

# A STATUE HEAD OF THE “GREAT MOTHER” DISCOVERED IN SAMOTHRACE

(PLATES 89–92)

IN 1988 a fine under-life-sized head from a statue (Pl. 89) was discovered in Samothrace during excavations in the area of the Neorion, or Ship Monument, which is located on the West Hill of the Sanctuary of the Great Gods.<sup>1</sup> This head probably belonged to a votive statue of the “Great Mother” (a goddess known in antiquity as Mother of the Gods, Kybele, and Magna Mater) in the same scheme as that represented on a series of Samothracian coins of the Hellenistic period (Pl. 90:a). It is the only sculpture of this type to have been found in the Sanctuary at Samothrace, which was one of the most important places of worship of the Great Mother. It is also one of the finest examples of this sculptural type that has survived.

The head is of white, fine-grained marble. It is quite well preserved, being broken in only a few places: horizontally *ca.* 0.01 m. above the hairline, at the tip of the nose, and at the back of the neck on the left side. The back of head and neck are flat and roughly dressed with a chisel (Pl. 89:b). The bottom of the neck is carved into a fairly shallow tenon of triangular outline, which was inserted into a statue, now lost.

On each side a long twisted lock of hair, carved free of the neck, extends from behind the ear to the shoulder. The hair is centrally parted and pulled back with a narrow, shallowly chiseled fillet. The brows curve downward toward the outer corners of the eyes, and the long, narrow bridge of the nose is flat with sharp edges. The small, full mouth is slightly open. The underchin is plump, and the neck has two “Venus rings”. The head turns slightly to the right and has an upward tilt.

The surface of the marble is finely finished. Evidence for the use of the point remains in two areas that would not have been visible: on the left side of the neck behind the lock of hair and on the bottom surface of the tenon. The flat surface of the back of the head and neck was dressed with a flat chisel. A drill was used to undercut the long locks of hair at either side of the neck; drill channels are visible at the intersection of neck and shoulder on both sides. The ear canals are drilled, as is the deeply indented area between the inside corners of the eyes and the root of the nose.

The shallow tenon is dowelless, but the arms and feet of the statue may have been attached separately by means of dowels, judging from the large number of sculptural

<sup>1</sup> Samothrace inv. no. 88.523. Max. p.H. 0.220 m. H. face 0.123 m. Max. W. face 0.131 m. Max. W. neck 0.121 m. Found August 5, 1988, north of the northwest corner of the Roman Building (west of the Neorion), in Byzantine fill (West Hill 48–50 S/ 29.20 W; level: –7.54; brown earth with small to medium field stones). Well preserved. White, fine-grained marble with calcareous encrustation; somewhat sugary surface. Notebook: VII p. 178. Diary: P. 244.

fragments of comparable size with dowel holes, found in the Sanctuary of the Great Gods, especially in the area of the West Hill.<sup>2</sup>

That this head represents a mature goddess is indicated by the plump underchin and “Venus rings” on the neck. She has the long shoulder locks seen frequently in representations of nurturing, motherly divinities.<sup>3</sup> The slight turn of the head and the parted lips convey the impression of a living, breathing deity. This aspect, together with the classicizing treatment of the brow and nose, suggests a date for the sculpture in the Hellenistic period (3rd–1st centuries B.C.). So does the fact that the statue was probably pieced together, as were many of the 2nd-century B.C. pedimental sculptures of the Hieron at Samothrace.<sup>4</sup> The style of this head may be compared, for example, with that of several statues of Hellenistic goddesses (Pl. 90:b–d).<sup>5</sup> It is also close to the style used for the goddesses on the Great Altar at Pergamon (e.g. Pl. 91:a, b).

