The Bona Dea Cult

Ylva Hallvig
Abstract

This essay concern the Bona Dea cult and women in the Roman Republic. By using ancient literary sources and inscriptions the different aspects of the cult is examined from a gender and an intersectional perspective. The essay covers the lives and rights of Roman women, their role in religion in general and how they participated in the Bona Dea cult specifically. The aim of the study is to understand the importance of the cult for women, freedmen and slaves, as well as analysing the paradox of letting women participate in rituals and customs otherwise forbidden to them.

Keywords: Bona Dea, Roman Republic, Women, Freedmen, Slaves, Cults.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 5  
   1.1. Purpose .......................................................................................................................... 5  
   1.2. Previous Research ....................................................................................................... 5  
   1.3. Source Material .......................................................................................................... 7  
   1.4. Method and Theory ................................................................................................. 7  
2. The Bona Dea Cult ............................................................................................................... 9  
   2.1 The identity of Bona Dea ............................................................................................ 9  
   2.2 The Bona Dea Myth .................................................................................................... 10  
   2.3 The Festivals .............................................................................................................. 10  
      2.3.1 The first of May sacrifice .......................................................................................... 11  
      2.3.2 The December Festival ......................................................................................... 12  
   2.4 Worshippers ................................................................................................................ 13  
      2.4.1 Freedmen and slaves .............................................................................................. 13  
      2.4.2 Men in the Bona Dea cult ...................................................................................... 14  
3. Roman Women .................................................................................................................. 16  
   3.1 Social life and legal rights, a short overview ............................................................... 16  
      3.1.1 Daughters, Matrons, Slaves ................................................................................ 16  
      3.1.2. The Virtues of Women ....................................................................................... 17  
   3.2. Women’s Role in Roman religion ............................................................................ 18  
      3.2.1 Vestal Virgins ........................................................................................................ 18  
      3.2.2 Matrons and administration of cults ...................................................................... 19  
4. Women and Wine .............................................................................................................. 20  
5. Analysis ............................................................................................................................... 23  
   6.1 Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 25  
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................ 26  
   Ancient Sources ................................................................................................................. 26  
   Inscriptions ........................................................................................................................ 27  
   Modern Literature ............................................................................................................. 27  
   Online Resources ............................................................................................................. 28
1. Introduction

The Republic of Rome was a society dominated and ruled by men whereas women were considered weak-minded and inferior.¹ Yet the festivals of Bona Dea were exclusive to women and men were forbidden to take part in the ceremonies. “The Good Goddess” whose identity remains a mystery to this day was the object of worship. In celebrating this deity women were allowed to venture outside the normal restrictions of society. Bona Dea appears to have been a simple fertility and agrarian goddess, but may have had a deeper significance to her worshippers.² The goddess attracted not only women but was also worshipped by other disadvantaged groups of society such as male and female freemen and slaves.³ Who was this enigmatic goddess and what purpose did she serve in the Roman society?

1.1. Purpose

The purpose of this essay is to examine the Bona Dea cult and what it meant to the women of Republican Rome (509-27BC). I intend to investigate why the women of Rome were given the freedom to take part in the Bona Dea cult when similar actions as those performed in the festivals were otherwise forbidden to women. In a society where laws and restrictions were made by men I would like to investigate what a cult like Bona Dea meant to the women.

Since the men were banned from attending the festivals the women might have experienced more freedom than usual. Was the festival perceived as a duty to be performed or something more? The cult was also very popular amongst freedmen and slaves of both sexes in Rome. I will also examine the origin myth of Bona Dea to see what the goddess represented and why she was so popular among the lower classes of society.

1.2. Previous Research

The Bona Dea cult has been investigated and discussed by many researchers.⁴ The most thorough description of the cult is presented by Brouwer in The Bona Dea cult; The Sources and a Description of the Cult.⁵ This publication does not offer any deeper analytical point of view of the cult, but is mainly a description of what is known of the cult from the sources

¹ Staples 1998, 57–58.
³ Staples 1998, 11.
⁵ Brouwer 1989.
without further analysis. Brouwer’s work lacks an extensive conclusion as there are no deeper analytical arguments but provides a good understanding of the nature of the cult.

Another work on the Bona Dea cult is that of Mastrocinque, *Bona Dea and the Cults of Roman Women.* Matrocinque offers a more analytical approach than Brouwer. Matrocinque analyses the relation between the gods and humans in a marital context. The focus lies on ritual and myths regarding the premarital bride and the gods. One of the cults to be examined in this context is that of the Bona Dea. Matrocinque relates his arguments to the ancient sources available and thus succeeds in giving a comprehensive view of the premarital women and religion. The subject of the premarital bride and virgin in relation to myth is thoroughly covered. In conclusion Matrocinque compares a number of women’s goddesses and what role they had for a woman growing up or getting married. Bona Dea appears to share the same roles as the Greek deities Semele, Omphale and Gynaikeia theos.

A more analytic depiction of the Bona Dea cult can be found in the publication *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* by Staples. Staples emphasises women’s participation in religion in Rome. She gives an account of several cults such as Ceres, Flora, Bona Dea and Venus. The comparative analysis between the cults gives an account of what was common for female cults. Staples conclusion is that the women of Rome were categorized after their sexual status. This was reinforced by the cult myths and rituals. As the sexual status of women relates to men Staples argues that it is one of the reasons women did not gain any constitutional rights in the Roman Republic.

The festivals of Bona Dea and the Thesmophoria are examined by Versnel in *Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual.* Versnel presents an extensive examination of the two festivals extensively and compare likenesses in how the festivals were conducted. Women’s rights in society and the clear paradox in what was allowed during the festivals are also brought up by Versnel. Conclusively Versnel argues that the status of matron does not coincide with the rituals of the festivals. The matrons temporarily gain a new status of “virgin” during the days of the festivals. This would contribute to the fertility that the rituals would provide.

The Roman calendar year and the specific dates reserved for festivals are presented in *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* by Scullard. The Bona Dea festivals are listed among the others with a short description of the cult. The work presents the Bona Dea cult among all the other cults and festivals of the Roman year.

I believe that several aspects of women and women cults has been covered by earlier research, but certainly not enough to provide a full understanding of the Bona Dea cult. My essay will contribute to the overall knowledge of the women cults and the case of Bona Dea specifically with focus on the paradox in relation to the rights of women during the Roman Republic.

For a general understanding of women’s lives and rights in Rome, the publication *Roman Women* by D’Ambra is useful. An old, but still excellent overview of differences in social classes and roles in religion of Roman women is provided by Pomeroy in *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves.* For a broader view of Roman religion *An Introduction to Roman Religion* by Scheid and *Religions of Rome, Vol 1: a History* by Beard, North and Price are useful.

