Cybele that the goddess elevates him to be worshipped alongside her. Being “born a eunuch,” contemporary LGBT popularizers notwithstanding who want this archaic designation to mean gay men impotent around women or even lesbians (e.g., Brustman, 1999; Brentlinger, 2008–2016), almost certainly refers to boys born with genital deformities: undescended testicles (cryptorchidism), which occurs in about one-third of premature babies, and 3% of full-term births (Wood, & Elder, 2009); anorchia, in which a Y-chromosome fetus develops without testes; testicular or scrotal hypoplasia, in which the testes are small and poorly formed during fetal development; or certain types of ambiguous genitalia (excluding here forms of hermaphroditism; Matsumoto & Bremner, 2016).

Attis as Cybele’s priest rather than her lover occurs in other myths and may reflect the Phrygian tradition that Ata (Hellenized Attis) is a priestly title rather than an individual’s given name. Centuries later, Maurus Servius Honoratus (*Ad Aeneid*, 1.115) reported that one of Cybele’s handsome priests named Attis runs into the forest to escape the lustful pursuit of a Phrygian king. The king overtakes him. The two men fight, and during the struggle each emasculates the other. The king dies immediately, but Cybele’s priests find Attis before he expires. The goddess cannot revive him, but orders elaborate obsequies, commanding that all her priests henceforth become eunuchs in his honor. In Ovid’s version (*Fasti*, 4.222–246), Cybele entrusts her devoted acolyte Attis with safeguarding her temple while she is away. She also asks him to remain chaste (for reasons of ritual purity rather than for love, it seems). He promises, but then breaks his vow by falling in love with a Naiad. When Cybele finds out, she destroys his lover, and Attis goes mad with guilt over his betrayal, eventually cutting off the parts that had made him break his word. Cybele turns him into a fir tree.

Pausanias also reported that Attis is Cybele’s beloved (*Description of Greece*, 7.19.11–13), a pairing that appears in other sources (e.g., Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes*, 5). Zeus and Gaia have a hermaphroditic child named Agdistis, whose male

and female sexual powers frighten the gods. They give Agdistis a sleeping potion, and one of the gods ties Agdistis’s foot to his/her penis with a strong rope. When Agdistis stands up upon awakening, s/he unwittingly tears the member off, drenching the earth with blood, which produces a growth of lush vegetation, including a mature fruit tree (variously almond or pomegranate). A river-god’s daughter becomes pregnant from holding some of the fruit in her gown and gives birth to Attis, who grows up to be spectacularly handsome. In some versions Agdistis, Attis’s emasculated hermaphroditic parent, became identified with Cybele (e.g., Gasparro, 1985; Lancellotti, 2002). Agdistis/Cybele falls violently in love with Attis, but he is promised in marriage to a (human) princess. Agdistis/Cybele is enraged by the idea of losing him. She appears at the wedding in her terrifying divine splendor, a sight that maddens all the wedding guests: Attis and his prospective father-in-law castrate themselves in their frenzy, and the bride cuts off her breasts. Attis’s wound is fatal, but a remorseful Agdistis/Cybele intervenes with Zeus to render his body incorruptible since he cannot be revived.

When in 204 BCE, the Sibylline prophecies declared that Matar could save Rome by defeating Hannibal in the Punic wars, her worship was imported to the Empire’s capital as a state religion, and Rome’s subsequent victory ensured her status, reinforcing her venerable “mother of the state” role. Her holidays were official civic celebrations, but popularly and privately she was worshipped as a goddess of fertility and sexuality (Bøgh, 2007; Roller, 1999). Cybele’s Roman celebrations came to include ritual days of mourning for Attis followed by a day of celebration around the Spring Equinox: apparently Attis became a vegetation god who was somehow revived, though revival runs counter to known sources since he is turned into a conifer; is dead but uncorruptible or produces flowers from his wounds). It may well be that the spring celebrations were general and did not actually refer to a resurrection of Attis, per se; indeed, suggestions of his resurrection are very late, apparently closely connected with the rise of Christianity (Cook, 2017). The only source is a very indirect reference from Julius Firmicus Maternus in a fourth-century CE



Christian polemic against pagan religions, stating, “In order to satisfy the wrathful woman [Cybele] or rather to seek solace for the penitent one [also Cybele], they [Phrygians; sic] boast that the one whom a short time before they buried [Attis], now lived again” (*De Errore Profanarum Religionum*, 3).

In some versions (e.g., Catullus, *Poems*, 63.4–8; Ovid, *Fasti* 4.222–246), Attis cuts off his testicles, but others (e.g., Lucian, *De Syria Dea* 15; Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 1.17) maintain that Cybele somehow causes the castration. According to Casadio (2003), the Cybele-Attis myth may have survived in two irreconcilable traditions: 1) Attis is the goddess’s acolyte, who castrates himself and thus negates any future sexual urge, remaining at her side as a loyal servant-priest; and 2) he bleeds to death as the male member of a divine couple (p. 237). Attis may be variously human, immortal, lover, son, acolyte, royal, or a shepherd; no matter: his fate is always inextricable with, and usually dependent on, Cybele. He has few, if any godlike powers, whole or emasculated.

Two later Anatolian goddess myths in Hellenized and Roman versions resembled the Cybele-Attis stories, that of Adonis and Aphrodite, and that of Atargatis. All shared apparently indistinguishable castration cults in later days, discussed together below.

The Anatolian Adonis is only known from Greek sources, appearing first in a sixth-century BCE Sapphic fragment (*Poems*, 3.59) describing the mourning rites women celebrated in his honor. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (10.503–739), Adonis is a youth so attractive that goddesses Aphrodite and Persephone fight over him. Zeus settles their dispute by commanding Adonis to spend one-third of the year with Persephone in the underworld, one-third with Aphrodite, and the remaining third with the lover of his choice. Adonis opts to spend his time with Aphrodite. When she must leave him alone in the forest for a period, she warns him not to provoke predatory animals, but he ignores her advice and is gored in the groin by a boar (sent in some versions by different divinities who wish to punish Aphrodite through him; Cyrino, 2010), a fatal emasculation. When Aphrodite finds his body, she is distraught and causes anemones to flourish where his blood spilled.

Worship of Adonis lasted about a thousand years, with a focus on his dying (Casadio, 2003): not only does he stay dead, but also his castration creates no supernatural offspring nor nutritive fructification, merely flowers. In a way, his death is actually associated with “negative” plant food: the tradition that Aphrodite laid out Adonis’s corpse among lettuce plants linked them popularly with impotence. Athenaeus, who reported several variants of this association (*DiepnoSophists*, 2.69.b–f), said that a certain type of lettuce was called “eunuch” by the Pythagoreans and “impotent” by women for its ability to depress sexual arousal (2.69.e–f). However, in Theocritus’s poems, Adonis spends six months with Persephone in the underworld and six months on earth, contemporarily interpreted as the vegetative cycle: “Adonis, that is, the grain which is sown, passes six months in the ground after sowing, and Aphrodite has him for six months, which is in the mildness of the open air. And after that people harvest him” (*Scholia in Theocritis, Id.* 3.48d, cited in Cook, 2017, p. 68).

