# Quindecemviri, Bull’s Blood, and the Taurobolium

## Taurobolium

This semester I worked as a research intern on the City of Rome project, investigating a Roman priesthood known as the *quindecemviri* (the ‘fifteen men’, although they actually numbered beyond sixteen by the imperial period). These priests were responsible for overseeing the centennial *ludi saeculares* festival, certifying foreign cults, and guarding and interpreting the Sibylline Oracles (Montgomery 2012: 451, Gordon 1990: 245, Parke 1988: 139; Beard 1990: 19-21).

One of the most interesting topics that arose during my research into these priests was the *taurobolium* ritual. Seven of the twenty-nine *quindecemvir* inscriptions I studied this semester mentioned the *taurobolium*. Of these, four also mentioned the *criobolium*. Here is a typical example of an inscriptions describing a *quindecemvir* carrying out *taurobolium* and *criobolium*:

“*... Clodius Hermogenianus Caesarius, a most distinguished man, proconsul of Africa, prefect of the city of Rome, quindecemvir sacris faciundis, having carried out taurobolium and criobolium fourteen [days before] the Kalends of August [19th July 374], for the divinities of the air, and by the guardian of his own mind, the altar spoke by our lord Gratianus Augustus, the third, and Flavius Aequitius, the consuls.*”

(*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* VI 499)

But what exactly is the *taurobolium*, and what significance did it hold for its ancient practitioners? The first clue is in the name: *taurus* means ‘bull’ or ‘ox’ in Latin, so it doesn’t take much of stretch to infer that the taurobolium is an example of the Roman tradition of religious animal sacrifice. This is reinforced by the existence of several extant sacrificial altars bearing bovine iconography which were used in the ritual (fig. 1). The fourth and fifth century Christian apologist Prudentius provides a detailed description of what is almost certainly the *taurobolium* ritual, though he doesn’t refer to it by name. The graphic nature of his narration may be partly attributed to his strong personal views on paganism:

“*The high priest, you know, goes down into a trench dug deep in the ground to be made holy ... Above him they lay planks to make a stage ... When the beast for sacrifice has been stationed here, they cut his breast open with a consecrated hunting-spear and the great wound disgorges a stream of hot blood, pouring on the plank-bridge below a steaming river which spreads billowing out. Then through the many ways afforded by the thousand chinks it passes in a shower, dripping a foul rain, and the priest in the pit below catches it, holding his filthy head to meet every drop and getting his robe and his whole body covered with corruption ...*”

([Prudentius](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/prudentius/prud10.shtml) *[Crowns of Martyrdom](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/prudentius/prud10.shtml)* [X 1005-1050, Loeb trans.](http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/prudentius/prud10.shtml))

The *taurobolium* was closely connected with the cults of Attis and particularly of Cybele/*Magna Mater*, the ‘Great Mother’ (fig. 2); five of the twenty-three *quindecemviri* in my study were also involved in the latter cult. The purpose of the *taurobolium* is thought to have been the purification of an initiate of the *Magna Mater* cult with the blood of the sacrificed ram (Magie 1924: 119). Some initiates chose to undertake *taurobolium* on their birthdays to emphasise the importance of the transition (*CIL* II 5260, XIII 573; *Anné Épigraphique* 1956 #255). One *taurobolium* inscription containing the phrase *in aeternum renatus* (“reborn forever”; *CIL* VI 510, c.f. *CIL* V 6961-2) may even suggest that the ritual was thought to guarantee a blessed afterlife (Forsythe 2012: 79). However, contrary to the notion of a single, definitive moment of transition, some Romans undertook the taurobolium more than once: twenty years seems to have been a popular interval (*CIL* X 1596, VI 502, VI 504, VI 512). Some inscriptions also suggest that one could perform *taurobolium* on behalf of a whole community rather than a single individual, and there is some evidence that the imperial government offered incentives for the wealthy to do so (*CIL* VIII.8203, *Fragmenta Vaticana* s.148, Forsyth 2012: 104-5).

Unfortunately, the *Magna Mater* cult’s infamous secrecy has caused the details of its beliefs and practices to be largely lost to history (Forsythe 2012: 78), although it is thought to have been brought to Rome from Asia Minor in 205 BCE on the advice of the *quindecemviri* – or *decemviri* (“ten men”) as they were then called ([Livy XXIX.10.4-11.8, 14.1-4](http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Livy/Livy29.html); [Ovid *Fasti* IV.247-348](https://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidFasti4.html)) – who continued to oversee it throughout its history. The connection with Anatolia may have fuelled its popularity by playing to the Romans’ belief in their Trojan ancestry (Forsyth 2012: 84-5). The cult’s popularity is attested by the existence of over one hundred inscriptions recording *taurobolium* rituals, far beyond the handful that happened to overlap with the *quindecemviri* inscriptions in my study (Forsythe 2012: 79).

Despite its apparent popularity, the *taurobolium* is not mentioned in many ancient literary sources besides Prudentius. The anonymous author of *Historia Augusta* reports that the third-century Severan emperor Elagabalus “adopted the worship of the Great Mother and celebrated the rite of the *taurabolium*” ([*Historia Augusta: Antoninus Elagabalus* VII](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Historia_Augusta/Elagabalus/1*.html)). In the case of its close cousin, the *criobolium*, the evidence is even thinner on the ground. Besides the inscriptional evidence such as Clodius’ inscriptions showing its ties to the cult, very little is known of its nature or function. In our current state of knowledge, it seems safe to assume that it was also a form of initiation into this fascinating branch of Roman religion. Like the cult of the *Magna Mater* and the *quindecemviri* themselves, these rituals declined and eventually disappeared following the Christianisation of the Roman empire over the course of the fourth century and beyond.

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