Venus in the Mirror: Roman Matrons in the Guise of a Goddess, the Reception for the Aphrodite of Cnidus

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The afterlife or reception of ancient sculpture offers a plethora of opportunities to discuss the continuance of images through ages and cultures. Aby Warburg’s work on the “survival of antiquity” and the ever expanding literature surrounding this topic indicates its potential fruitfulness.¹ Few sculptures from antiquity resonate with Warburg’s idea: Nachleben der Antike (the afterlife of the antique), more than the Aphrodite of Cnidus (Knidia) (fig. 1). A work by Praxiteles from the fourth century BC, often considered the first life-size female nude in western art.² The goddess draws her right hand across her groin, holding drapery in her left over a vessel.³ Sculptural copies and replicas in various media enable reconstruction, the work destroyed by fire in the fifth century AD when in Constantinople. Coins are an additional resource for identification and can be labelled.⁴ Three features are largely consistent: Aphrodite’s nudity, her gesture covering her groin with her right hand, and her pose, with weight resting on one leg, often her right. In most, she is also accompanied by a vessel, varying in nature.⁵

¹ Warburg 1999. The basis for much subsequent scholarship is: Haskell – Penny 1981; Prettejohn 2012: is more recent and encompasses modern and contemporary examples.
² Two of the ‘best’ copies are the Colonna and Belvedere or Standing Venuses: Rome, Vatican Museums 812 and 4260; LIMC II, 391.
³ Only a handful of texts detail the Knidia’s gesture: Lucian, Amores 13 and Cedr. 1.564.
⁵ Stewart 2010, 12–17.
Fig. 1: Aphrodite of Cnidus, Belvedere type, Rome, Vatican Museums 4260, after Havelock 1995, fig. 2. Photo: author.
The lack of an original does not detract from the Knidia’s position and it is still one of the foremost sculptures from antiquity. This reflects the eminence of its maker, its beauty and versatility as a subject. Significant in Warburg’s work on the reuse of antiquity was Sandro Botticelli’s Birth of Venus based on a replica of Praxiteles’s Knidia. Yet, this figure is somewhat removed from its source, visually and historically. An auburn haired goddess emerges from a shell, in blatant contrast to the now colourless ancient figures in marble. The appearance of Botticelli’s Venus also stems, not from Greek prototypes, but Roman copies of Praxiteles’s work. The most famous are the Capitoline and Medici Venuses, who also cover their breasts in the Venus pudica stance, although the obscuring of their genitalia links clearly with the Knidia (fig. 2). The Medici Venus is also accompanied by a dolphin and cupid. She seems more anxious, exemplified by the sharp turn of her head. Bereft of towel, she also lacks justification for her undress. These later works present a different image of the goddess from the original; nevertheless, the dissimilarities and equally the similarities between Greek works and their Roman equivalents are all too infrequently distinguished. The second can be seen as ‘the poor relation’, rather than a conscious attempt to draw aspects from the initial works, to fit a potentially different purpose.

7 Praxiteles certainly coloured his works and the Knidia may have been tinted: Plin. HN 35.133.
8 Havelock 1995, 69–101: discusses eight works inspired by the Knidia: the Capitoline, Medici, Crouching, Sandalbinder, both types of Anadyomene (rising from the sea), Melos and Callipygian; LIMC II, 50–77, nos. 391–687.
The use, and variety of interpretations ascribed to the *Knidia* develops significantly between the Greek and Roman periods. The later
replicas of the figure are those most often appropriated post-
antiquity, still little scholarship looks at the reception of the *Knidia*,
as opposed to the figure of Venus generally.\textsuperscript{11} More ink has been spilt
in an attempt to identify the nuances of Praxiteles’s work through
the surviving versions, and draw meaning from her appearance.\textsuperscript{12} Her
pose seen as one of shame or modesty, a reading ignoring the omni-
potent nature of Aphrodite, because of her position as goddess of
love and sexuality.\textsuperscript{13} Instead she highlights the basis of her influence.
This chapter looks at examples of Roman women who use the
gesture of the *Knidia*. It argues for a positive and powerful
reading for this figure, and thus its derivatives. Discussion of these Roman
matrons, particularly in a funerary context, has only briefly stressed
the popularity of the sculpture as a model. Henning Wrede’s cata-
logue and analysis of them focuses on portrait types and social con-
text;\textsuperscript{14} whereas Eve D’Ambra takes a more biological approach, focus-
ing on the maternal and fertile aspect of those they represent.\textsuperscript{15}
Although the latter mentions the prevalence for the Capitoline type,
she makes only brief comment on the reason behind its choice,
relating it to imperial propaganda and Roman founding myths.\textsuperscript{16}
Numbers suggest the use of the *Knidia* was a conscious decision,
governed by a certain aspect seen as suitable for these women in their
tombs. Roman Venus is a commanding force, mother of Aeneas and
as such Rome. By dispelling the myth that Praxiteles’s image shows
the goddess off guard and as such shielding her undress in a prudish
manner, and instead thinking of her drawing attention to the area of