The last Anatolian castration tale concerns Ataratha, whose name was Hellenized to Atargatis, a fertility and sexual love goddess from northern Syria syncretically linked to the virgin war goddess traditions, such as those of Hera, Artemis, and Matar (e.g., Bilde, 1990; Ogden, 1979), and whose many names (Ataryatis, Attayathe, Ta’artha, etc.) suggest her derivation from the Canaanite goddesses Anat, Astarte, and perhaps Asherah (e.g., Stuckey, 2009). She has mainly come down in history as Atargatis or Dea Syria, the Syrian Goddess, from the second-century CE accounts of Hellenized Syrian Lucian of Samosata (Dirven, 1997), writing of her cult center at Hieropolis. According to Lucian (*De Syria Dea*, 19–29), Atargatis appeared to the Assyrian queen Stratonice in a vision, commanding the queen to build her a temple in faraway Hieropolis, and later she punishes Stratonice for being dilatory about it. The king sends Stratonice away with treasure and staff to accomplish this pious task, including a project manager Combabus, a good-looking courtier who enjoys the king’s confidence. Anticipating trouble because of the queen’s reputation, Combabus is reluctant to take the commission, but unable to refuse, he secretly castrates himself prior to the journey as a preventive, preserving his organs in a box, which he

seals and gives to his master for safekeeping as his most precious treasure. The king promises to guard the box until Combabus returns and also applies his seal to it.

Combabus's fears come true. Stratonice pursues him so relentlessly that even the disclosure that he is a eunuch cannot dissuade her love, though she cannot realize her lust. Too many people notice Stratonice's ardent behavior, and word of it gets back to the king. Upon their return, Stratonice, to save herself, accuses Combabus of trying to seduce her. The king sentences him to death. When Combabus asks the king for his "treasure" and displays his dismembered parts, the king is so moved by Combabus's loyalty that he exonerates him, erects a statue of him in Atargatis's temple, and commands that her priests be castrated to honor the deed (Lucian, *De Syria Dea* 26). Lucian further relates (27) that a foreign woman, upon seeing Combabus officiating at the rites of Atargatis,

falls madly in love with him and is so heartbroken when she learns he is a eunuch that she kills herself. From that time forward Combabus wears women's clothing to avoid inspiring such feelings.

The tale is legendary, although a historical queen named Stratonice did exist (Stratonice of Syria, 317–268 BCE), as did a male statue in women's clothing in Atargatis's temple at Hieropolis (Lucian, *De Syria Dea*, 26). The sexually and politically powerful queen and attractive commoner resemble the other unequal pairs in Anatolian castration myths, but Combabus's rebuffing the queen's love by extreme lengths to prove his dedication to the king reads more like a moral tale for secular eunuchs in the royal administrations and harems of the time. Atargatis, other than setting the plot in motion for the humans, is not central to the castration dynamics.

Likewise, the unwitting self-emasculatation of the hermaphroditic Agdistis does not fit the pattern

	<b>Agdistis</b>	<b>Cybele/Attis Priest</b>	<b>Cybele/Attis Lover</b>	<b>Aproditte/Adonis</b>	<b>Stratonice/Combabus</b>
<b>Reason for castration</b>	Born hermaphrodite	None or Self-defense against homosexual rape or Punishment for disobeying/ betraying goddess	Punishment for betraying goddess	Punishment for disobeying goddess	Ensure sexual continence
<b>Act of castration</b>	Tricked into self-castration with ligature	Born eunuch or Combat injury or Self-castration	Crazed self-castration caused by goddess	Gored by boar	Self-castration
<b>Severed parts</b>	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Boxed and sealed Exonerate eunuch
<b>Fate of victim</b>	Dies Blood produces magical vegetation that produces Attis	Dies incorruptible or Turns into tree or Corpse produces flowers	Dies Blood produces flowers	Dies Blood produces flowers Corpse causes lettuces to produce impotence	Rewarded for sacrifice Cross-dresses to amplify negation of masculinity

**Table 2.** Themes of Anatolian Goddess-Youthful Partner Myths

of the goddess-inferior male pairs. As a group, the Anatolian goddess castration myths differ in their dynamics (Table 2), with all the castration themes possibly being Hellenic accretions. Common themes are castration as punishment for disobeying or betraying the goddess, whether self-inflicted or caused by the goddess or another. Emasculation tends to be a fatal transformation that restores the errant youth to the goddess's favor.

However diverse the goddess myths were originally, their cults as Hellenized and then imported to Rome came to resemble one another in featuring eunuch priesthoods (e.g., Bremmer, 2008b; Smith, 1996). Cybele became assimilated with Demeter and Rhea (sister and wife of Kronos) and began to be worshipped with Dionysus (Bacchus) and Pan (Lightfoot, 2002; Roller, 1998), whose rites, like hers, involved ecstatic dancing to loud music from tympana, castanets and cymbals. Unlike the drunken, orgiastic celebrations of Dionysus and Pan, however, Cybele's involved bloodletting. By the fifth century BCE, according to Bøgh (2007), Greeks began to display an "anti-oriental" attitude toward her worship, ironically blaming their own accretions as signs of her "alien" nature, when no evidence for these elements exists for her worship in pre-Hellenic Phrygia. The same happened with Atargatis, the "Syrian Goddess." Nothing suggests that her priests were eunuchs in the Graeco-Cypriot, Phoenician nor Hellenistic cults with one exception in a remote caravan city on the Euphrates where Adonis was worshipped in Atargatis's temple, and vice versa, in reciprocal syncretism documented in 152 BCE (Casadio, 2003). In both places, emasculated priests cross-dressed, did women's work, and employed loud music and ecstatic dance in their rituals. In Rome eunuch priests of both Atargatis and Cybele were called Galli, a word whose etymology remains disputed (perhaps deriving from Galatians, referring to an area of central Phrygia, or the river Gallus; perhaps from the Sumerian word *gallu*, meaning *in a woman's voice*, similar to *gala*, the word used for Inanna-Ishtar's gender-transgressing priests; or perhaps from the Indo-European \**ghel* for *cutting*; e.g., Leick, 2003; Lightfoot, 2002). Tellingly Apuleius has the leader of some Galli swear an oath by Atargatis, Adonis, and Astarte (Aphrodite),

and Cybele and Attis (*The Golden Ass*, 8.25), demonstrating how conflated these cults were in Roman minds.

The Anatolian goddesses' rites involved cacophonous music, howling, and ecstatic dancing with circular head-tossing, flagellation, and cutting, culminating in self-castration attested by multiple late sources. For example, Sextus Propertius asked, "Why do some men slash their arms with sacred knives, and are cut to pieces to frenzied Phrygian rhythms?" (*Elegies*, 2.22). According to Pliny the Elder, "The priests of the Mother of the Gods [Cybele] called Galli castrate themselves, if we accept the account of Marcus Caelius, with a piece of Samian pottery, the only way of avoiding dangerous results" (*Natural History*, 35.46.1; cf., Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.222).