---

6 Matrocinque 2014.
7 Staples 1998.
8 Versnel 1993.
9 Scullard 1981.
1.3. Source Material
This study will be conducted by examining the available ancient sources. The source material entails literary works as well as inscriptions from cult followers. The archaeological evidence consists of remains of statues of the goddess Bona Dea, dedications made to her and altars in her name. Something to keep in mind is that all the ancient literary sources were written by men and might provide a biased point of view.

Contemporary writers of the Republic to the late Republic include Cato, Pliny, Vitruvius, Tibullus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Cicero. The later sources provided during the imperial Rome are still of relevance as they mainly describe the cult and events of the Republican Rome. These works were made by well-known personas such as Ovid, Plutarch, Juvenal, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, Macrobius, Gellius and Valerius Maximus.

Cicero has provided the most sources through a variety of speeches and a collection of letters to his friend Atticus. In his letters he describes the events known as the Clodius scandal of 62BC. The speeches he made were also in regards to this scandal, as he witnessed in the trial against Clodius.

Most of the ancient literary sources are descriptive accounts of the Claudius scandal as a historical event. There are also descriptions of the Bona Dea cult made in relation to the religions of Rome as a whole.

I intend to read the translations of inscriptions in hope of finding anything that reflects upon the importance of the cult. I am interested in any inscriptions made by cult followers. Particular focus will be on inscriptions made by the minority groups of cult followers such as male and female freedmen and slaves. As I am mainly interested in the republican Rome I will focus my research on dedications and inscriptions made in that time period.

1.4. Method and Theory
Since this study mainly focus on women I will be conducting my research through a gender perspective. The gender perspective is often used in order to highlight the history of women, which in the past was not seen as a relevant subject of investigation. Society described without an extensive research into the lives of women would only make up half of the truth. Hence, if we wish to have a full understanding about the society of Rome we need to understand the roles of women as well as those of men.

Intersectionality is a paradigm that is relevant in my study as it deals with oppression and hierarchy in society. Essentially intersectionality deals with different social identities when they intersect in a person. For instance being a woman in Rome is one identity, but she might also be a slave or matron. In order to understand a person we have to take all of these social identities into account. Sometimes these social identities can lead to paradoxes and I want to examine this further to see what can be uncovered in the Bona Dea cult. As the Bona Dea cult was popular not only amongst women, but freedmen, servants and slaves of both sexes, I believe that intersectionality might offer an explanation as to why these social categories were worshippers of Bona Dea.

I intend to study the ancient sources by examining the attitudes they convey in regards to women and the Bona Dea cult. Specifically I am looking for discrepancies between the attitudes towards women behaviour within the cult and how women were expected to behave within the Roman society.

The ancient material presents a variety of attitudes towards the Bona Dea cult. The inscriptions made by the cult followers, both male and female, might provide insight in what the cult meant to them.

---

13 Manns; Hirdman 2016.
14 Reyes 2016.
The majority of the literary sources have neutral attitudes towards the Bona Dea cult. The authors that do show rather strong opinions about the cult are Cicero and Juvenal. Cicero is very supportive of the cult and describes it as a vital part of Roman religion as it is an honoured tradition dating back to the ancient times before the founding of Rome. Cicero also had personal experiences regarding Bona Dea as the festival was held in his residence year 63 BC. However, Cicero’s main objective in supporting the Bona Dea cult was to use it as an argument to convict Claudius in the Claudius scandal.

Juvenal on the other hand described the Bona Dea cult as a place of illicit and decadent behaviour. Juvenal’s work is named Satires which might explain his rather extreme description of the cult.

The other ancient authors and historians have mainly provided a description of the cult or of the events surrounding the Claudius scandal. These accounts are written in a rather neutral point of view, in order to convey facts rather than to articulate their own opinions on the matter.
2. The Bona Dea Cult

The cult of Bona Dea was considered to have existed in the ancient times before the founding of Rome. In the myth of Bona Dea and Hercules the Ara Maxima cult had only just been founded, suggesting that the Bona Dea cult had existed for even longer. The Ara Maxima altar was thought to be older than the city of Rome itself. It was in fact the earliest known shrine of civic religion. As the Ara Maxima cult existed before the founding of Rome it was already present at the time Romulus lay the foundations of Roman Religion.\(^\text{15}\)

The Bona Dea myth does not include a time for the cult’s establishment. The time before the building of Rome was known as a mythical period. Faunus, who according to the myth was either Bona Dea’s husband, brother or father, was thought to have existed in the times before Rome. Faunus characteristics are shrouded in mystery and he is difficult to interpret. According to Dionysus of Halicarnassus Faunus was a king in Italy before the arrival of Evander. Virgil on the other hand describes Faunus as a deity with the ability to foresee the future. Faunus was regarded as a good deity in some instances, whereas in other moments to be an evil or devious individual who was out for his own gains. In the myth of Bona Dea he most certainly is regarded as the latter.\(^\text{16}\)

2.1 The identity of Bona Dea

Bona Dea was a goddess of fertility and agriculture. She was also considered to have healing powers.\(^\text{17}\) She was often depicted with a cornucopia in her left hand and a serpent curling around her right arm feeding from a bowl in her hand.\(^\text{18}\) Bona Dea is roughly translated as “The Good Goddess”. This is the title given to the goddess as her real name was a secret only to be revealed to members of the cult. The secrecy of Bona Dea’s name intrigued contemporary Roman writers who put forth several theories as to who the goddess was. Cornelius Labeo stated that Bona Dea was in fact Maia as a temple was dedicated to Maia under the name of Bona Dea in the month of May. The pontifices of Rome themselves thought Bona Dea to be Fauna, Ops or Fatua.\(^\text{19}\) Another theory was that Bona Dea was Medea, as Bona Dea’s temple was filled with all kinds of herbs which the priests used to make medicine. The temple also contained serpents that slithered around without posing a threat to the people. Macribius furthermore lists the goddesses Semele and Hecate as possible candidates as Bona Dea. Bona Dea was often depicted with a sceptre in her hand which was a symbol usually associated with Juno. Macrobius therefore attributes Bona Dea with the power of Juno.\(^\text{20}\) The attributes of Bona Dea are numerous and it is not strange that she is compared to so many other goddesses. With time the goddesses real name did not matter as

\(^{15}\) Staples 1998, 32–33.
\(^{16}\) Staples 1998, 33–34.
\(^{17}\) Versnel 1993, 231.
\(^{19}\) Mastrocinque 2014, 24; Macrobr. 1.12.20–29.
\(^{20}\) Macrobr. 1.12.20–29.
“Bona Dea” became the known name for the goddess with these particular qualities. While the goddesses’ real name remained secret she was well known simply as Bona Dea.\(^{21}\)

