

# Late Traces of the Cults of Cybele and Attis. The Origins of the Kurenti and of the Pinewood Marriage (“Borovo Gostüvanje”)

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*The carnival mask of the kurent invokes the memory of the mythical companions of Cybele and Attis, who played an important role directly before Christianity became the prevailing religion throughout the territory of present-day Slovenia. It also seems that pinewood marriage (“borovo gostüvanje”), an event that takes place during the carnival festivities, reflects one of the high points of the March celebrations dedicated to Attis. The author further mentions some additional elements of the heritage which have preserved the elements of the Great Mother cult as late as the Middle Ages and even into modern times.*

There are numerous carnivals masks and traditions that originated during the pre-Slavic period. In his excellent, although almost unnoticed 1978 study concerning the mask of the hind, Niko Kuret emphasizes the pre-Slavic origin of this mask and presents the phenomenon of the survival of individual elements of pagan cults all through to the present (Kuret 1978). Kuret perceives in the hind the survival of an older cult figure worshipped by indigenous inhabitants that lived in the territory of present-day Slovenia and amidst the confusion of migrations, took to almost inaccessible areas of southeastern Noricum (Kuret 1978, 502). Here I would like to draw attention to the roots of the kurent (korant) from Ptujsko polje and the custom of pinewood marriage (borovo gostüvanje) in Prekmurje which can be traced to an important cult which was practiced in Slovenia during the Roman era.

A comprehensive review of masks in Slovenia maintains numerous attempts at explaining the figure of the kurent (Kuret 1984, 192-196) by ethnologists and linguists: their explanations tied it with the Slavs, the Uskoki, the Illyrians, the Greeks, the Latin peoples and all the way to the East Finns/Mongolians. The most renowned expert on masks in Slovenia, the late Niko Kuret, wrote in 1984 that the figure of the kurent remains a mystery (Kuret 1984, 193).

In a booklet, published in 1978 on the new collection of the Ptuj museum Š. Cobelj proposes yet another thesis concerning the origins of the kurent; from the point of view of this article she comes nearest to the solution of this enigma (Cobelj 1978, 9-10). Cobelj indicates that the origins of the kurent are related to the Kuretes, Greek demons who protected the young Zeus in a cave from his father Cronus by banging their swords against their shields and thus creating a great din, to drown the child’s crying.

This thesis was not welcomed by experts in the field. F. Bezlaj, for instance, termed it unpersuasive (Bezlaj 1982, 113), while N. Kuret felt that this comparison was forced, especially the part which linked the swords of the warriors from Crete with the hedgehog clubs of the kurenti (Kuret 1984, 196). Since the meager economic connections between the

present-day Slovene territory and Greece could not justify the transmission of this tradition in a satisfactory manner, the presumption about the links between the kurent and the Kuretes and the Koribantes from Crete was not convincing enough. Š. Cobelj compared the kurent only to the Kuretes from Crete (or to the Koribantes), but did not emphasize the role of the latter in connection with Cybele, the goddess from Asia Minor. Nor did she realize the connection between the cult of Cybele and the Slovene territory, despite the fact that two of the most beautiful depictions of the goddess in the Roman provinces had been found in the very town of Ptuj (comp. Modrijan, Weber 1979-1981, 95-97, and Abramič 1925, 188-189).



1. The front of a damaged altar dedicated to Cybele featuring symbols of the goddess and Attis; from Marof near Jurklošter. The central part of the surface depicts a pine tree with different musical instruments (a Phrygian flute, panpipes, tambourine, and cymbals) hanging from its branches and Attis' cap, adorned with stars. The tree with instruments (symbols of Attis) grows from a wall-shaped crown between two reclining lions (symbols of Cybele).

The current and different understanding of Slovene ethnogenesis is of some significance; the varying views concerning settlement patterns at the time the Slavs reached this territory had a heavy influence upon varying interpretations of the kurent figure. Until very recently it was commonly believed that at the end of the 6th century the Slavs migrated to a more or less empty territory with but a few fragments of the remaining indigenous inhabitants (comp. Grafenauer 1978, 230-233). The large majority of older researchers therefore looked for analogies for the kurent mainly in the heritage of the peoples who had settled in this area after the decline of the Roman Empire.