The Galli come:

And hollow cymbals, tight-skinned tambourines  
Resound around to bangings of their hands;  
The fierce horns threaten with a raucous bray;  
The tubed pipe excites their maddened minds  
In Phrygian measures; they bear before them  
knives,  
Wild emblems of their frenzy  
(Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 2.581)

In Rome, the castration rite was part of a celebration called the Day of Blood on March 24, with the holiday mourning Attis's death another occasion for ecstatic dancing, self-flagellation and self-cutting. The same happened at Atargatis's temple in Hieropolis:

On certain days a multitude flocks into the temple, and the Galli in great numbers, sacred as they are, perform the ceremonies of the men and gash their arms and turn their backs to be lashed. Many bystanders play on the pipes the while many beat drums; others sing divine and sacred songs. All this performance takes place outside the temple....

During these days they are made Galli. As the Galli sing and celebrate their orgies, frenzy falls on many of them and many who had come as mere spectators afterwards are found to have committed the great act. I will narrate what they do. Any young man who has resolved on this

action strips off his clothes, and with a loud shout bursts into the midst of the crowd, and picks up a sword from a number of swords ... kept ready for many years for this purpose. He takes it and castrates himself and then runs wild through the city, bearing in his hands what he has cut off. He casts it into any house at will, and from this house he receives women's raiment and ornaments. Thus they act during their ceremonies of castration. (Lucian, *De Syria Dea*, 50–51)

According to Lucian (*De Syria Dea*, 28–29), eunuch priests engaged in ritual sex at the temple in Hieropolis fronted by huge phalli that were decorated and climbed by devotees at a yearly festival. "Women desire the Galli and the Galli go mad for a woman. Yet, no one is jealous, for they consider the matter quite holy" (22). The Galli were allegedly skilled at oral sex with men and women (Martial, 3.81). Aside from digital, oral, or anal sex, genital sex was possible for priests who had been adults at the time of emasculation. (Post-pubertal removal of the testes reduces androgen and eliminates sperm production, but it is still possible to experience desire, have penile erections, and ejaculate seminal fluid; e.g., Wilson & Roehrborn, 1999). Church historian Eusebius recounts with horror how castrated priests of Adonis engaged in sexual congress (probably sacred prostitution for donations; Casadio, 2003):

Here men undeserving of the name forgot the dignity of their sex, and propitiated the demon by their effeminate conduct; here too unlawful commerce of women and adulterous intercourse, with other horrible and infamous practices, were perpetrated in this temple as in a place beyond the scope and restraint of law. (Eusebius, *De Vita Constantini*, 3.53).

Much of the Roman objection to the Galli's activities involved perceived exploitation of their status as foreigners, non-citizens, and priests to suborn gullible women, not necessarily disgust at their sexual acts per se, given the Dionysian bacchanals; the Galli enjoyed legal impunity from charges of sexual misconduct (e.g., Beard, 1996;

Casadio, 2003; Latham, 2012). Their sexuality was feared and ridiculed, not least because castration and cross-dressing affronted Roman norms of masculinity (e.g., Taylor, 2000): "The ancients looked upon Attis (and likewise the gallus) as a *semivir*, an *effeminatus*, not as an androgyne or a hermaphrodite" (Casadio, 2003, p. 243), an attitude clearly displayed in Apuleius's satire when a Gallus brings a donkey to his fellow priests, saying:

"Look what a pretty slave I've bought you, girls!" The "girls" were his troop of eunuchs who began dancing in delight, raising a dissonant clamour with tuneless, shrill, effeminate cries, thinking no doubt his purchase was a slave-boy ready to do them service. But on seeing...an ass instead of a boy, they turned up their noses, and made caustic remarks to their leader. "Here's no slave," one cried, "but a husband of your own." And "Oh," called another, "don't swallow that little morsel all by yourself, give your little doves the occasional bite." (8.26)

One day...they paid a visit to the bath-house, returning afterwards with a guest, a strapping countryman, with strong limbs and thighs. They'd barely tasted their salad hors-d'oeuvres before those vile creatures were driven by their unspeakable urges to commit the vilest acts of perverse lust. They soon had the young man naked on his back, and crowding round him forced their foul caresses on him. (8.30)

Apuleius also despised the Galli as manipulative mendicants exploiting their rites for gain:

Dressing in bright array, beautifying their faces un-beautifully, daubing their cheeks with rouge, and highlighting their eyes off they went, in turbans and saffron robes... waving frightful swords and axes, leapt about and chanted, in a frenzied dance to the stirring wail of the flute ... . On reaching the gate [of a wealthy manor], they rushed in wildly, filling the place with tuneless cries, heads forward, rotating their necks in endless circling motions, their long pendulous hair swinging around them, now and then wounding their flesh savagely

with their teeth, and at the climax slashing their arms with the double-edged knives they carried. One ... began to rave more ecstatically than the rest, ... simulating a fit of divine madness ... . Then he snatched up the whip, the insignia of those emasculated creatures ... and scourged himself savagely with strokes of its knotted lash, showing amazing fortitude given the pain from his gashes. The ground grew slippery with blood from the flashing blades and flailing whips ... .

But when they were weary at last of self-flagellation, or at least were sated, they ceased their antics and took up a collection, people vying for the pleasure of dropping copper coins, and even silver, into the ample folds of their robes. In this manner they roamed about plundering the whole region. (*The Golden Ass*, 8.26–8.29)

Romans accepted the Anatolian goddesses and their castrated partners, but not their castrated priests (Hales, 2002; Roller, 1998). All *castrati*, religious or secular, were barred from rights accorded to either sex and were not recognized in Roman law because of their unknown gender. Since the involuntary castration of boys increased their market value, whereas adult castration was usually punitive, a man's intentional emasculation was regarded with bafflement and revulsion as fanaticism without material, political, or social reward, and the contemporary records by male elites reflect disgust (e.g., Juvenal, 6.512; Ovid, *Fasti* 4.237; Martial 3.81, 11.74; Pliny, *Natural History*, 11.49). In a gendered world that assumed male superiority and masculine appearance, cross-dressing eunuch priests were thought to have made a crazy choice to become a grade below a woman, give up male privilege, have no place in society, and to display the most disagreeable aspects of both sexes and gender roles (Hester, 2005; Roller, 1998; Taylor, 2000). "Castration puts a man outside archaic society in an absolutely irrevocable way: being neither man nor woman, but 'nothing,' he has no place to go. He has no choice but to adhere to his goddess....Irrespective of motivation, the mere act makes apostasy impossible" (Burkert, 1979, p. 105).

Roman citizens were forbidden to participate in the Galli's activities, and although the emperor Claudius finally granted them permission to do so, including castration, subsequent emperors reversed his stance (e.g., Lancellotti, 2002; Beard, 1996).

