

2. VENUS. 4th Century BC to 3rd Century AD

Mother of Aeneas

The roots of the veneration of Aphrodite in the western Mediterranean reach far into the past, and the epicenter of her cult was located in Eryx on the western coast of Sicily.¹ The temple was at the peak of the mountain Eryx, which towered over the city of the same name, today's Erice. According to one version of the local myth, the founder of the city of Eryx was the son of Aphrodite.² Inhabitants of Eryx, the Elymians, completely adopted Greek culture centuries before the Romans, proof of which is seen on a tetradrachma with Aphrodite of ca. 410-400 BC.³ On the backside of the coin, Aphrodite is sitting on a stool with a dove on her hand, and Eros stands before her. The goddess is shown in the manner she began to be depicted in Athens around the mid-5th century BC. She sits in a relaxed pose, with her left hand hanging downward and her legs crossed. The relaxed atmosphere is strengthened by Eros, who is reaching for the dove that Aphrodite holds in her raised right hand. The dove in Aphrodite's hand is perhaps linked to the local legend concerning doves that continually follow their mistress.⁴ Venus's temple in Eryx has not been preserved, but we do know that the Romans held it in high regard, which is evidenced by the coin minted in late republican Rome.⁵ The appearance of the Greek-style temple with columns around a triangular tympanon is only schematically denoted; however, the image on the coin captures its placement on top of a hill over the city with defensive walls depicted below it.

On the Apennine peninsula, echoes of Greek depictions of Aphrodite first appeared among the Etruscans, who knew her as Turan. A wholly unique work is the small marble statue of a naked woman, probably Turan, from the end of the 6th century BC, which was created for the Etruscan temple (28).⁶ The woman was decorated with golden jewelry including a diadem, earrings and necklace (however, only holes are left where the decorations once were). The goddess had one hand lifted towards her breast and the other towards her crotch, on which the genitals were indicated in three-dimensional detail. The statue in Orvieto was evidently carved after Near Eastern models by a sculptor from eastern Greece. The bronze vessel for perfume, which in accord with its function was given the shape of Aphrodite's/ Turan's head, was

¹ Thucydides, 6.2 and 46. Similarly: Polybius, *Histories*, 1.55. Cf. Cathrin Schmitt, "Die Göttin auf dem Berg Eryx. Astarte - Aphrodite - Venus," in *Phönizische, griechische und römische Gottheiten im historischen Wandel* eds. Linda-Marie Günther and Bärbel Morstadt (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 109-136.

² Diodorus Siculus, 4.83.1-4.

³ Delivorrias, *Aphrodite*, no. 851.

⁴ Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 1.15.

⁵ See Eleanor Ghey and Ian Leins, eds., *A catalogue of the Roman Republican Coins in the British Museum, with Descriptions and Chronology Based on M. H. Crawford, Roman Republican Coinage (1974)* (London: The British Museum, 2010), no. 424.1.

⁶ Cf. Antonio Corso, "A Goddess of Cycladic Marble from Etruria," in *Paria Lithos: Parian quarries, marble and workshops of sculpture*, ed. Demetrius Umberto Schilardi (Athens: Cyclades Institute of Archaeology, 2000), 559-566.

produced in Etruria or some Italian city in Latium around 300 BC.⁷ The goddess has a necklace, earrings and a diadem with two doves on her head.



28. Aphrodite/ Turan, marble statuette, h. c. 75 cm, the end of the 6th century BC.

The Etruscans transmitted Greek ideas to the Praenestians and all other cities in Latium, including Rome. Proof of this is found in the Praenestian mirror from Orbetello from the early 4th century BC, which depicts the Greek myth of Aphrodite in Greek style.⁸ Praeneste (today's Palestrina), where the mirror was produced, belonged to the Romans in the 5th century BC and Latin was spoken there; however, the mirror was produced in a local Etruscan workshop. The mixing of cultures is evident in the

⁷ Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 98.682.

⁸ Musée du Louvre Br 1728. Cf. Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (London: Routledge, 1998), 95-126.

inscribed names of the gods – on the right is “PROSPENAI,” which is a combination of the Etruscan name “Phersipnai” and the Latin “Proserpina”. On the left is “VENOS,” the first proof of the Latin name of the Roman counterpart to Greek Aphrodite. The significance of the name is similar to the Greek Aphrodite, and is linked to the word “venustas” (beauty), which also had sexual undertones.⁹ On the mirror, Venus is depicted as she mourns with her face veiled. Proserpina is pointing to a closed chest containing a small Adonis, over whom the goddesses are arguing. Zeus, depicted above the chest, has passed his judgment – the beautiful Adonis is to spend a third of the year with Venus on earth, a third of the year with Proserpina in the underworld, and a third of the year by himself. However, Adonis gave his own third to Venus, and thus remained above the ground for two thirds of the year, during which the earth blossomed as Aphrodite rejoiced.

In ancient Rome, Venus also guarded good morals similarly to Aphrodite Apostrophia (She Who Turns Away). In Thebes, there were three archaic wooden statues of Aphrodite *so very ancient that they are actually said to be votive offerings of Harmonia ... They call the first Heavenly, the second Common, and the third the Rejecter (Apostrophia). Harmonia gave to Aphrodite the surname Heavenly to signify a love pure and free from bodily lust; that of Common, to denote sexual intercourse; the third that of Rejecter, that mankind might reject unlawful passion and sinful acts.*¹⁰ The Roman form of this Rejecter was Venus Verticordia, which literally translates to the “Changer of Hearts”: *so that minds of unmarried girls and mature women would easily change from lust to modesty.*¹¹ Already at the end of the 3rd century BC, a certain Sulpicia, wife of consul Q. Fulvius Flaccus dedicated a statue to Venus in Rome. It was evidently necessary to correct immoral Roman girls and married women at the time, and the virtuous Sulpicia, who was their exact opposite, was chosen for the task.¹² The Temple of Venus Verticordia was built in Rome in 114 BC, and is linked to a tragic tale. A Roman eques was returning home with his daughter, who was still a virgin, when the girl was killed by lightning and the fall stripped her of her clothing, revealing her genitals. The event was explained as a divine signal linked to immoral acts that three Roman Vestal Virgins had committed with the men of the cavalry. The stability of the Roman state was considered to depend on the virginity of the Vestals, and sins were therefore thoroughly investigated and harshly punished. In order to appease the gods, the Temple of Venus Verticordia was built.¹³

Both the dedication of the statue and foundation of the temple were motivated by efforts to carry out a moral renaissance, and the underlying situation in both cases was immorality. Stories that preceded the dedication of the statue and founding of the temple to Venus Verticordia shared themes of boundaries being crossed. In the first, matrons behaved like prostitutes, and in the second the Vestal Virgins did the same. Venus Verticordia was not called upon to uproot prostitution and immorality, but to reinstate the *status quo*.¹⁴ Matrons, virgins, and virtue, along with prostitutes and sin, were integral parts of Roman reality. However, these social and moral categories

⁹ See Erika Simon, *Die Götter der Römer* (Munich: Hirmer, 1990), 214, note 6.

¹⁰ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 9.16.3-4. English translation W.H.S.Jones.

¹¹ Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta Memorabilia*, 8.15.12. English translation H. J. Walker.

¹² Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 7.35.

¹³ Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.155-162.

¹⁴ Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins*, 106.

needed to be clearly and mutually differentiated and their hierarchy had to be reinstated again and again. The role of Venus in Rome was similar to the role of Aphrodite in Greece – she linked what was essentially different without suppressing this diversity.

The Temple of Venus Obsequens (i.e. the obedient, respectful of the rule) allegedly built in 295 BC was probably the oldest temple in Rome devoted to this goddess. The temple was built by Quintus Fabius Gurgus, who thanks to this goddess was victorious over the Samnites during Roman power struggles over central and southern Italy. Venus “obediently” granted his request, and therefore Gurgus *assessed a fine of money against a number of married women who were convicted before the people of adultery, and with this money erected the temple of Venus which is near the circus.*¹⁵ The fact that the temple was built from fines for adultery does not give us any specific information on the reasons why the cult of Venus was established in Rome. Nevertheless, it is certain that the goddess had something to do with sexuality and morality in this temple. We must bear in mind that it is not clear whether this Venus was identical to Greek Aphrodite. However, everything quickly changed, as Roman society radically transformed and adopted Greek culture in the 3rd – 2nd centuries BC.