Numerous fortified settlements, some of which had already been researched, indicate that the present-day Slovenia was still settled during the Late Roman era, however mostly in the hilly and remote areas far from valleys of transit. This is where the indigenous inhabitants spent the dangerous period of the great migrations, meeting new settlers with which they merged during the following centuries; this process remains very vague. Two such indigenous areas have been discovered in the vicinity of Ptuj: south of Donačka gora and Boč with Kozjansko

at its center (Ciglenečki 1992), and the southeastern slopes of Pohorje (Strmčnik 1997). Even though indigenous settlements have yet to be found in Slovenske gorice or in Haloze, these two areas cannot be completely ruled out as possible refuge territories.

The second significant element which should be taken into account when attempting an explanation of the individual fragments of folk culture and tradition is the much more important role of the cult of the Great Mother at the end of the Roman era; that is during

the critical time when Christianity prevailed over paganism. Many items which shall be mentioned later on confirm the existence of the elements of this cult in folk culture long into the Middle Ages, and in some forms - though sometimes largely transformed - even up to the present. One should of course also bear in mind a specter of the remaining pagan cults which had been only seemingly abruptly replaced by Christianity; in reality this was a very gradual process, and in some places it has never occurred on the whole.

While studying the Roman monuments that are dedicated to the cult of Cybele (Kybela) and which have been preserved in Slovenia, a hitherto overlooked possibility of explaining the figure of the kurent as well as the carnivals custom of pinewood marriage ("borovo gostüvanje") in Prekmurje in a different manner surfaced (Ciglenečki 1998a and Ciglenečki 1998b). A gradually increasing number of monuments dedicated to this cult enhances the knowledge which is further supplemented by the elements of folk tradition in Slovenia as well as by individual finds from neighbouring and also more distant lands.

In the territory of present-day Slovenia the cult of Cybele was concentrated around the Roman towns of Emona, Celeia, and Petoviona; individual monuments were also discovered at Ig, Marof near Jurkloster, Podkraj near Hrastnik, and in Koper (Kolšek 1968; Swoboda 1969; Lovenjak 1997, 67-68, 83; Ciglenečki 1998b). The majority are honorific inscriptions, two are statues, and some are also reliefs with depictions of symbolic objects pertaining to the cult of Cybele.

In order to facilitate the understanding of this theme it is necessary to condense the knowledge about this extremely complex goddess into several sentences. The literature about her is extensive; especially lately it consists also of popular, often somewhat uncritical works (for basic insight and literature see Cumont 1959; Vermaseren 1977; Garth 1984). The notion about the life-giving goddess reaches far back into the darkness of prehistory. In the forests and hills of Asia Minor people worshipped an ancient female deity; the first depictions by the Hittites date to the 2nd millennium B.C. In the course of time a goddess with all of her attributes and characteristics crystallized by Phrygians. Her two most important aspects were fertility and the protection of life, and her cult was centered on dying as well as upon awakening stagnant nature to spring life. One of the numerous variants of a story from the Roman Empire era depicts how Cybele falls in love with a shepherd named Attis. The goddess punishes



2. The marble statue of Cybele was discovered in the vicinity of the first Mithraeum in Hajdina near Ptuj; it is kept at the Graz museum. The head, adorned by a crown resembling a city wall, is missing. To the left and right of the goddess are the remains of reclining lions, her faithful companions.

him for his infidelity by driving him insane. Overcome by madness, Attis castrates himself under a pine tree and bleeds to death. Struck by remorse, Cybele pleads with Zeus to preserve the body of Attis; it is believed that Attis changes into an evergreen pine tree, is reborn again, and is reunited with Cybele. The original mythic companions of Cybele from Asia Minor were the Koribantes (*korúbantes*), in Greece they were joined by the Kuretes (*kouretes*) from Crete; both possessed similar characteristics. During the Roman era both groups represented Cybele's escorts (Roscher 1890-1894). The Kuretes and the Koribantes (sometimes they appear as demigods or even demons in literature) are a sort of antipode to the Amazonians, accompanying the triumphant march of Cybele with an apotropaic din and ritual dances with arms.