The iconography of the Samothracian head corresponds to that of sculptural representations of the Great Mother (Pl. 91:c, d, 92:a, b),<sup>6</sup> who is usually shown with long locks of hair, one at either side of her neck as on the Samothrace head (Pl. 89). The latter is also similar to some representations of Demeter in her capacity of earth goddess, with whom the Great Mother was sometimes conflated by the Greeks (Pl. 92:c).<sup>7</sup> The head is not likely to depict the youthful goddess Isis, whose long hair is characteristically rendered in corkscrew curls.<sup>8</sup> Nor does it depict Kore-Persephone, who is also a younger goddess, and who is usually represented with her hair tied up in the coiffure of a bride.<sup>9</sup>

That the Samothrace head is tilted upwards suggests that it is from a seated rather than a standing statue. The standard statue type of the Mother of the Gods shows her seated, with head turned upwards and slightly to the right, on a throne with a high back and footstool (Pls. 91:c, d, 92:b). She wears a peplos over a chiton with a himation draped over one shoulder, her head decorated with a fillet and polos or mural crown, her left hand

<sup>2</sup> A sandaled foot (inv. no. 88.551), found about two meters to the south of the findspot of the head under discussion, and a draped wrist fragment (inv. no. 88.129), found about ten meters to the south, are of similar size, material, and workmanship. 88.129 preserves a himation draped over a left wrist; the hand was extended and may have held an attribute.

<sup>3</sup> As, for example, the Eirene and Ploutos group of Kephisodotos: see Stewart 1990, pp. 173–174, pls. 485, 486.

<sup>4</sup> For the pedimental sculptures from the Hieron see *Samothrace* III, i, pp. 237–387; also P. W. Lehmann 1962.

<sup>5</sup> The plates in Marcadé 1969 and in Kabus-Preisshofen 1989 provide the best idea of the range of stylistic options used for the heads of goddesses in the Hellenistic period. Kabus-Preisshofen catalogue nos. 1 and 97–99 and Marcadé 1969, pl. XLI:A449 are quite similar to the Samothrace head in style. Compare, also, representations of other divinities, such as the Artemis from the cult group of Despoina at Lykosoura (Smith 1991, pl. 301:3). For the Great Altar at Pergamon see Kähler 1948.

<sup>6</sup> The best recent discussions of the iconography of the “Great Mother” are in Naumann 1983 and Vermaseren 1977–1989.

<sup>7</sup> See Kabus-Preisshofen 1975, Taf. 11, 20; Vermaseren 1977, p. 32:f; *LIMC* IV, i, addenda, s.v. Demeter, and Peschlow-Bindokat 1972.

<sup>8</sup> See *LIMC* V, ii, s.v. Isis 34, 52, 61, 62; also Smith 1991, pp. 75–76, pls. 90, 251.

<sup>9</sup> See Kabus-Preisshofen 1975, Taf. 14, 16.

resting on a tympanum or holding a scepter, and her right hand holding a patera.<sup>10</sup> The representation of the Great Mother of this specific type on a series of Samothracian coins from the Hellenistic period (Pl. 90:a) shows the goddess holding a scepter in her left hand and with lions at either side of her throne.<sup>11</sup> It is possible that the Samothrace statue was of this type. Alternatively, the goddess could have been shown holding a tympanum, with a lion on her lap (Pl. 92:a). A good idea of the lost statue body may be gained from a headless statue (1.3 m. high) of the Great Mother, dating to the 4th century B.C., found in 1971 in a small Metroon at Moschato in Piraeus (Pl. 92:d).<sup>12</sup>

The Samothrace head is half life-sized, suggesting that the statue as a whole stood slightly less than a meter high. Its size indicates that it was a votive, rather than a cult statue. That the back of the head and neck are cut as a flat surface suggests that the head may have been veiled (as Pl. 92:a), that is, that a separate piece of drapery rendered in stone or perhaps wood was attached here. On the other hand, the flatness of the back of the head and neck could simply indicate that the statue stood against a wall or in a small naiskos, as is often seen in relief representations of the Great Mother (Pl. 92:b). The good state of preservation of the head suggests that the statue was placed inside a building, in a location relatively near its findspot, perhaps in the Neorion or in the nearby "Roman building" (a structure that is rectangular in shape and of unknown function), which has a low bench (ca. 0.5 m. high) skirting its interior walls that could have been used to display votives of this sort. The head of a half-life-sized seated statue, positioned on this kind of bench, would have been approximately at the observer's eye level.