Venus was closely allied to the Roman state, which initiated her cult during the Punic Wars in connection to the catastrophic defeats that seriously threatened its existence. During the exceptional measures that were meant to secure the favor of the gods in 217 BC, two temples were built next to one another on the Roman Capitoline Hill – the temple of Venus of Eryx and Mens, the goddess of reason. In “Fasti,” Ovid wrote that the Romans had conquered Sicilian Eryx at the end of the 3rd century BC and took the local cult of Venus back with them to Rome.¹⁶ The temple that was built in Rome in Porta Collina in 181 was considered to be a copy of the Venus of Eryx (her statue, temple or both).¹⁷ The colossal Greek marble head from the classical epoch, which was found near the Roman temple, may have come from within it.¹⁸ If this was the case, it may have been an import from Eryx, where the statue of Aphrodite was created earlier than the oldest statue of this goddess in Greece.

The preserved head of the Venus statue from her temple in Porta Colina was originally richly decorated with metal jewelry, which is seen in the drilled holes that allowed them to be fixed on (29). The role of golden jewelry embedded into the stone sculptures during rituals is attested by a passage in Ovid’s “Fasti,” in which he describes rituals of Venus’s festival celebrated in Rome on April 1st. *Duly do ye worship the goddess, ye Latin mothers and brides ... Take off the golden necklaces from the marble neck of the goddess; take off her gauds; the goddess must be washed from top to toe. Then dry her neck and restore to it her golden necklaces.*¹⁹ It was the greatest Roman festival of Venus and was celebrated by chaste Roman women and prostitutes alike. Ovid described the ritual in detail, as he was allowed to take part in it. The ritual acts were carried out exclusively by women, but men were not forbidden from attending. The intimate and intoxicatingly pleasant identification with Venus was a specific trait of the veneration

¹⁵ Livy, *The History of Rome*, 10.31. English translation B. O. Foster.

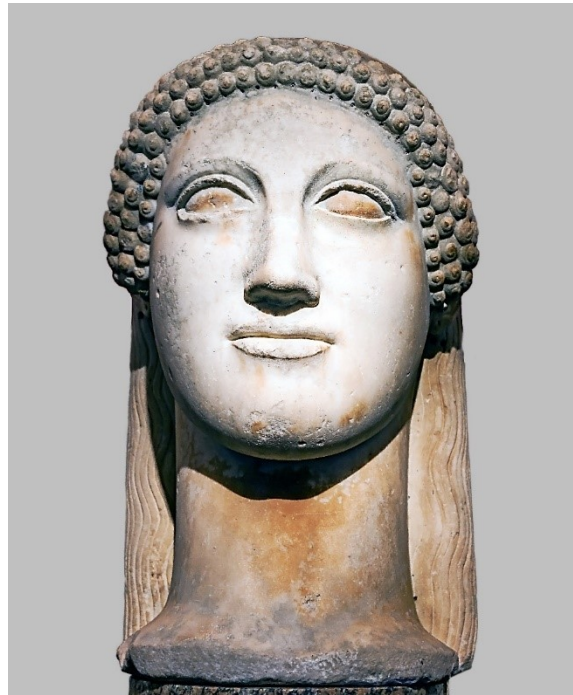
¹⁶ Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.871-876. English translation J. G. Frazer.

¹⁷ Strabo, *Geography*, 6.2.6.

¹⁸ Cf. Simon, *Die Götter der Römer*, 306 (269).

¹⁹ Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.133-138.

of this goddess. The ritual consisted of three parts, the first two of which were perfectly symmetrical. The rituals began with washing, beautification and the wreathing statues of Venus, followed by female bathing. Finally, excited by the rituals and warmed by their bath, the women cool down while imbibing ritual drink. Every Roman woman became Venus on the 1st of April. Ovid calls on the celebrating women to decorate themselves with myrtle, which the bathing Venus used to cover her nakedness, and to drink an intoxicating drink that Venus drank before her wedding.²⁰ Absolute identification with the venerated deity and those who worshiped her is unprecedented among other members of the Roman pantheon.



29. Venus, colossal head of a Western Greek marble statue, h. 83 cm, 480-470 BC.

In Roman baths, Venus was venerated as *Fortuna Virilis* (literally “Manly Fortune”), which was not a separate goddess as scholars had hitherto assumed. *Fortuna Virilis* seemed too explicitly erotic to the prudish 19th century and so they divided her from the Roman Venus, although it was only one of the names under which the Romans worshiped her.²¹ Ovid described Venus’s function as *Fortuna Virilis* in detail – the goddess helped women enchant men just as she had captivated her own lovers.²² For these means, she used a score of auxiliary tools and methods, like her magic belt with amulets of love; she also bathed, decorated herself and used perfume. The important fact is that Ovid tells of *Fortuna Virilis* while describing Venus’s festival on April 1st, when Roman women embodied Venus. The fact that Venus is called *Fortuna Virilis* or “Manly” notes a change in perspective – the goddess is not viewed through the eyes of her worshipers, but primarily by men, who are intended to see their fortune in a woman.

²⁰ Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.134-144.

²¹ Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins*, 109-110.

²² Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.145-150.

Ovid stresses that Venus was venerated in Rome primarily in April because nature began to awaken from winter.²³ Another Venus holiday was celebrated at the end of this month. During the Venus of Eryx festival, which Roman prostitutes celebrated on April 23, the link between alcoholic intoxication and eroticism was emphasized. It was not only a festival of Venus, but also of wine, and Ovid invites prostitutes to visit the Temple of Venus of Eryx in Porta Collina.²⁴ Ovid's text explicitly claims that the Roman Venus of Eryx was a form of the Greek Aphrodite Pandemos. The connection between Venus and wine emphasized by Ovid is expressed for instance in a relief on a Roman sarcophagus of the 3rd century.²⁵ The naked Venus, characterized by a diadem, small Amors and a goose, is hugging Bacchus, who is offering her grapes, which can be understood as an illustration of Terence's verse: *When Ceres and when Liber fail, Venus is cold.*²⁶ The Roman duo of Venus and Bacchus (Liber), which followed on in the close link between Aphrodite and Dionysus, was later elaborated in Renaissance Italy.

For the Romans, Venus was principally the mother of Aeneas, the progenitor of the Roman nation, and thus her cult was a part of state ideology presumably from the beginning. The oldest evidence comes from the end of the 3rd century BC, when Venus was venerated in the aforementioned temple on the Capitoline Hill in Rome; also, between the tables that were publicly displayed for the three-day feast of the gods, there was also a table designated for Mars and Venus.²⁷ This gives proof of the fact that, at the time, these two deities were understood as the parents of the founders of Rome; Venus was the mother of Aeneas and Mars was the father of Romulus.²⁸ The Roman myth of the Trojan origin of the Romans was created in interaction with the Greeks and was promoted in connection with the Roman occupation of the Mediterranean in the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC. This Roman myth was created gradually via the transformation of the Greek tale of Aphrodite's mortal son, Aeneas, whom she gave birth to and whose father was Anchises from the dynasty of Trojan rulers.²⁹ Aeneas's expedition into Italian territory is mentioned for the first time in Greek sources as early as the 5th century BC.³⁰

Venus as the progenitress of the Romans is depicted on a Chalcedon cameo from the early empire.³¹ The half-naked goddess characterized by her magical belt, the *kestos himas*, is sitting on a rock on the bank of the Tiber, which is indicated by the amphora on the ground. She is embracing her grandson, Iulus, the son of Aeneas and

²³ Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.115-129.

²⁴ Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.862-872.

²⁵ Antalya, Archeological Museum 2003/172.

²⁶ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 2.23.60. English translation H. Rackham. Cf. Shelley Hales, "Aphrodite and Dionysus: Greek Role Models for Roman Homes?" *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome. Supplementary Volumes* 7 (2008): 235-255.

²⁷ Livy, *The History of Rome*, 22.9-10.

²⁸ Simon, *Die Götter der Römer*, 227.

²⁹ Homer, *Iliad*, 2.819-821; 20.307-308; *Homeric Hymn* 5.196-197.