Ecstatic self-mutilating priests were the antithesis of the austere officials of traditional Roman religions, who were usually members of the ruling class and required to be physically whole (Beard, 1996). Besides the priesthood, the rites of the Anatolian cults contrasted starkly with the cerebral, restrained functioning of Roman religions (Warrior, 2002), which were transactional and businesslike: the gods grant favors to worshippers in exchange for sacrifices or votive offerings. Instead the foreign goddess cults were extremely emotional, involving personal identification with the goddess's sorrow over the death of her beloved as well as identification with that beloved (Willoughby, 2008). Women, in cultures where few had choice about marriage, could identify with intense mourning over the loss of a sexually desirable youth, which became conflated later with vegetable fertility. The same celebrations, and certainly the castration and/or death themes, provided male devotees with the means Adonis, Attis, and Combabus had to be exalted, transformed, and restored at a higher order to oneness with the beloved goddess. These practices were mystery cults that enabled devotees to experience joy, renewal, and salvation or immortality. According to Bøgh (2007), material records reveal a strong popular affinity for Cybele that belies the elites' disdain—and Cybele's cult lasted in Rome for six centuries. Roman citizens became Galli in Ostia (Hales, 2002), and others wanted to, per Claudius's edict. Mystery cults attracted Romans because they filled a void, offering comfort and emotional connection to the sacred as well as some form of salvation or rebirth into another life. Furthermore, they were open to anyone, including those of low social status (Burkert, 1987).

### **Castration and Spiritual Superiority**

The third castrated-god theme emerges from the Indic traditions, which contain any number of gender-bending, sexually ambiguous deities. The explicitly castrated ones are Indra and Shiva, but

for reasons that will become clear below, in one Hindu myth cycle, the legendary hero Arjuna, a son of Indra, spends a year disguised as a eunuch as part of a curse, teaching the feminine arts of dancing, singing, dressing, and the like, to women (e.g., *Mahabharata*, 4.12, 68). Furthermore, all Arjuna's Pandava brothers are also associated with eunuchism, or at least impotence, and disguise (e.g., *Mahabharata*, 2.76, 5.75, 8.69,70), despite otherwise behaving as fierce, masculine warriors. Since the language in the epic and other sources is ambiguous about whether Arjuna is castrated, hermaphrodite, or merely cross-dressing (a term for eunuchs did not exist in Sanskrit; Doniger, 2003; cf., Custodi, 2007; Hildebeitel, 1980; Loh, 2014)—and is similarly vague concerning his brothers—their stories are omitted to focus on those explicitly involving castration.

Indra is part of a venerable Indo-European tradition of randy pantheon-heads, including the Greek Zeus (e.g., Doniger, 1999; Doniger O'Flaherty, 1973) and Norse Odin, who have reputations for seduction, often by disguise. Indra is rampantly sexual, the "traditional enemy of ascetics" (O'Flaherty, 1969, p. 3). Numerous texts about his sexual adventures exist, the oldest dating to about 1900 BCE. To parse the stories of his castration to something manageable, only the gist of his seduction of Ahalya, which appears in sources from different regions and centuries, is presented. Depending on the source, Indra suffers a variety of punishments for this deed (Söhnen-Thieme, 1996), most involving castration by the time of the *Ramayana* (1.47.26–27, 1.48.1–10; 7.30.22–33; *Mahabharata* 13.34.25–26; 13.4.21). From early sources, such as the *Rig Veda*, in which Indra's virility as king of the gods is a matter for hyperbolic praise, his sexual predations gather increasing disapproval over time (Pattaniak, 2007; Söhnen-Thieme, 1996) as asceticism emerges as an alternative spiritual path: by the period of the *Mahabharata*, his exploits arouse discomfort but not retribution or condemnation; and by the time of the *Ramayana*, his seduction of a married woman is no longer acceptable, and thus his castration is an instrument of social sanction. (This same progression is seen in other religions; for example, Mohammed's astonishing sexual prowess was at first considered a sign of his spiritual attainment,

but later Moslem scholars were embarrassed by the stories (cf., Parrinder, 1996).

The gist of Indra's story is that he desires Ahalya, a woman of supernatural birth and beauty, who is traditionally one of the archetypal Hindu "five virgins" symbolizing female chastity. She is married to Indra's guru, the ascetic Gautama. Indra tries to seduce her while Gautama is away. In diverse versions, Ahalya ranges from innocent victim to willing accomplice in adultery. When they are discovered, Gautama curses her dreadfully, regardless of her degree of complicity. Ahalya endures rigorous penances but with Rama's intercession is eventually redeemed. Gautama's cursing of Indra is also severe. Even though Indra is king of the gods, the spiritually accomplished Gautama's curse removes Indra's penis and testicles in older versions of the tale. Elsewhere, the curse covers Indra's body with a thousand vaginas. In yet other versions, Indra is dismembered, but when the gods reconstitute him, his genitals cannot be found, and he is given those of a ram or a goat (e.g., *Ramayana*, 1.49).

Indra's castration is unambiguously punishment for adultery by his spiritually superior guru who controls his desires. Having his body covered with vulvas or being given the gonads of an animal associated with uncontrolled sexuality and fertility in the Indo-European tradition parades his shame. None of these states is permanent. Indra is a temporarily emasculated god whose reputation is actually virility.

Shiva, the Supreme Being in Shaivism, may be a continuation of Indra (e.g., Doniger O'Flaherty, 1973). Many myths surrounding Shiva, who is paradoxically both ascetic and highly sexed, involve castration; two of his most famous self-castration episodes are told here, the first, a creation story.

Brahma and Vishnu ask Shiva to create (*Mahabharata* 10.17.10–26). In response, Shiva goes underwater to meditate and remains submerged for a millennium. Vishnu becomes impatient and asks Brahma to take on the job of creation, so Brahma fashions all beings. When Shiva finally surfaces, ready to create, he sees that the universe is already full, and furthermore, that Brahma has produced miserable, mortal creatures, unlike the wise,

ascetic immortals Shiva would have produced (e.g., Shulman, 1986). In a rage, Shiva starts to destroy the world with fire. Brahma calms him down, and Shiva places his lethal fire in the sun. But, still in a tantrum, he breaks off his penis, which he says is redundant, since its only use is making creatures. Shiva flings it to the ground, where it plunges through the earth, extending down to the depths of the underworld and up to the vault of heaven. Vishnu and Brahma are unable to find the end or beginning of this mighty pole and worship it.

Shiva's castration is evidence of his lack of sexuality as a creator—yet it is ultimately procreative, releasing his power to the cosmos in a fertility cult of his member (Doniger O'Flaherty, 1973). "What is 'lost' by the god is, apparently, gained by the world ... the secure foundation that, from Vedic times onward, is sought as an anchor for human existence. If Shiva no longer needs his linga [phallus], the world can certainly use it—indeed will worship it" (Shulman, 1986, p. 110).

The second Shiva story has a different beginning but similar conclusion. Shiva castrates himself for "seducing" the wives of the Pine Forest ascetics (e.g., *Shivapurana*, Dharma Samhita 49; *Kurma Purana* 2.37). Shiva, who is mourning the loss of his lover Sati, walks naked through the forest as a beggar. He possesses an ithyphallic organ, which, along with his beauty, causes the sex-starved wives of the ascetics to go wild with desire for him. Their husbands, whose self-control is destroyed by jealousy and anger, use the power of their mantras to castrate Shiva. In a show of spiritual one-upmanship, Shiva demonstrates his non-attachment to his sexuality and allows his penis to fall to the ground, where it reaches down into the underworld and begins to fill the sky. Fearing that its expansion will destroy the universe the gods plead with Shiva to take his penis back. He has no use for it anymore, he says, since his beloved is dead. Only when the gods remind him that Sati will be reborn as Parvati, whom he will marry, does he restore his penis—and then only on the condition that it will be worshipped on earth.

