

**PERCEPTIONS OF DIVINITY
THE CHANGING CHARACTERS OF ROMAN VENUS**

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29001509

2014

A thesis submitted to the
University of Wales Trinity Saint David
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how at Rome the characters of the goddess Venus changed from the fourth century BC to the first century AD. It is argued that the different ways in which she was perceived, and the associations, powers and responsibilities she was assigned, were significant for the Romans' engagement with the goddess during the Republic and early Empire.

A discussion of some theories of Roman religion since the nineteenth century shows how these views and their subsequent re-evaluation have influenced understandings of Venus. The belief that the Romans of this period took little interest in the characters of their gods is challenged, though it is suggested that traces of this remain as negative preconceptions in some modern approaches.

Earlier theories of Roman religion saw the identities of the gods as late Greek imports. Four foreign goddesses known at Rome during the Republic (Aphrodite, Turan, Isis and Cybele) are examined to discover how their characters were represented and in what ways these might have influenced the character of Venus at Rome. The extent to which they were 'mother' or 'women's' goddesses, and whether they and Venus had similar connections with fertility and childbirth are discussed.

Evidence for the different representations of the character of Venus is drawn from a variety of sources including art, literature, numismatics and epigraphy. The changing characters are discussed in relation to women's engagement with her and both external influence and internal developments are shown to have shaped perceptions of the goddess. In the Late Republic the role of Venus as protector and ancestor is demonstrated to have grown in significance through her connection with Aeneas, whilst during the Principate her popularity enabled her to be used in support of Augustan values.

Acknowledgements

Dr David Noy gave advice at the outset of this project, and Dr Ralph Haeussler kindly agreed to take on the supervision of the dissertation even before he had arrived in Lampeter.

My employers, Bristol Baptist College, generously awarded me study leave, and colleagues, friends and family have provided much encouragement during the writing of this dissertation.

Libraries in Bristol, Lampeter and Oxford have all furnished useful resources.

Dr Richard de Puma graciously gave permission for the use of his drawing of an Etruscan mirror.

I am grateful to them all. However this dissertation is dedicated to the memory of the late Anthony Brothers, lecturer in Classics at Lampeter from 1964 – 2009; who introduced me to what was then St David's University College, and who first taught me about Roman religion.

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Introduction

Venus is popularly identified as the goddess of love and most frequently appears today as a symbol of sexual attraction.¹ Representing feminine seductiveness, she remains a favourite subject for artists.² But was the same simple equation 'Venus = love' all that the Romans knew? What were the different guises in which they recognized her? This dissertation examines the changing characters of the goddess at Rome, from the fourth century BC to the first century AD. Here by *character* is meant how she was perceived, and the way her powers and spheres of responsibility were represented.

A study of the character of one of the gods in this period of Roman history needs to begin with a consideration of past and present approaches to religion at Rome. This is because, as Feeney points out, 'according to the long-dominant models of Roman religion, the problems of the gods as entities, and of how to represent or engage with them, did not seem very pressing [to the Romans]'.³ The first chapter therefore examines theories of primitivism and conservatism, formalism and decline, and understandings of divine gender. All of these earlier models down-played the significance of individual gods in Roman religion, and denied the importance of their characters. The rejection of these theories and the re-evaluation which has taken place in recent decades

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- 1 The term *gods* will be used generically, and interchangeably with *deities*, and does not necessarily indicate male gender. When deities of one gender only are intended this will be made clear.
 - 2 Grigson, 1978: 228 provides a range of examples. Though his book is subtitled, *The birth, triumph, death and return of Aphrodite*, he acknowledges 'that her pretty Greek name never triumphed in the western world'. References to works of ancient writers mentioned or quoted are given within the text. All other references are in the footnotes.
 - 3 1998: 76.

will be discussed, but it will be suggested that, despite these developments, traces of the attitudes embodied in the old approaches still endure.

A number of key questions arise from the discussion in chapter one. These include the importance to the Romans of the diverse character(s) of Venus, the significance of foreign and other influences in forming those characters, and the connection between character in general and gender in particular and the way the Romans engaged with the goddess. The second chapter discusses foreign influence on the character of Venus by considering four 'foreign goddesses' that particularly shaped Roman perceptions: Aphrodite, Turan, Isis and Cybele. The time period chosen for this study is one in which the importance of the goddess grew, but at the same time her character changed. Chapters three and four look in detail at the changing characters of Venus as they were experienced by the Romans in the middle years of the Republic, and the instrumentalisation of the goddess during the Late Republic and Principate. By examining what shaped the different ways in which the goddess was viewed by the Romans, this dissertation seeks a reappraisal of the relationship between character (including gender) and personal engagement, and of the importance of both. How the Romans engaged with Venus and the way this was affected by changes in her character is examined.

Rüpke suggests that the gods may be understood by looking at the 'signs' which represent them, their images and the associated rituals.⁴ However this

4 2007: 7.

study will look more widely, not only examining the evidence of public and private cult, but also references to Venus (and the goddesses who influenced her) in literature and inscriptions, together with images on monuments, coins and other artefacts, in order to gain the widest view of perceptions at Rome. These sources for our knowledge of the religious life of the Republic and early Empire, even when taken together can only furnish a fragmentary picture, and much is unknowable. Information comes from a wide range of literature, though its value for providing reliable evidence is sometimes disputed.⁵ Most concerns public religion and the activities of the elite. Even then we know very little about what actually happened in the ceremonies and the temples of Venus in Rome. Some prose writers rarely discuss individual gods, preferring to speak of the gods collectively.⁶ Livy and Plutarch do provide information about Venus, but even they only give passing or conflicting reports, especially when describing events that occurred long in the past.⁷ The difficulty of interpreting ritual needs to be borne in mind and the perspective of male writers when writing about its significance will be particularly relevant when some of the practices relating to Venus are considered.⁸ Jenkyns suggests that poetry cannot supply reliable information about religion, yet it will be included here because of its value in giving different perceptions of the goddess, which may represent those widely

5 The scholarship is vast in this area. On Livy contrasting views are expressed in Orlin 2010: 8 ff. and Davies, 2004; Fantham, 1995 reviews different evaluations of Ovid.

6 For example Cic, *Att.* 16.6, 77.1; Tac. *Ann.* 4.1.2. For the defence of using poetry to understand perceptions of the gods, see Feeney, 1998: 97-114. For an opposing view see Jenkyns, 2013: 211-17. Abbreviations of ancient authors and their works follow the style of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

7 Feeney, 1998: 123-133 assumes that all the different explanations reflect actual understandings. Jenkyns is more sceptical, 2013: 211.

8 Langlands, 2006: 42-3.

held, or present innovative viewpoints.⁹ Jenkyns claims that ‘the Roman poets and their readers knew that the myths about the gods were all fiction’, but it is the different characters of Venus expressed by the poets as they retold or reinterpreted the myths that are important for this study.¹⁰ The contribution of literature can be supplemented and sometimes questioned by inscriptions and votive offerings which help to show what personal engagement Romans had with Venus. Offerings in particular may provide some indication of how the non-elite perceived and related to the gods, and it will be important to discover whether there is evidence of these in the case of Venus.¹¹ The images on coins and monuments give a different perspective from that of cult, and it must be assumed that they would have been easily recognisable.¹² Stewart has shown that the Romans did not necessarily make a clear distinction between cult statues and other representations, and these too are likely to have influenced their understandings of the gods.¹³ All these different sources will be used to explore the perceptions of Venus that existed at Rome in the time period in question.

9 Jenkyns, 2013: 211; for an opposite view see Feeney, 1998: 137.

10 Jenkyns, 2013: 210. Though few Romans actually *read* the poets.

11 It may not only have been the non-elite who made votive offerings, see Glinister, 2006: 28-9.

12 Certain images may have been as unclear to the Romans as they are to modern scholarship.

13 2003: 186, 191. As Jenkyns, 2013: 193, 205-6 points out, whilst the impossibility of knowing with certainty the mind of individual Romans is acknowledged, it may be possible to get an idea of how such people might have thought.

Chapter 1

The Gods of the Romans: The Changing Paradigm¹

1.1 *The Old Paradigm: Primitivism and Foreign Influence*

This chapter will examine changing views of religion at Rome, showing how they affected understandings of the gods and the Romans' engagement with them. From the eighteenth century the observations of explorers returning to Europe from their travels had contained reports of apparent parallels to descriptions of the religious activities found in classical texts.² However it was European expansion in India in the nineteenth century which gave an impetus to what would become known as comparative studies, providing large amounts of evidence, first from Sanskrit writings and, as the number of foreign territories increased, giving access to religious material from a wide range of other contexts.³ As evolutionary concepts were extended by anthropologists from biology to society during this period, the idea that all societies had developed in the same way, from primitive to sophisticated beliefs, seemed convincing to many.⁴ In comparing those at the same stage of development, Edward Tylor, the first Reader, and later professor of Anthropology at Oxford, explained that 'little respect need be had in such comparisons for date in history or for place on the map; the ancient Swiss lake-dweller may be set aside the mediaeval Aztec,

1 This description is used by Feeney, 1998:2-6.

2 There are a number of examples throughout Flaherty, 1992.

3 The study of myth was closely linked to the study of religion and also much affected by comparative studies. For understandings of myth from the Enlightenment, and especially connections with ideas of nationhood, see Lincoln, 1999, especially section II.

4 Phillips, 2007: 21. Burrow, 1996: 136 argues that the development of evolutionary anthropology owes as much to the 'impasse reached by mid-nineteenth century positivism' as to the work of Darwin. It was chiefly British scholars who applied evolutionary theories to Roman religion. For a discussion of philosophical and other reasons for German scholarship's antipathy to anthropological studies, see Phillips, 2007: 20-22.

and the Ojibwa of North America beside the Zulu of South Africa'.⁵ Tylor's focus was on psychological explanations of religion rather than on the different social structures of these varied peoples.⁶ All religions, he argued, had developed from an animistic stage, a belief in 'Spiritual Beings' who lived in all of nature, and this remained evident amongst more developed societies through what Tylor termed 'survivals'.⁷ These last he defined as:

processes, customs, opinions and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has evolved.⁸

Jevons acknowledged his indebtedness to Tylor, as well as to Robertson Smith, who had applied Tylor's views to Ancient Near Eastern religion, and to James Frazer, who had collected his observations of 'superstitious and religious observances of primitive nations in all parts of the globe'.⁹ Jevons described his *Introduction to the History of Religion* as an attempt 'to summarise the results of recent anthropology, to estimate their bearing on religious problems, and to weave the whole into a connected history of early religion'.¹⁰ He traced a process from animism (defined as pre-religion) to totemism (tribal or clan gods), which led both to polytheism and to monotheism.¹¹

5 Tylor, 1903: vol. 1, 6. His first contribution to the subject was published in 1871.

6 Burrow, 1966: 238-9.

7 Tylor, 1903: vol. 1.424 ff. Scholars differed in the exact terminology they used and the stages of progression they described.

8 1903: 16.

9 His book was first published in 1896: v; Robertson Smith's lectures on *The Religion of the Semites* in 1894 and Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (dedicated to Robertson Smith) in 1890; Johnstone 1995: section D traces relationships and influences between Robertson Smith, Frazer and Jevons in the 1870s.

10 Jevons, 1896: v.

11 1896: passim.

These ideas had a significant influence on the understanding of Roman religion throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Warde Fowler wrote in 1911:

If we wish to try and get to the original significance of [Roman] acts and thoughts, it is absolutely impossible in these days to dispense with the works of a long series of anthropologists, many of them fortunately British, who have gradually been collecting and classifying the material which in the long run will fructify in definite results.¹²

Commenting on Codrington's book *The Melanesians*, in which he had described those people's belief in a supernatural power called *mana*, Rose noted that 'a great deal of what the good bishop says of his Melanesian parishioners could be taken over with little change when we speak of the earliest Roman ideas'.¹³ In his view religion in archaic Rome was similar to that of the contemporary 'primitive' peoples studied by the anthropologists, consisting of the worship of the power located in the natural world, and the attempts to protect themselves from the harm which this power could bring about.¹⁴ What the Melanesians called *mana*, the Romans knew as *numen*.¹⁵ Warde Fowler described early Roman religion as the 'well-regulated practical life of the early agricultural settlers, with its careful attention to the claims of its divine protectors'.¹⁶ Where 'primitive' concepts, such as magic and taboo, could be found in Roman religion they were declared to be vestiges of this earliest period.¹⁷

The primitivists traced the stages of the development of the gods at Rome: the earliest deities, the *indigitamenta*, had particular spheres of responsibility in

12 1911: 19.

13 1948: 13.

14 Rose, 1948: 12 distinguishes 'dynamism' from animism; Warde Fowler, 1911: 85.

15 Rose, 1948: 13.

16 1911: 92.

17 Warde Fowler, 1911: 28-36.

agricultural life; according to Rose these were 'not so much gods as particular manifestations of *mana*'.¹⁸ The relevance of these ideas for this study can be seen in Schilling's theory that in the presumed primitive stage of Roman religion Venus had been an indistinct and impersonal deity who represented 'cette force mystérieuse que l'homme s'est plu à utiliser dans ses incantations'.¹⁹ He linked her name with the verb *venerari* which he thought was originally related to magic: 'ce verbe remonte à la phase primitive de la religion'.²⁰ Impersonal spirits like this became personalised when they were given a cult and a priest in a particular locality, and in this way Venus was the personification of divine grace.²¹ These ideas will be considered further in chapter three.²²

Theories about the evolution of religion often described a gradual progression towards the truth (usually Christianity), from animism to monotheism. However, the development of personalized gods with their individual characters was seen as a hiatus in this onward march. The idea of the 'Noble Savage' had been discarded by most scholars by the mid-nineteenth century, but it enjoyed a revival amongst those writing about Roman religion.²³ Warde Fowler disparaged the *lectisternium*:

The old Roman invisible *numen* working with force in a particular department of human life and its environment, was a far nobler mental conception, and far more likely to grow into a power for good, than the miserable images of Graeco-Roman full-blown gods and goddesses reclining on their couches.²⁴

18 Rose, 1948: 44-5.

19 1954: 60.

20 1954: 47.

21 Warde Fowler, 1911: 123-4; Schilling, 1954: 59ff.

22 Schilling's monograph remains the most recent detailed treatment of the goddess. His theory is cited by Beard, 1998: 62 (though without clear agreement).

23 Warner, 2013: 12 discusses the influence of Frazer's primitivism in the arts.

24 1911: 264.

According to Rose, 'Left to itself, the old religion of Rome might in time have risen into something lofty and pure, (...) but what good qualities it might have developed were (...) buried under foreign accretions'.²⁵ The effect of judgements of this kind was to downplay the importance of the characters of the Roman gods, which were not thought to be found in the most ancient form of religion.²⁶

Coupled with theories of primitivism, the old paradigm suggested that Roman religion was unusually conservative and had remained in its primitive stage far longer than in the neighbouring regions.²⁷ Although most direct information about religion at Rome dated from the writings of Romans no earlier than the third century BC, it now seemed possible to reach back to the beliefs and actions of their ancestors as early as the eighth century, and thus to gain a deeper understanding of the religion which was described in such literature. This perceived conservatism suggested that it was only under the much later influence of the Etruscans that the Romans anthropomorphised some of their personified spirits, later identifying them with the Greek gods, and adopting their rites, mythology and characters. So, for example, Rose describes Venus's association with the *Vinalia*, and the custom of prostitutes sacrificing to her 'as an example of undesirable foreign elements making their way into sober and decent Roman ritual'.²⁸ This statement epitomises the kind of value judgements

25 1948: 88.

26 As some ancient writers themselves thought, for example Varro, quoted in August. *De Civ. D.* 5.31, an idea apparently supported by nineteenth-century theories of myth which argued that the Romans had no mythology of their own, Phillips 2007: 19.

27 Warde Fowler, 1911: 25.

28 1948: 94.

which were once made about the quality of so-called primitive Roman religion and the 'contamination' which caused its change.

1.2 *The Old Paradigm: Formalism and Decline*

A further feature of the old paradigm was the view that whatever the vitality of a presumed primitive religion, by the first century BC it had been replaced by a widespread scepticism. Warde Fowler concluded that by this date the gods were 'quite dead'; once Rome was no longer an agricultural community they had lost their significance for its people. His description of deities surviving 'only as the obscure objects of some still obscurer form of cult, or (...) absorbed by Greek anthropomorphic gods, as the host will often be absorbed by the parasite, though retaining for the most part its outward appearance', exemplifies the negative attitude that held sway.²⁹ The view that the gods were not important was combined with the suggestion that the rituals of their cults had little meaning for the average Roman. All that mattered was their accurate performance by the priests.³⁰ Warde Fowler argued that a grain of the primitive religious instinct remained in the private household religion, but was extinguished in the increasing formalism of the public cult under the control of the priests, 'until it became a mere skeleton in dry bones, without life and power'.³¹ In such a system, the gods could hold little attraction. The interpretation of comparative material varied. Mommsen considered that Roman religion was founded on enjoyment and not fear of nature, as the primitivists

29 1911: 29.

30 Bailey, 1915 (no page) wrote of 'a cold conscientiousness, devoid of emotion'.

31 1911: 249.

had suggested.³² However he too thought that the religion of the Republic became formal and lifeless, it 'sank into an incredible insipidity and dulness (...) shrivelled into an anxious and dreary round of ceremonies'.³³ The popularity of the oriental religions was a sign of this loss of appeal 'as well as the increased craving of the multitude after stronger stimulants'.³⁴

Franz Cumont also accepted the idea that the religion of Rome was reduced to a meaningless series of rituals, musing that 'perhaps there never was a religion so cold and prosaic as the Roman'.³⁵ He set out to explain the impact of 'oriental religions' on Rome, attempting to demonstrate how the arrival of cults from Asia Minor, Syria, Persia and Egypt in the first and second centuries AD prepared the way for the Romans' conversion to Christianity.³⁶ He based his understanding of these religions on Frazer's concept of the myth of the dying and rising god, a myth which the latter thought originated in the rites used by primitive societies to attempt to control the forces of nature.³⁷ Whereas in the west, Cumont argued, by the time of the Empire there was no trace of these primitive nature religions, in the east they remained powerful, offering worshippers greater intellectual, sensual, emotional and moral satisfaction.³⁸ These cults would transform the religion of Rome, offering any adherent an assurance of present and eternal well-being.³⁹ For Cumont the triumph of

32 1854: I.12.221.