³⁰ Hellanikos fr. 84; Damastes fr. 3. Cf. Robert L. Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001-2013), 1: 187 and 2: 564. Cf. also Jenny Wallenstein, "Interactive Aphrodite: Greek Responses to the Idea of Aphrodite as Ancestress of the Romans," in *Brill's Companion to Aphrodite*, ed. Amy C. Smith and Sadie Pickup (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 269-284.

³¹ Firenze, Museo archeologico 14436. Cf. Erika Simon, "Venus als Grossmutter," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Römische Abteilung* 105 (1998): 305-314 (Simon 1998b)..

the founder of the Roman nation.³² Venus and Iulus are looking at an eagle, the emblem of the Roman Empire, and behind it is Iulus's grandfather, Anchises. Both Anchises and Iulus are characterized as Trojans (Anchises with sleeves on his clothing and Iulus with a shield in the shape of a pelta). Identification of the Roman state with Venus is demonstrated in scenes showing the half-naked or naked Venus caressing an eagle. On the Roman carnelian gem of the 1st century BC – 1st century, the benevolent result of this connection is shown: in the background is a cornucopia.³³ The eagle may be larger than the goddess in order to make it completely clear that it is not one of the animals that Aphrodite controls, but Jupiter's sacred eagle, a symbol of the Roman state.³⁴

The adoption of the Greek Aphrodite in Rome resulted from historical circumstances that also fundamentally influenced the sculptural form of the Roman Venus. In the 3rd – 2nd century BC, Romans clashed with the main power of the southwestern Mediterranean, the Punic Empire, and simultaneously with Greeks in the east. They conquered the Punic capital city of Carthage in Northern Africa in 146 BC and Greek Corinth in the same year, becoming the dominant Mediterranean power. They began to import Greek artwork from the eastern Mediterranean in large number and also copy it. Over the two centuries, when the existence of the Romans was under imminent threat, Romans built their own identity in which openness to external influences was a key element, allowing for their political expansion. The Romans did not view this openness as passive acceptance, but rather as the reformation of all external stimuli for the needs of the Roman state.³⁵ The cult of Aphrodite, which the Romans identified with Venus, was also adapted to fit their needs despite adopting Greek visual types for her depiction, which they usually only modified or elaborated upon.

Romans and Greek Statues of Aphrodite

The vast majority of statues of Venus preserved in our museums and galleries was created in Rome from the 1st century BC to the 3rd century.³⁶ However, the models for these statues were produced in Greece from the 4th to 1st century BC. And this must make us pause for thought. The Romans could be exceptionally open to outside stimuli. However, how is it possible that these sculptural types survived the fall of the Roman Empire? How is it possible that they can repeatedly enter new and often completely different religious, political and social contexts? How is it possible that they are an essential part of Western art culture even today?

We must seek the explanation in the Greek artistic revolution of which these sculptural types were the product. This artistic revolution was made possible by a fundamental transformation in understanding the relationship between the artwork

³² Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.628.

³³ St. Petersburg, State Ermitage GP-21422.

³⁴ Roman sardonyx cameo, 1st century. St. Petersburg, State Ermitage GP-1240.

³⁵ For Roman reception of Greek art cf. Michael Squire, "Reception: The Legacy of Greek Sculpture," in *Handbook of Greek Sculpture*, ed. Olga Palagia (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 725–767.

³⁶ See Evamaria Schmidt, "Venus" in: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* VIII. 1 (Zurich: Artemis, 1997), 192–230..

and what it depicted. While in the 5th century BC deities were differentiated from the statues that depicted them, a no less prominent process took place in the following century of differentiation between statues and deities. Already at the end of the 5th century BC, Athenians began to return for political reasons to famous buildings, statues and paintings from their past.³⁷ The original references of these works, which had been canonized by tradition, may have been partially overshadowed by what they meant for the following generations, for whom these works became a part of their cultural heritage, which legitimized the present. Taking a work out of its original religious, political and social context was a basic prerequisite for the birth of what we call classical art. It is the art of the past to which later generations return, not because of what it depicts, but because of the associations that it evokes in the audience, which returns to this art as a generally binding model. For Aphrodite's statue, which became a part of classical art, it is no longer important only *who* is depicted, but also *how*: the form of depiction has also become the bearer of meaning.

In the Greek imagination, statues of deities in the 4th century BC began to live their own separate lives, which to a large degree were independent of the deities. In ancient Rome, the cult of famous Greek statues from the classical epoch, i.e. from a half-millennium earlier, became an integral part of culture and also of social and political life.³⁸ Thanks to this fact, depictions of Aphrodite ceased to be exclusively linked to religious rituals and also became a means of self-representation of members of the political elite, who publicly exhibited them and also used them to decorate their private residences. Owning famous originals or their copies heightened social prestige in Rome, which explains the existence of a vast number of Roman versions of famous Greek statues and variations of them made from different materials and in different sizes. The separation of the statue from the deity it depicts was also crucial for the reception of ancient statues in late antique Christian society, medieval Europe or modern civilisation.

In this context, it should again be stressed that the Romans never mechanically adopted Greek ideas and artistic forms, which is also evidenced by the form of the cult statues of Venus. We, unfortunately, know very little about the statues of Venus venerated in Roman temples, but we can draw certain conclusions about them. We have no indications of Romans placing statues of half-naked or naked Venuses in small shrines as is known from eastern Greece from the middle of the 4th century BC. An exception was the Greek-speaking southern-Italian Campania, which had belonged to Rome since 340 BC. Venus was venerated there in the gardens dedicated to her, which housed small shrines with statues of the naked goddess.³⁹ On the Campanian gem of the 1st century, she is shown styling her hair in the small shrine; the moon crescent in the tympanon of the shrine identifies the goddess as Heavenly Venus (30).⁴⁰ On the Campanian terracotta relief of the same century, she is tying a strophion (31).⁴¹ Next to

³⁷ Cf. Andrew Stewart, *Classical Greece and the Birth of Western Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 191-227.

³⁸ Cf. Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1988).

³⁹ See Cathrin Schmitt, *Aphrodite in Unteritalien und auf Sizilien: Untersuchungen zu ihren Kulturen und Heiligtümern* (Heidelberg: Verlag Archäologie und Geschichte, 2016).

⁴⁰ Berlin, Staatliche Museen FG 3006. Cf. Schmidt, *Venus*, no. 117.

⁴¹ Paris, Musée du Louvre CA 1832. Cf. Schmidt, *Venus*, no. 153b.

Venus is a column with clothing thrown over it; the background of the scene is made up of vegetation with flowers, and there is also a flower at the center of the tympanon.



- 30 (left). Aphrodite in a shrine, Campanian carnelian gem, 1st century.
 31 (right). Aphrodite in a shrine, Campanian terracotta statuette, 1st century.

Campanian Pompeii was closely linked to Venus, its name – Colonia Veneria Cornelia Pompeianorum – indicated the city’s affiliation with the goddess.⁴² In 80 BC, Sulla transformed this Campanian city into a Roman colony bearing this name. Sulla also founded a temple to Venus on a prominent site on the Via Marina.⁴³ The temple’s precinct was in close proximity to the city center and adjoined the rear side of the basilica in the forum; at the same time, it was on the edge of the city, as the temple was placed facing south away from the city. The location on the Via Marina was also convenient, as the goddess was venerated in the city as the Venus of Pompeii, who was primarily the goddess of seafaring. The close link between Venus, fertility and nature was evoked by a “sacred grove” of trees lining the colonnades surrounding the temple from three sides. No cult Pompeian statues of Venus have survived, but the Venus of Pompeii was depicted in paintings as a queen veiled in a magnificent robe with a scepter in her hand; she wore a diadem or crown in the shape of the city’s walls. Venus may be holding an olive or myrtle branch and a ship’s rudder with its larger end upwards. Amor, the counterpart of Greek Eros, stands next to her mother on a pedestal and, like her, he is also depicted clothed (32). Ovid explains Venus’s patronage over seafaring, which is symbolized by the rudder, both because she came from the sea and because in April, which is her month, the season of seafaring begins.⁴⁴ Venus of Pompeii can also be standing on the bow of the boat, which is being carried by elephants, symbols of victory and luck, which seafarers needed more than anyone

⁴² Cf. Carla Brain, “Venus in Pompeian Domestic Space: Decoration and Context,” in *Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Rome 2016*. ed. Roberta Cascino et al. (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2017), pp. 51-66.