What would have been the model for such a statue? The famous statue of the Great Mother in the Metroon in Athens seems to have inspired many variations in large- and small-scale sculpture. Arrian describes the scheme of the statue in Athens (*Periplus* 9):<sup>13</sup>

[The goddess of Phasis] to judge by her posture would seem to be Rhea; she has a cymbal in her hands and lions beneath the throne and is seated as is the statue of Pheidias in the Metroon at Athens.<sup>14</sup>

The Samothrace head does not seem to have been inspired by a single famous prototype, however; by the time of its creation this seated-statue type had become widespread in Greece and Asia Minor.

<sup>10</sup> This enthroned statue type did not become common in Greece and Asia Minor until the Hellenistic period. Ancient writers tell us that a seated statue of the Great Mother stood in the Metroon in Athens in the 5th century B.C. (see *Agora* III, pp. 150–160). No sculptured versions of this type from the 5th century have survived, although they do occur in vase painting (see Naumann 1983, Taf. 24: volute-krater from Spina in Ferrara).

<sup>11</sup> See Gadbery 1992 (pp. 331–339, esp. p. 332, note 5). See also Head 1911, p. 263 and Head 1968, p. 75.

<sup>12</sup> On the Piraeus metroon see Papachristodoulou 1971, pp. 140–146 and pl. I.; also Michaud 1972, p. 611 and fig. 68. Compare the similar (headless) statue of the Great Mother found during excavations in the Temple of Cybele on the Palatine in Rome (Vermaseren 1977–1989, III, no. 3, with pl. XIII).

<sup>13</sup> *Agora* III, no. 468. εἴη δ' ἂν ἀπὸ γε τοῦ σχήματος τεκμαιρομένῳ ἡ 'Ρέα' καὶ γὰρ κύμβαλον μετὰ χειρὸς ἔχει καὶ λέοντας ὑπὸ τῷ θρόνῳ καὶ κάθηται ὥσπερ ἐν τῷ μητρῷ Ἀθήνησιν ἡ τοῦ Φειδίου.

<sup>14</sup> Pliny (*NH* 36.17): a reference to a famous statue of the Great Mother by Agorakritos in the Metroon at Athens.

Additional support for the proposed identification of this head is provided by ancient literary sources, which reveal how closely the worship of the Great Mother was associated with the island of Samothrace. The cult of the Great Gods at Samothrace involved the worship of several divinities, who were grouped around a major figure. This major figure was the Mother of the Gods. She was similar to the Great Mother of Anatolia, the Phrygian Kybele, and to the Greek Rhea. See, for example, Lucian's discussion of the worship of Rhea (*de Dea Syria* 15):

Attis was Lydian in origin, and was the first to teach the secret rites devoted to Rhea. The rites performed by the Phrygians, the Lydians, and the Samothracians were all learned from Attis; for when Rhea castrated him, he left off the masculine form of life, took on a feminine appearance, put on women's garments and, traveling into every land, performed secret rites, related what he had suffered, and sang the praises of Rhea.<sup>15</sup>

