Venus (Roman deity)

Definition: Venus from Philip's Encyclopedia

Roman goddess originally associated with gardens and cultivation, but also with the ideas of charm, grace, and beauty. She became identified with the Greek goddess Aphrodite, and hence also personified love and fertility.

Summary Article: Venus
From The Encyclopedia of Ancient History

Venus emerges from Rome's historical records as an increasingly powerful deity of sex, war, and politics, whose most prominent patrons were generals and statesmen. Women too played a role in the cult of Venus, but one closely circumscribed by the religious, legal, and moral codes that informed Roman life more generally. Respectable women contributed to Rome's wars through their chastity (pudicitia; compare the Vestals and the cult of Vesta for its links with military success). As a guarantee of paternity, pudicitia served as a foundation for both Roman law (the rights of property through testamentary succession) and religion (fathers passed rites to sons). Venus Verticordia, the goddess who "turned the hearts" of devotees to chaste conduct within the marital bond, was thus the Venus on offer to respectable Roman women (Val. Max. 8.15.12). Her temple, dedicated by Sulpicia, the "most chaste woman in Rome," was built in 114 BCE in response to unchaste conduct by an equestrian woman and by Vestals (Obsequens 97; Ov. Fast. 4.157–60; Oros. 5.15.21–2). Roman men, on the other hand, enjoyed, as they did in law, politics, and society, a double standard. Roman men (unlike their wives) could engage in extramarital sex (as long as the partner was of low status) without committing adultery, and prominent statesmen enjoyed full access to all Venus' gifts. She especially bestowed charismatic speech and the personal beauty that aids in seductive persuasion on the battlefield, at political gatherings, and in the bedroom (as historians, biographers, and poets abundantly attest). Her name, which is related to veneror, "worship," represents a feminine form of an originally neuter root meaning "desire," and is closely associated with words built on the same root meaning "charm" and "attractiveness."

Venus was not among Rome's original gods. Her first known temple, that of "Submissive Venus" (Venus Obsequens), was not vowed until ca. 295 BCE during the Third Samnite War, and it was financed with fines paid by women convicted of adultery (Livy 10.31.9; Servius Danielis Aen. 1.720). After the disaster at Lake Trasimene in 217 BCE, the dictator Quintus Fabius Maximus vowed, in compliance with the Sibylline books, a temple to Venus Erycina (a Venus from Mount Eryx in Sicily associated with temple prostitution; Livy 22.9.10; 22.10.10). A second temple to Venus Erycina was vowed in 184 BCE during the Ligurian wars and dedicated in 181 (Livy 40.34.4). Sulla, the successful general and dictator (notorious too for his sexual appetites), called himself "Epaphroditus," that is to say, "Aphrodite's Chosen One," the Greek goddess with whom Venus was increasingly identified. His protégé Pompey, likewise a general and subsequently a dynasty in his own right (famous for doting on much younger wives, including Caesar's daughter Julia), claimed Venus Victrix ("Conquering Venus") as his special patron, and his rival Caesar (an infamous adulterer whose affairs aided his political ambitions) claimed descent from Venus Genetrix ("Birth Mother Venus") through the legend of the Trojan refugee Aeneas, who, as the son of Venus and as the father of Iulus, represented the ultimate source of the

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Julian clan. The legend was foundational for Augustan ideology, and the emperor Augustus, the adopted son of Caesar, likewise claimed Venus as his ancestor. Vergil's *Aeneid* provides the canonic elaboration of the myth: Venus bestows so powerful a sex-appeal on her son that he overpowers the vow of chastity taken by Dido, Queen of Carthage, to the memory of her deceased husband. With divine aid, the favored statesman thus seduces a woman whose violation of chastity proves fatal to herself, and emblematic of the military doom that will befall her country. This close association of Greek myth with the religion of the Roman state was contrary to customary practice.

Venus' prestige continued to grow, and she later received, together with the goddess of Rome (*dea Roma*), a massive temple (likely the city's largest) that was begun by Hadrian in 121 CE, dedicated in 135 and, after a fire, subsequently restored by Maxentius in 307. Numerous coins, inscriptions, paintings, and statues attest to her dominating presence. Her planet still bears her name. Venus also became the patron of gardens and wine festivals (the Vinalia, whose dates coincided with the dedication days of her temples). As Venus Libitina, she was associated with Rome's funeral industry. But these associations represent distractions from her essential role: to the extent that sex, war, and politics mattered in ancient Rome, Venus was a crucial deity.

**SEE ALSO:**
Roma, goddess; Sex and sexuality, Rome; Vesta and Vestals.

**References and Suggested Readings**


Hans-Friedrich Mueller

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