⁴³ Cf. Maureen Carroll, “Exploring the Sanctuary of Venus and its Sacred Grove: Politics, Cult and Identity in Roman Pompeii,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 78 (2010): 63-106, 347-351.

⁴⁴ Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.131-132.

else (33). In the second half of the 1st century BC, Venus began to be depicted in Pompeii differently than we know her from the wall paintings described above. Her clothing was much simpler and lighter – it had no attributes with the exception of a small Eros, who is not standing next to her but perched on her shoulder. However, she was still shown fully dressed.



32 (left). Venus of Pompeii, wall painting from Pompeii (VI.9.6, Casa dei Dioscuri), before 79.
33 (right). Venus of Pompeii, wall painting from Pompeii (IX.7.6, Verecunda House), before 79.

Statues of Venus in Roman temples also depicted her completely clothed, including a veil draped over her head. The Roman wall painting from around 10 BC may have been an echo of a famous statue.⁴⁵ Venus sits on a decorated throne with a flower in her hand, and before her stands the naked Amor with a scepter. The intimacy of their relationship is indicated only by the fact that Amor is standing on Venus's footstool and their legs are touching. Behind Venus stands Peitho, who is concealing the goddess's head in a veil (or is taking it off). The painting comes from the Villa Farnesina, the decoration of which was typical for Augustus's era, which programmatically returned to classical Greece. The wall painting evokes Athenian art of the end of the 5th century BC in its technique (painting on a white background) and theme.

A renaissance in Venus's cult in Rome took place during the philhellenic emperor Hadrian, who in 136-137 had the Temple of Roma Aeterna (Eternal Rome) and Venus Felix (Bringer of Good Fortune) built.⁴⁶ This largest temple of ancient Rome stood between the Roman Forum and Colosseum, and its ruins are visible today next to the Basilica of Maxentius. An echo of the statue in this temple may be the so-called Dea Barberini, a wall painting from the epoch of Constantine the Great (34).⁴⁷ The painting depicts fully clothed Venus or the personification of Rome (a helmet on her head and a decorated throne are 18th century additions). She is wearing golden

⁴⁵ Roma, Museo Nazionale 1128. Cf. Schmidt, *Venus*, no. 229.

⁴⁶ Cf. Claudia Del Monti, ed., *Il tempio di Venere e Roma nella storia* (Milan: Electa, 2010).

⁴⁷ Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano 124506. Cf. Stephanus Mols, "La cosiddetta Dea Barberini smascherata," in *Atti del X Congresso Internazionale dell'AIPMA (Association Internationale pour la Peinture Murale Antique)*, Napoli 17-21 Settembre 2007, ed. Irene Bragantini (Naples: Università degli Studi di Napoli, 2010), 347-353.

clothing with red stripes, and over it is a cloak. On her shoulder sits Amor and Psyche. In her lowered right hand, Venus holds a scepter; in her raised left hand is a small figure of Victoria holding a globe, a symbol of world supremacy. Another possible echo is the backside of Hadrian's gold coin.⁴⁸ On it, the depicted Venus is holding Amor in her outstretched hand and a scepter in the other. She sits on a chair, and the hand that holds the scepter is placed on the backrest in the way that we know from the Greek sculptural type from the third quarter of the 5th century BC.



34. Venus / Roma enthroned, mural from the Lateran Palace, Constantine the Great period?

So, where did the hundreds of surviving Roman statues of naked Venus, which are only a fraction of their original state, originally stand? The above mentioned Roman festival on the 1st of April explains why statues of naked Venus were a standard part of the decoration of Roman baths.⁴⁹ The baths had a unique position in this society; they were not just for hygiene but where Romans preferably spent all their leisure time. We find a statue of Venus in this original context on a gilded bronze mirror from the early 2nd century.⁵⁰ In the center is a vessel for water on a long stand, which had been used by the Greeks for bathing. On the left is a woman standing at a well with a rope in her hand, drawing up water. Another vessel for water is depicted at her foot. A woman stands at the water basin and pours perfumed oil into it from a container in her hand. At her feet is an askos, a vessel with a handle used for storing aromatic substances. In the background on a small column is a statue of the naked Venus, who is styling her hair. Another place where we can assume the existence of statues of naked Venus is a private Roman residence. However, wherever they were

⁴⁸ See Richard Abdy and Peter Mittag, eds., *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. II - part 3 from AD 117-138 Hadrian (London: Spink, 2019), no. 2366.

⁴⁹ See Katherine M. D. Dunbabin, "Baiaurum grata voluptas: Pleasures and Dangers of the Baths," *Papers of the British School in Rome* 57 (1989): 16 and 24.

⁵⁰ Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 1978.158.

displayed in Rome, these representations' status was similar to that in Greece. These statues were always firmly connected to the goddess they represented. This is shown by the fact that the surviving Roman statues of naked Venus preserved the Greek taboo on the depiction of female genitalia.

Some prominent Romans had a special relationship with Venus, so it would not be surprising if they also had a statue of her in their residence, in a domestic sanctuary. Roman generals operating in the eastern Greek Mediterranean undoubtedly heightened their authority in the eyes of the Greeks by identifying with the Olympian deities. The first significant Roman commander and politician to choose Aphrodite as his protector was Lucius Cornelius Sulla.⁵¹ According to Plutarch, he did not espouse the Roman Venus, but Greek Aphrodite in order to gain the favor of the Greeks.⁵² On the frontside of a coin that Sulla had minted during his military campaign in the eastern Mediterranean in 84-83 BC, Venus wears a diadem and Amor holds a palm branch, a symbol of victory.⁵³ The center on the backside depicts ritual objects, a vessel and a staff (*capis* and *lituus*), and war trophies on both sides, a reference to victory at Chaeronea in 86 BC and at Orchomenus in the following year. Both ritual objects were symbols of the augur, which Sulla became in 82 BC. Thus, the coin does not depict the contemporary situation, but Sulla's political program, in which his divine protector Aphrodite played an important role.⁵⁴

Pompeius followed on in Sulla's tradition of venerating Aphrodite/Venus, and built the first theater building in Rome in 55 BC, a part of which included the Temple of Venus Victrix (the Victorious), which is the first record of this epithet.⁵⁵ The temple was located in line with the theater building above a semi-circular auditorium. The ground plan of the temple was adapted to this auditorium, giving it a semi-circular apse at the rear. We can only speculate about which type of Venus statue was placed in it.⁵⁶ The leading Romans, who derived their origins directly from Venus, followed the Hellenistic monarchs. In this connection we may also mention that Demetrius I Poliorcetes was presented as the son of Aphrodite and Poseidon in a hymn performed in 291/290 BC.⁵⁷

A whole score of elite Roman families claimed they were of Trojan origin and descended from Aeneas and Venus, the most famous of which was the gens Julia. In a funeral speech for his deceased aunt in 68 BC, Caesar proclaimed at a celebration in the Roman Forum: *The family of my aunt Julia on her father's side is akin to immortal Gods ... the Julii, the family of which ours is a branch, [goes back] to Venus.*⁵⁸ The direct connection between Caesar and Venus Victrix is attested by a report from Cassius that

⁵¹ Cf. Volker Fadinger, "Sulla als Imperator Felix und Epaphroditos (= Liebling der Aphrodite)," in *Widerstand - Anpassung - Integration: Die griechische Staatenwelt und Rom. Festschrift für Jürgen Deininger zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Norbert Ehrhardt and Linda-Marie Günther (Stuttgart: Steiner 2002), 155-188.

⁵² Plutarch, *Sulla*, 34.4.

⁵³ Ghey and Leins, *A catalogue of the Roman Republican Coins*, no. 359.2.

⁵⁴ Plutarch, *Sulla*, 19, cf. Appian, *Civil Wars*, 1, 97.

⁵⁵ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 8.20.

⁵⁶ Cf., for example, John Pollini, "The Dart Aphrodite: A New Replica of the Arles Aphrodite Type the Cult Image of Venus Victrix in Pompey's Theater at Rome, and Venusian Ideology and Politics in the Late Republic-Early Principate," *Latomus* 55 no. 4, (Octobre - December 1996): 757-785.