Ancient writers also identified the Samothracian goddess with the Great Mother of Mount Ida. For example, we hear from Diodorus Siculus (3.55.7–9) that the queen of the Amazons,

while subduing some of the rest of the islands, was caught up in a storm, and after she had offered up prayers for her safety to the Mother of the Gods, she was carried to one of the uninhabited islands; on this island, in obedience to a vision which she beheld in her dreams, she made [this island] sacred to this goddess, and set up altars there and offered magnificent sacrifices. . . . However, after the Amazons had returned to the continent, the myth relates, the Mother of the Gods, well pleased with the island, settled on it certain other people, and also her own sons, who are known by the name of Korybantes—who their father was is handed down in their initiation as a matter not to be divulged; and she taught the mysteries which are now celebrated on the island, and she ordained by law that the sacred area should enjoy the right of sanctuary.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Samothrace* I, no. 144. Ἀττις δὲ γένος μὲν Λυδὸς ἦν, πρῶτος δὲ τὰ ὄργια τὰ ἐς Ῥήν ἐδιδάξατο. καὶ τὰ Φρύγες καὶ Λυδοὶ καὶ Σαμόθρακες ἐπιτελεύουσιν, Ἄττεω πάντα ἔμαθον· ὥς γάρ μιν ἡ Ῥήν ἔτεμε, βίου μὲν ἀνδρῆλου ἀπεπαύσατο, μορφὴν δὲ θελήν ἡμεΐψατο καὶ ἐσθῆτα γυναικῆν ἐνεδύσατο καὶ ἐς πᾶσαν γῆν φοιτῶν ὄργιά τε ἐπετέλεε καὶ τὰ ἔπαθεν ἀπηγγέετο καὶ Ῥήν ἤειδεν.

<sup>16</sup> *Samothrace* I, no. 31. ἔπειτα καὶ τῶν ἄλλων νήσων τινὰς καταστρεφομένην χειμασθῆναι, καὶ ποιησαμένην τῇ μητρὶ τῶν θεῶν εὐχὰς ὑπὲρ τῆς σωτηρίας προσενεχθῆναι νήσῳ τινὶ τῶν ἐρήμων· ταύτην δὲ κατὰ τινα ἐν τοῖς ὀνείροις φαντασίαν καθιερωσά τῇ προειρημένη θεῷ καὶ βωμοὺς ἰδρύσασθαι καὶ θυσίας μεγαλοπρεπεῖς ἐπιτελέσαι· ὀνομάσαι δὲ αὐτὴν Σαμοθράκην, ὅπερ εἶναι μεθερμηνευόμενον εἰς τὴν Ἑλληνικὴν διάλεκτον ἱερὰν νήσον· ἔνιοι δὲ τῶν ἱστορικῶν λέγουσι τὸ πρὸ τοῦ Σάμον αὐτὴν καλουμένην ὑπὸ τῶν κατοικούντων ἐν αὐτῇ ποτε Θρακῶν Σαμοθράκην ὀνομασθῆναι. οὐ μὲν ἀλλὰ τῶν Ἀμαζόνων ἐπανελευσάντων εἰς τὴν ἡπειρον μυθολογοῦσι τὴν μητέρα τῶν θεῶν εὐαρεστηθεῖσαν τῇ νήσῳ ἄλλους τέ τινας ἐν αὐτῇ κατοικίσαι καὶ τοὺς ἑαυτῆς υἱοὺς τοὺς ὀνομαζομένους Κορύβαντας· ἐξ οὗ δ' εἰσὶ πατρὸς ἐν ἀπορρήτῳ κατὰ τὴν τελετὴν παραδίδοσθαι· καταδειξά τινες δὲ καὶ τὰ νῦν ἐν αὐτῇ συντελούμενα μυστήρια καὶ τὸ τέμενος ἄσυλον νομοθετῆσαι.