33 1854: I. XII. 222.

34 1854: IV.XII. 209.

35 Cumont, 1911: 28.

36 Showerman in his preface to the English translation of Cumont, 1911: v.

37 1911: part 3.

38 1911: 28.

39 1911: xxii. In fact the 'oriental religions' do not all appear to have offered the promise of life after death, at least before Christianity did, North, 2000: 70.

Christianity seemed the 'culmination of a long evolution of beliefs'.⁴⁰ This debate emphasised the supposed unsatisfying nature of the Romans' own cults and gods. Their characters and rituals were thought to be of little interest because they no longer met the religious needs of an urbanized people. This then was the dominant paradigm of Roman religion until well into the twentieth century: a primitive piety based on the life of an agricultural community and its worship of aniconic *numina*; its subsequent overwhelming and corruption by foreign ideas; a decline into meaningless formalism.⁴¹

1.3 Challenging the Old Paradigm: The Re-evaluation of Roman Religion

In the last fifty years this view of Roman religion has been challenged on many fronts. Evans-Pritchard dismissed the work of Jevons as 'a collection of absurd reconstructions, unsupportable hypotheses and conjectures, wild speculations, suppositions and assumptions, inappropriate analogies, misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and (...) just plain nonsense'⁴² The concept of survivals failed to recognise that different understandings could be held simultaneously by the same people, and that actions or concepts labelled as primitive could not be automatically assigned to an early date.⁴³ The primitivists' dismissal of the importance and antiquity of the gods was challenged on the basis of its false presuppositions: that the early lack of visual portrayal of deities was equivalent to a denial of personality; that *numen* was equivalent to Codrington's *mana*; and that the *indigitamenta* were either the object of cults or the source of more

40 1911: xxiv.

41 Beard, 1998: 10-11 summarises the elements of the old paradigm; also Feeney, 1998: 3.

42 1965: 5.

43 Dumézil, 1966: 21.

developed deities.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Burrow highlighted the fundamental weakness at the heart of the primitivists' enterprise; 'contemporary social anthropologists do not regard it as their task to collect information about primitive peoples with a view to reconstructing the prehistory of civilisation'.⁴⁵ In fact this had largely been the case since the end of the nineteenth century, but was only belatedly acknowledged by those who studied Roman religion.⁴⁶

One result of the rejection of the theory of primitivism was to re-emphasise the importance of individual gods, arguing that they had been part of Roman religion from the earliest times. Dumézil's understanding of the origins of Roman religion was based on the theory that Indo-European societies shared not only the same parent language but also an identical threefold social structure or *idéologie* of ruler, warrior, and farmer.⁴⁷ Dumézil described his methodology as a genetic comparativism. Using the term '*ensembles*', he stressed the importance of relating details to the whole and not studying them in isolation.⁴⁸ The different components of religion, such as mythology and the gods, were not to be fragmented into isolated themes but seen as an entity and understood in relation to each other.⁴⁹ Dumézil argued that fundamental to the mythology and religion of all Indo-European societies was a structured arrangement of the gods which reflected the triadic *idéologie*. At Rome this explained the

44 Dumézil, 1966: 26-7, 29-30, 35-7.

45 1966: xi.

46 Burrow, 1966: 262-3.

47 First noted by Wissowa, 1902: 23. See also Renfrew, 1987: 9-11;

48 1966: 22.

49 1966: 22.

importance of the gods Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus.⁵⁰ Criticisms of Dumézil's work and of Indo-European theories in general included the over-rigidity of the model, its incompatibility with the social structure existing at Rome, the lack of a goddess in his triad, his inconsistency and methodology and the misuse of such theories by those who wished to defend racist ideologies.⁵¹ Dumézil's defenders argued that many of these arose from misunderstandings of his arguments, and there was flexibility in his theory, yet it did not receive widespread support in relation to Roman religion.⁵² Dumézil did re-focus attention on the gods, in contrast to the primitivists, but his structure relied on deities having more clearly-defined functions than was the case at Rome, where the gods in general, and certainly Venus, seem to have operated more widely and more interchangeably.⁵³

The idea that non-Roman influences were a relatively late phenomenon was also abandoned. Beard, North and Price have described Rome as 'an amalgam of different traditions from as far back as we can go'.⁵⁴ Archaeological evidence has demonstrated that Rome was receptive to Greek and Etruscan influences as early as the sixth century and the names of deities and indeed the word *deus* itself, suggest they shared Indo-European origins even earlier.⁵⁵ Near-eastern influence was also felt much earlier than Cumont allowed.⁵⁶ Contact with Rome's neighbours through military conquest and commercial activity meant

50 1966: 25.

51 Renfrew, 1987: 250ff; Derks, 1998: 78; Beard, 1998: 15.

52 For example Eliade in the preface to Dumézil, 1966: xi-xii.

53 Beard, 1998: 16.

54 1998: 12.

55 Beard, 1998: 12; North, 2000: 15; Rüpke, 2013: 339.

56 Particularly through the orientalising of Etruscan cults, see chapter 2, note 49.

that religion continued to evolve.⁵⁷ In these ways the character of Venus was shaped and re-shaped by a variety of cultural influences.

The earlier view of Roman religion as a static and conservative institution has been revised. Though there is indeed evidence of the endurance of some religious practices over the centuries, the emphasis of modern scholarship is on change rather than continuity; change caused both by internal and external influences at Rome.⁵⁸ There is now a more nuanced understanding of how ideas were shared between cultures. Whereas 'foreign influence' was seen under the old paradigm as a contaminating and detrimental affect on the primitivism of the past, it is now more likely to be interpreted as a positive characteristic, a sign of a dynamic religious system.⁵⁹ The next chapter considers external influence of goddesses from other cultures, and explores how their characters shaped perceptions of Venus, mindful of Scheid's comment that 'cultural borrowing ... always transforms whatever is taken from another culture'.⁶⁰ Influence is no longer seen merely as external to Rome. Changes are equally likely to have been caused by locally-occurring developments in cultures as to have resulted from the influence of their neighbours.⁶¹ Recent accounts of Roman religion have located the prime cause

57 Rüpke, 2013: 358.

58 For example North, 2000: 17.

59 Gruen, 1992: 103; Orlin, 2010: 32 contrasting the Romans with the Babylonians, suggests that this was perhaps not typical of other ancient cultures, and was comparable to the Romans' 'willingness to extend citizenship to others'.

60 2003: 14; Alvar, 2008: 421 argues against a 'simple transactional model of borrowings, which assumes a dominant culture as donor, and a junior one in no position to do more than passively receive'.

61 Renfrew, 1987: 3.

of much change in events endogenous to Rome.⁶² In the case of Venus, developments in the way she was represented can be linked to social changes and views of women, as well as to political events. The adoption of the Aeneas legend in particular was significant for the goddess's growth in prominence. These and other internal influences on Venus will be discussed in chapters three and four.

Theories of widespread scepticism among the Romans by the time of the Late Republic have also been disputed. Whereas in the past the literature of the elite was interpreted as evidence either of disinterest or hostility, Beard, for example, has argued more positively that Cicero's *De Divinatione* indicates not only 'intense interest in religion' but also the growing phenomenon of the development of individual religious viewpoints.⁶³ References by Late Republican writers to that period as religiously negligent ought to be read as expressing their belief in the extremely close relationship between the security of the city and its dealings with the gods.⁶⁴ The success of 'oriental' religions as evidence for decline and lack of engagement by the end of the Republic has also been questioned. MacMullen has emphasised the continuing strength of the public religion of Rome, arguing that the evidence for its decline was patchy and unreliable.⁶⁵ Archaeology has increasingly provided evidence of individual

62 For example North, 2000: 17.

63 1986: 46. See also Feeney, 1998: 19 on Caesar, and Davies, 2004: 138-42 on Livy. This is not to deny the existence of scepticism. Liebeschuetz, 1995: 315 suggests that it was nothing new but was always one strand of Roman thought.

64 See the detailed discussion on this point in Beard, 1998: chapter 3.

65 1983: 127.

involvement in religion through the discovery of votive deposits and traces of private domestic religion.⁶⁶

Recent scholarship has largely abandoned the endeavour to find the origins of Roman religion, recognising it to be fruitless.⁶⁷ For example Scheid judges that 'the ability to reconstruct "pure" Roman religion is a modern myth'.⁶⁸ A number of recent approaches to Roman religion, however, whilst avoiding many of the worst aspects of the old paradigm, still do not give the characters of the gods and the Romans' interest in them sufficient attention. The focus on the importance of the civic cults at Rome, which has rightly stressed the interpenetration of religion into the whole of political and public life, has also made personal engagement with individual gods appear a secondary matter. Scheid maintains that 'tout ce qui concerne la religiosité intime de l'individu (...) n'est pas religieux au sens romain, mais superstitieux'.⁶⁹

The wise avoidance of attempts to understand Roman religion in terms of the credal nature or experiential language of Christianity can contribute to a suggestion that the Romans did not engage individually with the gods. Turcan, for example, states that 'religion was not a matter of personal devotion'.⁷⁰ Scullard suggests that 'what was done was more important [than belief] but only

66 Schultz, 2006a: chapters 3 and 4.

67 Scheid, 2003: 9.

68 2003: 8.

69 Scheid, 2001: 155. Scheid's approach is critiqued by Ando, 2009.

70 Turcan, 2000: 51; Kamm, 1995: 96, 'religion was less a spiritual experience than a contractual relationship'.

in a ritualistic sense'.⁷¹ Here a false dichotomy is set up between ritual and devotion. Though involvement probably varied and was doubtless more intense when the life of the state or the individual seemed to be at risk, the assumption that (especially) public religion was meaningless to many Romans rests on the dubious supposition that organised ritual is of its nature less meaningful than spontaneous acts of worship, that it is impossible for individuals to feel engaged in ceremonies which others perform on their behalf, and that an urban population is less likely to engage with ritual than those from the country.⁷² In fact the evidence shows that city-dwellers continued to celebrate festivals (such as the *Vinalia*) connected to rural life and its issues.⁷³

Gods are a valid area of enquiry in Roman religion, since as Rüpke puts it, 'the entire apparatus of religion depends on them'.⁷⁴ However Rüpke also suggests that 'the Romans were not excessively eager to contact' them.⁷⁵ Shelton considers that many Romans 'felt no personal interest in the minor deities of the state religion'.⁷⁶ Scullard describes Roman cults and festivals, not as an opportunity to engage with particular deities, but merely as 'interesting spectacles and reminders of the past'.⁷⁷ Often the inference continues to be drawn that Romans found not only the rites but also the characters of new

71 1981:31.

72 Shelton, 1988: 380, 382, note 145 even suggests that silence during religious ceremonies is evidence of non-engagement. For the idea that the privileging of earlier rustic religion by ancient writers is part of a general nostalgia for rural life, see Feeney, 1998: 133-6.

73 See chapter 3 below.

74 2007: 65.

75 2006: 225.

76 Shelton, 1988: 370. In fact she retains much of the old paradigm, see chapter 15 throughout.

77 1981: 25.

foreign deities more attractive than their own gods.⁷⁸ Turcan suggests it was their omnipotence which made them preferable to the Roman gods who were 'often limited in scope and in function'.⁷⁹ These attitudes continue to downplay the importance of the characters of the Romans' gods and engagement with them. Despite knowledge of, for example, modern Hinduism, it may be that scholars from a monotheistic tradition have had difficulty relating to the different characters and functions of the gods found in polytheism.⁸⁰ Jenkyns observes that 'there is a firm feeling that we should take Roman religion seriously, and maybe this has carried with it an unconscious impulse to play down those aspects of it which we find ourselves unable to take seriously'.⁸¹ It will be argued in subsequent chapters that the changing and varied characters of Venus were key to the goddess's importance for the Romans. The evidence to be examined in chapters three and four suggests that, contrary to the views of Scullard and others mentioned above, it was thought important to engage with Venus.

1.4 The Significance of Gender

The relation between character, engagement and gender forms part of this enquiry. Rüpke argues that 'differentiation by gender (was) crucial to the establishment of (a god's) identity'.⁸² Earlier understandings of religion provided a number of explanations for the existence of male and female deities,

78 Scullard, 1981: 22.

79 Turcan, 1996: 25.

80 A brief internet search will bring up examples of preferences for the characters of individual gods within the Hindu pantheon.

81 Jenkyns, 2013: 194, speaking in particular about 'small functional gods', but the point can be applied more widely.

82 2007: 80, since when gender was not known the formula *sive deus sive dea* was used.

relating variously to nature, society and psychology. Tylor's evolutionary theories had suggested that the assigning of gender to a god was linked to the characteristics of that particular deity.⁸³ In other words the perceived character of the god preceded gender. However he also connected the widespread existence of myths of a heavenly father and earth mother with the prevalence of patriarchy in ancient society.⁸⁴ Influenced by Tylor, Jane Harrison came to the view that goddesses reflected the existence of primitive matrilineal societies.⁸⁵ She saw, for example, the myth of the Judgement of Paris as a patriarchal retelling of a story which originally depicted three 'givers of blessing', but which had recast Aphrodite and the other two goddesses as contestants in a beauty contest.⁸⁶

The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas followed Dumézil's view of mythology as reflecting the structure of societies, but criticised the way he dealt with goddesses.⁸⁷ She argued that goddess symbolism reflected societies 'in which women as heads of clans or queen-priestesses played a central part'.⁸⁸ In Campbell's view however such cults may actually have existed in inverse proportion to the position of women.⁸⁹ In ancient polytheism power was not necessarily related to gender. Male and female deities shared power and were often worshipped by people of both genders, the actions of the gods being

83 1903: 302.

84 1903: 328.

85 1903: 261; in 1861 Bachofen had already claimed to have discovered survivals at Rome of matrilineal inheritance law.

86 1903: 263, 298.

87 1989: xviii.

88 1989: xx.

89 1982: 21.

shared by both genders and their character traits not being defined by their gender.⁹⁰

James maintained that the development of agriculture led to the 'growing consciousness of the duality of male and female in the generative process'.⁹¹ The worship of the earth mother gradually gave way to the prominence of the cosmic figure of the sky-father. Nevertheless goddess worship continued because it met particular human needs.⁹² Discussions of feminist theory, and religious history from the perspective of women as well as much popular writing about female engagement with the divine still pay attention to goddess worship, sometimes suggesting that goddesses express 'a feminine aspect of divinity'.⁹³ 'Mother goddesses' can be treated as if they were 'functionally equivalent'.⁹⁴ However Preston argues that these goddesses were 'polymorphous' and could be perceived in a number of ways, for example as idealized extensions of motherhood or models to be imitated by women.⁹⁵ Another developing area of research in recent decades has been the involvement of women in antiquity in religious activity.⁹⁶ These wider debates are outside the scope of this study, but, since the female gender of Venus may reasonably be described as an aspect of her personality its importance, especially for her female worshippers, will be discussed. In what sense was Venus a goddess for women, and what character

90 1981: 29.

91 1959: 257.

92 1959: 259-260

93 Armstrong, 1986: 72, quoted in Benko, 2004: 16, note 38.

94 Benko, 2004: 16, note 38, 'The "eternal feminine", the female face of God, was the object of those various approaches which we know as a bewildering multiplicity of cults. In this sense we should be able to talk about "the goddess"'.
95 1982: 337.

96 1982: 337.

96 Recent studies include Dillon, 2002 (Greeks) and Schultz, 2006a (Romans).

traits (such as connections with fertility and childbirth) did she share with other 'mother goddesses'? The aim is to discover how far she was a goddess whose attributes or cult were related to gender and whether she was particularly attractive to females, or provided a model for them.

Earlier ideas about Roman religion did and still do affect the importance given to the characters of individual deities. The 'foreign contamination', of Roman religion was a central motif of some earlier theories. Though such negative attitudes no longer hold sway, in order to understand the changing relationship between the characters of Venus and her significance to the Romans the impact of neighbouring cultures on the goddess must be considered. Chapter two will examine a group of foreign goddesses known at Rome during the Republic, to discover how their characters were represented, the way individuals (especially women) engaged with them, and how they influenced Venus.

Chapter 2

Four 'foreign goddesses': Influential Characters?

2.1 *Introduction*

The first chapter considered how changing views of religion at Rome affected understandings of the goddess Venus and recognised that foreign influence, once only perceived as negative, is now more thoroughly appreciated. This chapter examines how perceptions of Venus were affected by the characters of some other goddesses. Venus was equated with Greek Aphrodite, and by the Etruscans with Turan. The Greeks also saw Isis as the equivalent of Aphrodite, but these three goddesses were different in a number of ways from each other, and Aphrodite herself had various Greek forms. It is important therefore to distinguish which characters of these goddesses the Romans knew. A fourth goddess, Cybele, also has links with Venus as great Mother, protector of Rome and ancestor of the Romans.

A network of themes connect all the goddesses; beauty, sexuality, reproduction, fertility, motherhood and protection. This chapter attempts to untangle them, by exploring both how they were expressed in myth, cult, and image, and how they influenced the character of Venus.¹ Though she was equated with other 'foreign' goddesses, and shared with them some attributes, she differed in significant ways from each of them. Each goddess will be considered in turn with a summary discussing their influence on Venus. The Trojan legend is also

1 Writing on Greek religion, Burkert, 1985: 119 identifies cult, myth, iconography and the divine name as necessary to the understanding of a deity.

introduced here, before discussion in later chapters of its importance in relation to Venus.

2.2 *The Influence of Aphrodite*

By 400 BC Greek culture had already been influencing Rome (at first via Etruria) for several centuries.² Rome's contact with Greek literature and religion had increased over this period, both directly with Greece herself, and with the Greek cities of Campania which had come under Roman rule.³ During the third and second centuries Romans became familiar with works of Greek art, the prize of conquests in the East, and Greek artists were also moving to work in Rome.⁴ In the same period Roman writers began to re-tell Greek myths, and Latin versions of Greek plays were performed in the city.⁵ Playwrights like Plautus and Terence referred to the gods and goddesses as they freely-adapted Greek stories for their Roman audiences. Representations of Aphrodite thus reached the Romans through visual images, the retelling of myths about her, and travellers' experience of her cult.