2.2 The Bona Dea Myth

The myth of Bona Dea was documented by many ancient authors with slight variations.\(^{22}\) The historian Macrobius writes that Bona Dea was the daughter of Faunus. Faunus lusted after his daughter and tried to seduce her by giving her wine and when she still resisted he beat her with a myrtle branch. Eventually Faunus turned himself into a snake and had intercourse with Bona Dea.\(^{23}\) Another version of the myth is presented by Sextus Clodius. According to Lactantius, Sextus Clodius states in the sixth book of his *The Gods*, that Bona Dea was beaten to death by her husband Faunus with myrtle twigs because he had found her drinking a whole vessel of pure wine. After Bona Dea was dead Faunus regretted his actions and deified his wife.\(^{24}\)

Another myth involving Bona Dea was the myth of the Ara Maxima. The Ara Maxima was a cult dedicated to Hercules in which all women were banned from attending. The myth of Ara Maxima was referred to by both Macrobius and Propertius. The myth tells the story of how Hercules fought and killed a great monster called Cacus who lived in a cave by the Aventine. After the battle Hercules was overcome by a great thirst and went searching for water. He came upon a sacred grove where women were celebrating the rites of Bona Dea. Hercules asked the women for water but was told that the water was for the women’s goddess Bona Dea and thus unlawful for a man to drink. Upon hearing this Hercules is enraged and takes the water by force. As he leaves he curses the women and banishes them from his newly established rites.\(^{25}\)

2.3 The Festivals

There were two festivals every year in honour of Bona Dea. The first festival was held the first of May in the Bona Dea temple. The second festival was held sometime in December and took place in the house of the magistrate. The wife of the magistrate was responsible for this festival. The December festival was made famous in history because of the Clodious scandal which took place 63 BC. Not as much is known about the festival in May as it was not recorded in the same extent as the December festival.\(^{26}\)

The rites were pro populo Romano and like other female cults it symbolized the dangers of female sexuality and the need to restrain it. In carrying out the rites the welfare of the Roman state was secured. As such the sexuality of the elite women reflected the prosperity of the Roman state, or the decline of the state should the rites not be carried out. The Vestal Virgins attendance emphasized this link between sexual chastity and the security of the Roman state.\(^{27}\)

\(^{21}\) Brouwer 1989, 244–245.
\(^{22}\) These variations can be found in Plut. *QR*. XX; Arn. *Adv. nat.* V 18; Macro 1.12.20–29; *Lactant Div. inst.* I 22.9–11.
\(^{23}\) Mastrocinque 2014, 24; Macro. 1.12.20–29.
\(^{27}\) Hubbard 2014, 215.
2.3.1 The first of May sacrifice

The temple of Bona Dea had been dedicated the first of May, ever since then the date had been reserved for the festival.\textsuperscript{28} According to Ovid the temple was built upon a natural knoll in the slope of Aventine which was called The Rock. Ovid writes that it was the “Fathers” who built the temple and that a virgin heiress of “Clausi” dedicated it.\textsuperscript{29}

The month of May indicates a relation to the earth-goddess Maia which might have been the identity of Bona Dea.\textsuperscript{30} During the festival in May a pregnant sow was offered to Bona Dea as sacrifice.\textsuperscript{31} It is possible this sacrifice also took place in the December festival as both Plutarch and Dio Cassius mention burnt sacrifice in the December festivals of 63 and 62.\textsuperscript{32}

Macrobius writes in his \textit{Saturnalia} that some items were not allowed inside the temple. Bringing myrtle inside the temple would be sacrilege as it according to myth was used by Faunus to beat Bona Dea.\textsuperscript{33} Plutarch in his \textit{Quaestiones Romanae XX} offers a different theory in which he explains that the myrtle is the symbol of Venus who in ancient times was called Myrtia. As the women abstained from sexual pleasures during the festival the myrtle would be removed.\textsuperscript{34} The myrtle was commonly known as a symbolism for sexual-eroticism, especially as it was connected to the goddess Venus. For the same reason the myrtle was excluded from the traditional bridal gown wreath, as marriage was a sombre affair and not a place for erotic seduction.\textsuperscript{35}

Wine was allowed in the temple, but only under a different name. As Macrobius points out, the wine was not called wine but “milk” and was carried in a “honeypot” instead of a wine vessel. He believes the reason for this was the myth of Bona Dea in which her father Faunus tried to seduce her by getting her drunk on wine.\textsuperscript{36} Choosing the word milk instead of wine might also indicate that the cult was very old. Before wine became the common libation it was milk that was offered. The milk and cake sacrifices were thought to have been sacrificed to the ancient indigenous gods of Antiquity, such as Cunina, Rumina, Pales and Jupiter Latiaris. Several of these cults continued to sacrifice milk even after the wine libation became more popular.\textsuperscript{37}

Similar to the December festival all men were strictly forbidden to attend the ceremony. Ovid describe the temple as “tabooed to men’s eyes”.\textsuperscript{38} It was believed that should a man witness the secrets of the Bona Dea ceremonies he would go blind as punishment. Tibullus \textit{Elegy} tells the story of a woman called Delia who has fallen in love with a young man. The poet advises her husband to be on guard when Delia states she is going to the Bona Dea temple. To protect the husband the poet himself offers to follow Delia to the altar so “I need not fear for my eyes”.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{28} Macrobi. 1.12.20–29.
\textsuperscript{29} Ov. \textit{Fast.} 5 147–158.
\textsuperscript{31} Macrobr. 1.12.20–29.
\textsuperscript{33} Macrobr. 1.12.20–29.
\textsuperscript{34} Plut. \textit{QR} 20.
\textsuperscript{35} Versnel 1993, 262–264.
\textsuperscript{36} Macrobr. 1.12.20–29.
\textsuperscript{37} Brouwer 1989, 327–329.
\textsuperscript{38} Ov. \textit{Fast.} V 147–158.
\textsuperscript{39} Tib. I VI 21–24.
2.3.2 The December Festival

The festival in December did not have a fixed date and was not included in the calendar. The reason for this was that the festival didn’t fully belong to any public or private ceremonies. It was not paid for by the state and the pontiffs did not attend the ceremony. The ceremony took place in a private residence. However it was pro populo Romano and the Vestal Virgins preformed the rites. The planning and organising of the event was entrusted to the highest state official’s wife or sometimes his mother. She invited the most noble, married women of Rome together with the Vestal Virgins to perform the rituals at the magistrate’s house. As all men were banned from attending the rites, the men of the household would have to leave the house for the duration of the night.

