ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

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Summary :

Agdistis was a hermaphrodite creature from Phrygia in Asia Minor. No representation of Agdistis survives, whereas written sources preserve two versions concerning the myth.

Date

Archaic era

Geographical Location

Phrygia

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1. Agdistis-mythological tradition

Agdistis was a hermaphrodite creature from Phrygia in Asia Minor. There are no representations of Agdistis in ancient art. There are two versions concerning the myth: the first is reported by Pausanias[1] and the second by the Latin orator Arnobius.[2]

According to the first version, while Zeus was fast asleep, part of his semen fell on the earth and a strange hermaphrodite creature, Agdistis, sprang from the ground. The gods were so frightened by her that they chained and castrated her. From her severed penis sprang a fruit-bearing almond tree. The almonds were collected by the daughter of the river god Sangarius and she put them in her bosom. The almonds disappeared immediately and the young girl was soon pregnant. She gave birth to a boy and she abandoned him, but he was saved by a billy-goat who nursed him. The boy, named Attis, grew and became so handsome that one day Agdistis, who at the time was a woman saw him and fell deeply in love with him. The gods, in order to protect the young man, decided to send him away and took him to Pessinus, where he got married to the daughter of the local king. Just, however, when the matrimonial hymn was over, Agdistis appeared and inflicted madness upon Attis and the king, thus they both castrated themselves. This castration was fateful for Attis and Agdistis, regretting her uncontrolled action, managed to persuade Zeus that the dead body of the young man would never be altered.

According to Arnobius version, Agdistis' story takes place on the fringes of Phrygia, in the point where a deserted steep rock, Agdos rose. Deukalion and Pyrrha, father and mother of humankind, had carved people out of stone there and Cybele, the Great Mother, was herself also carved out of this rock.[3] Zeus was enchanted by the great goddess and tried to couple with her in vain, therefore he placed his semen in a nearby rock. Thus, Agdistis, a hermaphrodite creature, was born, who Dionysus, the god of vine and wine, got drunk and castrated. From the blood of her wound a pomegranate-tree grew up, from which Nana, daughter of the river god Sangarius, cut a fruit and placed it on her breast. She got immediately pregnant and gave birth to a child, which the father of the young girl advised her to abandon. Exposed to the eyes of the people passing by, the young boy, named Attis, was saved by a he-goat and was nourished with honey and milk. He grew to become a very handsome young man, for whom Agdistis and Cybele quarreled.

When Midas, king of Pessinus, attempted to marry the young boy with his daughter, Agdistis, out of jealousy, inflicted madness upon the entire wedding party. In his delirium, Attis was self-castrated under a pine tree and died. His wife, desperate, committed suicide. Cybele buried the two newlyweds and from the drops of blood of their wounds violets and an almond tree sprouted.

Upon Agdistis' request, Zeus accepted that the body of Attis would never decompose and that his hair would continue to grow long and his little finger to move. A celebration on his memory was also inaugurated in Passinus, where one of the greatest cult centres of Cybele was located.

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1. Paus. 7.17.10-12.

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2. Arnob., *Adv. Nat.* 5.5-7, 12.

3. This mythological tradition explains the fact that the goddess was worshipped in the form of an unwrought stone, a black meteoric stone (betylus).

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