Again Shiva's castration is not final: his phallus remains in the world, so his severed penis combines both divine presence that is worshipped

with absence and lack of wholeness (e.g., Shulman, 1986). In both stories, Shiva demonstrates utter indifference to his penis by casting it off at the same time he demonstrates his ability to overwhelm the cosmos with it. Thus, even in rejecting his sexuality, he allows penis to become more than his personal organ: it exceeds cosmic limits. Shiva is never considered a eunuch in the sacred texts: He "is neither male nor female; and he can't be said to be a eunuch either, since everybody worships his penis" (*Skanda Purana* 4.2.87.34–35, cited in Siegel, 1989, p. 374; cf., O'Flaherty, 1969, p. 29). "You [Shiva] are not a Brahmin nor a man nor a woman nor a eunuch" (*Mahabharata*, 13.17.56). This is important because, despite the gods' castrations, in India "eunuchs have the reputation of being homosexuals, with a penchant for oral sex, and are looked upon as the very dregs of society" (Hildebeitel, 1980, p. 162) in the epics, in the law books, and in contemporary society (e.g., Loh, 2014; Nanda, 1999). Shiva's phallus (as distinct from his lingam, which has far more abstract and metaphysical meanings; their separation or conflation is an area of intense scholarly discussion; e.g., Doniger, 2011; Shulman, 1986) is still venerated today. Shiva is an ambiguous figure who holds in suspension the extremes of ascetic chastity and sexuality, an erotic ascetic (O'Flaherty, 1969, p. 41).

The last Hindu myth of castration involves Bahuchara Mata, a goddess whose worship is attested historically only since the eighteenth century CE in Gujarat from the poetry of Vallabh Bhatt (Shiekh, 2010). Bahuchara also represents the poles of chastity and fertility and is the goddess of a eunuch priesthood. (Roscoe [1996] argued that goddess worship in India involved castration cults going back much farther, but his claims are too strangely bootstrapped to be substantiated [e.g., Roller, 1999]).

According to one legend (Shiekh, 2010), Bahuchara, a member of the high *charan* caste considered by much of India to be divine, is traveling when a bandit gang led by Bapiya attack the caravan and plan to ravish Bahuchara. Living by the death-before-dishonor code of her caste, Bahuchara grabs a sword and cuts off her breasts to get rid of her femininity, considered a version of female castration that assures deification for her virtue and purity

(Shiekh, 2010; Loh, 2014). In another version, she is raped, and the bandits become impotent but retain their genitals. As an act of contrition, they begin worshipping Bahuchara by dressing and behaving as women. According to Loh (2014), in a third version Bahuchara is not a woman, but a prince. When the bandits threaten him, he (nonsensically) uses his spiritual power to turn himself into a woman. The bandits then try to rape Bahuchara, and she cuts off her breasts, saying she is no longer either a woman or a man. This fails to deter the bandits, and when Bahuchara prays for deliverance, Vishnu splits open the earth and she jumps into the crevasse, cursing the bandits who become the eunuch priests of her sect. In yet another variation, a prince is forced to marry the goddess Bahuchara:

But he does not desire a wife and children, believing himself to be neither a man nor a woman. The goddess curses him for ruining her life and cuts off his genitals, saying that he, and others like him, will require the removal of their genitals in order to be reborn. (Loh, 2014, p. 34)

The Bahuchara myths differ from those of Indra and Shiva by involving female “castration” through the removal of the breasts, suggesting a female-to-neuter change to avoid rape and maintain purity. Bahuchara’s cursing of the bandits punishes them by making them become transgendered, possibly transsexual, or castrated, a point on which the legends are ambiguous. Losing the functioning of their genitalia and masculine presentation resembles the punishment visited on Indra for sexual trespass, but not the sublime indifference to sexuality Shiva demonstrates. Even the versions involving a prince are clearly goddess stories with her castration of male malefactors.

Bahuchara’s priests, the *hijrahs* (known by other names in different localities), are recognized by Hindu and Muslim Indians alike, and an estimated 50,000–500,000 live in India (e.g., Loh, 2014; Thappa, Singh, & Kaimal, 2008). Theoretically they are castrated, but in practice most only engage in ritual transvestism (e.g., Ferrari, 2015; Hildebeitel, 1980). Today the label *hijrah*, a legal term since 2014 constituting a third gender, is applied to people displaying a wide range of morphology, gendered

and sexual behavior, and sexual orientation, (e.g., Loh, 2014; Nanda, 1999), including transsexual, transgender, transvestite, homosexual, asexual, and intersex people in addition to eunuchs. A recent study (Steif, 2016) of *hijrahs* in Mumbai revealed them to be sometimes castrated, androphilic males who are typically the receptive partner in a sexual encounter. Fieldwork summarized and extended by Loh (2014) indicated that the majority self-identify as female and perform stereotypically feminine gendered roles, and that those who may behave as men in other ways typically cross-dress. *Hijrahs* not only cross-dress, but also frequently display exaggeratedly suggestive feminine mannerisms that so transgress Indian gender norms as to call attention to themselves (Loh, 2014; Nanda, 1999). Although most are lower caste with little education, they commonly claim that “sacred texts” are the basis for their beliefs (Custodi, 2007; Loh, 2014; Nanda, 1999), and other than the Bahuchara myths, identify primarily with the myths of Arjuna and his Pandava brothers mentioned above—warriors who temporarily adopted women’s guise, were skilled in the feminine arts, and may or may not have been eunuchs.

The spiritual power of *hijrahs* theoretically derives from castration, which is considered a rebirth and transformation out of the mundane human condition into a sainthood of ritual purity, grace, and sexual abstinence embodying the divinity central to their primary myth (Nanda, 1999). The castration rites are performed in a temple. While the initiate chants the goddess’s name, a specialist called a midwife cuts off penis and testicles and then waits until the unstaunched wound stops bleeding to remove the “heat” of male sexual desire and masculinity (pp. 26–29; Thappa, Singh, & Kaimal, 2008). The severed members are buried within the temple complex or under a tree. The castration-rebirth gives *hijrahs* the spiritual power to bless or curse, which makes them feared and tolerated. But most are neither castrated nor sexually continent in actual practice (Hildebeitel, 1980; Loh, 2014; Nanda, 1999). Because both castration and sexual continence are obligatory to assure the goddess’s favor, *hijrahs* discovered not to be eunuchs are publicly shamed.