The cult of Cybele spread from Pessinus in Phrygia; in 204 B.C. it was officially introduced in Rome. During the time that Hannibal was encroaching upon Rome, the Romans took their vows and accepted the goddess into their pantheon as the first Oriental deity. They named her Magna Mater Deorum (The Great Mother); in this form she is most often depicted on Roman monuments. Her cult spread in the imperial era, especially under the support of the emperor Claudius (41-54 B.C.), spreading to all the territories of the great Roman Empire; thus also into the area of present-day Slovenia. The indigenous population accepted the cult willingly, for in the image of the mother goddess they easily recognized the features of their local female deities. In Dalmatia, for instance, Cybele's beloved Attis was even associated with Silvan, the supreme deity of the Delmati tribe. This notion is supported by the relief from Pridraga (Cambi 1968, 137). The cult reached its zenith during the reign of emperor Antoninus Pius, although it did not lose in significance as it was supported by a considerable number of succeeding emperors.

Parallel to the growing crisis in the Roman empire and its subsequent depletion of power, the importance of the classical Greek-Roman deities was undermined as well. On the other hand, Oriental mystery cults offering people in distress a spiritual haven and the promise of ascent and eternal life later on became more prominent. Aside from Mithraism, two such cults that evolved were the cults of Cybele and Isis. Since Cybele was the first to have been incorporated into the Roman pantheon and thus also enjoyed the official protection of the state, she accrued a certain privilege and many followers throughout the centuries.

The cult of the Great Mother persisted for a long time concurrent with the rise of Christianity. During the reign of Eugenius, Theodosius' opponent, the cult experienced its last period of prosperity. A ritual cleansing of Rome was performed at that time and upon the initiative of the consul Virius Nicomachus Flavianus, pagan rituals were revived once again. Flavianus even performed the taurobolium in person. The sacred pine tree was carried in a procession and the Romans were once again able to admire and worship the statue of Cybele accompanied by silver lions. Revived were also the megalensia, festivities honoring the Great Mother. This final splendor of the cult is also reflected in some valuable objects of artistic value, for instance the patera from Parabiago with the depiction of the triumph of Cybele and Attis in the presence of the gods of heavens, earth, and water (Levi 1935). The motifs on contorniates from the second half of the 4th century are also similar. An important datum from the territory of present-day Slovenia mentions that in 388 Theodosius was greeted and solemnly received by the sacerdotēs, flamines, and Oriental cults eunuch-priests, together with the town council (Šašel 1983, 55).

Despite the scarcity of stone monuments which could attest to the cult of Cybele in the countryside, a taurobolium object (*fossa sanguinis*) was found during the excavation of

the Late Roman post at Gradina Zecovi near Prijedor. This object, dating to the middle of the 4th century (Medini 1980-1981), aptly confirms the thesis concerning the presence of the cult also in more remote parts of the provinces and not only in Rome. It is significant that an early Christian church was erected in Gradina only a few meters aside in the 5th or 6th century (Čremošnik 1955, 137-140).

An additional confirmation of the thesis of the great importance of the cult of the Great Mother in the final era of paganism is the famous depiction of the goddess in a somewhat rigid poise in the middle of a golden patera along with the depiction of classical antique gods (Heland 1973). Her superiority over the classical pantheon is clearly visible here. It was found in Pietroasa in Romania and dates to the first half of the 5th century (Harhoiu 1977, 36). This seems to be one of the last depictions of the pagan Great Mother.

The continuation of the story about the fight between Christianity and paganism in Slovenia is well known. The pagan destiny was sealed in the great battle between Theodosius and Eugenius in the Vipava valley on the 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> of September 394, whereupon the cult lost its official support; the temples of the Great Mother, along with those of other pagan cults, became the target of destruction by fervent Christians. Yet worship of the female divine principle has not completely died out; it has found its expression in Mary, the mother of Christ, who was - this is quite significant - raised to the status of the mother of god at the very council in Ephesus in 431, not far from the site from which the cult of Cybele once spread throughout the Roman empire.

