

A Divine Makeover:
The Reshaping of the Goddesses Venus, Fortuna, and Ma-Bellona
by Sulla according to his Propaganda Needs

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Abstract

While Lucius Cornelius Sulla may not be as famous as Julius Caesar, he did help to pave the latter's path to the dictatorship, crossing the proverbial Rubicon almost forty years before the Conqueror of Gaul: in 88 BC Sulla became the first Roman to have conquered Rome, an action he repeated six years later. Sulla had set a precedent for using military force to usurp control over Rome, which became a common pattern in the last decades of the republic. A talented and shrewd general, Sulla realized war took place not only on the battlefield, but also in the hearts and minds of the people, and understood the value of propaganda.

This thesis focuses on Sulla's use of three goddesses—Venus, Fortuna, and Ma-Bellona—and its influence on the public image of these goddesses later on. The three were by no means considered major goddesses in pre-Sullan Rome, nor did they play a significant part in the propaganda of Sulla's predecessors, but were still popular enough to have already had a set of roles and associations that Sulla found useful. Sulla's eastern campaigns introduced him to local and regional characteristics of similar goddesses previously unfamiliar to most Romans, which he merged into the goddesses he had already known. Thus Venus gained the belligerent elements of Aphrodite common in Greece and Asia Minor, yet not in contemporary Rome; Fortuna was combined with the *Tyche of the City*, a patron-goddess of cities and kings; and the Cappadocian warrior mother-goddess Ma was merged into the Roman war-goddess Bellona. To each goddess I dedicate a chapter in which I examine her documented relationship with Sulla and analyze his reasons for using that goddess in certain circumstances, in light of her known associations at the time.

Written and visual evidence shows that Venus and her Greek counterpart Aphrodite played a substantial role in Sullan propaganda. The Greek peoples accepted the Romans' claim that they were

descendants of Aeneas of Troy, son of Aphrodite, used by the latter to justify their interference with eastern affairs and helped them raise support for their cause. Influenced by local eastern cults of armed Aphrodite, Sulla established a connection between Venus and victory in the battlefield that was utterly foreign to the goddess's peaceful image in Rome at the time. Upon his return to Italy, Sulla adopted the victorious Venus and displayed her on his coins. Sulla was portrayed as a rebel in his opponents' propaganda, and Venus's support served to attest for his loyalty to Rome, as it was clear to all that the *Mother of the Romans* would want what was best for her children and would have not aided a treacherous general. Leveraging Venus's popularity in Italy, Sulla also used the goddess to send a pacifying message to the peoples against whom he had fought in the Social War of the early 80s.

As attested by the agnomen *Felix*, "lucky", Sulla stressed the role of chance in his success, thus connecting him to the goddess Fortuna as well. While Roman generals have founded cults to Fortuna already in the second century BC, Sulla was the first to claim the goddess as his enduring patroness, influenced by the Hellenistic idea of the *Tyche of the King*. Tyche, the Greek equivalent of Fortuna, was assumed to control the fates of cities and kingdoms as well as of those who ruled them. I propose that Sulla adopted Fortuna as his patroness to strengthen his connection with Servius Tullius, the legendary Roman king and a protégé of the goddess. Despite being an usurper, Servius was portrayed in the late Republic as an important democratic legislator, and it might be that Sulla, accused of being an usurper after conquering Rome and forcing the Senate to appoint him *Dictator for the making of laws and for restoring the republic*, considered himself a second Servius and used the precedent set by the popular king to prove he was not intending to become a tyrant. According to a myth known in the late Republic, Fortuna was also involved in stopping Coriolanus, another renegade Roman general, from conquering the city. It seems that in the pursuit of divine legitimacy for the conquest of Rome, Sulla wished to show that he was aided by the very goddess who had stopped Coriolanus from taking over Rome.

The last goddess I deal with is Ma-Bellona, a Sullan syncretism between an old Roman war-goddess and a warrior mother-goddess from Cappadocia. Bellona was a minor deity before Sulla and stayed so after his abdication and death, and Ma did not even have her own cult in Rome before Sulla and his troops established it there. Nevertheless Ma-Bellona played an important role in Sulla's life, as

the goddess who twice encouraged him to conquer Rome. An ancestor of Sulla's founded a temple to Bellona and the family tradition might have played a part in Sulla's decision to use this goddess in his propaganda. It also seems that Bellona was identified with war against the Samnites, an Italic people that led the resistance to Sulla upon his return to Italy, as both her temples in Rome were found during the Third Samnite War. I propose that Sulla mentioned Bellona in the context of his conquests of Roman to cover up their civil war aspect and portray them as part of a war against the Samnites. In addition, I demonstrate a noteworthy resemblance between two goddesses who appeared in Sulla's dreams, Ma-Bellona according to Plutarch and Aphrodite of Aphrodisias according to Appian, and suggest that the two authors described the same dream or at least the same goddess.

The final chapter surveys Sulla's influence on the role the three goddesses later played in Roman political propaganda. The armed and victorious Venus became highly popular and featured in the propaganda of Pompey, Caesar, and Octavian-Augustus; Fortuna was transformed from a goddess who occasionally aided generals in battle, to the patron-goddess of the leaders of the Republic and later of the *principes*. These changes are part of a general trend of connecting cults and gods to individual leaders, to which Sulla was a major contributor. The emergence of unified cults for Venus and Fortuna may also be attributed to Sullan influence. Unlike Venus and Fortuna, Ma-Bellona was not picked up by Sulla successors, apparently due to her close connection with the dictator. Sulla was not popular after his death and his successors wished to stay away from anything that might relate them to him; the role Ma-Bellona played in the Sullan conquests of Rome, along with her violent rituals, which included acts of self-mutilation, may have also thwarted her crossover into the mainstream of Roman propaganda.