⁵⁷ Cf. John Russell Holton, "Demetrios Poliorketes, Son of Poseidon and Aphrodite: Cosmic and Memorial Significance in the Athenian Ithyphalic Hymn," *Mnemosyne* 67, no. 3 (2014): 370-390.

⁵⁸ Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, 1.6. English translation J. C. Rolfe.

he wore a ring with an engraved image of the goddess and selected her name as a call to arms in the most dangerous situations.⁵⁹ Venus appears very often on Caesar's coins. The denarius minted on the Iberian Peninsula in 46-45 BC shows Venus's head with a diadem, and the bun of her hair has a star symbol.⁶⁰ A small Amor is on Venus's shoulder and in front of him there is a lituus, an attribute of pontifex maximus. Caesar kept the office from 63 BC until his death.

During his triumph in 46 BC, Caesar had the Temple of Venus Genetrix (the Mother) built in the Roman Forum.⁶¹ According to Pliny, the prominent Roman sculptor Arcesilaus created the Venus Genetrix statue in Caesar's forum.⁶² We have no further information on the appearance of the sculpture, but it may have had a shield at its feet and Victoria on its arm.⁶³ Another possibility for its appearance is found on later coins with the inscription of Venus Genetrix, on which the goddess is lifting up the edge of her cloak to veil herself. On one version of these depictions she holds an apple, a symbol of her victory in the contest of beauty with Juno and Minerva, but also a reference to the patronage of the goddess over nature and its prosperity.⁶⁴ The gesture on the coins would correspond to the Greek sculptural type, the most famous of which is the Louvre-Naples Aphrodite type from the end of the 5th century BC, which may have been adapted for the Venus Genetrix. However, the depiction of dressed Venus on a throne, which we find on gems, may have also been an echo of the Venus Genetrix statue.⁶⁵ The cosmic character of the goddess is emphasized in this composition. There are two busts with sunbeam diadems, a sun and a moon; stars are indicated in the background on the right and left. The goddess is holding a wreath with a butterfly, a symbol of the human soul, and a reference to the role of Venus in the afterlife. We will return to this topic again below.

In the 40s BC, we encounter a depiction of Venus and a small Amor nestling on her shoulder as a symbol of her motherhood. This pictorial type had a long tradition in Greece. We find Eros sitting on Aphrodite's shoulder in Greek art as early as the 5th century BC.⁶⁶ In Greek monumental sculpture, the motif appears for the first time around 100 BC on the group statue with Pan from Delos. The aforementioned Venus Genetrix may also have had Amor on her shoulder. Echoes of this were perhaps the wall paintings from Pompeii, one of which was contemporary with the foundation of the Roman temple of Venus Genetrix, and may have represented Cleopatra with Caesarion as the fully dressed Venus Genetrix with Amor on her shoulder.⁶⁷ The goddess is decorated with gold jewelry and walks out of the opened doors, perhaps from the Temple of Venus Genetrix. She is wearing a translucent tunic and purple cloak, and has a translucent veil over her head, on which she wears a gold diadem

⁵⁹ Cassius Dio, *Historiae Romanae*, 43.43.3.

⁶⁰ Ghey and Leins, *A catalogue of the Roman Republican Coins*, no. 468.2.

⁶¹ Cassius Dio, *Historiae Romanae*, 43.22.

⁶² Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 35, 156.

⁶³ Cf. Pablo Aparicio Resco, "La statua di culto di Venus Genetrix nel Forum Iulium di Roma," *Bollettino della Società Friulana di Archeologia* 17, no. 1 (February 2013): 1-17.

⁶⁴ Abdy and Mittag, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, no. 2576.

⁶⁵ Roman carnelian of the late Republic or early Empire (München, Staatliche Münzsammlung A 2048).

⁶⁶ E.g. Delivorrias, *Aphrodite*, no. 1271.

⁶⁷ House of Marcus Fabius Rufus (VII.16.17-22), in situ. See Susan Walker, "Cleopatra in Pompeii?" *Papers of the British School at Rome* 76 (2008): 35-46.

with a red jewel. Caesarion was born in 46 BC, a year before the foundation of the Roman temple, and Octavianus had him murdered in 30 BC. This may have been the reason why this high-quality Pompeiian fresco of 50-40 BC was not destroyed, but hidden behind a fake wall.

We also find Venus with Amor on her shoulder on the Roman coin from 46 BC. Venus holds scales in one hand and a spear in the other, the scales are a symbol of judiciary power and the spear symbolizes the enforcement of the law.⁶⁸ Amor may have been depicted in this position to emphasize the fact that the crime being judged by Venus is sexual in nature. Amor initiated the act that has taken place, but now it is exclusively up to Venus to judge the consequences and make atonements. A similar motif is found on a marble relief from the Temple of the Nymphs, which was a part of Emperor Tiberius's villa in Capri.⁶⁹ Venus is characterized by her diadem and revealed shoulder. Behind her bare shoulder is the small figure of Amor, who is embracing Venus with his right hand around her neck; in his left hand he holds a fan which he uses to cool her.



35. Venus Triumphant, denarius, inscription CAESAR IMPER(ATOR) on the obverse, Venus Triumphant on the reverse, 44 BC.

The adaptation of the Greek sculptural type of armed Venus in Rome was primarily the work of Julius Caesar, as the iconography of Venus Victrix was created during his reign. The backside of the denarius minted in the beginning of the year 44 BC shows the likeness of Caesar; on the back is Venus with a shield (35).⁷⁰ Her majestic nature is emphasized by a scepter and the fact that the shield upon which she leans her elbow leans is resting on a globe, a symbol of world supremacy. The goddess of victory stands on Venus's outstretched hand. Victoria is depicted in long clothing that flutters behind her as she has just landed on Venus's hand. Caesar's Venus distinctly differs from Hellenistic Aphrodites in the fact that she is dressed. She wears clothing ending above her knees, which was typical for female hunters and warriors – one of her breasts is bare, but is covered by the scepter. Her proportions are boyish; she has narrow hips, practically no breasts, and her head is bowed to indicate her chastity.

⁶⁸ Ghey and Leins, *A catalogue of the Roman Republican Coins*, no. 463.1.

⁶⁹ Sperlonga, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. Cf. Schmidt, *Venus*, no. 257.

⁷⁰ Ghey and Leins, *A catalogue of the Roman Republican Coins*, no. 480.17. Cf. Michael Speidel, "Venus Victrix – Roman and Oriental," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2, 17, 4, (1984), 2225-2238.

In 27 BC, Octavianus Augustus became the absolute ruler of Rome. By the time he died in 14, Rome had been completely transformed thanks to his lengthy reign – the republic was transformed into an empire, Roman culture was systematically Hellenized and the veneration of Venus became a part of the emperor's cult. Augustus realized the massive significance of the visual element of political publicity. He differed from his political opponents, who stylized themselves as Greek monarchs and identified with the Hellenistic canon, by clearly giving preference to the artistic canon of the 5th to 4th century BC. Augustus's characteristic link between politics, visuality and an emphasis on religion and spiritual values is attested by the aforementioned display of Apelles's famous Greek painting of Aphrodite Anadyomene from the 4th century BC in Caesar's temple in the center of Rome. By acquiring the painting, which at the time evidently had an aura comparable to Leonardo's Mona Lisa today, and displaying it in Rome, Augustus announced his promotion of classical Greek art and his respect for Venus. His placement of the painting pointed to the divine origin of the Iulus clan of which he was a member.

Given the strong republican tradition, Augustus presented his unique position very carefully. He referred to his divinity exclusively indirectly by denoting himself as the son of the deified Caesar. During Augustus's reign, the myth of Venus as the progenitress of the Romans took on its definitive form – Aeneas not only became a forefather of the emperor, but also his model as the divine son and embodiment of virtue and piety. We know the myth from a number of authors of Augustus's era, who gave a sophisticated form to the concept of the first Roman emperor.⁷¹ In his pro-Roman revision of the traditional myths, Virgil also attributed the foundation of the Temple of Venus on the peak of Eryx to the Trojan Aeneas, who settled in Latium and became the progenitor of the Romans.⁷²

Augustus initiated not only a new literary form of the Roman myth of Venus, but also her new artistic conception. The aureus and denarius minted during the Triumvirate around 42 BC show a half-naked Venus from behind as she looks into a mirror on the backsides of the coins. The goddess is wearing a cloak wrapped around her legs and stands at a column.⁷³ This concept is distinctly different from the depiction of Venus on Caesar's coins – the goddess is half-naked and active, and the effect of reality is strengthened by the fact that she is depicted in perspective view. During the reign of Augustus, this image type was perfected; the goddess is leaning on a column with her left elbow, which evokes the boundary-post at a sports track; it is a target that the goddess has reached, and so she can now rest (36). As we have shown in the previous chapter, the rest implied by the relaxed pose was one of the essential attributes of the sculptural types of Greek Aphrodite.

