

ANNA JANOVICS

University of Szeged

The Relationship Between Mater Matuta and Aurora

The Matralia, an event attended only by women to worship Mater Matuta or Mother Matuta, was annually held in Italy on 11th of June. The celebration was bound to start in the morning at the first sight of prima lux—probably this is why Mother Matuta is often identified with several goddesses whose origins and mythology are tied to the celestial sphere. One of these figures known to the Romans was Aurora, the goddess of dawn. In various scriptures, these two female figures are mentioned together with their identities intertwined. This paper aims to further explore these points of connection.

Keywords: Mater Matuta, Matralia, Aurora, Roman religion

Latin poets have commonly used expressions referring to Eos, the Greek goddess, regarding Aurora. We can clearly state the divine nature of Aurora from literary sources, despite the fact that she did not have a cult. However, according to D.S Levene, this was not a rare case in Roman religion, therefore, we know quite little about her actual worship practices.¹ Aurora herself speaks about this in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (13, 587–590).

omnibus inferior, quas sustinet aureus aether,
(nam mihi sunt totum rarissima templa per orbem)
diva tamen, veni, non ut delubra diesque
des mihi sacrificos caliturasque ignibus aras:

I am the least of all, whom the golden heavens hold
(since temples to me are the rarest in all the world),

¹ LEVENE (2012: 56).

yet I come as a goddess: though not that you might give me sanctuaries, or sacred days, or altars to flame with sacrificial fires.²

The expression *rarissima* is a euphemism in this case: in fact, she did not have any temples. The goddess states that one can be a divine being without having a sanctuary. The existence of her cult is not negligible, but it is not what makes her a deity. As a matter of fact, her class, the “category” that she belongs to makes a divine entity: she is the one who ends the darkness and brings light to people and gods alike (*Ov. Met.* 13, 591–593). It is her simple yet quintessential role she plays that makes her a rather important character in Roman mythology.³ Her tradition is somewhat disorganized: in several scriptures, she is mentioned under various names and in different aspects depending on the context and the culture of the given text. It also occurs that she is identified with other mythological creatures and deities, like Mater Matuta.

In contrast to Aurora, Mater Matuta or Mother Matuta was regularly worshipped and celebrated on every 11th of June at the *Matralia* or Mothers’ festival (*Ov. Fas.* 6, 473sq). Her cult was present among women all over Italy: they prayed to her as a goddess of fertility. Therefore, the question emerges: why is the character of Mater Matuta identified in certain sources⁴ with the goddess of dawn, especially in the absence of a proper cult? What is the connection between the two deities? The present study elaborates on the possible parallel between these two characters relying on a number of points of connection.

The first mention of Mater Matuta identified as Aurora can be found in the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius (5, 656–679)⁵.

Tempore item certo roseam Matuta per oras
aetheris auroram differt et lumina pandit,
aut quia sol idem, sub terras ille revertens,

² The study contains the author’s own translations, except where it is marked differently.

³ LEVENE (2012: 56).

⁴ LUCR.; SMITH (2000); MANTZILAS (2018).

⁵ SMITH (2000: 146).

anticipat caelum radiis accendere temptans,
 aut quia conveniunt ignes et semina multa
 confluere ardoris consuerunt tempore certo,
 quae faciunt solis nova semper lumina gigni;
 quod genus Idaeis fama est e montibus altis
 dispersos ignis orienti lumine cerni,
 inde coire globum quasi in unum et conficere orbem.
 nec tamen illud in his rebus mirabile debet
 esse, quod haec ignis tam certo tempore possint
 semina confluere et solis reparare nitorem.
 multa videmus enim, certo quae tempore fiunt
 omnibus in rebus. florescunt tempore certo
 arbusta et certo dimittunt tempore florem.
 nec minus in certo dentes cadere imperat aetas
 tempore et inpubem molli pubescere veste
 et pariter mollem malis demittere barbam.
 fulmina postremo nix imbres nubila venti
 non nimis incertis fiunt in partibus anni.
 namque ubi sic fuerunt causarum exordia prima
 atque ita res mundi cecidere ab origine prima,
 consequae quoque iam redeunt ex ordine certo.