There are numerous antique sources on the course of the worship of Cybele, especially during the great Ides of March festivities at the beginning of spring (comp. Cumont 1959; Garth 1984, 1517-1521). These festivities started on March 15<sup>th</sup> with a procession and the sacrifice of a bull which would assure the fertility of fields. After seven days of abstinence and fasting the central event of the March celebrations took place. Members of a special association, most often wood merchants or lumberjacks (dendrophores - The College of Tree-Bearers) cut down a pine tree or a spruce, decorated it with violets, wrapped it in wool, and in a ritual procession carried it to the temple on Palatine. Around the tree women sang mourning songs for the late Attis. Two days of mourning were followed by the so-called hilaria on March 25<sup>th</sup>, the Festival of Joy which celebrated Attis' rebirth.

Cybele's monuments from the territory of the present Slovenia represent the key to the enigma of the kurent and of pinewood marriage ("borovo gostüvanje"). The similarity between the mythical companions of Cybele, the Kuretes and the Koribantes, and our kurents is considerable; and the fact that until the end of the 4th century the cult of Cybele was well represented in our territory, especially in the southern part of the province of



3. A gold-plated silver plate from Parabiago (Milan) depicting Cybele and Attis on a lion-drawn chariot. Dancing Kuretes and Koribantes accompany their ride, banging their shields with their swords. The plate represents the culmination and simultaneously the last shimmer of depictions of the Great Mother cult.



4. The kurent - like his predecessors, but transformed into a mask and adapted to a different geographic region - continues to perform his basic mission: to revive the sleeping nature. Steer horns on his head symbolise the connection with the bull, Cybele's cult animal.

Noricum around Petoviona and Celeia, is all the more significant. It may therefore be presumed that the Kuretes and the Koribantes, with only slightly altered names (maybe even present with both names: Koribantes - korants, Kuretes - kurentes), have been absorbed into the local tradition and preserved to the present. Their identity has not been confirmed only by similar names and behaviour (ecstatic dancing and causing a tremendous racket), but mainly by their basic mission: the awakening of spring life. It is namely for this that the festivities honoring Cybele took place in the month of March. Other characteristics, such as clothes and paraphernalia, which necessitate further research and in-depth study should be set aside, most of these details were probably added later on. N. Kuret, in his study of animal figures, has already stated that often these masks do not morphologically correspond to their names (Kuret 1978, 498). He explained this with the fact that "people carelessly alter masks but remain conservative as far as names are concerned. Whenever possible, they cling to old, inherited names. The name thus stays but the form changes." We might also mention Lucretius' description of Cybele's festival celebrations in which he speaks of several armed people, whose heads are covered with menacing plumes and who dance inter-

tertwined, jump in step, and shed blood from the wounds inflicted upon each other (Lucretius). The horns which adorn the head of the kurent might also indicate Cybele, in whose honor a bull was sacrificed. Slovene folk heritage conveys an interesting reference to the sacred Kurent (Kuret 1984, 194) and bestows a much more important status upon this figure, perhaps even revealing the reminiscence of the status of demigod held by the Kuretes and the Koribantes in antiquity. The demonic character of the kurenti, whose music so affectively influenced everyone around them, can also be found in Slovene oral heritage and its subsequent artistic transformations (Stanonik 1992).

It is also necessary to mention the restraint expressed by Kuret. He namely allowed for the possibility that the kurent had been brought to Ptujsko polje from their previous home by the Uskoki (Kuret 1984, 192). As mentioned above, it is not possible to entirely refute this presumption since the mask could also have developed from the same roots elsewhere; the cult of the Great Mother was indeed widespread throughout the entire Roman empire. Yet the fact that the carnival mask of the kurent appears in the direct hinterlands of Petoviona, the town had been one of the strongest focal points of Oriental cults (aside

from the monuments dedicated to Cybele, let us bear in mind at least five Mythraeums!), most convincingly confirms the origin of the tradition in this area.

It is very possible that the origin of other similar masks such as the *lampe*, the *bušari*, or the *kukeri* can be traced to the same roots. It is especially interesting that, unlike the *kurent*, the *kukeri* from Bulgaria wear wooden swords, which points to the mythical *Koribantes* and *Kuretes* even more explicitly (Cobelj 1978, 10).