⁷¹ Livy, *The History of Rome*, 1.1-2; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 13, 623-627; 14, 607-608; Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.257-279, 286-287. Cf. Rachel Meredith Kousser, "Augustan Aphrodite: The Allure of Greek Art in Roman Visual Culture," in *Brill's Companion to Aphrodite*, ed. Amy S. Smith and Sadie Pickup (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 287-306.

⁷² Virgil, *Aeneid*, 5.22, 759-761.

⁷³ Ghey and Leins, *A catalogue of the Roman Republican Coins*, 494/34.



36. Armed Venus, backside of a denarus of Augustus minted in 32-29 BC.

A shield leans against the column, denoting that this target was a military victory. The goddess wields a scepter or spear in her left hand and holds a helmet or sword in her outstretched right hand. Weapons are used to characterize Venus as the goddess who brings victory – the “Venus Victrix.” Thus, on a later coin of Julia Domna, victory is explicitly indicated in the accompanying inscription and, in place of weapons, she now holds the symbols of completed victory – an apple and a palm branch.⁷⁴ However, Venus may have taken the weapons away from Mars, and so she is simultaneously “Venus Genetrix,” the progenitress of the Roman nation who on the contrary brings peace and prosperity. There is no conflict in this dual role – in Roman political imagery, military victory means death to the defeated, but brings peace to the whole world.

We know this visual type from Hellenistic art and find a similarly depicted half-naked Aphrodite taking off or putting on her shield on the gem made by Gelon mentioned above (26). The goddess is bowed in an unsteady position caused by the weight of the shield that she holds before her. The composition is based on two symmetrically placed arches evoking contrasting ideas – the bulge of the metal shield is placed in contrast to the graceful curve of the goddess’s naked back. Augustus’s Venus abandoned this typically Hellenistic playfulness and endorsed the tradition of classical Greek art. The goddess has a differentiated free and supporting leg, but her poise is firm, just like her moral principles.

Not only Venus’s pose was inspired by classical Greece, but also the depiction’s unmistakably educational dimension; the goddess is active, but her movement is restrained and she is pursuing a clear goal. The movement that is denoted by her striding legs is neutralized by the fact that the goddess is leaning her left elbow on the column. Venus is naked, but no one can see her genitals or breasts. She is displaying her naked body only in order to prove how perfectly she can control herself and those that are looking at her. She is showing her nakedness, but only to make it clear that her goal is in no way to offend or evoke undesired ideas. According to the generally held opinion in Rome, Greek nakedness was linked to the homosexuality cultivated in gymnasia there, and nothing of the sort existed in Roman cities. Ennius, who lived in

⁷⁴ Harold Mattingly, Carol Humphrey Vivian Sutherland, and Robert Andrew Glendinning Carson, eds., *The Roman imperial coinage*, vol. 4: *Pertinax - Uranius Antonius* (London: Spink, 1986), no. 536, p. 165.

Rome at the beginning of the 2nd century BC, claimed that taking off one's clothing was the first step to sin.⁷⁵



37. Armed Venus with Amors, Roman mirror from gilded bronze from Beirut, 2nd century.

Augustus's Venus type that we know only from coins reproduced a model from monumental art, but we have no further knowledge of it. In any case, it took firm root in Roman visual culture and can be found for instance also on Roman bronze mirrors from the 1st to 2nd century (37). On them, the erotic character of the depiction is emphasized by the small Amors who surround the goddess, and the Priapi standing by on pedestals. On one mirror, there is a phallus above the goddess.⁷⁶ Augustus's Venus not only brings victory and peace, but also encourages sexual activity of married couples and heightens birth rate.⁷⁷ In 18 - 9 BC, Augustus issued a whole series of laws, the aim of which was to prevent adultery, support marriage and increase the number of children from the upper classes. The goal was to ensure a sufficient number of candidates for functions in the army and administration of the state. Single and childless Romans were also penalized and received only half of the inheritance that would otherwise belong to them. Material offers were aimed at heightening the birth rate - a woman who bore a child after being released from slavery was freed from her obligations to those who released her; after having three children, she was wholly free and did not need a guardian.

Monumental structures initiated by Augustus were all created in the Corinthian order, the evolution of which culminated in this period. The Corinthian order differs from the other alternatives, i.e. the Doric and Ionic, in the vegetative ornaments inspired by acanthus leaves. Thanks to this, it could become an attribute of Venus, fertility and Augustus's golden era.⁷⁸ The Corinthian Temple of Mars Ultor (the Avenger) in Augustus's forum in the center of Rome was completed in 2 BC and was

⁷⁵ Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, 4.70.

⁷⁶ Cf. Demetrios Michaelides, "A Decorated Mirror from Nea Paphos," in *Engendering Aphrodite. Women and Society in Ancient Cyprus* ed. Diane Bolger and Nancy Serwint (Boston MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2002), 351-363.

⁷⁷ Cf. Carol U. Merriam, *Love and Propaganda: Augustan Venus and the Latin Love Elegists* (Brussels: Éditions Latomus, 2006).

⁷⁸ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, 1.5.

one of the largest temples of its time. It was furnished with an apse just like Caesar's aforementioned Temple of Venus Genetrix, which adopted this element from the temple in Pompeius's theater in Rome that was also mentioned previously.⁷⁹ On the tympanon of the Temple of Mars Ultor, Mars was evidently located in the center; to the left of him was the clothed Venus with Amor on her shoulder, a diadem on her head and scepter in her hand. Her posture corresponds to Greek models from the mid-5th century BC. We know the sculptural decorations of the tympanon from a relief that was found in 1583 in Rome and embedded into the Villa Medici's façade (38). We find a similarly depicted Mars and Venus duo on a relief from Ravenna of 41-54, where Augustus is depicted as the half-naked Mars, while Livia takes the form of a clothed Venus.⁸⁰



38. Relief reproducing the tympanon of the Temple of Mars Ultor (detail), Rome, Claudius epoch.

The relief from Carthage of 41-54 is considered to be an echo of the sculptural group in the Temple of Mars Ultor or in the Pantheon.⁸¹ Venus, dressed in a seemingly transparent peplos, has one shoulder bared. She has a distinct contrapposto and is leaning against a column with her left leg over her right as we know from the Greek sculptural type from the end of the 5th century BC, most likely created by Alcamenes. Over the peplos she wears a cloak, the end of which is held by Amor. Mars stood in the middle and on the right was the emperor or member of the imperial family. Amor is hiding from Mars under Venus's cloak and handing the goddess the sword which he has stolen from the god of war. The scene is thus a celebration of the peace that Venus's reign will bring.⁸² Augustus adopted the Greek sculptural type of naked Aphrodite for Roman use while preserving the traditional Roman form of Venus statues placed in temples. She appeared here, as a rule, fully clothed. In ancient Rome, the naked Venus was primarily associated with the private sphere, but this in no way meant that it was removed from the religious context. Portraits and funerary statues prove this beyond any doubt.

⁷⁹ Cf. Simon, *Die Götter der Römer*, 225-226.

⁸⁰ Ravenna, Museum San Vitale.

⁸¹ Alger, Musée National des Antiquités. Mars Ultor: Zanker, *The Power of Images*, 196-197; Pantheon: Edmund Thomas, "The Cult Statues of the Pantheon," *Journal of Roman Studies* 107 (2017): 146-212.

⁸² Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, 1.29-37.