The women prepared the house for the ritual by covering all images of men and removing all male animals. The hall would be decorated with flowers and vines in bowers. The cult statue of Bona Dea was transported from the temple to the house of the magistrate. In front of the statue a small table was placed with the sacred vessels from which the goddess would be able to drink and eat. A pregnant sow would be sacrificed and libations offered. After the sacrifices were made it is not clear what happened. There would be music as we know there were musicians present at the festival 63BC. According to Plutarch music and revelry would be heard from the house all through the night. Juvenal also writes in a satire dialog how women drink much wine during the Bona Dea festival.

We do know of two dates that the December festival took place. In 63BC it took place at the house of Consul Cicero during the night of 3rd of December. The following year of 62BC the festival was held at the preator Julius Caesars house, the date most likely the 3rd of December. The reason for knowing these two specific dates is because of events that unfolded during these festivals. Plutarch in his *Life of Cicero* describes how in year 63BC Cicero was worried over political events called the Catilinarian conspiracy taking place in Rome. During the Bona Dea nocturnal ceremony a flame leaped high from the altar even though the fire seemed to be out. The Vestal Virgins instructed Cicero’s wife Terentia to tell her husband that he should act as he saw fit to save the country as the goddess had given him a sign of salvation and fame. Dio Cassius also gives a similar account about Cicero and the divine sign from Bona Dea.

The second account of the Bona Dea festival is of the events of 62BC which became known as the Clodius scandal. There are several ancient sources regarding the scandal. Cicero wrote a series of letters to his friend Atticus in which he related the event, and he also held several speeches concerning the trial of Clodius. Plutarch writes of the incident in both his works *Life of Cicero* and *Life of Caesar*. Other authors such as Dio Cassius, Appian, Suetonius, Seneca, Asconius and Livy also write about the scandal in accounts of the incident or in relation to other matters in Rome.

In 62BC Julius Caesar was the highest official present in Rome and the Bona Dea festival took place in his home. Clodius, a man of noble birth had an affair with Caesars’ wife.
Pompeia. During the night of the Bona Dea celebrations Clodius, dressed as a female harp player, was let into the house by a servant girl who knew he’d be visiting. As he waited for the servant girl to summon Pompeia he was discovered by a different servant girl. The servant had asked him his name and upon answering his voice betrayed him. The servant girl then screamed and the women searched the house for Clodius who hid in a closet. Caesar’s mother Aurelia ordered the rites of the goddess to stop, made sure the sacred objects were covered and that all doors were locked.\(^{50}\) After Clodius had been removed the Vestal Virgins renewed the ceremonies.\(^{51}\)

These events led to Clodius being accused of sacrilege and being summoned by a special court. Cicero, who’ve had a dispute with Clodius at an earlier occasion took the opportunity to appear against Clodius in court. This led to years of enmity between the men. In court several witnesses were called who identified Clodius as being present at the Bona Dea rites. The court ruled in Clodius favour however, most likely due to being bribed.\(^{52}\) Caesar divorced his wife Pompeia as soon as the rumours of the affair came to light.\(^{53}\)

2.4 Worshippers

Bona Dea had a range of worshippers from all classes of society. Officially the festivals were only available to the noble women and Vestal Virgins. But this did not mean that the cult as a whole was restricted to the upper class women. In fact, most of the archaeological data in the form of dedications suggests that the majority of worshippers were freedmen and slaves. Most of the archaeological data available is dated to imperial Rome. Only eight inscriptions can be dated to the Republic, the earliest dating to the first century BC. Three of eight inscriptions are from the city of Rome.\(^{54}\)

Most of the inscriptions are made in recognition of repairs of temples or gifts to the goddess. The noble Octavia made an inscription that she had “the portico plastered, benches made, and the kitchen roofed, in honour of Bona Dea”.\(^{55}\) The nobles could afford to restore temples and give gifts to cults, whereas only a few inscriptions are found from the equestrian order.\(^{56}\)

2.4.1 Freedmen and slaves

Freedmen were excluded from the college of augurs and the worship of old Roman deities.\(^{57}\) Especially foreign freedmen were not allowed to partake in the worship of the old gods that protected Rome. Bona Dea was an exception to this rule and both freedmen and slaves of both sexes were allowed to worship her. This might explain the large number of inscriptions from freedmen and slaves, more than all the nobles, equestrians and plebeians.\(^{58}\) Many freedmen owed allegiance to other native gods such as the Lares. This reflects the wish to identify with the Roman culture and be accepted in society.\(^{59}\)

Freedmen remained under the patronage of their former masters all their lives. It is possible that the religion and worship of former owners influenced the freedmen. Many

\(^{50}\) Plut. Vit. Cie. XXVIII; Vit. Caes. IX-X.
\(^{52}\) Brouwer 1989, 364–365.
\(^{53}\) Plut. Vit. Cie. XXVIII.
\(^{54}\) Brouwer 1989, 258–260.
\(^{55}\) Regio V – Insula X – 2.
\(^{56}\) Brouwer 1989, 279–274.
\(^{57}\) Brouwer 1989, 258.
\(^{58}\) Brouwer 1989, 258.
\(^{59}\) Treggiari 1969, 203–204.
freedwomen became priestesses in the Bona Dea cult, as is evident in some of the inscriptions. It was most likely the freedmen and slaves that organised the cult worship, except for the festivals in May and December.\textsuperscript{60} In the inscriptions made by slaves and freedmen, more than half were made by men. It is difficult to understand the relationship between the goddess and these men, as men were banned from entering the temple or from participating in the festivals. As the Bona Dea goddess was permitted to the slaves and freedmen it is not strange that she was popular. Most of the inscriptions made by slaves and freedmen are erected to give thanks to their patronus or master. Many inscriptions also state that a vow to the goddess has been fulfilled. What the vows entailed is not known.\textsuperscript{61}

### 2.4.2 Men in the Bona Dea cult

The presence of men in the Bona Dea worship is evident from the many epigraphic sources available. The literary sources on the other hand focus on the exclusion of men from the cult. There seem to be some confusion in what the men were excluded from however. In some sources it is the festivals that men were forbidden to attend, in others the sanctuary is also forbidden to enter.\textsuperscript{62} In Ovid’s \textit{Ars Amatoria} it is written that “…Bona Dea bars the eyes of men from her temple, except such she bids come there herself.”\textsuperscript{63} This suggests that men could enter the temple if they had been summoned.\textsuperscript{64}