Burkert's view that the four categories necessary for the understanding of a deity are 'a complex [which] is easily dissolved' is important in considering the influence of Aphrodite.⁶ Though in Greek myth each god normally had their

2 Crawford, 1986: 402; Rüpke, 2013: 340.

3 Beard, 1998: 75.

4 Rawson, 1986: 433-34. Pollitt, 1978: 155-74 discusses changing attitudes of the Romans to Greek art. Bergmann 1995: 90 highlights Rome's re-use of Greek art as a sign of her own power.

5 Livius Andronicus' first Latin translation of a Greek play was performed in 240 BC.

6 1985: 119, see note 1 above.

own sphere, cultic expression could be much more fluid.⁷ Greek gods were worshipped in local representations and with a variety of epithets, appearing differently in different sanctuaries, offering varied benefits and eliciting a range of human responses.⁸ Kearns points out that in the representations of all the gods, in myth, art and in the cult, locally or more widely, with which the Greeks were familiar, 'no way at looking at (...) a god, was the only approach that an individual knew, however logically incompatible the different possibilities might be'.⁹ The diversity described by Kearns would have been a feature of the way Romans experienced Aphrodite, giving them varying ideas of the goddess's character and powers, in turn affecting the way they saw Venus with whom she was equated.¹⁰ By the fourth century the goddess's character had already bifurcated: Aphrodite *Ourania* representing higher spiritual love, and Aphrodite *Pandemos*, sometimes linked with sexual life and prostitution, but also representing the power of the goddess to unite all people.¹¹

In Greek myth Aphrodite was associated with love and erotic desire, both because she experienced these emotions herself, and because she aroused them in others.¹² In the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite* the 'laughter-loving goddess' is:

7 Heinrichs, 2010: 36.

8 Kearns, 2013: 283; Graf 2010: 67. Rutherford 2010: 46-7, suggests that the emergence in the sixth century of a dodecathlon may have been an attempt to standardize some of this diversity. Aphrodite was sometimes a member of this group, but not consistently so.

9 2013: 284.

10 Pausanias in his *Guide to Ancient Greece* alone mentions twenty-seven epithets for the goddess. Some of these represented locations of her cult, but others referred to aspects of her character and functions.

11 Kearns, 2013: 283. Plato *Symp.* 180 gave one responsibility for homosexual love, and one for the love of women.

12 Calame, 2010: 253, 262.

the golden one, the Cyprian,
she who awakens sweet longing in the gods
and subdues the race of human beings
and the birds that fly through the air
all the wild beasts and the many creatures
that the dry land feeds, that the sea nourishes.

(*Hymn. Hom. Ven. 5. 2-5*, trans. Cashford)

She aroused longing in both humans and animals, 'so that they all went in twos into the shade of the valleys and made love with each other' (*Hymn. Hom. Ven. 5. 74-76*). Homer describes her power: 'Sexual Pleasure and Desire and Intimacies and Sweet Persuasion that turn even wise men into fools' (*Il. 14.216*, trans. Jones). Aphrodite was responsible for 'blinding' Helen and causing her infatuation with Paris (*Od. 4.260*). Moreover she was not immune from the 'terrible passion' herself when she loved Anchises (*Hymn. Hom. Ven, 51.58*).¹³ Homer tells of her adultery with Ares and their entrapment by Hephaistos in the marital bed, but even then she remains so enticing that Hermes says, 'Though the chains that kept me prisoner were three times as many, though all you gods and all the goddesses were looking on, yet would I gladly sleep by Aphrodite's side' (*Od. 8. 340* trans. Rieu).¹⁴ Aphrodite was associated with beauty through her winning of the competition in the judgement of Paris, yet the tale also turns on her ability to inflame the Trojan's lust by offering him the beautiful Helen.¹⁵ Hesiod has the goddess give Pandora 'charm upon her head and painful strong desire' (*Hes. Op. 67-8* trans. Wender).

13 Aphrodite's relationship with Adonis is absent from Greek epic. First mentioned in Sappho, he probably entered her cult through her identification with Astarte, see Boedeker, 1974: 66. For other connections between the Greek and Semitic goddesses, including the sea and gardens, see Burkert, 1985: 152-3.

14 Zeitlin, 1995: 128-33, suggests Homer is drawing a contrast between Aphrodite and the faithful Penelope who will be reunited with Odysseus in the bed which he has created.

15 As told by Homer, *Il.24.25-30* and Ovid, *Her. 16.71, 149-52*.

The goddess's appearance to Anchises is described in the Homeric Hymns, 'unearthly beauty shone from her cheeks, such as belongs to the Cytherean in her lovely crown' (*Hymn. Hom. Ven. 5.174*). Hesiod describes one version of the goddess's birth, from the foam containing the seed of the castrated Ouranos:

The goddess came forth, lovely, much revered, (...)
From the beginning, both among gods and men
She had this honour and received this power:
Fond murmuring of girls, and smiles, and tricks,
And sweet delight, and friendliness and charm.

(*Theog.*197, 203-206 trans. Wender)

Aphrodite's beauty and erotic powers were frequently illustrated by Greek artists.¹⁶ Her birth was a popular subject; she was shown either emerging as an adult female from the waves or from a shell.¹⁷ The goddess was often shown inciting Helen's flight and adultery, and protecting her from Menelaus, or accompanied by the three Graces (figs. 1 and 2 below).¹⁸

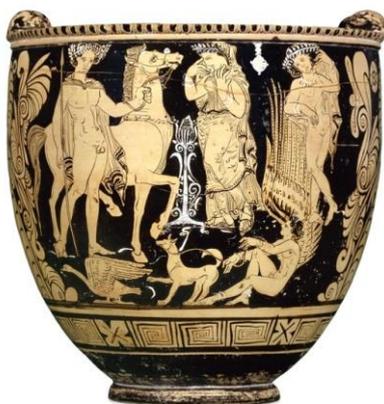


Fig.1. The meeting of Helen and Paris, watched over by Aphrodite. c.350 BC. This vase is from Campania, an area influenced by Etruscan culture, where the story was popular (see page 34 below).

16 Bron, 1996: 297 discusses the different ways Greek vase painters presented the story.

17 The two locations of the goddess's birth in myth were marked by shrines there. Her connection with the sea gave her a special concern for sea-farers, a role which was adopted by both Venus and Isis.

18 A scene also visible on the Parthenon. Other examples can be seen in Bron, 1996: 303, figs. 3-5.



Fig.2. Aphrodite (left) protects Helen from Menelaus, while Eros flies above. Detail from Attic krater, c.450 BC

In the mid-fourth century BC the famous statue of the goddess was carved by Praxiteles for her shrine at Knidos.¹⁹ Probably painted in bright colours, the statue depicted the naked goddess standing, her weight unevenly distributed and leaning on her right leg, and her head turned to the left. Her right hand covered her pubic region, and her left held some drapery. Visitors to the shrine would have seen the goddess as ‘a heavenly apparition of the goddess of love’ unrelated to any particular myth.²⁰ The statue was much imitated at Rome and throughout the Mediterranean world from the second century BC, often in the form of small statuettes for personal use, until its destruction in 476 AD (fig. 3 below).

19 Havelock 2007: 9-19 describes in detail the statue's likely appearance.

20 Havelock, 2007: 37. She suggests the statue was initially intended to be viewed from a distance but by Late Republican times was moved to a position where it could be seen much closer and in the round. She also dismisses earlier interpretations of the representation as related to the bath of Aphrodite.



Fig.3. Roman copy of the
Aphrodite of Knidos c.
175 AD



Fig.4. Small Roman copy of a Greek
statue of Aphrodite 2nd century AD

Havelock argues that these, as well as other innovative types of Aphrodite such as Aphrodite *Anadyomene*, the Sandal-Binder and the crouching Aphrodite (fig.4) represented a surge of interest in the naked female body in the form of the goddess during the Late Republic. In cities like Delos, on important trade routes, travellers to and from Rome could see these statues and figurines in shrines to the goddess as well as in private homes.²¹ Such sculptures became popular in the houses and gardens of wealthy Romans where they emphasised Venus' connection with the erotic sphere.²² Even in Augustan times when, as will become clear, the goddess's character was in some ways 're-formed', she was never to lose her association with love, sex and the attraction of the female form.

21 Havelock, 2007: 107, though seeing the Hellenistic period as 'one of skepticism' argues that such objects combined decorative and religious function.

22 Pollitt, 1978: 160-62, traces the development in Roman attitudes to Greek art. Bergmann, 1995:79-120 suggests that Roman artists sought to bring their own ideas and interpretations rather than making slavish imitations of Greek originals.

Aphrodite was served by both male priests and female priestesses, and though women were forbidden from some shrines, there were also ceremonies restricted to women.²³ At Athens, young girls took part in rituals on the eve of their marriage.²⁴ Cults in a number of Greek cities were connected with prostitution, both that of ordinary working girls and sacred prostitutes. This was especially the case in Greek Corinth whose protector goddess was Aphrodite, and where the worship of prostitutes was seen to be essential to the safety of the city.²⁵ Dillon suggests that the so-called Ludovisi throne depicts a respectable female citizen and a prostitute, indicating the goddess's dual role as 'goddess of sexuality worshipped by the prostitute, and the deity who brings love to the marriage bed' (figs.5 and 6).²⁶ This idea of the inclusion of two kinds of women may have influenced Ovid's description of the festival of *Verticordia* at Rome.



Figs. 5 and 6. Left and right hand reliefs of the Ludovisi Throne
Greek c. 460 BC

23 A ceremony for women is described by Pausanias, 2.10.4. For the exclusion of women see Dillon, 2002: 79, 134-5.

24 Calame, 2010: 246-7, describes rituals carried out at Athens by young girls on the eve of their marriage.

25 Dillon, 2002: 207-8.

26 Dillon, 2002: 202-3, though the identity of the central figure as Aphrodite is uncertain.

Votive offerings provide evidence that individuals wished to achieve a relationship with Aphrodite. Gifts were given in gratitude to the goddess for answered prayer and hope of help in the future.²⁷ At the shrine of Aphrodite *Psithuros* at Delphi, worshippers were invited to whisper secret prayers into the ear of the cult statue.²⁸ Some individuals associated themselves closely with Aphrodite, and by designating her with a personal epithet, claimed her special protection.²⁹ Worshippers sought the goddess particularly in connection with sexual matters. A fourth century votive relief from the goddess's sanctuary between Athens and Eleusis depicts female genitalia and invites those passing by to praise the goddess.³⁰ Reliefs of this kind may represent answered prayer for healing of gynaecological disease, or success in pregnancy, or possibly success in attracting a sexual partner. Worshippers of Aphrodite were not only women, but women appear to have made more offerings in relation to disease, whilst men made them in relation to their priestly service.³¹ Male anatomical offerings to Aphrodite have also been found, and worshippers made dedications on behalf of others as well as themselves.³²

Votive reliefs dedicated to Aphrodite by family groups are less common but this may merely indicate that the practice of seeking healing was normally an individual one.³³ Groups did associate themselves with Aphrodite as their

27 Van Straten, 1981: 72.

28 Versnel, 1981: 27.

29 Wallensten 2008: 82, provides evidence of a 2nd century BC inscription of this kind on Delos relating to Isis/Aphrodite.

30 Illustrated in Van Straten, 1981: fig. 63.

31 Cole, 2004: 172.

32 Cole, 2004: 172-3 suggests that women offered more models of body parts and jewellery, whilst men other more valuable items.

33 Klöckner 2010:117.

protector in a more general sense.³⁴ Aphrodite then was not a goddess merely for women, though her connection with sex may have encouraged women to seek her help with gender-specific problems.³⁵ She appears to have been one of a number of Greek healing deities, such as Artemis, Zeus and Asklepios, who attracted similar offerings and requests.³⁶ At Rome however, Venus does not seem to have had this role.

2.3 The Influence of Etruscan Turan

Etruscan influence was being felt at Rome and throughout Latium from the sixth century BC.³⁷ Even when Etruria's political domination declined, cultural and religious influence continued as its cities were conquered by Rome during the fourth and third centuries. The gods of the Greek myths were gradually identified with Etruscan deities, though these correspondences were not exact equivalents.³⁸ The Etruscans equated Turan with Aphrodite (and also with Venus). Like the Greek goddess Turan was associated with love and beauty, and she adopted many of Aphrodite's attributes but it is her non-Greek aspects or emphases which are of particular interest here. Since no Etruscan literature survives much of the evidence concerning Turan comes from her iconography, often on mirrors dating from the fourth century, from Etruscan cities subdued by the Romans (fig. 7 below).

34 Wallensten, 2008:92; Roller 2013: 303. Ascough, 2012: 19, 22 has a number of examples of groups or associations dedicated to the goddess.

35 *Hdt* 1.105.4 describes an occasion when Aphrodite's temple at Ascalon was robbed and the goddess punished the culprits by inflicting them with 'the female disease', though he himself denies the illness had any divine origin, see Lloyd, 2003: 117.

36 Cole, 2004: 172-3, suggests that models of breasts and vulvae are more often found in shrines to Aphrodite.

37 Beard, 1998: 12.

38 Simon, 2006: 46.



Fig.7. A mirror depicting the Judgement of Elscntre/Paris. A popular Etruscan image of Turan.

Greek ceramics painted with mythical scenes had been imported into Etruria since the eighth century, their designs imitated by both local and immigrant Greek artists.³⁹ It is not certain whether the Etruscans received Greek myths purely through such images or if they had any knowledge of the texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.⁴⁰ Lowenstam argues for a milieu in which different versions of the myths (oral, visual and written) circulated and interacted upon each other.⁴¹ The Etruscans only depicted a selection of the available Greek myths and

39 Lowenstam, 2008: 124.

40 Lowenstam 2008: 2-3 discusses the various possibilities.

41 2008:124-8.

presented them rather differently from the Greeks, perhaps to draw attention to particular characters or elements in the stories.⁴² These items depict images which are recognisable from Greek myth as well as others from unknown, presumably Etruscan, myths concerning native deities. Different gods often appeared in similar compositions.⁴³ Bonfante finds four typical features in Etruscan representations of myth: the prevalence of couples; the importance of mothers; the depiction of birth; and the appearance of ghosts.⁴⁴ Caution needs to be exercised in suggesting that all these aspects were especially important to the Etruscans, since many of the surviving representations are on mirrors, and these subjects may have been thought particularly suitable for items used predominantly by women.⁴⁵

Turan's responsibility for arousing the love of Helen and Paris interested the Etruscan illustrators, as it had the Greeks, but Etruscan versions often show Aeneas taking a role in the story.⁴⁶ The goddess's involvement in one of her own love affairs, with Atunis/Adonis, was also frequently depicted.⁴⁷ The Judgement of Elcentre/Paris was another very popular topic illustrating Turan's seductive charm, which enabled her to win the competition. Schilling suggests that it was this Etruscan emphasis which led to the association of Venus with

42 Bonfante, 2006b: 9. Torelli, 2000: 283 suggests particular Greek myths were chosen by the ruling Etruscans to convey a political message.

43 See the examples in Simon, 2006: 50-51

44 2006a: 19-20.

45 De Grummond, 2006: 11. Engraved gems worn by men, for example, show more male gods and heroes alongside females.

46 See examples in Lowenstam, 2008: figs. 75-77; Galinsky, 1969: 129. Aeneas' importance to the Etruscans as well as the Romans is discussed further in section 2.6.

47 A sixth century inscription at the Etruscan temple of Pyrgi is dedicated to Astarte, and relates to the celebration of the festival of Adonis. The festival may have been connected with ritual control of fertility. The Etruscan goddess worshipped at Pyrgi was not Turan but Uni, Turfa, 2006b: 67,

victory at Rome.⁴⁸ However the competitive element does not appear to be strong, and the three goddesses sometimes seem to be greater friends than in the Greek versions of the myth. The reasons for the goddess's adoption as protector in the Late Republic, and her identification as *Victrix*, will be discussed further below.

The role of fate was important to the Etruscans and symbolized through the hammering of nails. One mirror shows Turan with her lover Atunis/Adonis and the goddess of fate Athrpa, indicating the inevitability of their separation through death.⁴⁹ Torelli maintains that a key characteristic of Etruscan gods was a 'horrendous' aspect, and their association with vague groups of gods or spirits, many of whom were connected with death.⁵⁰ De Grummond suggests that the Etruscan attitude to death and the afterlife may have changed due to pessimism following their defeat by Rome.⁵¹ Turan was linked to the spirits of the underworld and depicted in tomb paintings.⁵² At Rome Venus was worshipped as *Libitina*, the goddess of burials, and statuettes of Venus/Aphrodite were commonly placed in tombs from the third century BC onwards. However the frequent appearance of Venus on funerary monuments in the early centuries AD may have owed less to any presumed chthonic role than to her identification with the deceased's character in life.⁵³

48 1954: 160.

49 Simon, 2006: 53.

50 2000, 275.

51 2013: 331-2.

52 Torelli, 2000: 275; Krauskopf, 2006: 66-78, discusses the difficulty of interpreting Etruscan beliefs about death and the afterlife.

53 See chapter 4 below.

Both in illustrations of myth and in cult, the gods of the Etruscan pantheon were frequently found in groups.⁵⁴ Turan was worshipped together with Tinia, Thesan, and Uni. If, as Simon suggests, the aspect of harmony was important for the Etruscans, this may be evident in an illustration of the Judgement of Paris/Elcentre, where the three goddesses appear to be shown cooperating rather than in competition (fig. 8 below).⁵⁵ Turan was often accompanied by the goddess Alpan, who may have been the equivalent of Greek Harmonia, daughter of Aphrodite and Ares. Simon describes her as ‘a special goddess of peace’, and suggests that this aspect of Turan is expressed by Virgil in his depiction of Venus in the Aeneid.⁵⁶ The tension between war and peace in the character of Venus and the representation of her relationship with Mars, is evidence of Etruscan influence on the character of Venus will be discussed further in chapter four.