Promise of Rebirth

In the Roman Empire, prominent Roman women had themselves depicted as naked Venus.⁸³ This new direction was initiated by empresses, beginning with the first, Augustus's wife. Greek Hellenistic queens may have served as a model, the most famous of which was Arsinoe II (316-270 BC), the wife and sister of the founder of the Ptolemaic Empire, who let herself be venerated as Aphrodite.⁸⁴ On the fragmented turquoise cameo of 14-37, Livia is depicted as Venus the Mother with one shoulder bare, just like Aphrodite was depicted from the second half of the 5th century BC.⁸⁵ In her hand she holds a sculptural bust of her deceased husband or one of her sons.⁸⁶ Antonia Minor, the mother of Emperor Claudius, also had herself depicted as Venus the Mother with a small Amor leaning on her shoulder. This statue was found in the imperial villa in Punta Epitaffio.⁸⁷

The sculptural type of the Capitoline or Cnidian Venuses were used most often as models for Roman women depicted as naked Venuses.⁸⁸ In the past, these statues were commonly interpreted as the depiction of various empresses; however, not a single case exists that could prove this theory. Empresses set the tone in portrait art, and therefore it is difficult to differentiate the portrait of an empress from a portrait of a common Roman woman likening herself to her. The oldest preserved statue of this type depicts an older woman with wrinkles under her eyes and over her mouth, which is unattractive and wide. She has an aquiline nose and a grave expression on her face (39).⁸⁹ However, her body corresponds to the Capitoline Venus type, and was originally accompanied by Amor, of which only fragments by her feet have been preserved. A somewhat younger sculpture of an older woman also closely adheres to the way in which Venuses were depicted, including the bracelet on the left arm, a dolphin at the feet and a gesture of the right hand, which points to the nipple.⁹⁰ Another variation on the theme of the Cnidian goddess was the portrait statue of

⁸³ Cf. Sadie Pickup, "Venus in the Mirror: Roman Matrons in the Guise of a Goddess, the Reception for the Aphrodite of Cnidus," *Visual Past* 2, (2015): 137-154; Stephanus Mols, "From Phidias to Constantine. The Portrait Historié in Classical Antiquity," in *Example or Alter Ego? Aspects of the Portrait Historié in Western Art from Antiquity to the Present* ed. Volker Manuth et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 39-47.

⁸⁴ Cf., for example, Agnieszka Fulińska, "Divae Potentes Cypri: Remarks on the Cult of the Ptolemaic Queens as Aphrodite," *Eos* 99 (2012): 47-73.

⁸⁵ Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 99.109.

⁸⁶ See Elizabeth Bartman, *Portraits of Livia: Imagining the Imperial Woman in Augustan Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 83.

⁸⁷ Museo Archeologico dei Campi Flegrei, Baia 222738. Cf. Maria Friedrich, "Eine Kaiserin im Gewand der Aphrodite? Die Antonia Minor mit Kind," in *Ansichtssache: Antike Skulpturengruppen im Raum*, eds. Jens-Arne Dickmann and Ralf von den Hoff (Freiburg: Albrecht-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, 2017), 94-99.

⁸⁸ Cf., for example, Christopher H. Hallett, *The Roman Nude: Heroic Portrait Statuary 200 B.C. – A.D. 300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 199, 217-222; Annetta Alexandridis, "Mimesis oder Metapher? Aphroditekörper im römischen Frauenporträt," in *Formkonstanz und Bedeutungswandel*, ed. Dietrich Boschung and Ludwig Jäger (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014), 67-102; Mols, *From Phidias to Constantine*, 45-47.

⁸⁹ See Hallett, *The Roman Nude*, 199.

⁹⁰ Napoli, Museo archeologico nazionale 6291. Cf. Tomasz Mikocki, *Sub specie deae: Les impératrices et princesses romaines assimilées à des déesse. Étude iconologique* (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1995), 191, no. 273.

Venus with a vessel of water next to her on the ground with clothing thrown over it, an attribute of the goddess.⁹¹ The ideal body of the young Venus contrasts with the portrait of a mature woman with sharp features and a sophisticated wig with peacock feathers on the forehead. Portrait sculptures with the body of the naked Venus were limited to the Roman elite living in Rome and its surroundings, and were not a very widespread custom. Next to several hundred statues of Roman men with heads depicting a specific individual and an ideally beautiful and young body, only sixteen statues depicting naked Roman women as Venus have been recorded.⁹²



39. Roman Woman as Venus, h. 191 cm, Roman marble statue from Lago Albano, ca. 90.

⁹¹ Napoli, Museo archeologico nazionale 6299.

⁹² See Hallett, *The Roman Nude*, p. 331-332 no. 327-342.

The Greeks understood the person as an indivisible whole. Romans, however, did not share this concept and created a genre of sculptural busts that began to develop the Roman physiognomic portrait from around 100 BC.⁹³ At that time, the Romans also began to combine realistically depicted heads with ideally beautiful bodies in a Greek style. Roman portraits capturing the appearance of an individual down to the tiniest details give us the impression of an additional step in artistic development leading towards the way we understand sculpture today. However, we may perceive the portrait of an older lady with the body of a naked girl, who also has attributes of a goddess, as something bizarre or even comical.⁹⁴ Until only recently, portraits of Roman women in the form of Venus did not surprise anyone, as Roman art was considered to be a degenerate version of Greek art. The existence of unique Roman art was discovered for the first time at the end of the 19th century, and it took a very long time for this opinion to take hold. Today we know that the Romans had their own unique visual art culture. However, what we are missing is the knowledge of the idioms which the Roman artists used to express themselves.

Portrait statues of Roman matrons as naked Venuses can be divided into two components – the physiognomic portrait and the idealized naked body. We know that Roman art was a sophisticated semantic system, which expressed itself by using specifically Roman ideas on various stylistic levels and were taken from local artistic tradition (“Italic” or “plebeian”) and Greek art. However, we still cannot form an idea of how these combinations functioned and the way they were perceived by the Romans. The head clearly identified the depicted figure by capturing its unique physiognomic traits; however, the ideal body denied this identification and placed the given individual into a mythical context among the gods. These statues are usually understood in a figurative sense as a convention that makes use of the huge prestige that ancient statues of naked deities held in the ancient world. According to this interpretation, a Roman woman with the body of Venus was celebrated by the fact that the statue denoted her as being *as beautiful as* a goddess. Similarly, a Roman woman with the body of Diana was virtuous and a Roman woman with the body of Ceres was *as fertile as* a goddess whose body and attributes they had borrowed.

How then should we interpret portrait group sculptures that depict a naked Roman woman as Venus embracing her lover Mars (40)?⁹⁵ We cannot imagine what virtues this statue group should celebrate; here Venus and Mars are depicted as adulterers.⁹⁶ What if these statues were not understood in their time in a figurative sense? We cannot rule out the possibility that they truly celebrated them as gods. Laura Salah Nasrallah has recently pointed out that the works of Christian authors from the time when these statues were created, i.e. the 2nd century, have yet to be fully

⁹³ Cf. Peter Stewart, *Statues in Roman Society: Representation and Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53-59.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (London: John Murray, 1956), 43-44; Nancy H. Ramage and Andrew Ramage, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Roman Art*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 134.

⁹⁵ Cf. Rachel Meredith Kousser, “Mythological Group Portraits in Antonine Rome: The Performance of Myth.” *American Journal of Archaeology* 111, no. 4 (October 2007): 673-691.

⁹⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 4.169-189.

explored.⁹⁷ These authors are highly qualified as witnesses, as they intimately knew the society of the time and its conventions and artistic culture, and they strongly criticized it for blurring the borders between the mortal and divine, endangering the salvation of the soul. The absence of self-control, immodesty, overindulgence, and (primarily) undesirable visual stimulation awakens base instincts that endanger the god in a person. As Clemens of Alexandria wrote, *we are rational formations of God's Logos, through whom we have our origin.*⁹⁸ According to Christians, the rich and powerful were flaunting themselves in Roman society in the form of unliving statues of fake gods, while each person in the Christian community was a walking statue of the real God.⁹⁹



40. Roman portrait group statue of woman and man as Venus and Mars, ca. 180.

⁹⁷ Laura Salah Nasrallah, *Christian Responses to Roman Art and Architecture: The Second-Century Church Amid the Spaces of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁹⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 1.6.4. English translation G.W. Butterwoth.

⁹⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 4.59.2.