The epigraphic sources show donations made by men, or building projects funded by men. There are also inscriptions of various nature in which they thank the goddess for having been healed or having become a freedman.\textsuperscript{65} It is important to separate the dedications made by men in an official capacity and those made by private individuals for personal worship. For instance, the oldest known inscription was made by a male slave by the name of Felix Asinianus.\textsuperscript{66} The inscription states that he has fulfilled his vow willingly and heartily and has sacrificed a white heifer, thanking Bona Dea for the recovery of his eyesight. Even though the physicians had given up, Felix Asinianus eyesight returned after 10 months by taking medicine.\textsuperscript{67} The inscription supports the statement made by Macrobius that Bona Dea had healing qualities and that herbs were cultivated by the priestesses for medicinal purposes.\textsuperscript{68} We do not know if Felix Asinianus was permitted to enter the sanctuary on this occasion. It is possible that a female mediator was sent in his stead or he was consulted by priestesses outside of the temple. An interesting aspect is that Felix Asinianus evidently went to doctors for aid at first and only consulted the Bona Dea priestesses when the doctors had declared the case hopeless. Arnhold suggests that it is possible that the herbs and medicine of the Bona Dea cult was intended for women normally.\textsuperscript{69} Bona Dea’s healing qualities can be seen emphasized on monuments naming her “Bona Dea Hygia”, as on the base of a statue found in Rome.\textsuperscript{70} Hygia was a goddess of health and the consort of Asclepius, a god of healing who kept snakes in his sanctuary (just like snakes lived in the Bona Dea temple).\textsuperscript{71}

Other men, such as the magistrate M. Maecilius Furrianus, acted in an official capacity

\textsuperscript{60} Brouwer 1989, 279–282.
\textsuperscript{61} Brouwer 1989, 290–294.
\textsuperscript{62} Arnhold 2015, 52.
\textsuperscript{63} Ov. Ars. Am. III 633–638.
\textsuperscript{64} Arnhold 2015, 52.
\textsuperscript{65} Arnhold 2015, 52.
\textsuperscript{66} Brouwer 1989, 258.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{CIL} VI 68 = ILS 3513 (Via Ostiense)
\textsuperscript{68} Macrobr. 1.12.20–29.
\textsuperscript{69} Arnhold 2015, 53–55.
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{CIL} VI 72.
\textsuperscript{71} Takács 2008, 101–102.
when he made the inscription found in Ostia. Maecilius had financed the building of a temple dedicated to Bona Dea. It also states that he approved of this building in his role as magistrate.\(^\text{72}\)

Some men merely left inscriptions giving thanks to Bona Dea. An example of this is the inscription of Anteros, slave of Valerius. It states that … “he has given this to Bona Dea Oclata, willingly and gladly”.\(^\text{73}\) Unfortunately it does not state why Anteros offered items to Bona Dea so the nature of the relationship between himself and the goddess is not clear.\(^\text{74}\)

The Bona Dea cult was mainly for women but as the epigraphic evidence demonstrates, men were also involved with this goddess. In most cases the inscriptions are made from officials who have restored or built sanctuaries to Bona Dea. But in some cases there are men who personally sacrifice items to the goddess and make inscriptions. While we cannot know the nature of this relationship between male worshippers and the cult it is clear from the epigraphic evidence that some men worshipped the goddess, regardless of whether they were allowed in the sanctuaries or not.\(^\text{75}\) Takács suggest that men could choose Bona Dea as their guardian deity and consult the goddess and priestesses even though the men could not enter the temple.\(^\text{76}\)

\(^{72}\) Regio IV-Insula VIII-3.
\(^{73}\) CIL VI 75 = ILS 3508.
\(^{74}\) Arnhold 2015, 61–68.
\(^{75}\) Arnhold 2015, 68–69.
\(^{76}\) Takács 2008, 102.
3. Roman Women

In order to investigate what a women’s cult like Bona Dea meant to the women of Republican Rome we must seek to understand what their daily life looked like. What freedom did the women have? To what extent were they able to partake in society?

3.1 Social life and legal rights, a short overview

3.1.1 Daughters, Matrons, Slaves
The women of Rome lived in a hierarchal and patriarchal society. As such they had very limited access to public life, such as politics. Their influence varied depending on social class. Women could socialize and attend festivals or go to the theatre. However such activities largely relied upon the women’s wealth. Women could also receive an education if they belonged to the upper-class. The aim of the education was so that the women would be able to carry on intelligent and interesting conversations and be part of the husband’s intellectual life.\textsuperscript{77}

The daughter in a typical Roman family was under the protection of her father until the time of her marriage. Pater familias was the concept which stipulated the father’s right to rule over his family with the power over life and death. This meant that it was within the father’s legal right to kill his daughter without repercussions. If the father died the power of pater familias would pass to the closest male relative unless the father had named a different guardian in his will.\textsuperscript{78}

When a woman was married her status changed to that of a matron which implied that she was a wife and a mother. A matron was entrusted with the household management. She had keys to the storages and held accounts of the household economy. Higher class matrons would have servants and slaves to do most of the housework whereas lower classes would do much of the work themselves.\textsuperscript{79} The wealthier women who could rely on servants to care for the household were able to go out and visit acquaintances, go shopping, attend festivals and supervise their children’s education.\textsuperscript{80} The women of the elite class would often appear together with her husband at important public events or administrate cults. This required that the woman’s reputation was spotless as any scandal might reflect poorly upon her husband. Elite women might also promote their family politically by donating money to charity or to building projects.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{77} Pomeroy 1995, 150–152, 170.
\textsuperscript{78} Pomeroy 1995, 150–152.
\textsuperscript{79} D’Ambra 2007, 95.
\textsuperscript{80} Pomeroy 1995, 169–170.
\textsuperscript{81} D’Ambra 2007, 17–21.
3.1.2. The Virtues of Women

Men believed that women were weak-minded creatures that were not capable of conducting their own affairs. As such they needed to be protected and guided by men. At the same time, women posed a threat to the very state of Rome and the patriarchal hierarchy. These opinions seem to be contradictory but were very real in the mind of the Roman men. When a law was being revoked which regulated women’s wealth, the matrons of Rome spoke to men in the streets so that they would vote to revoke the law. The sight of matrons talking politics to men in the streets appalled contemporary writers such as Cato. He warned men to be on their guard and that women were trespassing into the legislative proceedings which belonged to the politics of men. That women of Rome were an organised group threatened the foundations of social and political life. If women got a hold in public affairs and broke the bonds set up by men they would not only become equal, but maybe even aim to become superior to men. The threat that the matrons posed to the state of Rome was a political one, yet when described it was told in relation to a woman’s sexuality. Women’s sexuality was a danger as it was thought women couldn’t control their sexual urges. As such it was the duty of men to control their daughters and wives. The sexual urges of women made them unreliable and spontaneous, which would threaten the state should they have a say in public affairs.