On the worship of Kybele and Attis and how it fitted into the cult of the Great Gods, see Cole 1984, esp. pp. 26–37; also *Samothrace* III, ii, pp. 42–47 and K. Lehmann 1983, pp. 24–28, esp. 24–27. From Diodorus Siculus (5.48–50.1 = *Samothrace* I, no. 142) we hear a bit about the paraphernalia of these mysteries. He tells us that among the gifts presented at the wedding of Cadmus and Harmonia, which took place on the island

By Hellenistic times the Samothracians felt entitled to claim that the rites of the Phrygian mother had actually originated on their island and had been exported from it to Asia Minor by Dardanos. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Antiquitates romanae* 1.61.2–4)<sup>17</sup> tells us that Dardanos founded Samothrace and subsequently emigrated from the island to Asia with his son Idaios,

who occupied the mountains which are now called after him the Idaean mountains, and there founded a sanctuary to the Mother of the Gods and instituted secret and initiatory rites which are observed to this day throughout all Phrygia.<sup>18</sup>

The textual evidence, then, shows how expectable a votive statue of the Great Mother would have been in a Samothracian context.

It seems fitting that this syncretistic goddess, who was associated with both Asia and Greece, should have been such a strong presence on Samothrace, an island that was geographically situated between these two worlds. How was this goddess conceived of on the island itself? Presumably she meant different things to initiates from different parts of the ancient world. In the native language of Samothrace, which was in use down to the Hellenistic period, she was probably known as Axieros. We hear from several sources that Axieros was one of the Great Gods of Samothrace, for example, the Scholia Laurentiana to Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 1.917:

The initiation at Samothrace is into the cult of the Kabeiroi, as Mnaseas says, and the names of [the gods], four in number, are Axieros, Axiokersa, Axiokersos. Axieros is Demeter, Axiokersa is Persephone, and Axiokersos is Hades. Kasmilus, who is added as the fourth, is Hermes, as Dionysodorus relates.<sup>19</sup>

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of Samothrace, were "the sacred rites of the Mother of the Gods, as she is called, together with cymbals and kettledrums and the ecstatic revelers of her ritual. . . ." It is possible that the rings of magnetized iron that have been found in the Sanctuary (see K. Lehmann 1983, pl. 9) were distributed to initiates, so that they could continue to benefit from the Great Mother's protection after they left the island.

<sup>17</sup> *Samothrace* I, no. 59. . . . Ἰδαῖος μὲν ὁ Δαρδάνου μέρος τῆς στρατιᾶς ἔχων ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν ἃ νῦν Ἰδαία ἀπ' ἐκείνου λέγεται, ἔνθα μητρὶ θεῶν ἱερὸν ἰδρυσάμενος ὄργια καὶ τελετὰς κατεστήσατο, αἱ καὶ εἰς τὸδε χρόνον διαμένουσιν ἐν ἀπάσῃ Φρυγίᾳ.

<sup>18</sup> Compare Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2.13.3 (= *Samothrace* I, no. 145): "a curse then upon the man who started this deception for mankind, whether it was Dardanus, who introduced the mysteries of the Mother of the Gods, or Aetion, who founded the secret and mystic rites of the Samothracians." ὄλοιτο οὖν ὁ τῆσδε ἄρξας τῆς ἀπάτης ἀνθρώποις, εἴτε ὁ Ἀρδανός, ὁ μητρὸς θεῶν καταδείξας τὰ μυστήρια, εἴτε Ἑρτίων, ὁ τὰ Σαμοθράκων ὄργια καὶ τελετὰς ὑποστησάμενος.

<sup>19</sup> *Samothrace* I, no. 150. μυθῶνται δὲ ἐν τῇ Σαμοθράκῃ τοῖς Καβείροις, ὡς Μνασέας φησί· καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα αὐτῶν, δ' τὸν ἀριθμὸν, Ἀξίερος, Ἀξιώκερσα, Ἀξιώκερσος. Ἀξίερος μὲν οὖν ἐστὶν ἡ Δημήτηρ, Ἀξιώκερσα δὲ ἡ Περσεφόνη, Ἀξιώκερσος δὲ ὁ Αἰδης. ὁ δὲ προστιθέμενος τέταρτος Κάσμιλος ὁ Ἑρμῆς ἐστὶν, ὡς ἰστορεῖ Διονυσόδωρος. . . . Several other ancient authors say much the same thing (see *Samothrace* I, nos. 150a–e). Alternatively, in some ancient sources, the Great Gods are identified with the Dioskouroi or with the Korybantes, suggesting that Axiokersa could refer to the Mother of the Gods, while Axieros and Axiokersos could refer to two attendant male deities (see Cole 1984, pp. 2–3).