\textsuperscript{11} Clark 1956, 64–161: devotes two chapters to the goddess, but only brief mention to the
*Knidia*. Havelock 1995: discusses the subsequent representation of Aphrodite and Venus,
rather than the continued reception of the *Knidia*. Salomon 1996: on the reuse of her
gesture. Barolsky 1999, 93–117: overviews the deity in post-Renaissance art, beginning
\textsuperscript{12} The Colonna Venus was long seen as the closer approximation: Pfrommer 1985, 173–180;
\textsuperscript{13} Osborne 1996, 81–85; Spivey 2013, 206: does not find this reading persuasive.
\textsuperscript{15} D’Ambra 1996.
\textsuperscript{16} D’Ambra 1996, 222, note 10.
her control, a better explanation arises for the Roman use of the *Knidia*.17

Praxiteles’s sculpture was ‘the first of its kind’, causing something of a revelation. Pliny the Elder, in the first century AD, claims it was intended for the Coans, but deterred by her nakedness, they selected a draped version of Aphrodite and she was purchased by the Cnidians.18 Ambivalence to her nudity did not last. The Bithynian king Nicomedes (generally identified as Nicomedes I who died in 247 BC), was apparently so enamoured with the work, he was willing to write off Cnidian debts to secure it.19 The number of copies of it also indicates its popularity.20 Yet, an almost Christianised perception can prevail, reading it as one of humiliation. Myth enables a much more plausible interpretation. In certain genealogy Aphrodite is born from Ouranus’s severed testicles, arriving on the island of Cyprus fully formed where she bathes and adorns herself.21 Her drapery and jar are necessary for cleansing after her birth. In the *Fifth Homeric Hymn* (*Aphr.*), the goddess prepares for her rendezvous with Anchises (father of Aeneas), through beautification.22 The resulting effect is almost all encompassing, from her father Zeus to the animals she passes over on the way to her encounter.23 Aphrodite is a persuasive goddess, though her nudity can mean this characteristic is forgotten. Early Hellenistic Aphrodite is not the hapless goddess of the *Iliad*, wounded by the mortal Diomedes, who runs to her mother.24 Her support of Jason and his crew in the *Argonautica* is crucial to their

17 Although regularly repeated epigrams alleging its model as his courtesan lover Phryne, continue to fuel such suggestions: Ath.13.591a. Anth. Pal. 16.159.
18 Plin. HN 36.20.
22 In Cypria Fr. 4: Aphrodite prepares for the Judgement of Paris by bathing and anointing, dressing in an elaborate garment dyed by the Graces.
23 Aphr. 50–52: Faulkner 2008, 7. Excluded from this list are the three virgin goddesses: Artemis, Athena and Hestia.
24 Hom. II. 5.310–430.
success and above all, she is a potent force. A humorous explanation for the Knidia does not gain credence. Aphrodite draws attention to her area of control in a similar fashion to the Roman matrons based on her.