The main virtues of women were virginity and chastity. This is a theme in both myths and religion. For example, in the myth of Lucretia we gain insight in how a good, virtuous wife should act. The myth tells us of the king Tarquinius and princes who discussed the merits of their wives while gathered round a campfire. Tarquinius cousin suggested that they should surprise their wives in their homes to see how they act while the men were out in war. He was confident that his wife Lucretia would win the bet of which of the wives was the most virtuous. As they visit each of the wives it was evident that they were all socialising and drinking wine, all except for Lucretia who was spinning wool late into the night. King Tarquinius, who admired Lucretias beauty and virtue, decided to return a few days later to rape Lucretia. At night he entered Lucretia’s room with sword in hand and threatened her to be quiet. At first he tried to persuade her without force, but as she still resisted the rape, he then threatened to kill her and his male slave and present it as if he had found them together. Upon hearing this Lucretia succumbed to Tarquinius. The following day Lucretia summoned her husband and her father and told them of the rape. She tells them that she intend to kill herself and made them swear to avenge her dishonour. The men try to stop her suicide by saying she is blameless and that it is Tarquinius who is at fault. However, Lucretia still went through with the suicide by thrusting a dagger into her own heart.

So why does Lucretia kill herself when she is not to blame for the rape? Staples argues that Lucretia was not subdued by force but by the cunning of Tarquinius. She only succumbs out of fear of disgrace if she had been found together with the male slave. As the rape is carried out through the guile of Tarquinius and not by violence or force, Lucretia is not completely blameless. In other words Lucretia was so virtuous so she’d rather be raped than to be disgraced by having committed adultery. Most likely she wanted to protect her husband from the shame of having an alleged adulterous wife. The story can be likened to the myth of

---

83 Livy 34.2.3–4
84 Livy 34.3.2
85 Livy 34.2.13–14.
88 Livy 1.57–59.
Bona Dea, who resisted her father’s advances when he used force, but succumbed to rape when her father cunningly turned himself into a serpent.89

3.2. Women’s Role in Roman Religion
To understand the Bona Dea cult we need to put it in context of what the women’s role in Roman religion entailed. As such I will address what parts of religion were available to women. As a prominent example I will use the Vestal Virgins which was the main female priesthood in republican Rome.

Cato had the following to say about how a wife should behave:

She must visit the neighbouring and other women very seldom, and not have them either in the house or in her part of it. She must not go out to meals or be a gad-about. She must not engage in religious worship herself or get others to engage in it for her without the orders of the master or the mistress; let her remember that the master attends to the devotions of the whole household. – Cato, De agricultura 143.

Cicero in his work Legibus states this law:

No sacrifices shall be performed by women at night except those offered for the people in proper form; nor shall anyone be initiated except into the Greek rites of Ceres, according to the custom. – Cicero, Legibus 2.9.21.

3.2.1 Vestal Virgins
The Vestal Virgins were the only female priesthood in Rome. They had a very important role in Roman Religion as the guardians of the sacred fire of Vesta. Vesta was the goddess of the hearth and through the tending of the sacred hearth the continued prosperity and peace of Rome was secured. Should the fire go out the city would be in grave danger or fall into chaos. The Vestal Virgins were also responsible for the preparation of the salted flour, mola salsa, which was used in all sacrifices to the gods in order to sanctify the sacrifice.90 The Vestals were often present in important rituals or sacrifices as they symbolized Rome. Through the preparation of the mola salsa the Vestals were always symbolically present at all sacrifices in Rome.91

The Vestals received a unique status and special privileges in Rome. Once a girl was selected to become a Vestal she was removed from her family and moved to live with the other priestesses. The Vestal was freed from pater familias which set her apart from all other Roman citizens.92

If a Vestal travelled through the streets of Rome she would always be accompanied by an honorary guard called a lictor, which would normally be reserved for the highest members of

91 Staples 1998, 154–156.
92 Staples 1998, 141–143.
office. The chariot which carried the Vestal was a carpentum, and the Vestals were the only women allowed in such a chariot. In the times of Augustus the Vestals had theatre seats in the emperor’s podium whereas normal women of Rome had to be content with standing furthest away from the stage. After serving as a Vestal Virgin for 30 years the woman could decide to marry and have children, or to remain as a Vestal for the rest of her life.

The importance of the Vestal Virgins is reflected in the severity of the punishment should they break their vow of chastity. If a Vestal Virgin was found guilty of having broken her vows the punishment was to be buried alive under the Colline Gate. To understand this gruesome punishment we must consider what the Vestal Virgin represented. Not only did she tend to the hearth of Vesta which kept Rome safe, the Vestal herself and her vow represented Rome. In betraying the ideology of virginity she endangered the state of Rome. But as the Vestal Virgin represented Rome she could not be executed without threatening the existence of Rome. Instead she was symbolically “returned to the earth” by being buried alive, so as not upset the gods.

3.2.2 Matrons and administration of cults

Men were in charge of most public priesthhoods in Rome. The household and neighbourhood cults were also a responsibility carried out by men. Sacrifices were strictly reserved for men. Women were not allowed to slaughter animals as sacrifice to the gods, or to prepare the mola salsa. Few exceptions were made from these laws aside from the Vestal Virgins. Some priests, such as the flamen dialis and the rex sacrorum, were required to be married and have their wife assist during rites.

Women could not hold a position as priestess on behalf of the state. They were not excluded from an active religious life however and could take part in all cults except those who specifically banned women. Some cults were administrated by women, called matron cults. Cults such as Bona Dea, Pudicitia, Juno Caprotina and Fortuna Mulebris are examples of such cults.

The cults of Rome could be divided into two categories. First there were the cults with the primary objective to protect or strengthen the state. These cults were supported by the state. Secondly there were cults which aimed simply to bring joy to the participants. Religion and cults were present through the different stages of a woman’s life. For instance there were cults that symbolized the coming of age and cults for the married woman as well as cults for widows. There were also cults that were exclusive to certain classes of society.

---

93 Staples 1998, 145.
94 Suet. Aug. 44.2-3; Vit. 5.6.
95 Staples 1998, 129.
97 D’Ambra 2007, 170.
5. Women and Wine

In this chapter I will address women and the consumption of wine. As we have seen, women were allowed to handle and consume wine during the Bona Dea festivals. However, the consumption of pure wine amongst women was otherwise stigmatized in Roman society. This paradox is thus worthy of closer examination.