Aside from their devotions, the *hijrahs'* spiritual activities involve appearing at marriages and birth rites to ward off evil spirits and bless the principals (e.g., Hildebeitel, 1980; Loh, 2014; Nanda, 1999). They are, as a rule, uninvited, but must be treated well lest they curse instead of bless. They dance and sing, often abusively and sexually suggestively, until paid to leave, escalating the outrageousness of their conduct until they get what they want. *Hijrahs* are considered nuisances as spiritually blackmailing beggars; most live marginalized lives, supported by prostitution or begging. Their public behavior—and society's perception of them—resemble that of the Galli: they are exaggeratedly made-up cross-dressers who dance wildly to loud, percussive music and engage in transgressive bawdy behavior; they beg; and they are paid sex workers in “deviant” sex (e.g., Loh, 2014; Nanda, 1999; Sharma, 1989).

Sexual asceticism in general, though, has long been a feature of Hindu practice in India, regardless of sect, and castration is not confined to the cult of Bahuchara. Recently spiritual teacher Gurmeet Ram Rahim Insan and two physicians were formally charged with forcibly castrating around 400 of the teacher's disciples in the “false hope that their emasculation would lead to realization of God through Ram Rahim” (Kondal, August 3, 2018, n.p.).

The latest recorded castrated god descended from the Indo-European tradition is represented in the Old Icelandic *Prose Edda* and *Poetic Edda*, the sacred texts of the Norse pantheon. Odin is the head deity, who, besides being the god of magic, poetry, battle, and death, is a master of disguise and illusion, like Zeus, Indra, and Shiva of the same lineage. Many of Odin's names refer to his adventures in disguise. Among them is *Jálk*, which means *gelding*, an identification found in both *Eddas* (Gylfaginning, 3, 20; Grimnismál, 50, 55). Regrettably the tales attached to this name have been lost, except for one rather doubtful Christian source (Saxo Grammaticus, *Danish History*, 3) reporting a folktale in which Odin assumed a woman's role and dress to further a rape—not exactly evidence of castration. Odin impregnates women in early and late sources, and lists of his progeny appear in both *Eddas*, the *Danish History*, the skaldic poems, and

in northern European royal genealogies. It seems that Odin's eunuchism is temporary or merely one of this trickster god's many illusions, similar to the exploits of his Hindu counterparts. Odin is a god of ambiguous powers, whose sexuality may resemble the both/and transcendence of categories in the Shiva and Arjuna stories. The “Dagenham idol,” a figure dating to 2250 BCE thought to be the earliest image of Odin, which features a hole in its pubic region that may either represent a vagina or be the place where a penis peg was fitted, contributes to the notion that Odin could lose his penis and change sex at will.

Two legendary Norse heroes, both shamans, are said to be eunuchs. Because of their status as heroes rather than gods—and owing to the nature of their shamanic activities—these characters possibly represent a “priesthood tradition” associated with Odin, although no historical castrated priesthood is attested. One is Sinfjotli, who temporarily becomes a werewolf to avenge dead kinsmen (*Poetic Edda*, Helgakviða Hundingsbana 1.36–37; *Volsunga Saga*, 8). The wolf is one of Odin's totem animals, and shapeshifting into a wolf is something both Odin and his historical berserk warrior-shamans did in battle (Wade, 2016). The same poem that records Sinfjotli's heroic deeds contains a *flyting* in which an antagonist taunts him with having been gelded by giantesses, the traditional forces of evil in the Norse cosmology (*Poetic Edda*, Helgakviða Hundingsbana 1.40), without providing further details. Sinfjotli does not deny the charge. The second hero, Atli, son of earl Ithmund, understands the speech of birds (*Poetic Edda*, Helgakviða Hjorvarþssonar, 1.1–4), a sign of shamanic power in Norse culture, though not necessarily specific to Odin's cult. In a *flyting* (Helgakviða Hjorvarþssonar 20–21), a giantess accuses him of having been castrated. Like Sinfjotli, Atli does not deny it, but responds that he not only enjoys supernatural strength but also may have a magical way to penetrate her sexually.

The only other suggestion that any Norse priesthood involved ritual castration comes from the questionable Saxo Grammaticus, who has his hero Stærkodder (Starkad) profess revulsion for the rites attributed to priests of the Norse fertility god Frey at the temple at Uppsala: Stærkodder

“was disgusted by the effeminate gestures and the clapping of the mimes on the stage, and by the unmanly clatter of the bells” (*Danish History*, 6). Comparative mythologist Georges Dumézil (1970b) suggested that a special priesthood for Frey (and also the god Njord) dressed as women and wore their hair in a feminine hairstyle, although no basis for such a conjecture exists in any of the Norse or contemporary Christian literature, which would surely have called attention to such practices. His supposition is tenuous at best since it is based on Tacitus’s mention of a Germanic tribe called the Nahanarvali (*Germania*, 43), reported to worship a pair of young men called the “longhairs” whose priests wore women’s clothes. Tacitus was working from hearsay (he never visited any of the lands described in *Germania*), and, in any case, long hair in the Indo-European heroic tradition was a sign of elite warrior-shamans dating back to Homeric times (e.g., Miller, 1998) with no association to gender-transgressing practices. Possibly Tacitus conflated reports of a long-haired priesthood with the Galli in Rome during his lifetime.

In conclusion, the evidence for a castrated Odin probably refers to a temporary disguise or his other shape-changing abilities, and if Sinfjotli and Atli were attached to Odin’s cult in the legends, it seems they were castrated but maintained their supernatural and warrior powers, including, in Atli’s case, the ability for magical penetrative sex. Castration does not appear in any of the textual records related to Norse cults; indeed, it only appears in post-Christian records as a punishment visited on enemies (Adams, 2013; Hallakarla, n.d., paragraph 4).

Indra, Shiva, and Odin share the polarities of extreme virility and sexual potency with loss of genitalia. For Shiva and Odin, castration seems more likely an effort of self-will in an exhibition of their spiritual prowess, a temporary state that flaunts their superiority, including, perhaps, their transcendence of the poles of neutered asceticism and rampant virility. Indra, on the other hand, retains his reputation for sexuality, and Bahuchara’s tales are really goddess stories involving female “castration” through the loss of breasts or the castration of mortals. The tales of Arjuna and his brothers, which

are ambiguous about their sexuality, like some of the Bahuchara myths, are more about transcending the poles of masculinity and femininity. This third grouping of castration themes is summarized in Table 3, which omits the Bahuchara myths for not involving emasculated gods and the Arjuna stories for their ambiguity about castration. Indra and Odin seem to demonstrate their power through hyper-virility, but in the case of Shiva and Odin and the legendary Sinfjotli and Atli, the power of the penis is subordinated to their magical powers: intact or castrated, they have more power than their antagonists through force of will or cunning.