Due to limited space it is not possible to analyze other fascinating similarities among the masks which accompany the *kurenti* and the cult of Cybele. Let us only mention the figure which appears in the group surrounding the *kurent*, the so-called “*picek*” (cockerel). This mask is worn by a child and consists of an underskirt, a white shirt, and a long pointed cap (Kuret 1984, 203-204). While the mask’s name alludes to Cybele’s priests who were named *Galli* (*galli*=roosters), the cap is similar to the pointy Phrygian head-covering of Cybele’s beloved *Attis*. The mask is thus reminiscent of the infant *Attis* that was often depicted on small bronze or clay statuettes in Roman times.

It is also possible that the above mentioned custom of cutting down a pine tree during the festivities dedicated to Cybele is reflected in the unique custom bearing no known analogies as of yet, “*borovo gostüvanje*” (the Pinewood Marriage). “*Borovo gostüvanje*” is an unusual event depicting a marriage (*gostüvanje*) to a pine tree (Kuhar 1957; Kuret 1984, 168-170). Kuhar studied the origin of this custom in detail, concluded that even though the first mention of it was relatively late, its origin is not contemporary; the custom was merely revived according to the old tradition (Kuhar 1957, 50). The choice of a tree (a pine or another evergreen) in particular, as well as the central event (the marriage) are clear allusions to Cybele, who achieves the revival of *Attis* (the symbol of *Attis* is a pine tree) and then reunites with him.

In addition to the masks of the *kurent*, the “*picek*” and the custom of “*borovo gostüvanje*”, certain elements from neighboring countries are also reminiscent of the remains of the Cybele and *Attis* cult which has been preserved throughout the Middle Ages and into modern times.

Concerning the oral tradition of the *Kuretes* and the *Koribantes*, perhaps we should also cite the testimony of Thomas Archidiakonus from the 13th century, who described the downfall of *Salona* with the following words: “Croatia used to be named *Kurecija*, and the



5. Children’s masks of the “*piceki*” with pointed caps are reminiscent of the young *Attis*, Cybele’s beloved. The “*piceki*” - cockerels - might best be explained with the term “*galli*” (roosters) as the priests of Cybele’s cult were named.



6. The central event of "borovo gostüvanje": the felling of a tree (at Andovci, Feb. 22, 1998).

nations which are now called Croatians used to be called Kuretes or Koribantes." He further mentions their custom of banging on bronze objects at the waning moon in the hope of helping the suffering moon by making great noise which will scare away the demons from biting off pieces of the moon (Archidiakonus 1960, 19). Perhaps the author was familiar with the tradition which was still alive in Dalmatia's hinterlands, although he confused it with the reports from old texts?

Part of an oral tradition from eastern Tyrol is of special significance. It mentions a procession with a ram which set forth from some smaller villages in the vicinity of Lienz to Lavant. Lavant, a cult stronghold, sheltered a settlement of refugees from Aguntum during the Late Roman era. Three early Christian churches from the 5th and the 6th century were discovered under the structures of two churches from the Middle Ages. According to S.Karwiese, who has written a lengthy study concerning this procession, it portrays the remainder of pre-Christian sacrifice rites (Karwiese 1973, 21-24). Karwiese presumes that a temple dedicated to Cybele used to stand in the spot of this later stronghold from the Late Roman era. A criobolium, the sacrifice of an animal dedicated to Attis, the ram, took place in the temple. In later centuries, when the Christian church supplanted pagan customs, or better yet built upon them, this custom was preserved due to the fact that eastern Tyrol of that time represented an island secluded from the course of events. Karwiese's assumption is further attested to certain - although indeterminate - remains of an older shrine on the hill, and indirectly also by the fact that such cult localities did exist on hills; this had also been demonstrated by the taurobolium object that was discovered on Gradina Zecovi and mentioned above.