I have copied Marcus Cato’s words from the oration entitled On the Dowry, in which it is also stated that husbands had the right to kill wives taken in adultery: “When a husband puts away his wife,” says he, “he judges the woman as a censor would, and has full powers if she has been guilty of any wrong or shameful act; she is severely punished if she has drunk wine; if she has done wrong with another man, she is condemned to death.” Further, as to the right to put her to death it was thus written: “If you should take your wife in adultery, you may with impunity put her to death without a trial; but if you should commit adultery or indecency, she must not presume to lay a finger on you, nor does the law allow it. – Gellius 10.23.1-2.

According to Gellius, if a woman was caught drinking wine the punishment would be as severe as the punishment for adultery. The punishment for adultery was death. In other words, the husband could choose to kill his wife without a trial and it would all be within the law. As a source Gellius claims to have copied this statement from a speech made by Cato the elder, who lived during the second century BC. According to legend, Egnatius Maetennus, who lived during the reign of Romulus, killed his wife because she had been drinking wine. Maetennus was not punished as the wife was thought to have set a bad example. Other cases are found in Fabius Pictors Annals where a matron was starved to death for opening the casket which contained the keys to the wine-cellar. Cato even claimed that the tradition of women being kissed by their male relatives stemmed from the men trying to smell alcohol on their breath. That wine was forbidden to women in ancient times is a fact that was recorded by many ancient authors. The foremost reason for this is the idea that wine would have an aphrodisiac effect on women. Maximus relates the following:

100 Russel 2003, 77–84.
103 Pliny H.N 14. 89–90.
In olden days the use of wine was unknown to women, for fear that they might lapse into some disgraceful act. For it is only a step from the intemperance of Liber pater to the forbidden things of Venus. – Valerius Maximus 2.1.5.

The idea that women who drank wine would be more likely to commit adultery might go some way as to explain the severity of the punishment. Married women were meant to give birth to legitimate heirs who would grow up to become Roman citizens. Adultery might result in unwanted children. Not only did the adulterous women bring shame upon themselves, but also upon their family and the pater familias. As most women were constantly under the influence of the pater familias any infidelity would reflect badly upon him.106

The laws and the taboo of drinking wine can be recognised in the Bona Dea cult. In one version of the Bona Dea myth, she is beaten to death by her husband for the sole reason of drinking a vessel of wine.107 If we are to believe the accounts of Pliny and Cato this was an appropriate punishment for drinking wine in the “olden days”. The myth is very much like the events of Maetennus and his wife.108

In the other version of the Bona Dea myth her Father Faunus tries to seduce her by getting her drunk on wine. This highlights the view of wine as an aphrodisiac for women. If a woman drank too much wine she would commit adultery. Bona Dea resisted her Fathers advances despite being drunk which made her a particularly chaste goddess. The fact that Faunus used a myrtle branch (the symbol of Venus) to beat Bona Dea suggests a symbolic link between drinking wine and sexual impropriety.109

Gellius tells us that the wine of the olden days was called temetum. Women did not drink this wine. They did however drink sweetened wine, such as passum, loream and murrinam.110 This is supported by the archaeological evidence recovered from Archaic Latin graves. The graves of aristocratic women contained wine vessels engraved with women’s names. Thus the evidence suggest that the women of Archaic Italy did drink wine, despite the accounts of Maximus and Cato. If we believe Gellius’ distinction between the pure wine temetum and the sweetened wine, the archaeological and literary evidence are no longer contradictory. The division between processed and pure wine would explain the archaeological evidence of wine cups and the literary sources mention of forbidden wine consumption.111

Is it possible that the wine present at the Bona Dea festival was sweetened wine, which would be more acceptable for women to drink? The pure, forbidden wine temetum was reserved for men and for the use as libation to the gods. By forbidding women to handle or consume the pure wine used for libations, women remained inferior in political and religious spheres. As wine was offered to Bona Dea during the festival it would have to be temetum as other wines would not do as proper libation to the gods.112

There are several theories as to why wine was permitted to the women. For one thing, the wine of the Bona Dea festivals was not called wine but “milk”, possibly to emphasise that it was used in a religious purpose.113 Staples argues that wine represented masculinity and for this reason the wine was called milk and was covered along with all other images of male items in the house. Milk on the other hand was representative of the female. Milk could only be produced by women and was considered the semen of females.114 As such the milk

---

109 Russel 2003 77–84.
110 Gell, N.A. 10.23, 1–2.
112 Versnel 1993, 265–266.
113 Russel 2003, 79.
symbolized the female procreative power. Both the male (wine) and the female (milk) were present at the festival, but while the male was covered up, the female was overly represented.\textsuperscript{115}

Versnel believes that an exception was made to let women handle and consume wine under the condition that it was called milk and was covered up to render it “disguised and harmless”.\textsuperscript{116}

Wine had a prominent part in the myth of Bona Dea. The consumption of wine might have had a ritual purpose in the festival as to honour the goddess. Brouwer believes that wine was permitted because of its significance in the Bona Dea myth. Wine-drinking becomes part of the ritual and is considered a religious act.\textsuperscript{117}

The ancient literary sources give us an insight in the men’s opinion about the Bona Dea cult and the consumption of wine. The satirist Juvenal describes the festival as an opportunity for orgies where “maenads delirious with music and wine whirl round”. He implies that the festival was an opportunity for adultery together with servants, slaves or whatever was available, even animals such as donkeys.\textsuperscript{118} Juvenal also mentions the Bona Dea festival as a place where large quantities of wine were consumed.\textsuperscript{119} Plutarch describes that revelry and music is heard all through the night during the festivals.\textsuperscript{120} Cicero on the other hand, describes the Bona Dea festival as a well-respected and sombre ritual.\textsuperscript{121} Since Juvenal is the only writer to describe the Bona Dea festival as an adulterous orgy there is little support of this statement.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{115} Staples 1998, 48–51.
\textsuperscript{116} Versnel 1993, 267–268.
\textsuperscript{117} Brouwer 1989, 335–336.
\textsuperscript{118} Juvenal II, vi 314–345.
\textsuperscript{119} Juvenal III, ix 115–117.
\textsuperscript{120} Plut. Vit. Caes. IX–X.
\textsuperscript{121} Cic. Har. Resp. 17.37.
\textsuperscript{122} Staples 1998, 43.
6. Analysis

The aim of this study is to examine the Bona Dea cult and the relevance it had to the women and other minority groups of the Roman Republic, as well as investigating the paradox of allowing women to partake in rituals otherwise stigmatized by society.

The paradigm of intersectionality looks at different social identities and how they intersect in a person. The women of Rome embodied several identities; they were both seen as inferior beings as matrons, daughters and slaves, but paradoxically they were also bearers of culture in that their chastity was closely linked with the virtue and security of Rome. Such as in the cult of Vesta where the Vestal Virgins protected Rome by keeping the sacred hearth lit. Hence it is clear that Roman women played a significant role in state religion, especially in cults meant to protect and secure the stability of Rome. The importance of female virtue is reflected in the severe punishment following deviation from chastity vows.