A label of passivity for the female nude is nothing new. In the 1970s, John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (although basing his discussion on post-Renaissance art), questioned the long held notion that: “*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” The Roman Lucian tells the story of a youth, who overcome by the Knidia’s beauty, hides in her temple overnight. The same writer recounts the tale of three male friends visiting the statue, one announcing his envy for Ares as the lover of Aphrodite. In their dialogue, the Knidia’s physique and female charms are much admired, even by the homosexual member of the party. But why is something attractive, devoid of religious significance, or might? This purely visual response is parodied in Kenneth Clark’s study of the nude where he says: “To be naked is to be deprived of clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone.” Much quoted, this approach shapes art historical perception of nudity. Clark later states that the Knidia is exposed and defenceless, opposed to the Capitoline Venus, who is enclosed; both are nevertheless naked. He assumes nudity equates to erotic sentiment; the Knidia therefore becomes titillating and sexualised, even if her eroticism is characteristic of her influence as a goddess. As Sherry Lindquist highlights in her volume on nudity in medieval art, Clark’s categories pose a number of interpretative problems for feminist art historians and also those studying art from this period.

27 Lucian, Amores 15 and 16.
28 Lucian, Amores 13.
29 Clark 1956, 1.
30 Clark 1956, 79.
greater association with sex and allure, this does not deprive them of additional meaning. More plausibly, Aphrodite’s appearance demonstrates her association with sexuality and fertility, at what was a significant sanctuary at Cnidus.\textsuperscript{32} The sculpture is clearly amatory, nevertheless still a cult image and not without sacred association – an imposing symbol, not simply a debased figure of amusement. Without this understanding, the \textit{Knidia}’s initial reception in a Roman context may seem bizarre, adopted as an identity for dutiful Roman matrons in their tombs. Not mere wish-fulfilment on the part of the middle-aged to rejuvenate themselves; instead, it reflects the importance of this guise, now relating to sexuality and maternalism. Its use seems a wilful choice, either by the deceased, or their relatives, with other figures of Venus less represented than the \textit{Knidia}.

Initially the figure is utilised by empresses, most often in free-standing sculpture, life-size or bigger.\textsuperscript{33} The assimilation of women to goddesses is attested since Queen Arsinoe I of Egypt, who identifies with Aphrodite in the second century BC.\textsuperscript{34} In Rome, Livia (wife of the emperor Augustus) is the first empress to be deified in 41 AD, although she is previously represented as Venus \textit{Genetrix} (mother).\textsuperscript{35} A cameo, a private presentation piece, shows her in this manner, possibly alongside her son Tiberius, yet with garment slipping from her shoulder.\textsuperscript{36} Nero’s sister Drusilla is also compared to Venus \textit{Genetrix}, as is a wife of Caligula, although details do not extend to the nature of their imagery.\textsuperscript{37} Evidence is greater during the Flavian and Trajanic periods of the first and second centuries, when funerary portraits in the manner of Venus seem most popular.\textsuperscript{38} Why should this image hold appeal? Did these women really see themselves as Venus? Surely they would not wish to be portrayed as

\textsuperscript{32} At Cnidus Aphrodite was worshipped as: \textit{Doritis} (bountiful), \textit{Acroea} (of the height) and \textit{Euploia} (of the fair voyage). Anth. Plan. 16.160; Paus. 1.1.3.
\textsuperscript{34} Fraser 1972, 240; Matheson 1996, 182, note 4.
\textsuperscript{35} Bartman 1999.
\textsuperscript{36} Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 99.109. The male identity is uncertain, the MFA describe it as a portrait of Augustus. Bartman 1999, 83, fig.68–9: sees it as Drusus.
\textsuperscript{37} Dio. Cas. 59.11.2–3 and 63.26.3.
\textsuperscript{38} D’Ambra 1989, 397, note 27.
Aphrodite caught out bathing? Their potentially erotic nature also seems unsuitable for the commemoration of respectable women at their death. But only if we equate a purely sexual meaning to this figure-type under the spectacle of traditional interpretations ascribed to the *Knidia*, rather than considering it as symbolic of a woman’s domain of fertility and motherhood.