In order to interpret portraits of Roman women as Venuses, we must also take into consideration their sepulchral contexts, which are recorded in exemplars from the beginning of the 2nd century found in tombs.¹⁰⁰ In Roman thought, Venus was much more closely linked to war and death, and the afterlife than Greek Aphrodite was.¹⁰¹ On the grave relief from Rome, the deceased is not only depicted as Venus, but was explicitly identified in the inscription, which has been preserved only in fragments.¹⁰² The departed woman is depicted naked, and her hands cover her breasts and loins in the model of Venus statues. However, she is not depicted in contrapposto, which was typical for these statues. On a grave stele from Latium, which is now in The British Museum in London, the deceased woman with stylish hair was depicted as a half-naked Venus Victrix, which is indicated by the palm branch in her left hand.¹⁰³ The dove in the bottom left corner emphasizes that the depicted woman is Venus. The funereal function of the relief is indicated by the opened doors leading to the realm of the dead, which are at both sides at the bottom. The empty surface between the half-opened doors was meant to bear an inscription, which was ultimately never engraved.

On the grave stele that Onesimos had erected for his wife Neike in Macedonia in the 2nd century, the deceased woman is also depicted in the form of Venus.¹⁰⁴ It is of the Louvre-Naples type with one breast unveiled, which was quite common for tomb stones. While the departed woman is compared to the goddess, the members of her family who were evidently still alive at the time of the stele's creation are depicted in the common scheme for tomb steles, i.e. at an eternal feast. Onesimos lies on a couch with a cup in his left hand and a wreath in his right; the veiled women sitting on either side of him are his mother and daughter.

On the front side of the sarcophagus from the 3rd century, the naked Venus is depicted kneeling in a seashell. At the same time, however, she is the deceased, as her hairstyle is the same as the one known from portraits of Empress Julia Domna.¹⁰⁵ With her left hand, she is covering her genitals, and with her right she is holding her billowing clothing, the end of which is held by Amor with a torch. The seashell with Venus is held by sea Centaurs, and on their backs sit Nereids, which are another tool used to transfer the departed woman to mythical timelessness. The procession of mythical sea beings is commonly found on tomb stones as a reference to the post-mortual pilgrimage to Elysium, the island of the blissful, which was located in the West somewhere in the ocean. A similar scene can be found on the funereal altar in Capitoline museums, which depicts Venus's bath (41).¹⁰⁶ Amor is pouring water on the back of the crouching goddess. The scene thus explicitly refers to the birth of the

¹⁰⁰ Roma, Musei Vaticani, Magazino 2952 (from the tomb of the Manilii family on the Via Appia near Rome); Roma, Musei Capitolini 245 (from the tomb near Porta San Sebastiano in Rome).

¹⁰¹ See Marion Bolder-Boos, "Der Krieg und die Liebe – Untersuchungen zur römischen Venus," *Klio* 97, no.1 (2015): 81–134.

¹⁰² Roma, Museo Nazionale Romano. Cf. Schmidt, *Venus*, no. 123.

¹⁰³ London, The British Museum 1948,0423.1. Cf. Schmidt, *Venus*, no. 193.

¹⁰⁴ Thessaloniki, Archaeological Museum 1524. Cf. Björn Christian Ewald, "Minding the Gap: Issues of Cultural Translation in Graeco-Roman Art," in *Visual Histories of the Classical World. Essays in Honor of R.R.R. Smith*, ed. Catherine M. Draycott et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, , 2018, 243–251.

¹⁰⁵ Roma, Museo e Galleria Borghese 81. Cf. Paolo Moreno and Antonietta Viacava, *I marmi antichi della Galleria Borghese: La collezione archeologica di Camillo e Francesco Borghese* (Rome: De Luca, 2003), no. 137.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Schmidt, *Venus*, no. 248.

goddess, who in this case is the promise of rebirth after death, after which a person will live eternally. In this specific case, Venus was not the alter ego of the deceased, but pointed generally to post-mortal bliss, as the funereal altar belonged to a man.¹⁰⁷ The inscription on it meant: *For A. Albius Graptus. Ciartius Sergianus had this created for his friend.*



41. Venus, Roman marble urn with relief decoration (Aulus Albius Graptus), 1st-2nd century.

Venus also appears on the relief of a funereal altar from the end of the 2nd century, the inscription of which designated it to a male individual, a certain "Tiberius Claudius Faventino."¹⁰⁸ Under the inscription is an illustration of Venus's infidelity, which is otherwise only rarely depicted in ancient art.¹⁰⁹ The chained Venus sits on a bed next to her lover Mars, who is hanging his head in shame. The mythical tale is pointed out at the top by Helios, who has exposed the adulterers, and Hephaestus, who has bound them with chains. The scene could not have served as a form of

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Verity Platt, "Framing the Dead on Roman Sarcophagi," *Res. Anthropology and Aesthetics* 61-62 (2012), 213-227.

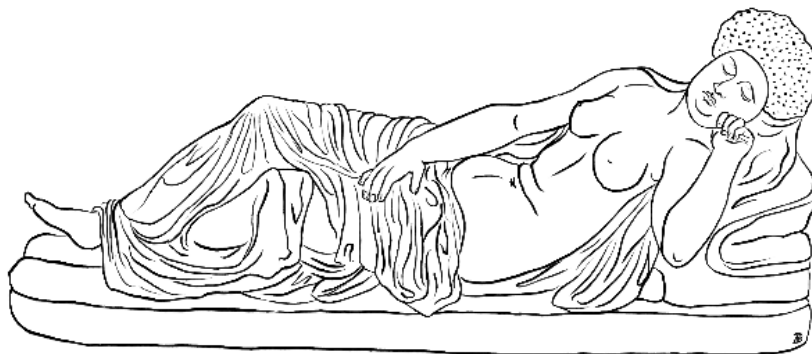
¹⁰⁸ Città del Vaticano, Museo Pio Clementino 1186.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Monica Salvadori and Monica Baggio, "Lo svelamento di Marte e Venere, tra repertorio iconografico e narrazione ovidiana," *Eidola. International Journal of Classical Art History* 8 (2011), 79-96.

amusement and we must understand it as a part of the stories that decorate the sides of the altar, which commemorate the Trojan War and the beginning of Roman history. The scene on the front plate is thus evidently a reminder of Venus as the foremother of the Roman nation.

The Roman sepulchral context also includes sculptures or reliefs that depict a deceased woman in the form of Venus sleeping in a bed. This sculptural type appeared in Rome already in the early empire and the last exemplars are from around 300. The individualized traits of the face correspond to the true form and age of the departed, whose identity is also made visible by their hairstyles, which were fashionable at the time. The deceased woman is in a half-reclining position on her side with her chest facing the viewer; the fact that she is asleep is denoted by her closed eyes, crossed legs and head comfortably resting on her hand. Her other hand can be placed over her chest and holding her shoulder, or her arm can be lifted and resting on the crown of her head. Her inert state can also be indicated by her head tilted backwards. The bedroom is evoked by a pillow or the backrest of the sofa (42).

An important attribute of sleeping women on Roman tomb stones is the fact that they have either partially or fully unveiled the whole upper portion of their bodies, making them similar to Venus. Erotic attraction was part of the ideal of Roman matrons, just as a basket of yarn symbolized diligence or a dog loyalty (43).¹¹⁰ Portrait characteristics of the deceased and the depiction of sleep commemorated their life and death. The beautiful body that was compared to a goddess was the promise of post-mortal bliss. In the 1st century, Tibullus expressed this belief in a colorful description of Venus's garden of love: *But me, for I have been ever pliable to gentle Love, shall Venus' self escort to the Elysian fields. There ... troops of young men meet in sport with gentle maidens, and Love never lets his warfare cease. There are all, on whom Death swooped because of love; on their hair are myrtle garlands for all to see.*¹¹¹ This idea could not be farther from the Christian ideal of eternal life. The sculptural type with sleeping naked Roman women is on the contrary very close to famous paintings of sleeping naked Venuses from the beginning of the 16th century, when efforts to revive the ancient goddess culminated.



42. Deceased Roman woman, Roman statue on the lid of a sarcophagus made of Luna marble, 2nd century. Villa d'Este.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Mols, *From Phidias to Constantine*, 44-45.

¹¹¹ Tibullus, 1.3.57. English translation J. P. Postgate.



43. Ulpia Epigone, Roman portrait relief on the lid of a sarcophagus in Luna marble from the facade of the tomb of Volusia on Via Appia, c. 100.