### Christianity and Castration

Finally, this analysis would not be complete without mention of the castration heritage in Christianity, many of whose sects, notably the Roman Catholic Church, officially require sexual continence for priests, the relict of a suppressed castration tradition. The convention that Jesus and Saint Paul of Tarsus were unmarried Jewish men has created speculation about their sexuality, including the possibility that they were eunuchs. Tertullian, an influential second-century church authority, stated that Paul had been castrated and referred to both Jesus and Paul as *spadones*, a word usually translated as *eunuchs* (far less often meaning *celibate* or *impotent, unfruitful* men; *De Monogamia*, 5.6, 3.1, 7.3–4; Moxnes, 2004, p. 85; cf. Kuelfer, 2001). Most commentaries hold that Tertullian was exaggerating for shock value (Moxnes, 2004; Kuelfer, 2001). The lack of contemporary historical evidence that either man was emasculated suggests that they were intact since castration was a subject of serious religious scrutiny among Jews and would have been cause for comment about a spiritual teacher, especially one as controversial as Jesus. Paul, in Galatians 5:2–12, said that circumcision will not produce salvation, and he cursed those who disturb Christians by wishing that they were castrated (circumcision and castration were not confused; e.g., Edwards, 2011). Whether Paul himself had been castrated was not part of his frank discourse.

Jewish laws regarding castration changed over time (de Hoop, 2008; Wright, & Chan, 2012). According to Deuteronomy 23:1, “No man who

has been castrated or whose penis has been cut off may be included among the Lord's people" (cf. Leviticus 21:20). But in late Isaiah the Lord "will give them [eunuchs who observe the Sabbath] an everlasting name better than sons or daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off" (56:5). The Wisdom of Solomon, part of the Jewish Septuagint and canonical Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox bibles, also looked favorably on pious eunuchs: "And blessed is the eunuch, which with his hands has wrought no iniquity, nor imagined wicked things against God: for to him shall be given the special gift of faith, and an inheritance in the temple of the Lord more acceptable to his mind" (3:14).

When Pharisees challenged Jesus on whether it was permissible to remarry after a divorce and his disciples suggested that it was better not to remarry (and thereby technically commit adultery), Jesus introduced eunuchism into the debate, saying:

Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb; and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it [the word not to remarry], let him receive it. (Matthew 19:12)

Religious controversy still swirls about the last category—men who have castrated themselves "for the kingdom of heaven"—because it suggests that self-emasculatation may create a type of religious superiority, if not a priesthood per se. (Somewhat similarly but with more reference to mystical nonduality, in the gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus said, "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside and ... the male and the female one

	Indra	Shiva as creator	Shiva as mourner	Odin
<b>Reason for castration</b>	Punishment for adultery	No use for penis as procreative instrument	Jealous rage of ascetics for their wives' lust	Unknown
<b>Act of castration</b>	Spiritual adept's curse or Total dismemberment	Breaks off penis in self-castration	Attempted spiritual adepts' curses trumped by magical self-castration in which penis falls off	Unknown
<b>Severed parts</b>	Unknown or Lost	Attains cosmic proportions	Attains cosmic proportions Threatens to overwhelm the cosmos	Unknown
<b>Fate of victim</b>	Body covered with vaginas or Penis replaced by ram/goat penis Castration is temporary Retains reputation for virility	Cosmic phallus is worshipped Not considered a eunuch or a sexual being Transcends eunuchism and sexuality	Restores own penis for another divine coupling and on condition it be worshipped Not considered a eunuch or a sexual being Transcends eunuchism and sexuality	Castration is temporary Not considered a eunuch Possibly transcends eunuchism and sexuality

**Table 3.** Themes of Indo-European "Virile Eunuchs"

and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female ... then you will enter [the kingdom of heaven];" 37.24a–35.) According to Harvey (2013), in the Matthew 19:12 verse, Jesus was shocking for effect, making an obvious reference to the Galli, and suggesting that if pagans would go so far in their devotion, Christians should be equally devoted, in effect: "I [Jesus] have told you to do without a hand or an eye if they get in the way. There are people out there who will do even more. What about them as an example of commitment and dedication?" (p. 203). Hester (2005) summarized the traditional positions on the text: 1) that Jesus's words were a response to a supposed taunt about his and his disciples' non-married status; and 2) that the text is an instruction on commitment to celibacy and being single, which may or may not be appropriate for some believers. According to Hester, all interpretations reflect the notion that eunuchs reject sexual behavior, an opinion totally at variance with the perception of eunuchs' "deviant" sexuality in the ancient world. In fact, over time castration was rehabilitated in early Christian circles to become "an emblem of extreme chastity, highlighting a sharp contrast in sexual conduct between Christians and pagans" (Caner, 1997 p. 399).

Castration went in and out of favor in the early centuries of Christianity, though church leaders downplayed the extent to which early Christians engaged in castration (Caner, 1997). Origen castrated himself to avoid criticism of sexual impropriety when he counselled women, but when it became known, his emasculation was used against him (Richardson, 1937), and he himself argued against it as a solution to sexual desire. According to the apocryphal Acts of John, a new convert cut off his genitals with a sickle, and when he showed them to the apostle, was rebuked for doing so (53–54). Ritual castration was performed for centuries within the mainstream church as well as more heterodox groups, despite the anti-Galli rants of church leaders (Hester, 2005; Stevenson, 2002). Eunuchs were part of the Eastern church hierarchy in Byzantium (Ringrose, 1996). According to Stevenson (2002), some church fathers were castrated while officially condemning it. Monasteries in Egypt and Syria castrated priests, and the Coptic church castrated boys for the secular

market for centuries (Caner, 1997; Hester, 2005). Both the Council of Nicaea and authors of the Apostolic Constitutions banned self-castrated men from entering the clergy, and the latter excommunicated laymen who castrated themselves for three years (Caner, 1997)—policies suggesting the frequency of the deed among religious aspirants. After the fifth century, the practice seems to have finally died out with the exception of a heretical Skoptsy sect in Russia, which started in the late eighteenth century (Engelstein, 1999; Tulpe & Torchinov, 2000).

Skoptsy adherents were ascetics who took the Matthew 19:12 verse to mean that castration was the primary means to salvation (Engelstein, 1999; Tulpe & Torchinov, 2000). They repeated the Jesus Prayer constantly and engaged in ecstatic dancing to gain access to the Holy Spirit, but the castration rites were separate. The first stage of initiation involved removal of the testicles for men, or of the nipples for women (Engelstein, 1999). The second initiation was removal of the penis for men, and breasts for women (sometimes also the labia majora, labia minora, and clitoris). Members would either excise their own organs or have a leader do it, using twisting for castration, hot irons, or later blades. Children's parts were excised by adults to purify them early. Unlike Galli or *Hijrahs*, the Skoptsy were a very secretive sect for protection from repressive measures by the Russian Orthodox Church and Tsarist government. They survived into the 1920s when Soviet authorities subjected them to sensational public trials, and by 1962 none were believed to still be alive (Wilson & Roehrborn, 1999).

Information on castration among contemporary Christians for religious reasons is hard to come by, but apparently it does still exist (Jackowich et al., 2014) outside cases of religious delusion deemed psychosis (e.g., Franke & Rush, 2007; Stunzel, Power, Floyd, & Quinlan, 2006). Both psychotic and normal castrated males evince a belief that castration can control undesirable sexual thoughts and behaviors associated with sin and divine displeasure (Franke & Rush, 2007; Jackowich et al., 2014; Vale, Siemens, Johnson, & Wassersug, 2013). Research (Wassersug, Zelenietz, & Squire, 2004) indicates that today many more men desire

castration for religious reasons than actually have it performed, probably because it is socially taboo and difficult to obtain. Thus the Christian legacy of castration “for the kingdom of heaven” is one of irreversible sexual asceticism and ritual purity as a form of spiritual attainment.