The Bona Dea cult has been described as a fertility and agricultural cult by ancient sources such as Macrobius. Twice a year there would be festivals in which sacrifices were made to secure the welfare of the state. That the sacrifice was a pregnant sow was most likely to enhance fertility. The fact that men were excluded from these festivals must have been a rare opportunity for women to gather without being under the direct control of men. Everything male such as paintings or statues were covered up to underline the absence of men.

When assessing the significance the Bona Dea cult had for Roman women it is important to recognise that there are limited sources available, the vast majority of which are written accounts of the cult made by men and there are no direct testimonies from the women who participated in the Bona Dea ceremonies. Bearing this in mind, the available sources offer some insight as to the nature of the cult. When examining the contrast between the limitations of their normal life and the liberties experienced during the festivals certain aspects stand out. According to Gellius, the consumption of temetum wine was forbidden to women. Temetum wine was the only wine considered worthy of libations, hence women remained inferior in political and religious spheres. However, as attested by Plutarch, Macrobius and Juvenal, temetum was present at the Bona Dea festivals. Furthermore Plutarch tells us that much revelry and music would be heard all through the night during these festivals. This does not sound like a strict and sombre ritual setting, but indicates a rather festive atmosphere. The security of the state, and the fertility and agricultural aspects of the ritual were undoubtedly very important, but it is likely the sacrifices were not perceived as just another duty to perform, but rather a festive evening to look forward to. The festivals were only available to noble women. The noble women of Rome had more freedom and privileges than the women of lower classes but they were still subjected to pater familias and limited rights in society. The fact that men were excluded from the Bona Dea festivals, where women were in control, made these occasions a prominent exemption from the regulations of daily life.

123 Reyes 2016.
124 Macrobi. 1.12.20–29.
126 Plut. QR XX; Macrobi. 1.12.20–29; Juv. III.
127 Plut. Vit. Caes. IX–X.
The Bona Dea cult revered the virtues of women. In the myth Bona Dea was regarded as the most virtuous of all the gods. She was so chaste she would stay hidden from the eyes of men. As her father lusted after her and tried to seduce her she resisted. Her virtue stood against the force of her father. The beating with a myrtle branch had no effect upon her. The wine she drank did not stimulate her to succumb to her father’s advances. The myrtle, which symbolized Venus, was used in the myth to underline the force of sexual desire that Bona Dea withstood. Wine, which was known to be a powerful aphrodisiac, was also powerless to move her. Her father Faunus only succeeded in raping her by turning into a serpent. As Staples argued, the myth of Bona Dea has a certain likeness to the story of Lucretia, the virtuous wife. Both of the tales emphasise the virtue of abstaining from sexual advances in order to stay pure and not be dishonoured. The fact that Lucretia commits suicide after she has been raped indicates how grave the situation was regarded. In the other version of the Bona Dea myth she was beaten to death by her husband Faunus because she drank a whole vessel of pure wine. In this version there is no rape. However, Bona Dea did succumb to a threat, here presented as wine. Symbolically, wine represented men, and as a sexual aphrodisiac it was considered dangerous.\(^{128}\) By emptying the wine vessel she inadvertently committed adultery by not resisting the urge. As the punishment for adultery and wine drinking in ancient times was death, her husband beat her to death in a fit of rage. In death, Bona Dea was cleansed from guilt (as Lucretia was freed from her dishonour after committing suicide) and her husband, who regretted his actions, deified her.

It could be that the aspect of women’s virtues in the cult was encouraged by men and that this was the reason they were allowed to participate in rituals otherwise forbidden to them. Bona Dea would represent a role model to matrons, like Lucretia. The drinking of wine during the festivals might have served as a recreation of the events of the Bona Dea myths. The women of the cult resisted the effects of the wine and just like Bona Dea protected their virtues. Virtuous and chaste wives were the ideal matron in Rome. The men let the women drink wine as it had a ceremonial purpose. Outside of the festival however, drinking large amounts of wine would be seen as a lapse in self-control and virtue. Thus, pure wine was only permitted in a ceremonial purpose during the festival, and otherwise would be seen as a great offence.

Slaves and freedmen, both male and female, made up a major part of the worshippers of the Bona Dea cult, as is evident from the archaeological evidence. The nature of men’s involvement in the cult is still not entirely known. Even though men were excluded from participating in the festivals and according to Ovid were forbidden to enter the Bona Dea temple on their own accord.\(^{129}\) The epigraphic evidence suggests they could still dedicate inscriptions to her or choose her as a guardian deity.

Why was the Bona Dea cult so popular amongst freedmen and slaves? Just like women these were disadvantaged groups in the Roman hierarchy. As Brouwer stated in his book, slaves and freedmen were not allowed to worship just any god. Many of the ancient Roman gods were not permitted to them as the freedmen and slaves were “foreign” to Rome. I believe that since Bona Dea was an exception and allowed to the slaves and freedmen she became very popular. No doubt slaves and freedmen wanted to become Roman citizens, or at least be seen as Roman. While other cults were forbidden, the Bona Dea cult was the only Roman cult available to them. By making dedications to the goddess, slaves would make an effort to be part of the Roman society and customs. Many slaves and freedmen adopted the faith of their masters, but since only the Bona Dea cult was allowed it was this cult they turned to. The aspects of Bona Dea were probably appealing as she had healing powers and represented fertility and virtue. Slaves and freedmen were also a restricted group, like all women in Rome. The appeal of a sanctuary where no men were allowed is thus understandable.


6.1 Conclusion

Although a lot of Bona Dea is still shrouded in mystery, the existing material can offer some insight and interpretation as to the importance and function of the cult. The Bona Dea festivals were an opportunity for women to temporarily escape the restrictions put upon them by society and engage in independent worship in a festive setting. The virtuous nature of the cult could offer an explanation as to why men permitted rites which included wine consumption and the exclusion of men from participation in the ceremonies as Bona Dea served a role model for female chastity. While we do not know to what extent men were allowed to worship Bona Dea, it is evident from the epigraphic sources that male freedmen and slaves had a relationship to the goddess. The fact that the cult was popular amongst these other deprived groups of Roman society could be attributed to the restriction of worshipping other Roman cults as well as the desire to adopt Roman customs and virtues.
Bibliography

Ancient Sources


Inscriptions

*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, book 6, inscription 68.

*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, book 6, inscription 75.

*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, book 6, inscription 72.

*Regio V – Insula X – 2*.

*Regio IV – Insula VIII – 3*.

Modern Literature


**Online Resources**