We do not know if any of the Samothracian gods were ever individually addressed by the name of a Greek divinity, such as Demeter, Rhea, Kybele, Hades, or Persephone. Samothracian inscriptions are silent about the identity of the Great Gods; they are dedicated simply to *theoi* or *megaloí theoi*.<sup>20</sup> It is probable that the exotic names Axieros, Axiokersos, and Axiokersa<sup>21</sup> were not to be included in inscriptions because, as part of the mysteries, they could not be revealed. A later reflection of this secrecy is found in a rhetorical statement in the writings of the emperor Julian:

Shall I write about things not to be spoken of and divulge what ought not to be divulged? Shall I utter the unutterable? Who is Attis or Gallus? Who then is the Mother of the Gods? She is the source of the intellectual and creative gods, who in their turn guide the visible gods: she is both mother and the spouse of mighty Zeus. . . she is in control of every form of life, and the cause of all generation. . . .<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion, the art-historical and ancient literary evidence supports an identification of this fine statue head from Samothrace as the Great Mother. While representations of this goddess are plentiful in Greek art, very few freestanding sculptures of the seated type survive. The larger, marble seated statues are all headless. On a smaller scale, plenty of statuettes and reliefs survive intact, but their heads are stylistically abbreviated. This makes the Samothrace sculpture important. In quality it is well above the general run of under-life-sized votives of this goddess. It is also unique in being the only representation of a principle deity of the Samothracian mystery cult to have been found on this island.

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<sup>20</sup> See *Samothrace* II, i, nos. 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 18. Neither the stone nor the ceramic inscriptions from Samothrace preserve any Greek or non-Greek individual names of gods who figured in the cult. For discussion on this subject see *Samothrace* II, ii, pp. 26–36.

<sup>21</sup> The etymology of these names is disputed. The element *kers* often appears in Thraco-Phrygian names. Axi- may have meant "great", and the axi- root in these three names may be related to the Greek *axios* (ἄξιος), "worthy". Axi-eros may well be *megale meter*, Axio-kersos "great lord," and Axio-kersa "great lady". See *Samothrace* II, ii, p. 9 with note 5. On the non-Greek etymologies of these words see Bonfante 1955, pp. 106–107; Chapouthier 1935, pp. 160–161; also Hemberg 1950, pp. 87–89.

<sup>22</sup> Text cited in Vermaseren 1977, pp. 86–87. Julian, *On the Mother of the Gods*, VIII [V], p. 112, ed. Rochefort: τίς οὖν ἡ Μήτηρ τῶν Θεῶν; Ἡ τῶν κυβερνῶντων τοὺς ἐμφανεῖς νοερῶν καὶ δημιουργικῶν θεῶν πηγὴ, ἡ καὶ τεκοῦσα καὶ συνοικοῦσα τῷ μεγάλῳ Διί, θεὸς ὑποστᾶσα μεγάλη μετὰ τὸν μέγαν καὶ σὺν τῷ μεγάλῳ δημιουργῷ, ἡ πάσης μὲν κυρία ζωῆς, πάσης δὲ γενέσεως αἰτία, ἡ ῥᾶστα μὲν ἐπιτελοῦσα τὰ ποιοῦμενα, γεννῶσα δὲ δίχᾳ πάθους καὶ δημιουργοῦσα τὰ ὄντα μετὰ τοῦ Πατρὸς. . .