### Conclusion

Trying to scan the diverse cultures, centuries, and degrees of documentation for the castrated gods does all of them violence—especially from today’s perspective of sexuality and genderedness. It is impossible to know what these gods truly meant to their worshippers, especially from times when religion was not personal in the way that it is today and when private spirituality differed greatly from what was practiced in religious institutions (e.g., Bøgh, 2007; Pinch, 1994; Robbins, 1993; Tyldesley, 1995). Yet it is striking that castrated gods appeared in such a wide range of traditions, and clearly some of the symbolism attached to them can be explored, however superficially.

In all of the myths, the god’s penis and testicles are powerful instruments of procreation and manliness, so castration is a watershed event in the mythical storyline that transforms, kills, or both. Both the male-oriented myths of dynastic succession and of spiritual superiority stress the power of the severed parts, which, with the exception of the Indra and Odin stories, have greater magic—fertility and otherwise—than when their owners were whole and literally bring about a new cosmic order. In contrast, the goddess stories are not about procreation per se but about sexual love or priestly devotion; in them castration is associated with death and disobedience, but a death that restores the erring male to the goddess’s favor, which immortalizes or otherwise elevates him from his former status as an ordinary mortal or demigod. Death of the goddess’s lover apparently only later came to be associated in some cultures with the earth’s fertility, something the goddess herself already ruled.

In the Egyptian, Greek, and Anatolian stories castration unalterably changed the god, who, regardless of what he gained, lost his ability to be active in earthly life, though his successor avenged him, conquered the castrator, and established a new

order. The hyper-masculine gods—Set, Ouranos, and Indra—were punished for their aggressive sexuality with castration. If the progression from rampant masculinity to socialized sexuality demonstrated by the change in perception of Indra’s and Mohammad’s sexuality over time is a normal evolution, at a minimum perhaps the castration-as-punishment myths were later developments in stories that at first had quite a different message. Cybele’s origins as Matar suggest a similar change over time, augmented by her syncretization with Artemis and other virgin-huntress-warrior goddesses as well as Astarte, Demeter, and Aphrodite, who acquired youthful, inferior lovers, but in the opposite direction: so far from the goddess being socialized through her partnerships, she appears to have been demonized when syncretically linked to wild nature and a punishing, demanding sexual love that killed any partner not subservient to her wishes. Her lovers were not hyper-sexual and never appeared to have been mature peers, just irresistibly attractive youths punished for deviating in their devotion to her. No evidence suggests that any of the castrated gods, Combabus excepted, were worshipped in their emasculated forms as eunuchs. It may be that these gods’ ability to undergo emasculation and retain, or succeed to, greater power is the attractive part of their stories, rendering all of them symbolic of resurrection and transcendence of terrible misfortune. They lose male sexuality, often through a supernaturally fertile act of castration, and go on to gain greater spiritual qualities. This is especially true of Shiva and Odin, who, so far from being punished by anyone, intentionally doff their gonads, signaling indifference to their sexuality in favor of greater spiritual power. Whereas Shiva still demands reverence for his severed parts and can obviously destroy the cosmos with them, Odin more ambiguously alternates between masculine and feminine, male and female, at will to suit his purposes as a trickster-magus without diminishing his status as king of the gods.

LGTB proponent Roscoe (1997)—and ironically Jones, who opposes transgression of heteronormative sexuality and genderedness in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (2000)—posed the central question about castrated gods and their castrated followers:

Why is gender transgression so often attributed with religious meaning? Mircea Eliade and Carl Jung see the androgyne as a projection of a longing for a return to primordial unity, for escape from the unbearable tension of the opposites, for a mode of humanity no longer divided into halves, but transcendence is only one of the motives in the ancient world. (Roscoe, 1997, p. 203)

But the symbolism of castrated gods cannot be reduced to androgeny, hermaphroditism, nor any other form of transcending or integrating male and female polarities (qualities that are exhibited per se in many of the different pantheons mentioned). Indeed, conflating castration with these conditions, as Roscoe (1997) and Jones (2000) do, is error. In archaic times the loss represented by castration—of life, fertility, masculinity, sexuality—was a key part of the story, including the way that loss was overcome or transformed into power of a higher and spiritual order. The sacrifice is essential, and it creates a special state that transcends not so much male-female extremes but the poles of mortal and divine. According to Hippolytus of Rome, a third-century CE church father, Attis cut off his testicles to “[pass] over from the earthly parts of the nether world to the everlasting substance above, where, he says, there is neither female or male” (*The Refutation of all Heresies*, 5.2). Sallustius understood demi-gods like Attis to be freeing themselves of the power to procreate in order to recover their connection with the immortal gods (*On the Gods and the World*, 5). Even for those who are already deities without a taint of humanity, like Osiris and Ouranos, castration transforms them into even more mysterious gods whose powers are unquestionably beyond those of the earthly plane.

The eunuch cults seem to echo this theme. Only a few castrated gods were associated with mystery religions, which feature deities subject to mutability. Mystery religions in archaic times were characteristic of Hellenized areas (Bøgh, 2007). They featured “initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred” (Burkert, 1987, p. 11), typically involving a death-like experience, or

one of intense suffering that produced illumination, salvation, or transformation—something castration would certainly replicate, whether in the god or in the initiate. By emasculating themselves, eunuch priests put themselves in a permanent liminality, irreversibly placing themselves outside ordinary human nature, neither gods nor men but something in-between (Södergård 1993). They assimilated themselves with the goddess through their cross-dressing and performance of feminine roles. At least in theory they guaranteed their permanent ritual purity, putting themselves beyond human sexual love and procreation—even if they served the sexual needs of others, as temple prostitutes. Perhaps they also put themselves beyond death by gaining the type of immortality promised in mystery religions, such as the kingdom of heaven to which Christian eunuchs aspired. Human sexual continence has been associated with ritual purity in traditions the world over on the basis that sacred functions can be properly performed only by those so qualified, including prepubescent children and virgins as sacrifices or officiants, as well as eunuchs. The sacrifice of sexuality through virginity, celibacy, or castration (sometimes involving the sacrifice of genderedness)—or its opposite—unlimited surrender through sexual service to the gods in sacred prostitution—directs sexual potency to the divine on behalf of the individual and the community. Excising sexual organs, as opposed to celibacy, makes such a choice irrevocable and ensures a life of service. Only lifelong priesthood following castration would validate such a social choice: eunuch priests made themselves god-like, and they did it through their own efforts.

The soteriological value of sacrifice remains a vital principle in religions past and present, whether it involves ascetic practices around food, personal display, material wealth, comfort, sexuality, or life itself. The castration of the gods reflects the full range of sacrifice: from being the involuntary victim of another’s jealousy, rage, or just punishment; to self-punishment as an act of remorse; to willing and free self-inflicted wound as a revelation of power. All the castration myths read as teaching stories: the messages vary, but at their core they are stories of transformation and liberation.

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