Matuta also at a fixed hour
 Spreadeth the roseate morning out along
 The coasts of heaven and deploys the light,
 Either because the self-same sun, returning
 Under the lands, aspires to seize the sky,
 Striving to set it blazing with his rays
 Ere he himself appear, or else because
 Fires then will congregate and many seeds
 Of heat are wont, even at a fixed time,
 To stream together- gendering evermore

New suns and light. Just so the story goes
 That from the Idaean mountain-tops are seen
 Dispersed fires upon the break of day
 Which thence combine, as 'twere, into one ball
 And form an orb. Nor yet in these affairs
 Is aught for wonder that these seeds of fire
 Can thus together stream at time so fixed
 And shape anew the splendour of the sun.
 For many facts we see which come to pass
 At fixed time in all things: burgeon shrubs
 At fixed time, and at a fixed time
 They cast their flowers; and Eld commands the teeth,
 At time as surely fixed, to drop away,
 And Youth commands the growing boy to bloom
 With the soft down and let from both his cheeks
 The soft beard fall. And lastly, thunder-bolts,
 Snow, rains, clouds, winds, at seasons of the year
 Nowise unfixed, all do come to pass.
 For where, even from their old primordial start
 Causes have ever worked in such a way,
 And where, even from the world's first origin,
 Thuswise have things befallen, so even now
 After a fixed order they come round
 In sequence also.⁶

Among other topics, Lucretius talks about birth, development, growth, and death in the fifth book of his poetry. The subject of his work is the creation of the world and humankind, their mortality, and their downfall under the harmful influence of civilization. In lines 656–679 describing dawn, the presence of Matuta reflects directly on a different aspect of the goddess. The question of whether Matuta has always been worshipped as the goddess of dawn, or she acquired this as-

⁶ William Ellery Leonard (translator).

sociation through the fusion with another Greek divinity still remains unanswered. It seems that Lucretius implies to the Greek world once when he starts the paragraph with Homer's reference (656–657: the beginning of a new day), and then in lines 663–665 when he speaks about the events that occurred at Mount Ida in Troy (Mount Ida was one of the homes of Cybele or Magna Mater). The notion of birth often appears in the poem of Lucretius: in one of his explanations, the sun seizes the sky; in another one, the seeds of fire unite; then line 662 ends with the word *gigni* referring to the daily rebirth of the sun. The Matralia is not only a celebration of birth but also a celebration of early childhood, which opens the child's way to his growth and development. The elements used by the poet to compose this part of his work are worth mentioning. He does not use nurture as his main motive, but the whole cycle of life. He demonstrates this through plants that grow and then die; through the development of a child, from the appearance of the first teeth to adolescence; and finally through time and how everything with it will reach its own final cycle (669–679). Therefore every moment of birth becomes an integral part of life. So when Lucretius introduces Mother Matuta as the goddess of dawn, fertility, and growth, he gives her a significant place in life's never-ending cycle.⁷

There are multiple possible variations of the origin of the name Matuta⁸: it might be derived from the Latin words *mane* ("early morning"), *manus* ("good, benevolent"), and *maturus* ("mature"). According to Mantzilas, Link combines the words *manus* and *mane* in his work published in 1930. He insists on his idea that Matuta's name is derived from an adjective that has an Indo-European stem **ma-* (meaning "good, at the right time")⁹. Bishpam traces back the meaning of the name Matuta to "dawn mother", because he finds an etymological link between the word Matuta and the adjective *matutinus* ("of the morning"). The word *matutinus* obviously carries along the meaning of dawn, and therefore indicates that Mother Matuta is the goddess of dawn.¹⁰ According to another explanation given by Saint Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei* (4, 8), the name of the goddess is linked to the verb *maturescere* ("to mature")¹¹:

⁷ SMITH (2000: 147–148).

⁸ MANTZILAS (2018: 542).

⁹ MANTZILAS (2018: 542).

¹⁰ SMITH (2000: 143).

¹¹ ROSE (1934: 157).

maturescentibus deam Matutam;
 when maturing, to the goddess Matuta

Etymology and the texts of Lucretius show us very well how the forms of the two goddesses intertwined over time. Just like Aurora, the Romans woke up at dawn (*prima luce*) on the day of Matralia to benefit from the *prima lux* brought to them by the Mother of Dawn. This is the first significant moment of the day when she casts misty morning dew on the soil and fields, bestowing the gift of fertility on the world. We can also reason that the early beginning of the Matralia celebration underlines the importance of the “first light”: it is an essential part of development and growth; without it, the cycle of life would cease to go on. This is how we get closer to the meaning of *maturatio*, as we can regard Aurora as not only a dawn goddess but one that is responsible for fertility, which is actually the main role of Mother Matuta.