Let us briefly summarize our conclusions: the kurenti are part of the heritage pertaining to the Great Mother who was worshipped in the area of present - day Slovenia - and likewise throughout the Roman empire - for centuries. During the celebrations dedicated to Cybele, her male worshippers recreated the mythical event of driving winter away by dancing ecstatically and by creating a tremendous racket thus enabling the arrival of new life. Their noisy behavior is reflected in the behavior of the mythic carriers of the cult of the Kuretes and the Koribantes who, accompanied by the goddess, roamed the forests looking for Attis and made noise in order to wake up the sleeping god, namely the sleeping vegeta-



tion. And “Borovo gostüvanje” reflects the memory of the ritual performed by Cybele’s worshippers during the March celebrations dedicated to the cult of Cybele; they cut down a pine tree, symbolically performing the death of Attis, in order to celebrate his revival and his uniting with the Great Mother in the following days. The connection with the survival of the last significant pagan cult in our territory and the fragmentary traces of the late tradition in the neighboring regions signify that the memory of the cult of the Great Mother has persevered much longer than we had imagined, especially in hidden and remote areas where isolated groups of the old population survived.

Elements of the old Eurasian cult have endured - albeit only as masks and carnival customs - to the present. They represent the remarkably interesting heritage of a time long gone - a connection with antiquity, alive even today.



7. A decorated tree, already on the ground and prepared for the ceremonial transportation (“borovo gostüvanje” in Andovci, Feb. 22, 1998).

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**Pozni sledovi Kibelinega in Atisovega kulta.  
O izvoru kurentov in borovega gostivanja**

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Raziskave ostalin kulta Velike matere bogov (Kibeles) iz rimskega obdobja v Sloveniji so opozorile na možno povezavo med likom pustne maske Kurenta in mitskimi spremljevalci Kibeles, kureti in koribanti. Posebej pomembno je dejstvo, da je bil Kibelin kult v slovenskem prostoru še najbolj razširjen v južnem delu Norika s Petovionem in Celejo. Tako smemo domnevati, da so kureti in koribanti le v malo spremenjeni imenski obliki (morda prisotni celo z obema imenoma: koribanti - koranti, kureti - kurenti) prešli v lokalno tradicijo in se tu ohranili do danes. Njihove istovetnosti ne potrjuje le imenska podobnost in njihovo obnašanje (ekstatični ples in povzročanje trušč), ampak predvsem njihovo temeljno poslanstvo - obujanje pomladnega življenja, saj so Kibelina in Atisova praznovanja obhajali v marcu prav s tem namenom.

Potrebno je izpostaviti še lik, ki se pojavlja v kurentovi družini pod imenom "picek" (petelinček): maska, v katero se napravi šolar, ko obleče spodnje krilo, belo srajco, na glavo pa posadi dolgo koničasto kapo. Ime aludira na Kibeline svečenike, ki so se imenovali gali (galli - petelini), kapa pa na koničasto frigijsko pokrivalo Kibelinega ljubljenca Atisa. Skratka, spominja na otroškega Atisa, kot je bil v antiki velikokrat upodobljen v majhnih bronastih ali glinenih kipcih.

Tudi pri borovem gostivanju, izjemnem običaju, ki je doslej brez vzporednic, je bilo mogoče v podiranju bora v sklopu Kibelinih praznovanj najti ustrezno razlago za nenavaden običaj ženitve (gostivanja) z borom. Pri tem je posebej izbira drevesa (bor ali katero drugo zimzeleno drevo) pa tudi osrednje dejanje (poroka) jasna aluzija na Kibelo, ki doseže ponovno vstajenje Atisa (njegov simbol je bor) in se nato z njim združi.

Poleg maske kurenta, piceka in običaja borovega gostivanja je potrebno omeniti še dva podatka v soseščini, ki opozarjata na preostanke kulta Kibeles in Atisa v srednjem in novem veku, namreč omemba kurentov in koribantov pri Tomažu Arhidijakonu iz 13. st. in "ovnova procesija", ki so jo do začetka 20. stoletja prirejali na znani kulturni in naselbinski točki Lavant na vzhodnem Tirolskem.

Povezava z ostalinami zadnjega pomembnega poganskega kulta pri nas in sledovi drobcev poznega izročila v soseščini opozarjajo, da se je spomin na kult Velike matere bogov obdržal mnogo dalje, kot smo si predstavljali doslej, posebno še v skritih, zakotnih predelih, kjer so se ohranili staroselski otoki.