Like the Greeks, the Etruscans made offerings of statues, tablets and pottery to Turan and other gods, representing vows made in the hope of receiving the god's favour, in thanksgiving for answered prayer, or as marks of respect to the deity.⁵⁷ Dedicatory inscriptions indicate that the worshippers were both male and female, and of varying wealth, and Turfa suggests that the poor also made

54 The Etruscan groupings did not fit Dumézil's *idéologie*, and were placed by him in an appendix to his *Archaic Roman Religion*.

55 Simon, 2006: 45.

56 Simon, 2006: 60.

57 Becker, 2009: 88; Turfa 2006a: 95, offerings have also been found in the context of funerary cult.

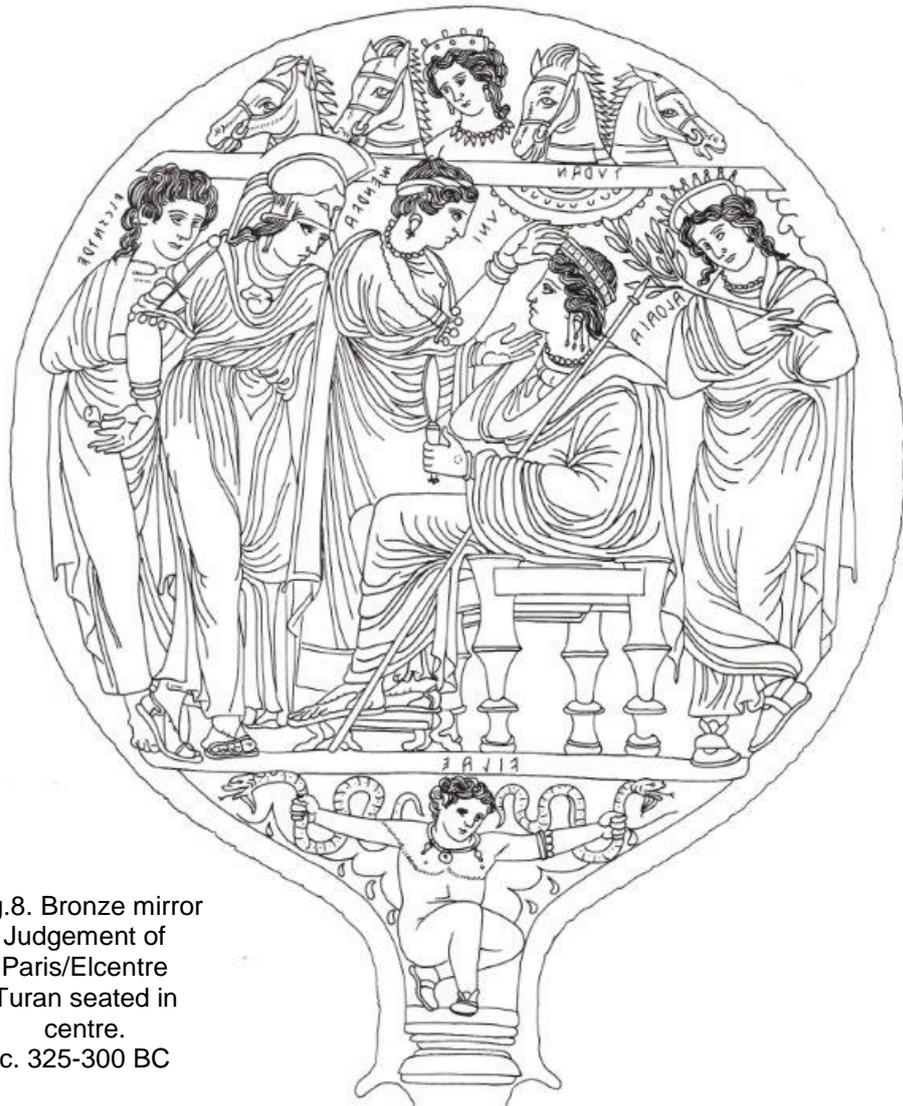


Fig.8. Bronze mirror
Judgement of
Paris/Elcentre
Turan seated in
centre.
c. 325-300 BC

offerings (probably wood, wax, textiles and food) which have not survived.⁵⁸ According to Turfa, the Etruscan gods to whom votives were offered 'tend to be protectors, healers, feeders and comforters'.⁵⁹ However, this description must be used very broadly, since offerings were made to a wide variety of the Etruscan gods.⁶⁰ There is evidence from 400 BC onwards of such a variety of

58 Turfa, 2006a: 103.

59 2006: 106.

60 Glinister, 2006: 23, 'almost any deity, male or female could be their recipient'.

different anatomical votives, which are rarely inscribed, that it is hard to argue that any one god was particularly concerned for women's needs, even though many appear to deal with reproduction.⁶¹ Turan is occasionally called 'Mother' in inscriptions, and she was often shown accompanied by babies, but though nursing mother images were popular with the Etruscans, Turan was not depicted in this way.⁶²

2.4 The Influence of Isis

Isis however was definitely a mother goddess. Worshipped in Egypt from at least the middle of the third millennium BC, in the 'Heliopolitan' pantheon she was the daughter of the sky and the earth.⁶³ Isis was known for her wisdom, and called 'great in magic power', because of her knowledge of the secret name of the god Re.⁶⁴ The goddess was part of a group of deities connected to death and the afterlife, with particular responsibility for protecting the internal organs of the deceased.⁶⁵ Myths told of the murder of her brother/husband Osiris. Isis and her sister Nephthys collected up the parts of his dismembered, later reviving body, Isis then conceiving her son, Horus, with him.⁶⁶ Temple dedications spoke of the goddess as 'Great Isis, mother of the God'; she was not only the mother of the god Horus in myth, but also the protector of the living ruler (fig 9 below).

61 Described in De Grummond, 2013: 328; Glinister, 2006: 23, suggests the fertility goddesses 'were not the only ones to whom anatomicals were directed as gifts; (...) nor did they (...) deal exclusively with "women's concerns"'.
62 De Grummond, 2006: 85; Bonfante, 2006: 20. Fridh-Haneson, 1987: 69-71 links these images with Etruscan funerary cult. Turfa, 2006: 72 suggests that 'mother' was a common designation for Etruscan goddesses.

63 Lesko, 1991: 91, fig. 29.
64 Bleeker, 1985: 32.

65 Silverman, 1991: 44.

66 Silverman 1991: 44. The myth is retold and expanded by Plutarch, *Mor.* 5. 3-5, 7-191.

It was in the Ptolemaic period that Isis began to be known by the Greeks and Romans, as following Alexander's conquest of Egypt trade increased, along with the immigration of people into Egypt from across the Mediterranean.⁶⁷ In Alexander's new capital diverse cultures and their deities coexisted. Ptolemaic queens had traditionally identified themselves with Isis-Hathor, now they and she were equated with Aphrodite.⁶⁸

Greek influence had already affected the character and representation of the goddess in Egypt by the third century.⁶⁹ Though some images continued to show her in Egyptian style with an ornate vulture headdress supporting the disc of the sun, an elaborate collar and a tripartite wig, she began to be depicted there with Greek hairstyle and clothing and holding the cornucopia, symbol of wealth and prosperity.⁷⁰ Her Egyptian persona was as the giver and restorer of life and mother of the sovereign, identified with Renenutet-Thermuthis, cobra-goddess, the protectress of harvest. As she continued to assume wider powers, she also appeared as patron of sea-faring, Isis *Pelagia* (fig 10). The rudder she leant on indicated not only her connection with ships, but also her guiding of human affairs, as she was assimilated to Tyche/Fortuna.⁷¹ Where she was equated with Aphrodite, images of her naked with flowing hair, wreaths of flowers, and a crown appeared.⁷²

67 Dunand, 2013: 176.

68 Walker and Higgs, 2001: 111.

69 Dunand, 2013: 179-80.

70 Dunand, 2013:179; Walker and Higgs 2001: figs. 126-7; compare the image of Isis at fig. 192.

71 Walker and Higgs 2001: 130-131.

72 Dunand, 2013: 179.



Fig.9. Isis suckling her son Horus. Egyptian, c. 330 BC



Fig.10. Isis/Tyche wearing vulture cap and holding rudder. Roman c.150 AD

The goddess's cult spread to the island of Delos, where she was also assimilated to Artemis, who had associations with both chastity and childbirth, and reached the towns of Puteoli and Pompeii in Campania on the trade routes to Rome.⁷³ In the second century Isis/Tyche was worshipped at Praeneste, close to the city. A number of first century decrees at Rome attempted to ban the worship of Isis and destroy her shrines there, but in 43 BC a temple in the city was authorised by Antony, Octavian and Lepidus.

Many Greek inscriptions of short prayers found at the Ptolemaic shrine to Isis at Philae demonstrate the goddess's importance for personal devotion in Egypt.⁷⁴ At other sanctuaries advice or healing were sought from the goddess and from

73 See Alfano, 2001: 280-81 for evidence of Isis at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Schmitz, 2013: 213 describes how at Delos and elsewhere there was contact with Phoenician and other Near eastern goddess cults, and Isis/Aphrodite and Demeter were equated with Astarte.

74 Silverman, 1991: 115.

her son Horus.⁷⁵ Women asked Bes (a male deity) and Isis for help in childbirth, by offering small statues and amulets dedicated to them.⁷⁶ Seen as the giver of immortality because of her efforts to revive Osiris, figurines of the goddess were often placed in graves.⁷⁷ In her cult on Delos she was also associated with healing, and incubation was practiced by worshippers at her shrine.⁷⁸ Hymns to Isis (written in Egypt but for a Greek audience) identify her as concerned for women, especially marriage and childbirth.⁷⁹ Much information about the practices of her worshippers at Rome comes from later writings such as the third century AD *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius and cannot be relied upon for an earlier period. However in the first century AD Juvenal criticised women's propensity to make public displays of devotion to the goddess (*Sat.* 6.522-530).

At Rome, Isis was still seen as a mother goddess, and giver of life, but more emphasis was laid on her powers over nature than was the case with Venus and, equated with Demeter, she was described as 'lady of the sky and of the earth'.⁸⁰ The Greeks conflated Isis with Aphrodite, but in Italy she remained distinct from Venus, though the two goddesses shared common competencies in the chthonic sphere, and associations with love. Isis' own character as mother of the mortal sovereign never had life in Rome, possibly because her connections with kingship were too strong for the Republic, and later her

75 Dunand, 2013: 173, Doxey, 2013: 197.

76 Dunand, 2013: 174.

77 Tobin, 1991:198.

78 Witt, 1971:191.

79 Quoted in Heyob, 1975: 50-51.

80 *CIL.* X .3800; Dunand, 2013:180; Tobin 1991:198 argues that Isis' role as mother of the earth only developed under Greek influence.

associations were with the defeated enemy of Rome, Cleopatra.⁸¹ But her character as mother-protector was the kind of motherhood which became important for Venus during the Later Republic.

2.5 The Influence of the Anatolian Mother, Cybele

Like Venus, Cybele was one of the 'foreign' gods brought to Rome and given a state cult during the Republic in response to a time of crisis in the second Punic War. As will be shown to have been the case with Venus *Erycina*, she was already known by the Romans when she arrived, since she was familiar in Etruria, Sicily and southern Italy.⁸² The two goddesses' links with the Trojan legend and Aeneas gave them similar roles as protector and ancestor, and influenced the way each was perceived.

The cult of *Matar*, the Mother, known to the Romans, had spread by the sixth century from Asia Minor to most of the Greek world, where she was known as *Meter* or *Kybele*, through contacts resulting from commerce, immigration, and war.⁸³ She was depicted with lions indicating her power over the natural world and her character as protector.⁸⁴ In a frieze at Delphi showing the gigantomachy and dated to c. 550 BC the lions pull her chariot as she takes part in battle alongside the other gods.⁸⁵ However the most frequent images show her sitting on a throne in a rigid pose, her arms fixed on each side of her

81 Described by Plutarch, *Ant.* 50, 54.

82 Roller, 1999: 281.

83 Roller, 1999: 108. One of her epithets *kubileya*, which had referred to the mountains over which she ruled, provided her Greek name.

84 Roller, 1999: 134-5. A variety of wild animals had accompanied her in Anatolian iconography. Roller suggests the lions helped her acceptance in Greece because they were already used as symbols of power in connection with other goddesses.

85 Vermaseren, 1977: 71.

body and her feet on a footstool. She usually wore a low crown, often turreted to represent her status as a protector of cities and was dressed in a long garment, often holding a *tympanum* and a libation bowl (fig 11).⁸⁶



Fig.11. Cybele with turreted crown. She may have originally held a cornucopia. From Formia, Lazio, 1st century BC

The Homeric *Hymn to the Mother of the Gods* describes how the Greeks saw the goddess:

Mother of all gods and all mortals...
She loves the clatter of rattles and the din of kettle drums
and she loves the wailing of flutes
and also she loves the howling of wolves
and the growling of bright-eyed lions
echoing hills and wooded hollows.

(15. 1-5 trans. Cashford)

⁸⁶ Vermaseren, 1977: 74; Turcan, 1996: 13. Roller, 1999: 146-7. The bowl was a symbol of divinity and the tympanum a reference to her rites.

The hymn highlights the key characteristics of the Mother, the animals which accompany her, her association with the tympanum and sistrum, and her mountain home. As mother of the gods, she was identified with fertility goddesses such as Gaia, Rhea, and Demeter.⁸⁷ It was probably only in the fourth century that Greek Kybele gained a consort in the person of Attis.⁸⁸ Like both Aphrodite and Isis the myths about the goddess told of a tragic love affair. The Mother had loved the younger Attis, whose death was usually described as the result of self-castration.⁸⁹

Individuals could show their devotion to the Mother through private mysteries as well at public temples and shrines.⁹⁰ Klöckner points out that in reliefs women are often shown reacting to the presence of the goddess, whilst men are more restrained.⁹¹ However she argues that the purpose of the images was to show both men and women behaving in an appropriate way, and not to indicate that women were more common or fervent devotees.⁹² Greek plays also show women as worshippers, but this may be literary convention rather than an accurate indication of a greater prevalence of women in the cult.⁹³ Many copies were made of statues of the Mother, and used as votive offerings in sites across the Greek and Roman world.⁹⁴ There is seldom any indication of the reason for the offerings, which are mostly anonymous, but there are occasional

87 Roller, 1999: 170, 181, 184. For example by Euripides, *Bacch.* 79, 129-30.

88 Roller, 1999: 177-8. For the view that the cult of Attis existed earlier, see Versnel 1990:107.

89 Different versions are told in Ov. *Fast.* 4.221- 44; Paus. 7.17.9-12; *Diod.* 3.57-9.

90 Roller, 1999:162; there was one at Athens from the fifth century.

91 Illustrated in Klöckner, 2010:110. Roller, 1999: 23

92 Klöckner, 2010:113.

93 For example, Eur. *Bacch.* 55-60; Roller, 1999: 23 criticises the continuing 'unsupported notion' that women and individuals of low social class were predominant among Cybele's devotees.

94 Roller, 1999:145.

connections with childbirth, suggesting that the goddess may have been petitioned for this reason.

Cybele was brought to Rome from Asia Minor in 204 BC, during the war with Hannibal, following consultation of the Sibylline oracles.⁹⁵ She was first given a home in the Temple of Victory until her own temple on the Palatine was dedicated thirteen years later. However the cult at Rome took on a different identity from the one it had in either Greece or Phrygia. The goddess lost her association with wild nature, but maintained a strong emphasis on human fertility, a sphere in which Venus was recognized to have responsibility. Votive offerings included many images with sexual connotations, relating to fertility and reproduction.⁹⁶ The goddess may already have been linked with Aeneas and the origins of Rome.⁹⁷ Ovid records how wood from the sacred pines on Mount Ida, the Great Mother's home, were used to build the ship which brought her to Rome, just as Aeneas had built his ships to escape Troy.⁹⁸ Terracotta pine cones found near her temple could relate to this story, though they also became a symbol of Attis. From the beginning of her time in Rome the goddess was seen as key to the security of the state even though the practices of her cult and the behaviour of her eunuch priests caused concern.⁹⁹

95 Turcan, 1996:5, 7; Roller, 1999: 6-8, 271 suggests that she was actually brought from Pergamon.

96 Roller, 1999: 277-8.

97 Salzman, 1985: 61.

98 *Fast.* 4.273-6.

99 Reported by Valerius Maximus 7.7.6 and Dionysios of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 2.19.3-5.

Those aspects of Cybele which developed after her arrival at Rome are most relevant to the changing character of Venus. The goddess's connections with victory and protection were similar to those of Venus, as evidenced by the similarity in the way they were portrayed on coins (fig. 12 and compare with fig. 14). Both goddesses had arrived in Rome in order to secure the safety of the city and would have an important role as the Romans sought to define their identity in relation to neighbouring peoples.¹⁰⁰ Cybele's role as protector of Rome, like that of Venus, would take on even more significance in the Late Republic.¹⁰¹



Fig. 12. Roman coin of 78 BC. Obverse shows helmeted bust with laurel wreath. Reverse shows Cybele wearing a turreted crown, holding a patera in her right hand, and driving a chariot drawn by lions.

2.6 *Aeneas, Son of Venus*

An important factor in the growing importance of Venus in the late Republic was the adoption of the legend of her son Aeneas as the founder of Rome. Aphrodite's son in Greek myth, it may well have been through Etruscan influence that his story first came to be important at Rome. Homer depicts

100 Beard, 2012: 348; Roller, 1999: 316.

101 Salzman, 1985: 63. Virgil gives Cybele a key role, *Aen.* 9.82-4.

Aeneas as one of the leading Trojan fighters, often mentioned together with Hector, both for his bravery and his intelligence.¹⁰²

Aeneas was 'a mighty killer' and 'fully intent on battle' (Homer *Il.*13.483; 13.468 trans. Rieu). Poseidon prophesies that he will 'rule over Troy and be followed by his children's children in the time to come' (20.308). According to the Homeric Hymns, Aphrodite told Anchises that the nymphs would bring him up:

And when the lovely prime of youth first possesses him,
The goddesses will bring him here and show you your child.
And when you see him with your eyes – like a young shoot –
You will delight in looking at him
For he will look most like a god.