We can find multiple descriptions of the Matralia in the work of Ovid’s *Fasti*, where even the opening lines imply the presence of Aurora (6, 473–474). She is the one who rises in the East from the river Oceanus once the night is over, then departs and leaves behind her husband Tithonus in their matrimonial bed:

Iam, Phryx, a nuptaquereris, Tithone, relinqui,
 et vigil Eois Lucifer exit aquis:

Now you complain, Phrygian Tithonus, abandoned by your bride,
 And the vigilant Morning Star leaves the Eastern waters.

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, Aurora is a goddess without a cult and without any temples. In contrast stands Mater Matuta, whose sanctuaries are often mentioned in several literary sources, like in the work of Livy *Ab Urbe Condita*. In 5, 19, he is most likely speaking about the temple dedicated to Mother Matuta by King Servius Tullius that the Roman *dictator* Marcus Furius Camillus wanted to dedicate once again after the capture of Veii:

... satis iam omnibus ad id bellum paratis, ludos magnos ex senatus consulto vovit Veii captis se facturum aedemque Matutae Matris refectam dedicaturum, iam ante ab rege Ser. Tullio dedicatam.

as all the preparations for war were now sufficiently advanced, he vowed, in pursuance of a senatorial decree, that on the capture of Veii he would celebrate the Great Games and restore and dedicate the temple of Matuta the Mother, which had been originally dedicated by Servius Tullius.¹²

Later, in 5, 23, we can see that the dedication of the temple had been realized.

Tum Iunoni reginae templum in Aventino locavit, dedicavitque Matutae Matris;

After this he signed a contract for building the temple of Queen Juno on the Aventine and dedicated one to Matuta the Mother.¹³

According to 6, 33, there was another temple dedicated to Mother Matuta in Satricum that miraculously remained intact even after an arson initiated by the Latins—all because of the threatening voices coming from the building that warned the soldiers.

Nec aliud tectum eius superfuit urbis, cum faces pariter sacris profanisque inicerent, quam Matris Matutae templum; inde eos nec sua religio nec verecundia deum arcuisse dicitur sed vox horrenda edita templo cum tristibus minis ni nefandos ignes procul delubris amovissent.

They flung firebrands on sacred and profane buildings alike, and not a single roof of that city escaped except the temple of Mother Matuta. It is stated that it was not any religious scruple or fear of the gods that re-

¹² Rev. Canon Roberts (translator).

¹³ Rev. Canon Roberts (translator).

strained them, but an awful voice which sounded from the temple threatening them with terrible punishment if they did not keep their accursed firebrands far from the shrine.¹⁴

Only matrons (*bonae matres*), that is women in their first marriages (*univirae*), were allowed to attend the celebrations held in temples. It was crucial that these women were not widows already, since every notion of death could negatively affect the goddess. The celebration had to remain entirely pure.¹⁵

There are two rituals that we can associate with Mother Matuta's name: one is the expulsion of a slave girl from the sanctuary, and the second is the prayer for the children of relatives of the gathered women. The first ritual demonstrates a very interesting contradiction in itself, since according to the tradition, only mothers and women of free birth could attend the event. Based on research, we know that slaves were not allowed to set foot in the sanctuary.¹⁶ Despite these rules, the first ritual was to choose a slave woman, bring her to the temple by force, and then chase her out of the temple while hitting her with wooden sticks. After this, the women present at the gathering offered flowers and saffron-colored bread loaves to the goddess as a pledge—the color of saffron was Aurora's most common adjective, second only to “rose-fingered”.¹⁷

The second ritual included women holding the children of their relatives in their arms and praying only for them—and not for their own (*Ov. Fas.* 6, 559–562)—to ask the goddess to protect and shelter the present children. Ovid presents the origins of this ritual through the mythology of Ino: after Semele's death, Ino and her husband Athamas decided to raise Bacchus himself, the child of Semele and Iuppiter. Ino had frequently emphasized

¹⁴ Rev. Canon Roberts (translator).