On one level these Roman matrons should be read as a means of glorification by association with divinity, displaying desirability through nudity, not dissimilarly to male members of the imperial family.39 They exhibit the different interaction between gods and mortals during the first century BC, when the two can be shown almost interchangeably, emanating from the link established since the Julian dynasty with Venus, claiming descent from her son Aeneas. An image of Lucilla is one of the most overt examples of an empress as the goddess, in an apparent portrait from the second half of the second century AD. Although her identity has been questioned, her ‘portrait’ was found alongside one of her husband Lucius Verus. An idealised depiction shows his wife with a distinctive hairdo reminiscent of the Capitoline Venus.40 Long curls fall onto her shoulders and her hair is bound on the top of her head in an elaborate top-knot.41 The overall appearance of the sculpture is difficult to ascertain, although her hairstyle, rarely seen accompanying clothed sculptures of Venus, or in portraiture, means she is likely to have been shown as the *Knidia*, highlighting aspects of Lucilla’s beauty, appropriate perhaps for a marriage portrayal.42 Found in Asia Minor, these images may well have been publically displayed, referencing the godlike status of the emperor and his wife. Other depictions variously identified as Lucilla or Faustina the Younger are known from Taurus and Aphrodisias, suggesting the value of such a presentation in this region.43

40 Toledo, Museum of Art 76.21 (Lucilla); 76.20 (Lucius Verus).
41 Kleiner – Matheson 1996, cat. nos. 28–9, note 5.
42 Matheson 1996, 185, note 27.
Faustina the Younger may also be represented as Venus in one of the best known Roman matron Knidia compositions, in the Vatican collections since 1509. Another example also still relatively well intact may be Marcia Furnilla, second wife of the first century AD emperor Titus, now in Copenhagen (fig. 3).\textsuperscript{44} The latter is similar to the Capitoline Venus, but is instead accompanied by Cupid. No doubt his presence is an additional hint to goddess-mortal assimilation. Marcia Furnilla (if this work is indeed her) is completely undressed, using her right hand to shield her breasts, her left her groin. She was found at Frattócchie near Albano, possibly the site of a Flavian villa.\textsuperscript{45} Flavian women are particularly hard to distinguish individually and there is no consensus over this sculpture’s identity, although an image of such care suggests at least someone of standing.\textsuperscript{46} She has a solemn countenance, with slightly parted narrow lips and downcast gaze. This contrasts with her decorative coiffure presenting a series of stylised curls bound on her head. Her neck is bent forward, adding to her grave nature. Although she is not old, she is equally not youthful, with shadows under her eyes, naso-labial lines and smile creases around her mouth. Her body replicates the same level of maturity. Slightly plump, it hints at developed woman, rather than nubile young female. Weight is placed firmly on her left leg, with her right relaxed, causing a downward tilt of her right hip and upwards shift of her left. This draws attention to the flesh around her midriff, with her upper body streamlined, with pert breasts. Her stance is slightly awkward, primarily because of her disproportionately long thighs, projecting forward, giving the impression she is off balance. A support is now well worn, but does not foretell the inclusion of a vessel. The scant remnants of Cupid reiterate the maternal role of this woman, whoever she may be.

\textsuperscript{44} Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 711. Hallett 2005, 199, pl. 121 and B327: including further bibliography.
\textsuperscript{45} Johansen 1995, 50–3, cat. no. 14.
\textsuperscript{46} D’Ambra 2013.
No more certain identity is ascribed to the example previously mentioned from Rome (fig. 4). Faustina the Younger is the name often quoted; a daughter of Antoninus Pius, the fashion and execution of her hairstyle are consistent with that period. Her attractive coiffure frames her small delicate face, with strong eye-

48 Haskell – Penny 1981, 323–325, no. 87: Sallustia Barbia Orbiana is suggested, on the basis of the proximity of her residence to its findspot, claimed as S. Croce in Gerusalemme. She was a consort of Alexander Severus in the early third century AD.
brows forming an arc below her forehead, over broad rimmed eye-lids, also as Julia Domna, a key member of the subsequent Severan dynasty. The sculpture is reminiscent of Praxiteles’s original, although her use of drapery to conceal is more akin to later replicas, such as the Troad Venus. Her right arm pulls clothing to her groin, therefore covering her right leg. Her left arm is adorned with a swath of cloth, meaning much of her lower body is unexposed. An off-balance and uncomfortable looking Cupid reaches up on her left side. It seems she reciprocates by taking his offering, possibly an apple, or a mirror. Cupid is well developed and the delineation of musculature seen on his torso. Venus is also firm and youthful; a fecund deity and a fortunate one, surely a positive reflection on her husband and family. Venus Felicis (lucky) is inscribed on her base, venerated from the first century BC, in the hope of militaristic success. Sulla uses this cognomen from 81 BC, attributing his accomplishments in battle to the goddess. Much as Aphrodite could be a powerful force in relation to love, so could her Roman counterpart in matters of war, the two aspects hardly poles apart. Venus Victoria (victory) can be shown with sword, shield and even baldric, as a dominant image, much as the Knidia. Many of these Roman martial Venuses are half-draped in the manner of the Rome matron, who at times has been identified as Victoria, appropriate in the context of the imperial family, referencing military success on the part of her relatives, but also reiterating the strength ascribed to the image of the Knidia.