(*Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 276-279 trans. Cashford)

Although Homer mentions Aphrodite's intervention in battle to rescue Aeneas, and she describes him as 'the son who means more to me than anyone', the relationship between them is given little prominence in the *Iliad* (5.312; 378). However, the brave warrior Aeneas was popular in art in both Greece and Etruria, appearing in illustrations of episodes from the epic, and of groups of the gods and heroes.¹⁰³ Though later writers (following Virgil) would emphasise his piety, his survival and escape from Troy and his rescue of the Penates appear to have been what interested earlier writers and artists.¹⁰⁴

The Aeneas legend was widely disseminated throughout the peoples of the Mediterranean (fig.13). Between the sixth and the fifth century Aeneas was

102 *Il.* 5.467-8, 6.75, 17.513, 534, 754.

103 Galinsky, 1969: 14-19, 122-30.

104 Galinsky, 1969: 46-57.

especially popular in Etruria, where a large number of vase paintings show episodes from the Trojan legends.¹⁰⁵



Fig.13. Attic vessel showing Aeneas and Anchises, c.520 BC.

At this time Rome was under Etruscan domination, and even after they had gained their freedom, Galinsky argues it is unlikely that the Romans would have quickly adopted a founding legend concerning an Etruscan hero, and this view is supported by the lack of archaeological finds connected with Aeneas at Rome in this period.¹⁰⁶

By the end of the fourth century however the legend of Aeneas was revived at Rome. The removal of the Etruscan threat may have reduced Roman sensitivity to their hero. The legend of the founding by Romulus may have seemed less appealing in the light of the Latin wars, whilst the adoption of Aeneas as founding father could now reflect Roman domination of Latium.¹⁰⁷ Finally, the Romans' descent from Aeneas would link them more closely with

105 Galinsky, 1969: 122-30.

106 1969: 130.

107 Gruen, 1992:28.

the Greeks. Gruen sees the adoption of the Aeneas legend as part of the quest for Roman identity, laying 'a foundation for a national character'.¹⁰⁸

Chapter four will explore the implications for Venus of a fuller expression of the Aeneas legend, developed at Rome under the dictators and the principate.

2.7 Summary

A number of aspects and functions of character of the four foreign goddesses considered here affected perceptions of Venus at Rome. Aphrodite's most important role was the power to arouse love in others, and this was demonstrated clearly in myth and image. Though Etruscan art expressed its own concerns through Greek myth, this aspect was also central to how Turan was perceived, despite other characters becoming important. Connected with, though not identical to, erotic power was the representation of these goddesses as physically attractive, and their involvement in their own love affairs.

Greek poetry suggested that Aphrodite's powers extended from humans to the animal kingdom and to all of the natural world. Lacking Etruscan writings, it is not clear if Turan had the same role, but Isis's Egyptian persona included responsibility for growth in nature, and the myth of the death and rebirth of Osiris related to the seasonal ebb and flow of the Nile, crucial for the annual harvest. The iconography of Cybele showed her power over wild nature, and she was equated by the Greeks with other goddesses responsible for the fertility of the earth. At Rome this aspect became even more important.

108 1992: 31, though the word 'national' is inappropriate.

However Venus's connections with the fertility of nature appear limited, though she was often associated with flowers. Her responsibility for the success of the vine harvest will be discussed in the next chapter.

Recognition that all of the four goddesses in some way had responsibility for the fertility of the earth most likely explains their connection with childbirth and reproductive issues. It was probably this rather than a perception that they were especially maternal deities which led people to make offerings in the hope of healing or preservation through pregnancy. Many other gods in their respective pantheons were approached with these matters, both men and women were involved in their worship, and there is no evidence that these four were uniquely 'goddesses for women'. Only Aphrodite seems to have had specific female rites, as Venus did at Rome, but she does not appear to have taken on responsibility for childbirth or other gynaecological matters.

The meaning of the title mother is different in relation to each of the goddesses. Isis was mother of the divine sovereign, and in her Egyptian form was shown suckling her child, but this image was not popular at Rome. Cybele was the Great Mother of the gods in her assimilation to Gaia and Rhea, and as Great Mother of Ida, was an ancestor of Aeneas, and thus of the Romans. Though Turan was occasionally called mother, like Aphrodite she does not demonstrate significant maternal qualities. Venus's character as *genetrix* would become increasingly important in the Late Republic, but the emphasis would not be on 'motherhood' but her role as ancestor of the Romans.

The role of protector also varies; Aphrodite's character as guardian of mariners, linked to her mythical birth from the sea was also taken by Isis and Venus at Pompeii. Both Cybele and Venus were seen from their arrival in Rome as protectors of the city, and this role increased in importance towards the end of the Republic. The myths of Isis, Cybele and Aphrodite (and so also Turan), describe a relationship between the goddess and a young man which ends tragically. Originally both Isis and Turan appear to have had responsibilities as protector-deities in the sphere of death and the after-life, and it was probably the latter who influenced Venus's own role in this sphere. Also significant for the comparison with Venus is the identification of the goddess with mortal, especially royal, females. This has been noted as an aspect of Egyptian Isis, but in Augustan times can be seen in respect of both Cybele and Venus, and will be discussed further below.¹⁰⁹

This survey has noted a number of times the assimilation of one deity with another, and the way functions and powers were shared between different gods. These goddesses were also connected to other deities from whom they remained distinct but whose proximity affected how they were perceived.¹¹⁰ The variability with which these goddesses were represented, worshipped, and connected begins to explain how the changing characters of Venus might have made sense to the Romans.

109 Beard, 1998: 140-49 traces the gradual blurring of the distinction between mortals and the gods during the Republic.

110 For example, Turan and Uni; Cybele and Juno *Sospita*, see Roller, 1999: 311.

Chapter 3

Characters of the Goddess: Venus at Rome

3.1 Introduction

Feeney has suggested that the Roman understanding of religion was above all performative, grounded in ritual action which 'worked'. However there were other understandings too, expressed in systematizing expositions, philosophical speculation, and poetry.¹ This list, to which could be added visual representation and political action, provide different ways of exploring Roman engagement with the gods, and perceptions of their characters.² Rüpke points out that within the constraints of one's culture and language individual or innovative representations were quite possible.³ Just as interpretations of festivals changed over time, so did individual views of the gods.⁴ Recognizing Venus's changing characters will give greater understanding of her increasing significance to the Romans during the Republic and early Empire.

Chapter one described the re-evaluation of Roman religion. The old paradigm, now abandoned by most, had presented the gods as unimportant, their personalities borrowed from the Greeks, their rites meaningless and generally without the sense of personal engagement with divinity found in 'oriental' cults. Recent scholarship has placed new emphasis on the public cult in the life of the city, reconsidered the cultural interaction between Rome and her neighbours,

1 1998: 137-42.

2 Feeney, 1998: 2 argues that poetry and Davies, 2004: 4 that history, are still often read from the viewpoint of the older perspectives on religion.

3 2007: 83.

4 On changing interpretations of festivals see North, 2000: 49-51.

reinterpreted the supposed scepticism of elite writers, and reassessed the religious engagement of ordinary Romans.

Chapter two analysed the characters of four 'foreign' goddesses which (it was argued) influenced perceptions of Venus, noting in particular the association of those goddesses with sexual attraction and beauty, motherhood (in its widest sense) and the needs of women. This chapter and the next will examine the representations of the goddess at Rome and consider the causes of her changing characters and their significance to the Romans. As will become clear, aspects of the characters of the foreign goddesses which were influential on Venus, including sexual attraction, fertility and protection, were adapted and took a particularly Roman shape.

Recent re-evaluations of Roman religion have looked for the cause of innovation as much in changes at Rome as in influences from outside, and the evidence concerning Venus will be examined in the wider context of Roman life and society.⁵ Three issues are especially important. The first relates to social changes at Rome, and in particular the role of women.⁶ During the Republic, women (at least within the elite) gained increased autonomy over their economic and sexual affairs and growing involvement in public life.⁷ Though it is not fully understood how far these changes were reflected in the religious sphere, there is some evidence for the growth of gender-specific and chastity

5 Beard, 1998: xi; North, 2000: 17-18.

6 Described by Rawson, 2006: 332-40.

7 For the reasons for this see Kraemer, 1992: 55-56.

cults associated with Venus, and the significance of this feature of women's involvement with the goddess's cult will be examined.⁸

Also important during the Republic was Rome's expanding influence, and the resulting interaction with the peoples with whom the Romans came into contact. New expressions of Italic cults as well as 'foreign' gods arrived in the city. Gruen argues that this brought into sharp focus the question of Roman identity, and the elite 'felt compelled to articulate national values and to shape a distinctive character for their own corporate persona'.⁹ Venus was important in this process, first in the way new expressions of her cult were incorporated into Roman religion, and secondly in the growth of interest in her son Aeneas as ancestor of the Romans.¹⁰

3.2 *The Character of the Earliest Roman Venus*

Venus does not appear in the first century copies of the fourth century calendar and does not seem to have had a temple at Rome before this date, by which time she may have already associated with Aphrodite.¹¹ Nevertheless various attempts have been made to discover a 'native' Venus. Wissowa suggested that she was originally the goddess of gardens, and the personification of charm or grace (*venus*) in nature. She was assigned this sphere of influence by a number of ancient writers, including Varro, who mentions Venus in his list of the

8 See North, 2000: 19; also Beard, 1998: 297 on women's inability to sacrifice, a view challenged by Shultz, 2006a: 131-37.

9 1992: 1, though Gruen's word 'national' is not appropriate for Rome in this era. Orlin, 2010: 7 uses Habinek's phrase 'a crisis of identity'.

10 Others include literature, and the adoption of distinctive clothing and styles of architecture, Orlin, 2010:23.

11 As she was by the Etruscans. On the calendar, see Rüpke, 2013: 353.

twelve deities who are patrons of cultivation, describing her both as the protector of the garden, and also the deity in whose honour the *Vinalia Rustica* was established (*Rust.* 1.4,6).¹² This was one of the two festivals connected with the vine at Rome, and took place on 19th August, when prayers were offered for the protection of the plants over the winter (*Plin.* HN. 2.18.284-9).¹³

Wissowa's view of Venus as responsible for gardens was dismissed by Schilling, because of the late sources he used, and because Virgil refers to Priapus and not Venus as the protector of gardens.¹⁴ However he also saw the festival of the *Vinalia* as a clue to the original character of Venus. The other *Vinalia* was the *Priora* on 23rd April. This seems to have involved the first tasting of the previous year's vintage, and Ovid links the festival with the temple of Venus *Erycina* outside the Colline Gate (*Fast.* 4.863).¹⁵ Plutarch does not specify which temple of Venus was involved, but describes a ceremony (which he calls the *Veneralia*) during which the wine was poured out in front of the building (*Mor.* 4. 45). Ovid's aetiology of the festival does not explain Venus's connection with the rite, he simply relates the story of Aeneas' defeat of Mezentius, and his vow to offer the vintage to Jupiter (*Fast.* 4.877-900).¹⁶

As already noted, Schilling linked *venus* with *venerari* and *venia*, taking it to mean what he called 'charme magico-religieux'.¹⁷ In his view the roots of the

12 Schilling, 1954:24 points out that this festival was not in the most ancient calendars.

13 Varro suggests it was the beginning of the grape harvest.

14 Virgil perhaps considered Venus had more important things to protect.

15 Scullard 106-7. Schilling suggests Ovid is incorrect because he wants to describe the temple which had the most elaborate ceremonies, 1954: 105

16 Ovid and Varro give different views of the priority of Venus and Jupiter in the rite.

17 1954: 61.

Vinalia lay in the understanding of the sacred significance of wine and was once a celebration of divine grace.¹⁸ Venus was connected to the festival through the myth about Aeneas and Mezentius, and her association with the Trojan legend.¹⁹ He saw her role as mediator between Jupiter and the Trojans reflecting her original character as the personification of the reciprocal relationship between mortals and the gods, the 'gardienne de la précieuse *venia deum*'.²⁰

Both the theories of Wissowa and Schilling, though differing in their understanding of the 'original' Venus, argue that she was at first a personification of some kind of charm (natural or magical) which only later became associated with sexual allure. Dumézil, who largely accepted Schilling's theory, suggested that 'feminine charm with its cunning approach, so powerful over its masculine objects', came to be described by the same word as 'the effort to charm and capture the goodwill of the god'.²¹

Nothing can be certain about the nature of the earliest Venus. However these presumed early characters are very different both from the foreign goddesses described in chapter two, and from what Venus would become during the Middle and Late Republic, and it is these characters which will now be examined.

18 1954: 136.

19 His evidence includes statues of Aeneas and Anchises found at Veii, but the early representations of the Aeneas story do not seem to have included a role for Venus. See page 48 above.

20 Schilling, 1954:148.

21 1996: 421-2.

3.3 *Obsequens and Verticordia, a women's goddess?*

The question of how significant Venus's gender was for the Romans has already been raised. The discussion in the previous chapter revealed a particular association between some of the goddesses described there and the concerns of female worshippers, but suggested that though the characters of the goddesses were important factors in how and why people related to them, none of them were exclusively women's goddesses. While not seen as goddesses uniquely for women, they all seem to have received offerings from women seeking assistance with health issues related to their gender, especially childbearing. Venus does not appear to have received this kind of attention at Rome, though possibly offerings were made to the goddess for help in these areas, since the identity of the god for whom a gift was intended was often unclear.²² Other gods however were clearly more important for healing. Aesclepius, whose temple at Rome was dedicated in 291 BC, and his daughter, Hygeia, who was given the Roman name Salus, were both worshipped by men and women seeking cures..²³ Ovid refers to the prayers of women to Juno *Lucina*: 'Shout "be present for the prayers of birth". Pregnant women untie your hair and pray to her for gentle, unfettered delivery' (*Fast.* 3.256-8 trans. Boyle and Woodard). Aphrodite was the only goddess of the four examined above who had specific female rites. Diana's temple in the grove of Nemi, a few miles from Rome, was also a place of pilgrimage for women, 'Many placards give thanks to the goddess. Often a woman is granted her prayer, wreathes her brow and bears shimmering torches from the city' (*Fast.* 3.268-270).

22 Rüpke, 2007: 160

23 The goddess Carmentis seems to have had some responsibility for childbirth: Ov. *Fast.* 621-36. Plut. *Mor.* 4.57, August. *De civ. D.* 4.11.

The evidence suggests a rather different connection between Venus and women in Republican Rome. The earliest temple to Venus at Rome, according to a writer in Late Antiquity, was dedicated to Venus *Obsequens*.²⁴ The fourth century AD writer Servius explains the epithet as related to the goddess's favour in answering the founder's prayer (*In Vergilii Aeneidos* 1.720).²⁵ The title was important for Schilling's theory of the goddess's origins, and he translated it to mean 'la qualité d'être accessible aux demandes, propice aux prières'.²⁶ Arguing that the epithet had a restricted use, only being applied to Jupiter, Fortuna, and Venus, he suggested it was a 'bi-polar' title describing the reciprocal attitudes of both worshipper and worshipped.²⁷ The dedication day of the temple was 19th August, the date of the *Vinalia Rustica*. Livy does not mention the title *obsequens* used by Servius but clearly links the temple with women and describes its construction near the Circus Maximus during the Samnite war by Quintus Fabius Gurges, son of the then consul.²⁸ Though the military campaign was going well, according to Livy, at Rome there was distress caused by plague and omens. The Sibylline books were consulted and the cause of the trouble traced to the adultery of a number of women, who were fined and the money used to finance the construction of the temple (10.31.9).

Pliny describes the dedication of a statue to Venus *Verticordia* by a woman called Sulpicia, chosen from among the Roman matrons for her chastity (*HN*.

24 Near the Circus Maximus, *TDAR*: 409.

25 The connection is dismissed by Wissowa, 1902: 235, note 4.

26 1954: 28.

27 Boyd, 1956: 267 challenges this idea in his review of Schilling's book.

28 Beard, 1998: 80 points out that Livy has his own agenda, emphasising the Senate's role in controlling and responding to events,.

7.120).²⁹ Ovid alone links a rite on the 1st April with this representation of the goddess, and underlines her connection with women's sexuality. The poet mentions a 'fall from chastity', referring to the execution of three Vestal Virgins in 114 BC and the subsequent consultation of the Sibylline books, as a result of which a shrine was built to Venus.³⁰ He describes the cult ritual in which three groups of participants are said to be present: elite mothers and brides, and lower class women: 'Yours, are the goddess's rites Latin mothers and brides, you too without the headband and long gown' (*Fasti* 4.133-4).³¹ The image of the goddess was bathed in the river, an action not attested elsewhere in Roman literature, but the description (and possibly the practice) may be influenced by similar rites for Greek gods described by Callimachus (Athena) and Pausanias (Hera) (*Call. Hymn.* 5; *Paus.* 2.38.2)³² After washing and drying the statue was decked with flowers and the women bathed themselves under the myrtle, the tree associated with Venus, and sacrifice was offered to Fortuna *Virilis*. A ritual drink was followed by prayer: 'Appease her with suppliant words. Her power secures beauty and character and noble fame' (*Fast.* 4.155-6).³³ The threefold nature of the rite (bathing of image, bathing of participants, sacrifice) with their apparently different emphases and the mention of the two goddesses has

29 See also *Val. Max.* 8.15.12. Takács suggests that the statue may have been set up in the temple of *Obsequens* or *Erycina*, 2008: 44. For this public acknowledgement of outstanding sexual purity in a women, chosen by her peers, as a key feature of the tradition, and paralleled elsewhere in Roman writers, see Langlands, 2006:58ff.

30 *Fast.* 4.133-162. The event is also mentioned in the 4th century AD epitome of Livy: *Obsequens* 37, and by Plut. *Mor.* 83.

31 Fantham, 1998: 115 suggests the third group are prostitutes, but this is disputed by, among others, Pomeroy, 1975: 208. For Degrassi's attempts to reconcile Ovid's account with the *Fasti Praenesti*, see Fantham, 1998: 115-6.