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a. Front view



b. Back view



c. Left side view



d. Right side view

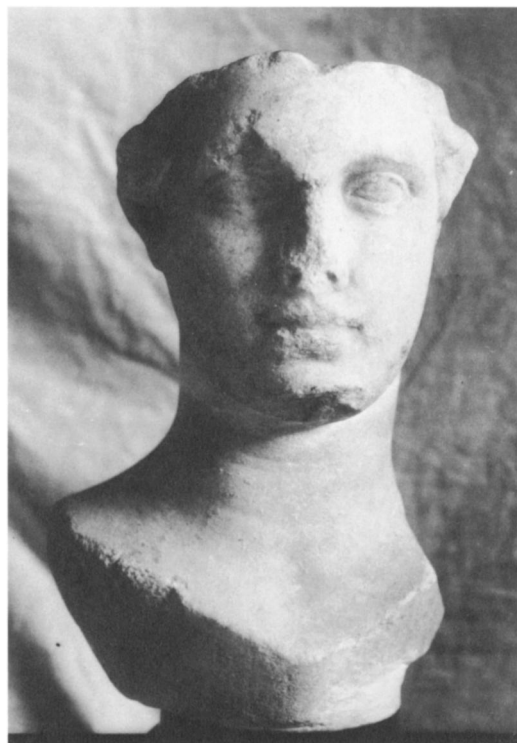
Head of the Great Mother from Samothrace  
(photographs J. R. McCredie)

**KATHERINE WELCH: A STATUE HEAD OF THE "GREAT MOTHER" FROM SAMOTHRACE**





a. Coin of Samothrace with seated Great Mother  
(photograph L. Gadbery)



b. Goddess, from Kos (Istanbul Archaeological  
Museum 1536. H. 0.39 m.)



c. Goddess, from Kos (Stuttgart,  
Landesmuseum 1.57. H. 0.145 m.)



d. Artemis (Delos A 449. H. 1.43 m.)



a. Nyx, Great Altar at Pergamon (Berlin)



b. Artemis, Great Altar at Pergamon (Berlin)



c. Front view



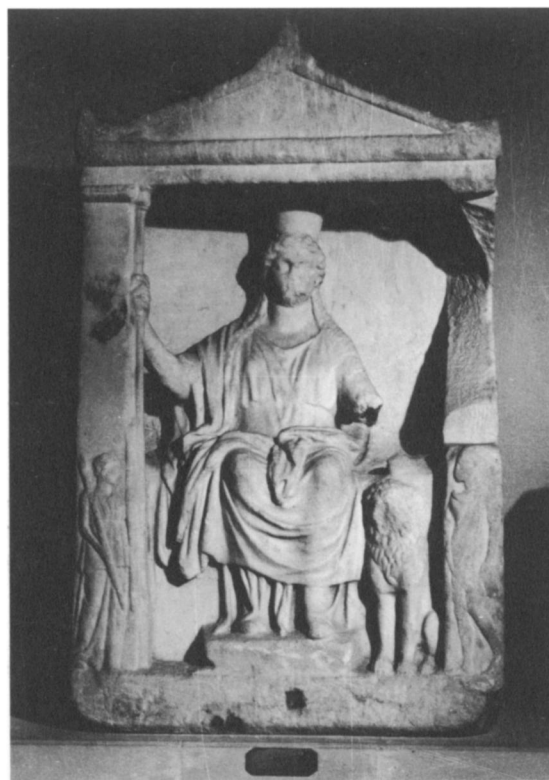
d. Side view

c, d. Statuette of the Great Mother (Metropolitan Museum of Art 22.139.24. H. 0.34 m.)

KATHERINE WELCH: A STATUE HEAD OF THE "GREAT MOTHER" FROM SAMOTHRACE



a. Statuette of the Great Mother  
(Fitzwilliam Museum,  
Lewis.103.92. H. 0.34 m.)



b. Statuette of the Great Mother (Syracuse,  
National Archaeological Museum. H. 0.70 m.)



c. Demeter (Kos Museum 40. H. 1.08 m.)



d. The Great Mother (Piraeus Archaeological  
Museum 3851 and 3852. H. 1.3 m.)