50 Rome, Palazzo Massimo, 75674. LIMC II, 54, no. 422.
Ultimately, not only Roman imperial women were presented as the *Knidia*. Statius records the wife of freedman Abascantus, Pricilla, in

![Venus Felici, Rome, Vatican Museums 936, after Hallett 2005, pl. 122. Photo: author.](image)
the guise of Venus on her death in the first century AD. These so-called *libertinae*, (freedwomen), undoubtedly draw inspiration from earlier precedents. Identifying yourself with Venus may lie within the bounds of probability for empresses, but the mix of aging Roman matron and semi-idealised venereal body, is jarring. These wives were revered for their chastity, not a symbol inherently associated with the *Knidia*. How should we then reconcile such modes of unrealistic beauty?\(^5^3\) Clearly the same boundaries did not apply to statues. Austere expressions of moral restraint could be transposed with nubile, fertile bodies. Reference is made to the jurisdiction and significance of these women within their family through their form. Bathing and nudity was an important part of ritual activity associated with the cult of Venus *Verticordia* (changer of hearts, to chastity). Many of the connotations given to nudity in a Hellenistic context are not applied in a Roman one and the exclusively funerary context for these pieces, argues for a serious and meaningful response.

The tomb of Claudia Semne from the reign of Trajan is a lavish construction, aimed to glorify its freedman patron and his wife.\(^5^4\) She is depicted five times, including as Venus and also in a supine position half-draped, bringing her right hand to her groin.\(^5^5\) Her partial nudity draws attention to her sexual appeal, imitating the alluring aspect of the *Knidia*. Although not at the prime of her beauty, she is not without erotic sentiment, a positive asset necessary to perform her function as a wife. A similarly dated funerary relief to Ulpia Epigone also replicates this figure type, described as: “a free adaptation of the Capitoline Venus type within the context of the *kline* relief”.\(^5^6\) Her action accentuates her fertility and she also wears a bracelet on her arm as the *Knidia*, embellishing her appeal. The dog and basket at her side and feet represent chastity and virtue, likely emphasised because of her servile ancestry.\(^5^7\) The prominence of

\(^{52}\) Silvae 5.231–33; D’Ambra 2000.  
\(^{53}\) Boardman 2004, 51: suggests these images should not be taken seriously; Stewart 2003, 51–53: on their popularity.  
\(^{54}\) The tomb is recorded in 1792–3. Wrede 1971; Bignamini – Claridge 1988.  
\(^{57}\) D’Ambra 1989, 398–400.
these homages within circles of freedmen and freedwomen, appearing to emulate practices of the imperial family, infers an element of the ‘nouveau riche’. Unable to attain many of the levels afforded citizens, their children, appropriately produced by a dutiful mother, suitably commemorated as Venus on her death, it was hoped, would produce the first free born generation.

These images of the Knidia are certainly different in conception to those identified as empresses. Yet they share in common the choice by their family members to represent them as Venus. They differ from Lucilla, who is modelled as Venus, rather than on Venus, but equally, the Vatican Venus Felici uses aspects of the goddess to reflect positively on her husband, much as these freedwomen held up as dutiful wives (and probably model mothers). All wear a positive costume of the goddess through the Knidia, with no connotations of amusement, or equally using her gesture through necessity. Their primary function was as mothers, although this was not necessarily at the expense of their position as sexualised women. It seems that the Knidia could be manipulated to various means. She may allude directly to the goddess, be used in conjunction with another aspect of Venus, such as Felici, or even Victrix, and equally indicate fertility or chastity. These ‘empresses’ and freedwomen are not Venus; instead they take positive aspects of her, through representation in the manner of Knidia. The reference to fertility in the latter group, a fundamental aspect of their lives to ensure the continuation of their families, and so important to them they took it to their graves.

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