32 For the suggestion of Ovid's reliance on Callimachus' Hymn 5, *the Bath of Pallas*, for this section of the *Fasti*, see Fantham 1998: 11-18 and Miller, 1980: 210.

33 Schilling 1954: 229 suggests that *Verticordia* is the equivalent of Aphrodite *apostrophia*. This would explain the use of poppy seed, usually associated with Demeter, with whom Aphrodite was identified. Langlands, 2006: 67 points out the tension between the three aspects Ovid mentions.

proved problematic, Fantham suggesting that each element originally took place at a different location, and was restricted to a particular group of women.³⁴ Ovid may have combined two separate ceremonies, in honour of Venus and Fortuna, that were linked by association with women's sexual behaviour .

Venus' character as *Verticordia* is not immediately obvious. No calendar or inscription mentions the name and Ovid himself does not use it, though the words *verso...corde* refer to Venus (*Fast.* 4.160).³⁵ They suggest that in Ovid's eyes at least, it is Venus whose heart and character are changed from her role in myth as an adulteress. This may also be his purpose in mentioning the rite for Fortuna, who here seems to be connected with sexual attraction in marriage. Venus had become a goddess who upheld marriage, an idea also found in Propertius: 'All love is great, but greatest that for a husband acknowledges: Venus herself fans this torch that it may live' (4.3.48).³⁶ Generally the name *Verticordia* is taken to refer to Venus' ability to turn the hearts of others, but unlike the role of Venus/Aphrodite/Turan in myth, who incites (often adulterous) love, *Verticordia* encourages females, both young girls and married women, to turn from (sexual) vice to virtue.³⁷ Though Turcan suggests that Venus was seen as a goddess who could be addressed by betrayed husbands, this is conjecture since there is no evidence of male participation in the rite of *Verticordia*.³⁸

34 Fantham, 1998: 116; Schilling, 1954: 232, Staples, 1998: 110 argues unconvincingly that Fortuna *Virilis* was a title for Venus.

35 Fantham, 1998:122 suggests this is due to the demands of metre.

36 On Propertius and Ovid see further in chapter 4.

37 Valerius Maximus 8.15.12: '*a libidine ad pudicitiam converteretur*'.

38 Turcan, 2000: 24. He notes that there was no such recourse for betrayed wives.

Langlands argues more convincingly that, since both religious cult and sexual morality were closely linked with Venus, 'the new incarnation of her as *Verticordia* was a national response to a moral crisis'.³⁹ The bathing of the women in the ceremony may have suggested their purification, in contrast to the bathing connected with Fortuna *Virilis* which indicated preparation for seduction. The cult was perhaps a representative action by the respectable women of the city to encourage the chastity of all. Sexual behaviour (for women at least) was not a private matter. The chastity of the Vestal Virgins was necessary for the safety of Rome, but ordinary women who disregarded moral norms were also seen as a threat.⁴⁰ Venus *Verticordia* was a chastity cult whose aim was to ensure the city's security by controlling women's sexual activity.⁴¹ Reflecting the emphasis in the writings of Roman writers on the importance of the morality of women, the statue and later the temple were seen as a warning to adulteresses.⁴²

Venus was not the only goddess associated with this aspect of women's lives. Others were Bona Dea, Fortuna *Virginalis*, Fortuna *Primigenia*, Pudicitia, and Juno *Sospita*. If the cults' origins date to the time of the Punic wars, a period of social change for women, they, together with number of restrictive laws, may have been an attempt to redress the balance.⁴³ Kraemer sees these cults as

39 2006:52, 67.

40 Parker, 2004:588-92, Takács, 2008:18.

41 Parker, 2004:588. Kraemer, 1992:24 argues that Ovid wishes to blur the difference between respectable women and others, suggesting that Venus is a goddess for all women. On Ovid, see further in chapter 4.

42 See the lengthy list in the appendix to Parker, 2004: 593-5.

43 Pomeroy, 1975: 179-81.

'complex refractions of Roman gender relations'.⁴⁴ She notes that the evidence for them comes from (male-authored) literature rather than inscriptions and suggests that they may be 'religious and social propaganda rather than manifestations of authentic women's piety'.⁴⁵ Their description by later writers may indeed owe more to the effect of the Augustan morality drive than to the desires of women themselves.⁴⁶

None of the goddesses discussed in chapter two were closely associated with women's chastity, though Cybele's arrival in the city was linked to the issue, at least as it was later recalled.⁴⁷ In Greek myth and cult it was Artemis and Athena who had this role.⁴⁸ It appears therefore that *Verticordia* was a particularly Roman character for Venus, or rather an adaptation of her association with sexual attraction.⁴⁹ D'Ambra suggests that rituals like the *Verticordia*, 'attempted to reconcile the uncontrolled sex drive of Aphrodite with the socially responsible fertility of Venus'.⁵⁰ This gives the impression that the two goddesses were seen as different rather than equated by the Romans. In fact the idea that Venus might represent 'socially responsible fertility' was not yet clearly a character of Venus, though it would become so in the time of Augustus. While connections with women's sexual behaviour may relate

44 1992: 55.

45 1992: 55.

46 See below in chapter 4.

47 According to Catullus 63.17 the followers of Cybele castrated themselves '*Veneris nimio odio*' in order to become the slave of the goddess, see Roller, 1999: 306-7.

48 Though note that there is a difference between chastity and virginity.

49 Kraemer, 1992: 69 suggests that this transformation of foreign mother goddesses into deities associated with chastity is a feature of Roman religion, and finds the same process with Cybele, Matuta and Ino.

50 1996: 221. Though she notes that cults were often founded in response to moral crises, it was more likely that causes for political or military crises were found in supposed immoral behaviour.

conversely to the myths about Aphrodite's power to arouse love, they seem largely to spring from the Roman tendency to see chastity as related to the security of the city, for which Venus would be seen to have increasing responsibility.

3.4 Venus, Goddess of Love

Alongside this connection with chastity, Venus represented the beauty and sexual attraction associated with Aphrodite, and allusions to the goddess with this character are found frequently both in the literature and in the graffiti of ordinary Romans.⁵¹ Since her name was also used as a common noun to mean sexual intercourse it is not always clear if the goddess is being specifically referred to, but that in itself indicates the perception of her responsibility in this sphere.⁵²

The poet Sulpicia honours Venus and receives her help in love:

Thanks to the importunity of my poetry
Venus has brought him to my breast and laid him there.
She has kept her promise.

(3.13.1-5 trans. Dunlop)

Lucretius, who uses Venus as a symbol to describe the universe according to Epicurean philosophy, describes her as 'Life-stirring Venus, Mother of Aeneas and Rome, pleasure of men and gods' (*De. Rer. Nat.* 1.1 trans. A.E. Stallings).

51 *Cat.* 3.1 and 13.11-12 is an exception, despite his interest in love, only mentioning Venus twice, writing of *Veneres Cupidinesques* in both places. Merriam, 2006: 14 describes his Venuses as 'rather abstract goddesses' who nevertheless take 'a personal interest in the lives of lovers'.

52 Adams, 1982: 188-9 points out the noun does not have the perjorative sense of *stuprum*.

Ovid calls the goddess one who 'united the crude hearts of humankind and instructed all to pair with a mate', and thus has power over all the world (*Fast.* 4.97-8). Horace describes Venus, 'about whom flutter both Joy and Desire' (*Odes.* 2.33-4). As already noted above this aspect of the goddess was portrayed in statuary found in elite homes in the Late Republic and early Empire, where Venus/Aphrodite was a common subject. Some statues were copies of Greek originals, but many more were probably variations, as artists reproduced the key elements of a particular statue-type.⁵³ Roman philosophers, like the Greeks, discussed the relation between the gods and their images.⁵⁴ No-one suggested that the statues they saw actually were the gods, but they provided visual reminders of their characters.⁵⁵

Venus was also associated with nature's growth and the beauty of flowers in particular.⁵⁶ Ovid makes the connection explicit:

No other time accords with Venus more than spring.
In spring earth glistens, in spring fields unfold;
Then grasses shoot their blades through the bursting ground,
Then the vines bud on the plumping bark.
Beautiful Venus merits a beautiful time.

(*Fast.* 4 .125-129)

These ideas reflect Theognis's words about Aphrodite:

Love comes in season, when the pregnant earth
Bursts forth with blooming flowers of the Spring;

53 Stewart, 2003: 236-49.

54 For example Cic. *De Nat.Deor.*1.75 -79. Nasrallah 2010: 229-235 shows how this subject continued to interest the Romans into the second century AD.

55 Stewart 2003: 195-207 shows that the gods were frequently depicted on mundane household objects, such as lamps, so these images would have been known in the homes of ordinary Romans as well as the elite who could afford statues.

56 For example Virg. *Ecl.* 7.62; *Aen.* 5.72; *Ov. Fast.* 4.15; *Paus.* 6.24.7.

Then leaving Cyprus, beautiful island, love
Comes to the men on earth, and brings them joy.

(*Elegies* 1275-8 trans. Wender)

At the festival of the *Verticordia* the statue of Venus was decked with flowers and roses, and at the *Vinalia* she was offered roses and myrtle, plants associated with Aphrodite.⁵⁷ Because of her connection with myrtle, Venus was also known as Murcia (Plin. *HN*.15.36). Of the goddesses discussed in chapter two, Cybele and Isis were also sometimes depicted with roses, but they were not seen as especially responsible for the *growth* of flowers. It seems most likely that the connection with flowers has more to do with Aphrodite and her association with beauty. Van Essen suggests that Venus's role as 'déesse de fertilité', which he describes as her true (ie original) character, also links her to the shrine of *Cloacina* at the entrance to Rome's sewer.⁵⁸ He suggests the origin of the shrine mentioned by Pliny was a ritual purification by the Sabine and Roman women at the end of their menstrual bleeding.⁵⁹ If there are in these associations traces of the character of an Italo-Roman Venus who was a goddess responsible for the earth's fertility, then these ideas had become less obvious to the Romans in the Republic, under the powerful influence of Aphrodite, and the emphasis on love and sexual attraction.

There is a further relationship between Venus and sexual activity in Ovid's description of the festival of the *Vinalia Priora*. This too was a rite for women, but in which 'street girls' celebrated Venus. Ovid links the ritual with the temple

57 Eden, 1963: 458, suggests that the link with vegetables (mentioned by Naevius) came about through the similarity of the word *eruca* (cabbage) and *Erucina*.

58 1956: 142.

59 *Plin. HN*.15.119

of *Erycina* outside the Colline Gate (*Fast.* 4.865). Chapter two noted the connections between prostitution and some versions of Aphrodite's cult. Venus' association with the immoral behaviour of women was to last into the Christian era.⁶⁰ However, when Aphrodite of Eryx first arrived in Rome her character was perceived rather differently.

3.5 *Venus Erycina, a Foreign Goddess?*

Livy reports that following a defeat in the course of the war with Hannibal the Sibylline books were consulted once more. As a result a *lectisternium* which included Venus and Mars was held, and a shrine was vowed by Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus and dedicated to the goddess two years later, in 217 BC.⁶¹ The significance of the move is indicated by the importance of the official who vowed the temple, Fabius Maximus: 'he who was highest in the state' (*Livy* 22.10 trans. De Sélincourt). The temple was rapidly completed and Fabius performed the dedication.⁶² The site of the temple on the Capitoline hill, close to the temple of Jupiter *Optimus Maximus*, was also an indication of its significance.⁶³

According to Polybius, Venus had had a cult at Mount Eryx on the island of Sicily from the time of the first Punic war, when the holding of the Mount by the Romans had been important in their defeat of the Carthaginians (1.55, 57, 58).

60 For example Lact, *Div. inst.* 1.17; Clem. Al., *Protr.* 2.12; Euseb., *Vit. Const.* 3.55; see the discussion in Garrison, 1997: 27.

61 *Liv.* 22.9.10, 10.10; 23.30.13-14.

62 *Liv.* 23.30. Orlin, 2010: 73 suggests Fabius was chosen for his family connection with Fabius Gurges, who had dedicated the earlier temple to the goddess.

63 Beard, 1998: map 1, xvi-xvii.

The island had been a centre for the cult of Aphrodite and one of her supposed birthplaces. Orlin suggests that it was the hope that the goddess would once again act as a protector which led to her being brought to Rome.⁶⁴ The move may also have had diplomatic intent. The Romans hoped to build connections with the Sicilian people by the evocation of their goddess, and thus gain their continuing support in the fight against Carthage.⁶⁵ As already noted, the story of Aeneas had been long known at Rome, but his adoption as the city's founder was of fairly recent origin.⁶⁶ Therefore this may have been the first time the Romans had used it to strengthen a relationship with their allies.⁶⁷ Legend told of Aeneas dedicating the shrine on Eryx to his mother Venus.⁶⁸

Although the arrival of Venus *Erycina* can be seen as the importation of a foreign goddess, the Romans probably did not view her as such.⁶⁹ There is no evidence either that the practices of the cult at Eryx which included sacred prostitution accompanied the goddess to Rome.⁷⁰ The perception of her as a Roman goddess may explain why her first temple was built on the Capitoline rather than outside the *pomerium*.⁷¹ Stehle rejects these explanations for the choice of Venus, and argues instead that key to the Roman's decision to import the goddess was indeed her character on Sicily. Religious innovation (including

64 Orlin, 2010: 73. Coins from Eryx show Victory; those from Rome in the first century have a similar design but with Venus.

65 Orlin, 2010: 74.

66 Galinsky, 1969: chapters 3 and 4; Gruen, 1994: 31, Beard, 1998: 84.

67 Orlin, 2010: 74.

68 Retold by *Thucydides* 6.2.3. Galinsky, 1969: 101-2 suggests the reasons for the development of the legend.

69 Stehle describes her as 'exotic' 1989: 143; see also Schilling 1979: 94-102.

70 As described by *Diodorus* 4.83.4-7; Schilling 1954: 23. Galinsky, 1969:75-6 suggests that the cult on Eryx was that of Venus *Marina*, Aphrodite of seafaring.

71 Though see Orlin 2002: 1-18 for the view that there was no such 'rule' against foreign cults in the city.

cults and festivals) was used by male authorities 'to maintain social integration (...) and to serve as a source of legitimation for political leaders'.⁷² Venus was chosen because of her ability to appeal to her worshippers; symbolising as she did the Roman bride and mother who crossed 'boundaries, conveying (...) sexuality and productive power' she was invited to come to Rome to protect the city.⁷³ Though Venus was later identified with Roman brides and mothers, this does not seem to have been an important aspect of *Erycina's* character on Sicily.⁷⁴

The second temple to Venus under this guise, already mentioned above, was described by Strabo as 'the temple before the Colline Gate which is called that of Venus *Erycina* and is remarkable for its shrine and surrounding colonnade' (*Geog.* 6.2.6 trans. Jones). This second temple was dedicated more than forty years after the first, in 184 BC, and literary and epigraphic evidence locate it clearly outside the *pomerium*.⁷⁵ Stehle sees this cult as reasserting Venus's characteristic association with sexuality.⁷⁶ However only Ovid suggests that it was a temple popular with prostitutes, and there is no evidence that its worship involved cult prostitution.⁷⁷ Venus's character as protector of Rome was to develop very differently from Aphrodite's in Greek Corinth.

72 1989: 145.

73 Stehle, 1989: 151.

74 On Venus's identification with matrons, see chapter 4.

75 See *Liv.* 30.38.10; *App. B.Civ.* 1.93; *CIL* 1² 316.

76 1989: 156. Anguissola, 2006:643 also takes this alternative.

77 The Praenestine calendar notes that 24th April (the day after the *Vinalia Priora*) was a holiday for prostitutes.

Venus may have had other characters. A temple to Venus *Libitina* also had as its dedication day August 19th, according to Festus.⁷⁸ This goddess was connected to burials and Varro believed that the link with Venus was caused by verbal confusion with *Libentina* (sensual pleasure) (Ling. 6.47). However the survey of the other goddesses has already suggested a number of connections with chthonic powers which may explain why the identification was made.

3.6 Summary

The origins of Roman Venus are obscure. She may have developed from the idea of 'grace', either divine or natural, or she may have always been related to the power of sexual attraction and human fertility. Her equation with other goddesses of love meant that she adopted many of their attributes and characters. Most significant was Greek Aphrodite, but Etruscan influence was also important, especially in the spheres of death and harmony.⁷⁹ Venus always kept her association with sexual attraction but its expression was affected by the Roman tendency to link the security of the city with the chastity of women. Connections with the fertility of the earth and the growth of plants existed, but a reshaping of her character to emphasise protective qualities was encouraged by her connection with Aeneas, and her arrival in the city as *Erycina*.

Women engaged with Venus in her character of *Verticordia* though at least by the time Ovid described the festival, and probably earlier, it was being used to promote a moral agenda which exercised control over women. A purification

78 On the Esquiline, *TDAR*: 409.

79 Aspects of peace and harmony in the character of Venus will be discussed in chapter 4.

rite for women may have also been associated with *Cloacina*. Both men and women sought her help in the sphere of love and sex, but the proliferation of statues of her image in Late Republican times may have had more to do with male tastes. In the final decades of the Republic, the character of Venus would continue to change as new perceptions of the goddess became important.

Chapter 4

Mother and Protector of Rome: The Politicising of Venus

4.1 Introduction

The Late Republic has been described by John North as ‘marked by the fragmentation of legitimacy’, as different leaders competed for power, leading to the eventual collapse of the Republic itself and its replacement by imperial rule.¹ The suggestion that the approaching demise of the political system was accompanied by religious decline was part of the old paradigm, but the very fact that the struggles of this period were fought out in terms of religion is, according to Orlin, ‘the surest sign of its vitality’.² Political developments did have an impact on religion; membership of priestly colleges became open to election, temples were not just dedicated by individuals, but were strongly associated with their founders, and individuals and families claimed deities as personal protectors.³ At the same time members of the non-elite also began to identify with individual gods, representing themselves on grave-stones with divine attributes.⁴ These developments were crucial to Venus's importance as she was adopted in turn by Sulla, Pompey, and Julius Caesar. Zanker has emphasised the power of the visual language of Augustan imagery to express the values and mythology of the new Empire, and Venus's place in this was not insignificant.⁵

1 2000: 32. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this study. See the summary of different theories in Morstein-Marx and Rosenstein, 2006: 627-35.