¹⁵ MANTZILAS (2018: 544).

¹⁶ MICHELS (1990: 77).

¹⁷ *Ov. Fas.* 3, 403: *Cum croceis rorare genis Tithonia coniunx coeperit et quintae tempora lucis aget...* ‘The wife of Tithonus is about to cast dew with her face colored saffron and bring light for the fifth time...’

Ov. Amor. 2, 4, 43: *seu flavent, placuit croceis Aurora capillis.* ‘or shining as gold, as Aurora is flaunting with her saffron-colored hair.’

and talked about the child's divine nature, and this angered the goddess Iuno. Iuno, in her jealousy, cast a curse of madness on Athamas, who, as a result, killed one of his sons. To save the other boy, Melicertes, Ino jumped into the sea with him—this is how she became Leucothea, a goddess of the sea, while Palaemon, his son, became a god of the sea (*Ov. Met.* 4, 416–431, 494–541). Ino, therefore, was the guardian of Semele's son, her sister's son, but she would send her own child to death. This story fits the above mentioned aspect of the Matralia, since even though Ino proved to be a cruel mother, she was a good guardian to her nephew. Ovid, in his *Fasti*, finishes this story with the following lines (6, 559–562):

non tamen hanc pro stirpe sua pia mater adoret:
 ipsa parum felix visa fuisse parens.
 alterius prolem melius mandabit illi:
 utilior Baccho quam fuit illa suis.

But let no loving mother pray to her, for her child:
 She herself proved an unfortunate parent.
 Better command her to help another's child:
 She was more use to Bacchus than her own.

Praying for the children of relatives has been a subject of research for a long time and raised many questions. We know that in Rome, only the fathers had the authority and ownership over all of their children—no matter if by blood, adopted or grandchildren. Mothers had no such power to claim, not even over their own children, let alone the children of their sisters.¹⁸

According to Mantzilas, Dumézil was the one who came up with a complex theory providing an explanation for this unique rite. On the day of Matralia, mothers do the same thing that Aurora does every morning by chasing away the darkness: this is the symbol of driving a slave girl out of the temple. He also notes the presence of many similar elements in the cult

¹⁸ ROSE (1934: 156).

of the Vedic goddess Ushas. Ushas (the Roman Aurora) and Ratri (the Roman Nox) are both “mothers” who take care of the Sun. The real mother of the Sun is actually Ratri, and her sister Ushas is the aunt of the Sun. The Sun reaches its full maturity and chases away the malicious, demonic and dangerous darkness (*tenebrae*). This mythology might give an answer to some of the specific rites related to Matralia: for example, the aspect of only once or firstly married women being able to attend the celebration. Surya is the daughter of the Sun, representing an archetype of all new marriages, one aspect of the many of Ushas. Furthermore, there are two rites present at the celebration: one of them, the banishment of the slave from the temple is negative, and the other is positive: the presence of the children of relatives. This symbolizes how the darkness of the night is eventually bound to pass, and the Sun must come up to reign over the sky afterwards.¹⁹

Despite the fact that the exact relationship between the two goddesses is still being researched, in my opinion, we can conclude that there is a truly strong correlation between them. As it is remarked by Lucretius, the existence and role of goddess Aurora overlap Mater Matuta’s cult and her essence. This is because Aurora represents the beginning of each and every day, which is the basis of all growth and development: those of a child and the cycle of life itself. From a religious point of view, it is understandable why Roman mothers were fearful and why they were so keen on pleasing the goddess. They feared that if the goddess does not get enough attention, respect, or gratitude, she might be displeased with her subjects. In her dissatisfaction, she might not encourage the process of ‘maturation’ and with that, the children of Roman women would remain unprotected and unsheltered. It is not only the role played by both Mater Matuta and Aurora that connects them, but also an etymological connection that in some cases leads back to Indo-European roots, just like the origin of the Matralia celebration can be traced back to Vedic rites. Mater Matuta, one divine entity with various aspects and roles, has deep connections to other deities. Her worship and cult were syncretic, a mixture of different myths, as we could see through the

¹⁹ MANTZILAS (2018: 545).

examples previously introduced in this study. She is one of those ancient Mediterranean goddesses who held various powers and who had almost exclusively women as their truest believers and followers.

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