2 2007: 65; and see chapter 1 above.

3 Orlin, 2007: 66.

4 Rüpke, 2007: 84.

5 Throughout Zanker: 1988.

4.2 *Venus as Protector*

The practice of groups or associations who looked to a particular god for protection or patronage developed in Rome from the third century.⁶ Though Greek Aphrodite was worshipped in this way, at Rome there is no firm evidence of groups connected to Venus before the time of Augustus. The Romans sought the help of the gods for individual needs, but few votive offerings, inscriptions or examples of domestic cult can be linked to Venus.⁷ There is plenty of evidence that the goddess was honoured in the domestic cult at Pompeii, but this may be explained by Venus's special position there from the time of Sulla.⁸ Though the custom of families honouring specific gods may have its origins in earlier gentilian cults, little is clear before the Late Republic and outside a restricted group of clans.⁹ Coins minted by the Julian family show Venus driving a chariot drawn by two galloping horses, whilst Cupid offers her a crown. Similar representations of the goddess as the bringer of victory, sometimes accompanied by Mars, are found on coins of the Memmian clan (fig.14 below). Though the association with his patron may be one reason why Lucretius later dedicated his poem to the goddess, the coins probably suggested the victory of Rome rather than the victory of the family over opponents, since by now the goddess was being recognised as a protector of the city. Individuals also increasingly vowed and dedicated temples to deities, including Venus though

6 Rüpke, 2007: 57.

7 This is clearly an argument from silence.

8 The evidence is listed in Boyce, 1937. For the view that there was no link between Sulla and Venus at Pompeii, see Balsdon, 1951: 6.

9 Turcan, 2000: 43-4, but see Beard, 1998: 67-68 for a more cautious treatment of the evidence.

(as with the Temple of *Erycina*) they may often have acted in a representative, rather than a personal capacity.



Fig.14. 106 BC coin of Memmian clan with reverse showing Venus driving chariot pulled by horses. Cupid flies above. Obverse depicts Saturn. See similarity to the later coin of Cybele (fig. 12 above).

However in the first century BC a number of individuals claimed the personal patronage of Venus, in what Beard calls, 'a competitive display of ever closer connections with the goddess', and Zanker labels as propaganda.¹⁰ These comments could be taken to suggest cynical manipulation rather than any sincere devotion to Venus as a true protector.¹¹ This was reasonable under the old assumptions about Roman scepticism, but these developments can be better appreciated when it is accepted that 'religion was a fundamental, even immovable, part of (...) thinking'.¹² The actions of Sulla, Pompey and Julius Caesar indicate the importance of the gods in general, and of Venus in

10 Beard, 1998: 144; Zanker, 1988: 44.

11 Though Zanker 1988: 44 perhaps wants to have it both ways when he suggests 'the imagery gradually shaped the protagonists' own view of themselves and affected their behaviour'.

12 Davies, 2004: 3.

particular, as her characterisation as a protector of the city and bringer of victory gave her a new significance in Rome.¹³

In 84-83 BC Sulla had a coin minted which depicted Venus next to his name (fig.15).¹⁴ The words *imper(ium) iterum* on the obverse most probably refer to Sulla's victories at Cilicia and Chaeronea. Appian describes how he celebrated the second by erecting two trophies dedicated to Ares, Nike and Aphrodite, whom he believed had brought him success (*B.Civ.*1.97).¹⁵ The inclusion of Aphrodite seems to relate to an oracle recorded by Appian and a dream associated with Sulla in which he saw the armed goddess leading his army.¹⁶



Fig. 15. Coin of Sulla, 84-83 BC

13 Davies, 2004: 4-6.

14 Santangelo, 2007b: fig. 1.

15 Santangelo, 2007b: 204.

16 Plutarch, *Mar.* 46. records that Sulla's opponent, Marius was also called 'son of Venus',

It was in her character as special protector of the Roman people that Venus was important to Sulla. Santangelo suggests that Sulla employed the theme of Venus's role 'to renegotiate the perception of Rome among the Greeks after the first Mithridatic War'.¹⁷ The oracle required him to send a gift to the shrine of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias in Asia Minor. Once again the Trojan legend was being used for diplomatic reasons, on this occasion to rebuild relations with a region which had supported Rome, and to honour a shrine which had been plundered early in the campaign.¹⁸ Sulla's aim was to show the Greeks that they had the same inheritance as the Romans, both being descended from the goddess, though it seems unlikely, as Santangelo suggests, that it was in her character as the one 'who presided over love and social coexistence' that she was important to Sulla.¹⁹ Rather the elements of victory and protection were predominant.

According to Wissowa, Sulla 'verehrte die Venus insbesondere als Glücksgöttin'.²⁰ Schilling suggests that Sulla became 'un dévot exclusif de Venus'.²¹ However Sulla's personal attitude to Venus is less clear-cut than they suggest. Pausanias and Plutarch charge him with carrying out acts of impiety towards the gods, but he is also recorded engaging with other deities (Paus. 1.20.7; Plut. *Sull.* 12).²² It is likely that he was responsible for the association of the colony at Pompeii with Venus, but in Italy his promotion of the relationship

17 2007a: 230.

18 Santangelo, 2007b: 207-8; Balsdon dates the oracle much earlier, to the start of the campaign rather than its end, 1951: 6.

19 2007b: 213.

20 1902:237.

21 1954:273.

22 For a discussion of Sulla's impiety, see Santangelo, 2007b: 201-2. Other gods mentioned by Plutarch include Apollo: *Sull.* 9.7, 29.11, 34.5.

with the goddess was less obvious than with Aphrodite in the east.²³ In Greece he used the name *Epaphroditus*, but in Rome *Felix*, which he did not link to Venus. Sulla did not establish a temple to the goddess at Rome, and there is no evidence that dedications there to Venus *Felix* relate to him.²⁴ However, though Santangelo concludes that Sulla 'had no such thing as a personal god', the dictator's adoption of the goddess was a significant factor in the growth of her importance at Rome.²⁵ She was now clearly associated with victory and other leaders would seek her protection.

Pompey did just this, claiming Venus's patronage for himself. His supporters issued coins carrying images of the goddess, and he dedicated a shrine to Venus *Victrix* in his theatre in the city in 55 BC.²⁶ Pompey was the first explicitly to link Venus with Hercules, also a god of victory. He also associated her with the other goddesses honoured with shrines at the theatre: the personified qualities *Honos*, *Virtus*, *Victoria* and *Felicitas*.²⁷ Santangelo suggests that Plutarch does not discuss Pompey's attachment to Venus because evidence of his interest in religion was 'neutralised' after his defeat by Caesar.²⁸ Pompey's devotion to the goddess may well have been genuine at a time that Venus was gaining importance at Rome, and she was becoming increasingly recognised as protector of the state.

23 Balsdon 1951; Santangelo 2007b: 199-213; For a contrasting view see Keaveney, 2005: 69.

On Pompeii see Schilling, 1954: 286, Balsdon, 1951: 8 dismisses the connection with Sulla.

24 For example, *CIL*. 6.781-2.

25 2007a: 230.

26 Recorded by Pliny: *NH* 8.20; The coins are illustrated in *RRC* 426/3 and 4, and described by Santangelo, 2007a: 231.

27 The names of the goddesses are recorded in the *Fasti* of the Arval Brethren, quoted by Santangelo, 2007a: 229-210.

28 2007a: 228.

Plutarch describes Pompey's surrender of Venus in the face of Julius Caesar's superior claim on the goddess (*Pomp.* 69).²⁹ As a member of the Julian clan Caesar had drawn attention to this relationship early in his career, at his aunt Julia's funeral oration reminding his audience of the family's descent from Venus, and by 49 BC the title *Venere prognatus* was in use by those who wished to mock him.³⁰

After the defeat of Pompey he showed Venus and Aeneas on his coinage (fig. 16).³¹ Before the battle at Pharsalus he is said to have vowed a temple to Venus *Victrix*, but after his victory, which showed that the goddess had deserted her former protégé, he dedicated the shrine in his forum *Iulium* to Venus *Genetrix*.³² The dedication was later said to have been suggested to Julius Caesar in a dream, though this description of the goddess had already been used by Lucretius.³³ The connection with victory remained strong, however. Coins showed Venus holding Victory in her hand, symbolizing the goddess's part in his success (fig. 17 below).³⁴

29 Santangelo, 2007a: 233 suggests that this story may have originated from Caesar's supporters and was intended to show that Pompey's claim of a relationship with Venus was ill-founded.

30 Suet. *Divus Julius* 6, 49.7; Cic. *Fam.* 8.14.

31 Weinstock, 1971: 85, plate 6, 10-12; Galinsky, 1969: 5 suggests that Caesar's portrayal of Aeneas emphasises warlike features.

32 App. *B.Civ.* 2.10.68. Weinstock, 1971: 84-85; the dedication to *Genetrix* is assumed though contemporary sources do not use the epithet, only later imperial ones. Though Caesar had commenced the development of the forum in 54 BC, the temple was probably hastily constructed after the victory, Ulrich, 1993: 66-71.

33 Servius, 1.720; Lucretius *De Rer.Nat.* line 1.

34 Greek goddesses like Artemis and Demeter were shown holding Nike in a similar pose to that of Venus on Caesar's coins.



Fig.16.
Coin of Julius
Caesar, showing
Venus and
Aeneas
46-44 BC



Fig.17.
Coin of
46-44 BC,
showing Venus
bestowing
Victory on
Caesar

Pliny tells of Julius Caesar dedicating a cuirass made of pearls in the temple (*HN.9.11*). The object represented gratitude for his conquest of Britannia, but the pearls were particularly appropriate for Venus, who is often shown wearing them.³⁵ Pliny records that the cult image made for the temple was by the Greek sculptor Arcesilaus, though its appearance is unknown (*HN. 35.156*). Weinstock suggests the statue may have been of Venus with Cupid on her shoulder or with Victory on her hand, both representations which appeared on coins.³⁶ Schilling provided no evidence for the new design which he believed was created for the

35 Pompey had offered jewellery on the Capitoline, and Plin. *HN.37.11* suggests this was what inspired Caesar. Venus's connection with pearls was probably linked with her birth from the sea, sometimes described or depicted as from a sea shell, for example in Plaut. *Rud.* 704.

36 1971: 86.

temple: 'drapée avec la dignité d'une matrone dans une tunique ajustée par une ceinture et dans un manteau long', but Venus's character and appearance would change in this way after the death of Julius Caesar.³⁷

4.3 Augustan Venus, the Mother of the Empire

Venus's role as protector of Rome had taken a number of different expressions; as ancestor of the whole Roman people, as defender of individuals who claimed to stand for Rome, and finally of Caesar who as a Julian could claim literal descent from the goddess. In the period after Julius Caesar's death and before he gained sole power, Octavian continued the religious allegiance of his adoptive father. Images of Aeneas and Anchises and Venus appeared on his coins, along with portraits of *Pax* and *Victory* (figs. 18 and 19).³⁸ Comparing the coinage of the Late Republic to that of Octavian, Zanker describes the latter as 'models of clarity and simplicity' whose imagery needed little explanation.³⁹



Fig.18.
Coins of Octavian
before 31 BC,
showing Venus and
Octavian

37 1954: 311.

38 Zanker, 1988: 53-4

39 1988: 54.



Fig.19.
Coin of Octavian
before 31 BC,
showing Venus and
Octavian

One coin shows a portrait head of Octavian on the obverse, with an armed and semi-naked Venus on the reverse and another in the series depicts the head of Venus on the obverse, with the figure of Octavian entering battle on the reverse.⁴⁰ Octavian ensured the games which had been vowed by Julius Caesar in honour of the goddess were carried out in 44 BC, during which statues of Caesar and Venus were carried in procession.⁴¹ A comet which appeared on the day of the games was seen as a sign of Caesar's apotheosis, presided over by the goddess, and this *sidus Iulium* became part of the iconography of the divine Julius.⁴² The star as a symbol of divinity had already been associated with Venus on Caesar's own coins.⁴³

Zanker assesses the choice of imagery in this period as 'determined by the struggle for power'.⁴⁴ Whilst Mark Antony associated himself with Dionysius, Octavian looked to Apollo as his patron.⁴⁵ After the victory at Actium it was the

40 Zanker, 1988: 54-5.

41 Described by *Dio Cass.* 47.18.4.

42 Plin. *HN.* 2.93-4; Zanker, 1988: figs. 25, 26,; Schilling, 1954: 319-23.

43 1971: 376.

44 1988: 34, with a detailed discussion 45-52.

45 Antony /Hercules: Coins of Antony showing Hercules: *RRC* 494/2a,494/2b; Plut. *Ant.* 4; Zanker, 1988: fig. 35. Octavian/Apollo: Zanker fig. 39.

gods Victory and Apollo whose images appeared everywhere at Rome.⁴⁶ Perhaps Venus had seemed compromised by her association with Cleopatra, whom Octavian had ridiculed for drunkenness and for her emasculation of Antony.⁴⁷ According to Appian, Julius Caesar had placed a statue of Cleopatra in the temple of Venus *Genetrix* alongside that of the goddess. (App. *B.Civ.* 2.102). Cleopatra had appeared as Aphrodite when she met Antony, and was depicted with her son by Caesar, Caesarion, as Eros in her arms on coins minted in Cyprus (fig.19).⁴⁸ If these actions had negatively affected perceptions of Venus then Octavian sought rectification, placing the spoils of the war in Egypt in the temple of Caesar near to a painting of Venus *Anadyomene*.⁴⁹ In 25 BC he made an offering to the goddess in the Pantheon. The gift of pearls which had reputedly belonged to the Cleopatra herself demonstrated the victory of the dynasty of Venus over the now defeated Egypt. Flory suggests that Octavian's intention was also to demonstrate that such jewellery, though suitable for a goddess, was inappropriate for Roman women.⁵⁰



Fig. 20. Cleopatra depicted as Venus with her son Cupid, perhaps dated to 47 BC to celebrate the birth of Caesarion. Bronze coin minted in Cyprus.

46 Zanker, 1988: 79-82.

47 Plut. *Ant.* 26; Zanker, 1988: 57-8.

48 Plut. *Ant.* 26. See Goudchaux, 2001: 137.

49 Plin. *HN* 9.21; Kleiner, 1996: 38.

50 1988: 503.

Venus received renewed emphasis in Augustus' introduction of the cult of Mars *Ultor*, claiming both gods as the protectors and ancestors of the Julian dynasty, despite their adulterous relationship in Greek myth. The images of the divine couple were not only transformed in line with Augustan morality but became representations of a new imperial mythology.⁵¹ Augustus was combining two stories of the origins of Rome, the Trojan cycle and the legend of Romulus.⁵² The images of Venus before Actium contrasted with the way she was now depicted on the pediment of the new temple, 'dignified in a long garment and holding a sceptre'.⁵³ Ovid describes her role in Julius Caesar's apotheosis after her unsuccessful attempt to avert his assassination:

Life-giving Venus set herself down in the heart of the Senate, though no-one could see her, and caught the souls of her Caesar up as it passed from his body. She did not allow its component atoms to be dispersed into air, but carried it straight as it was to the stars in the heavens.

(*Metam.* 15.843-7 trans. Raeburn)

Venus's role as mother of a new dynasty was shown on an altar of ca. 7 BC, presiding over the apotheosis of Caesar, in the presence of Augustus, and protecting his two sons Gaius and Lucius.⁵⁴ Statues of Augustus often showed him accompanied by Venus or Cupid, reinforcing his divine parentage (fig.21).

51 Zanker 1988: 195. Pollitt, 1978: 167 suggests that Livia's dedication of a statue of Cupid in the temple of Venus Capitolina (Suet. *Caligula* 7) may have been intended as a statement of her continued allegiance to the Julian dynasty.

52 Zanker 1988: 195.

53 Zanker 1988: 196, fig. 150.

54 Zanker, 1988: fig. 177.



Fig.21. Statue of Augustus with Cupid. Marble copy of a bronze original, after 20 BC

Early in his rule Augustus had banned craftsmen's associations, but by the end of his reign many were re-established as religious cults dedicated to the emperor. Often their shrines included altars to personifications such as *Pax* or *Concordia*, honouring the emperor, or to personal gods like Venus now given the epithet *Augustus* or *Augusta*.⁵⁵ Vows made at these shrines were for the safety of the emperor and of Rome.⁵⁶

55 Zanker, 1988: 134, fig. 112.

56 Zanker, 1988: 80.



Fig. 22. Gem with Empress Livia depicted as Venus, holding a portrait head of Tiberius 14 – 37 AD.

Livia was voted sacrosanctity by Octavian in 35 BC, and statues of her and Octavia were placed in the temple of *Venus Genetrix*. The empress had been adopted into the Julian family by a clause in Augustus's will, and therefore her association with the goddess was quite appropriate.⁵⁷ In a new development, female members of the imperial family began to be depicted as Venus, associating the women with the character of the now-respectable goddess (fig 22).⁵⁸ Matheson further argues that the representations were designed to show that these high-status women 'embodied the powers of Venus, imitating familiar cult images of the goddess'.⁵⁹ She suggests that such images may not have been acceptable at first to popular opinion and existed initially only on private objects. However they soon began to appear on public monuments and temples, some initiated by the empress herself. Her depiction in the style of Venus, like the placing of her statue in the temple was intended to associate the

57 Matheson 1996: 184. Kleiner, 1996: 38. The latter's suggestion that there was an implicit contrast between Venus and Livia, to the detriment of the former, is unconvincing.

58 Zanker, 1988: fig. 184; Schilling, 1954: plate 25.

59 Matheson, 1996: 182.

goddess with Livia, both representing the beauty and virtue of the ideal Roman woman.⁶⁰

A relief on the Ara Pacis has a figure whose identity has been much disputed, but may represent Venus (fig.23).⁶¹ The garment slipping off her shoulder associates her with other representations of the goddess, and the two babies on



Fig. 23. Relief on the Ara Pacis 13-9 BC

her lap are reminiscent of Turan. Other features identified by Galinsky as attributes of Aphrodite are the billowing mantle, the swan, and the children pulling at the drapery on her breasts.⁶² Though Zanker prefers to identify her with *Pax*, he suggests that this figure does not relate to traditional mythology but expresses and combines the associations, powers and attributes relating to fertility (both human and natural) which were so important for Augustan

60 Kleiner, 1996: 37. Matheson, 1996: 184, Livia was also portrayed as Ceres, but probably only after her death.

61 Zanker, 1988: 172-177; other candidates are Tellus, Roma and Pax.

62 For a detailed discussion of the relief and its meaning see Galinsky, 1969: 203-224.

values.⁶³ If this is Venus then it illustrates her changed character by the principate. The fertility of nature and childbirth had not been particularly strongly represented aspects of her character earlier in the Republic, but here they appear related to the strength and peace established at Rome by Augustus. Close to this figure on the monument appears Livia, the ideal Roman woman, who demonstrates the same virtues of motherhood and modesty for which Venus was now to be celebrated.⁶⁴

Fig 24. Portrait of Maria
Furnilla as Venus,
79-81 AD



In the first century AD images of less important women began to appear on funerary monuments in the guise of Venus, portraying the ideal wife, or the virtuous daughter, and as a means of praising the qualities of fertility and beauty

63 1990: 174.

64 Kleiner, 1996: 38. Representations of empresses as Venus as continued into the third century, see Matheson 1996: 186-8.

(fig 24 above).⁶⁵ Standard types of Venus, often portrayed naked, were carved in large numbers for portrait heads to be added to order.⁶⁶ D'Ambra has argued that in these images the deceased are shown 'in the immortal physique of the goddess'.⁶⁷ The beauty and erotic attraction of Venus were re-told in terms of virtue and fertility.⁶⁸ Such images idealize the person depicted, associating her with the character and attributes of the goddess. There is no information about how such images were viewed by women, though they appear to have been applied to daughters as well as to wives, so mothers may have been involved in the choice of image.⁶⁹ Important here is the fact that such qualities were recognised to be associated with Venus, and that the goddess had become one with whom respectable Roman matrons might wish to be identified. Women were associated with other goddesses, but the frequency with which Venus appears surely relates to her growth in importance during the Late Republic.⁷⁰

4.4 Venus in the Augustan Poets

Feeney has stressed how Classical poets could present different characters of the same divinity within a single work. 'The sheer variety of possible ways of figuring or imagining divinity is an important part of the (literary) tradition from the beginning'.⁷¹ Despite Jenkyns's view that this makes poetry inadmissible evidence in the search for information about Roman religion, some of the

65 Kleiner and Matheson, 1996: fig. 55, D'Ambra, 1996: figs. 92-3. Such depictions became popular in the Flavian and Trajanic periods.

66 Kleiner, 1996: 36.

67 D'Ambra, 1996: 219.

68 D'Ambra, 1996 :221.

69 D'Ambra, 1996 :222. For a discussion of how later Christian writers responded to such images, see Nasrallah 2010: Part 2.

70 According to Kleiner and Matheson, 2000: 12, identification with Venus was more common than other goddesses.

71 1998: 100.

writers of the Augustan period will be considered briefly here, since they demonstrate how the poets held in tension different perceptions of Venus.⁷² In the fourth book of the *Odes* Horace's Venus displays a number of different characters; she is the 'fierce mother of pretty Cupids' who will be represented in a marble statue, worshipped by young men and women, the pleasing goddess who wins over Jupiter on behalf of Aeneas, the deity whose gifts of beauty make a young man cruel and powerful, but who has deserted the elderly Lyce, and finally the nurturing mother of Aeneas, and of his descendant Augustus (*Odes* 4.1.5 trans. Shepherd).⁷³ The goddess remained an important figure for Augustus, for her associations with the ancestry both of the dead Julius Caesar and of Aeneas. This dual significance was expressed in Virgil's *Aeneid*, commissioned by the *princeps*, which gave the goddess prominence not just in the history of the Julian family, but portrayed her part in the eventual triumph of Rome itself. The importance of the goddess is highlighted early in the poem, when Jupiter says to her: 'Spare your fears, Cytherean. You have your people's destiny still, and it shall not be disturbed'. (*Aen.* 1.257-8 trans. Jackson Knight).

Later he speaks of the future:

And then shall be born, of proud descent from Troy, one Caesar,
to bound his lordship by Ocean's outer stream and his fame by
the starry sky, a Julius, bearing a name inherited from Iulus his
great ancestor. One day you shall welcome to Heaven with
peace in your heart this Julius, coming weighted with the spoils
of the Orient; and he shall also be invoked to listen to prayers.
Then shall our furious centuries lay down their warring arms
and grow kind.

(*Aen.* 1. 286-90 trans. Jackson Knight)

72 2013: 211.

73 Also 4.6. 21-4, 4.10.1, 4.15.32. Discussed by Feeney, 1998: 102-3. Havelock, 2007: 117-25 traces the connections between the widespread statues of the naked Venus/Aphrodite in Rome and the poetry of the love elegists.

Virgil's Aeneid demonstrates her traditional character as goddess of love when she decides to send Cupid to Dido 'to enflame her with a distraction of love, and entwine the fire of it about her very bones', and protects Helen from the fury of Aeneas (*Aen.* 1.657-659, 2.588-600). Virgil's Venus, though a mother, demonstrates few recognizably maternal qualities compared to the emotion of the relationship between Thetis and Achilles in the *Iliad*.⁷⁴ In her first encounter with Aeneas, she cuts him short and then turns away before revealing her true identity, making Aeneas accuse her of cruelty in preventing their embrace.⁷⁵ However Leach suggests that Virgil's Venus models an appropriate duty of *cura* for her son.⁷⁶ As she becomes *Genetrix*, 'Venus has also been made a recognizably Roman mother'.⁷⁷

Two further examples illustrate the way the poets depicted Venus. Merriam suggests that in the writings of the first century love elegist Propertius, the identification of the goddess with the Augustan regime affects how she is portrayed, and that his view of the goddess shows 'some resentment of her power over the poet'.⁷⁸ Venus is a frightening figure who causes suffering just as Augustus does. She is 'vengeful, jealous and dangerous', and personally directed against the poet.⁷⁹ However, Venus only seems to have these negative characteristics when the poet is unsuccessful in love. Plautus' Calidorus, many years before, had complained of the tyranny of Venus, so this

74 *Il.* 1.453-515; 18.428-61; *Aen.* 1. 227-53, 8.374-86, discussed in Leach, 1997: 354-358.

75 McCarter 2012: 364 admits the oddness of the scene but considers it indicates the disparity between the two rather than Venus' cruelty.

76 1997: 365-68.

77 Leach, 1997: 371.

78 2006: 107.

79 Merriam 2006: 12-13, 47, 56 suggests that Propertius criticises Venus more over time, as opposition to Augustus becomes more risky. For a dissenting view, see Cloud, 1993: 113-38.

view of the goddess is not as new as Merriam suggests (*Pseud.* 1.1). Ovid's attitudes to Augustus have been interpreted as supportive, subversive and much in between.⁸⁰ He addresses the goddess, whom he sees as his particular patron:

I asked, have I ever left your standards?
You are my theme, my eternal opus.
We played the right games in my youth without offence;
Now our horses trample a greater plain.

(*Fast.* 4.7-10 trans. A.J. Boyle and R.D. Woodard)

Johnson argues that in the *Ars Armatoria* the poet juxtaposes her roles as erotic goddess and Augustan ancestor in order to indicate 'the inherent contradictions between Augustus' moral order and Venus' mythological history', and the same possibility was noted in his description of the *Verticordia*.⁸¹

4.5 Venus, Goddess of War?

The Etruscan interest in harmony was discussed in chapter two. Peaceful co-existence is quite a different matter to erotic love, but Turan appears to have combined the two aspects. Johnson suggests that Ovid describes Venus as 'an aggressive imperialist' because of her association with Augustus.⁸² The idea that during the Late Republic the Roman goddess of love was transformed into a more warlike deity will now be considered. As Pironti points out, Aphrodite was never a goddess of love in the sense of 'tenderness, fondness or reciprocity'.⁸³ The goddess, presiding over the forces of union, was not always

80 Merriam 2006:84. For a summary see Nugent, 1990: 239-57.

81 Johnson, 1996: 132. See chapter 3 above.

82 1996: 132.

83 2010: 118.

peaceful.⁸⁴ There is therefore no need to adopt Flemberg's view that warlike aspects of Venus's character came from near-eastern goddesses of war such as Ishtar and Astarte.⁸⁵ Budin argues that though Aphrodite was a warrior goddess in Sparta, in the Hellenistic period she gained more widely epithets relating to leading and campaigning.⁸⁶ However it was the circumstances of Venus *Erycina's* arrival in Rome, followed by the chaotic events of the last years of the Republic, and her connection with Aeneas, which gave prominence to more military associations, and connections with victory and led to the development of the goddess's characterization as Venus *Victrix*.

Yet Venus was not unequivocally a goddess of war, even in Augustan times. The image of the Greek Aphrodite with the arms of Ares, referring originally to his disarming seduction, had already been used by Lucretius to refer to the bringing of peace:

Make the mad machinery of war drift off to sleep.
For only you can favour mortal men with peace, since Mars,
Mighty in Arms, who oversees the wicked works of wars,
Conquered by Love's everlasting wound, so often lies
Upon your lap.

(*De Rer Nat.* 1.30-34)

Virgil's Venus in the *Aeneid* does not fight in battle (and when she does intervene she herself is injured), she gives Aeneas his armour in order that he can wage war, but above all so that he will be protected. It is Cupid, rather than Venus, who shoots arrows. Octavian associated her on his coinage with both *Pax* and *Victoria*. An Augustan relief of Mars and Venus, where Cupid passes

84 Pironti, 2005: 81.

85 1995: 114.

86 2010: 82.

the sword of Mars to his mother may sum up the tension between these two characters for Venus, the same tension expressed by the poets. Here however the harmonious and the martial natures are integrated in the service of Augustus who through military force has created peace for Rome (fig. 25).⁸⁷



Fig. 25. Augustan relief showing Venus Genetrix, Mars Ultor and an Augustan prince.

4.6 Summary

This chapter has analysed the significance of Venus during the final years of the Republic and under the rule of Augustus. In this period the goddess's connections with victory were invoked by a number of politically important individuals. This may have been encouraged by her already existing popularity with ordinary Romans. Whether caused by cynical opportunism or true devotion on the part of their leaders, this attention increased her significance as protector

87 Zanker 1998: 196-7, suggests this relief is similar to the cult statues which stood in the Temple of Mars. Ramsby, 2007:52: 'Venus beside Mars represents the healing of Rome's recent wounds and moral failings'.

and mother of Rome. Just as 'a work of art may be invested with new meanings by the propagandist', as political leaders claimed the goddess's special protection, new understandings of Venus were developed.⁸⁸

The motherhood of Venus was connected with her role as ancestor of the Romans but over time and under the influence of particular events this motherhood became restricted to one family, and eventually to one individual, Augustus. One can only speculate if her adoption by individual leaders and the emphasis on victory during the Late Republic had any effect on her popularity. The same question arises with the widespread appearance of the goddess in the city as incorporated into imperial iconography. Galinsky suggests that the adoption of the goddess by Augustus actually increased her cult's popularity.⁸⁹ However, the new prominence given to Venus by this representation may have affected the way she was perceived by ordinary Romans, her role as emperor's patron potentially lessening their sense of personal engagement with her.⁹⁰ This could be the explanation for the small number of associations which sought her patronage, and for the dearth of personal inscriptions to the goddess at Rome.⁹¹ The transformation of Venus into an ideal Roman matron, with its moral agenda and encouragement of child-bearing, may not have been popular with all women.

88 Ross, 2002: 25; Orlin, 2010: 202.

89 1969: 186-7.

90 Galinsky 1969: 190 comments on the 'deluge of artefacts with the Aeneas theme'.

91 A few inscriptions do describe her as kind and gentle, for example: *CIL* 10.7257; 6.783.

Though Venus was portrayed respectably clothed on public monuments as *Genetrix*, it was the naked statues of the goddess, familiar to Romans, and expressing her beauty and sexual attraction, which would continue to be used as a model for funerary portraits. The popularity of these images to depict and commemorate the deceased indicate that this character was still viewed positively, even when other perceptions of her existed in parallel.

Conclusions: Recognising Venus:

In the first book of the *Aeneid*, Venus meets her son outside the walls of Carthage, but hides her identity from him. Only as she turns away does he recognize her, decrying her act of concealment (*Aen* 1. 405-9).¹

This study has discussed the different ways the Romans 'recognised' Venus, how the goddess was represented in myth, image and cult, and what caused changes to the way she was viewed. The relation between character and the engagement of the Romans has been explored, particularly in relation to the gender of both deity and mortals, and it has been noted that some apparently contradictory understandings of the goddess co-existed at Rome. These contrasting emphases include love and war, morality and adultery, Roman and foreign, themes which art, literature, and the goddess's cult itself, held in tension.

The origins of Venus are obscure, and likely to remain so. From at least the fourth century she was identified with Aphrodite. Though as an Italic-Roman deity she may initially have had connections with the fertility of the earth, little trace of this remained after her increasingly close association with the Greek goddess, and the arrival in Rome of many other deities who functioned in this sphere. The influence of Aphrodite's character was important, but the Roman tendency to 'adopt and adapt' meant that Venus did not merely 'become' Aphrodite, but was given a distinct Roman identity. In the same way as the Greek goddess, Venus was closely identified with love, seduction and beauty,

¹ The episode is discussed by Reckford, 1995: 1-2.

ideas which the Romans saw expressed in poetry and art, illustrating the stories from myth and depicting her as the deity who presided over sexual attraction. Her identification with Turan influenced her character both in her chthonic aspect and in relation to peace and harmony. Isis was identified with Aphrodite and through the Greek goddess may have affected the way Venus was perceived, though the two remained distinct. The presence of so many goddesses at Rome who shared similar functions and competencies in the area of reproduction may have lessened the importance of these for Venus. Cybele's role as protector and Mother-ancestor mirrored that of Venus in many ways. Paired with Victory, depicted driving a chariot (though pulled by lions rather than horses), closely identified with the founding legends of Rome, this goddess too was featured in monuments and poetry in the Augustan age and was identified with the empress. It seems likely that these features influenced representations of Venus, whose own character as protector and mother-ancestor had been recognised in the bringing of *Erycina* to the city only a few years before the arrival of Cybele. In the Augustan period imperial women were identified with both goddesses.

The relation between the character of Venus and engagement with her, especially by women, has been explored. Though the goddess was probably petitioned by women on personal matters, the claim that Venus might have been 'a goddess for women' has appeared not to be straightforward. As goddess of love, she was equally invoked by men as well as women.² Unlike the other goddesses discussed, she was not strongly associated with the

2 Admittedly we have little evidence from female writers. See Schultz 2006a: passim for a rejection of the idea that there were specific women's deities.

physical needs of women. Though earlier representations of her, like the statue of Knidos, had emphasized her divine beauty, later statues represented her as a sexually attractive *human* female. It is not possible to tell whether these images were particularly pleasing to women; it seems more likely that they expressed male ideals of feminine beauty.

The description of different goddesses as mother has shown that the title could be understood in various ways. Sometimes this character was expressed in cults which particularly met the needs of women either in childbirth or seeking children. At others motherhood developed into a wider emphasis on the fertility of the earth, but at Rome these spheres were assigned to other deities than Venus (at least before the time of Augustus).³ Though it is possible that the early Roman Venus was connected with the growth of crops, apart from the specific association with grapes at the *Vinalia*, little understanding of this remained in the goddess of the Republic. Venus was definitely seen as responsible for the power of sexual attraction, but ironically where she did appear to relate specifically to Roman women in this area, her cult was used to control the expression of female sexuality through the promotion of chastity, and later to support the moral agenda of government and encourage childbearing.

The visual imagery of the Augustan age transformed Venus into the representative ideal woman, ignoring her adultery in myth, and associated Livia with the goddess, bestowing her powers and character on the empress. This trend would reach its full expression in the later use of Venus portraits to

3 *Fast* 2.435-52; Kraemer, 1992: 69.

commemorate deceased women of more humble status. The effect of such images on women is impossible to tell, or if they were as popular with women as with the men who presumably generally chose them.

The re-shaping of the characters of Venus was related to internal events at Rome, especially in the Late Republic. This is evident in her growing association with victory and war, and her adoption as patron goddess by political leaders and Rome itself. Her rise in importance was closely connected to Aeneas' role as founder of Rome. That she survived the negative effect of her connections with Cleopatra, even after Actium, shows the strength of her position by this stage, and her popularity with ordinary Romans. Her description as *Genetrix* expressed ideas of the heritage of a people rather than her 'motherly' nature.

Augustine reports Varro's comment that 'it is of no purpose to know the name of a physician and what he looks like, if you do not know that he is a physician' (August. *De civ. D.* 4.22 trans. Bettenson). The Roman writer lists the names of so many gods in order that people would know who to petition with particular needs. The character of each god, and the way this was portrayed and described were important precisely because they indicated the nature of the powers possessed by each deity. The Romans asked for the help of Venus in matters of love and sex, since this had long been her traditional sphere of influence. However the goddess's character and responsibilities changed and developed over time, increasingly being recognized as important for the safety of Rome.

Far from being a matter of indifference to the Romans, it was the nature of her different characters which caused the Romans to engage with Venus, as a deity powerful in matters of love, responsible for personal or natural fertility, representative of beauty or as the mighty ancestor-protector of the Romans.

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Abbreviations used in the text

RRC Roman Republican Coins in the British Museum. E. Ghey and I. Leins (eds). Online research catalogue
www.britishmuseum.org/research/publications/online_research_catalogues/rrc/roman_republican_coins

CIL Corpus inscriptionum latinarum. Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of sciences and Humanities. Online database
www.cil.bbaw.de/cil_en/dateien/datenbank_eng.php

TDAR A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome. L. Richardson (ed.). 1992. Baltimore :John Hopkins University Press.

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