

Attilio Mastrocinque

Bona Dea and the Cults of Roman Women

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Bona Dea and the Cults of Roman Women

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To my mother,
who wrote these verses:

Il vino della sposa
Profuma di mammole.
Assaporato in silenzio
a piccoli sorsi
inebria,
è il solo vero piacere della festa,
è la grazia della sposa che si dona,
il mistero
del suo fiore che inebria.

Iside Zecchini (1921–2011)

The wine of the bride
It smells of violets.
When savoured,
sipped silently,
it inebriates;
it is the only delight of the wedding,
it is the grace of the bride who gives
herself,
the mystery
of her flower which inebriates.

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I. PREFACE

This book was written in Heidelberg, at the Seminar für alte Geschichte und Epigraphik, thanks to the support of the Alexander-von-Humboldt-Stiftung. Some aspects of this work, concerning Omphale, were presented at the IX congresso della Società europea di storia delle religioni: *Religion in the History of European Culture* (Messina, 13-17 September 2009), within the Panel “Religious Experience in the Roman World”, organized by Jörg Rüpke and myself.¹

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Attilio Mastrocinque

1 “Dionysos and Religious Experiences in Bona Dea Rituals”, in: *Memory and Religious Experience in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. by N.Cusumano, V.Gasperini, A.Mastrocinque, J.Rüpke, *PawB* 45, Stuttgart 2013. Other aspects of Omphale and Bona Dea have been presented in: “Religione e politica: il caso di Bona Dea”, in: *Politiche religiose nel mondo antico e tardoantico. Poteri e indirizzi, forme di controllo, idee e prassi di tolleranza*, Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Florence, 24–26 settembre 2009, ed. by G.Cecconi and Ch.Gabrielli, Bari 1911, 165–172; and in: “Orfismo nel culto romano di Bona Dea (OF 584)”, in: *Tracing Orpheus: Studies of Orphic Fragments in Honour of Alberto Bernabé*, ed. by M.Herrero de Jáuregui et alii, Berlin - New York 2011, 259–268.

II. INTRODUCTION

Between the modern, “European” concept of marriage and that of the Romans there is a profound difference. With Christianization, an entire world of mythology and pagan rituals was forgotten. This world of fantasy, beliefs, education, rituals and social relations aimed to prepare girls and boys for marriage. It was the intricate world of initiations. For Christians, nothing is required in order to get married. Other monotheistic religions require very little. Modern society does not require any form of ritual before marriage. Even religious forms of marriage are scarcely preceded by other rituals, and no mythology surrounds this fundamental passage in human life. There are exceptions, of course, but the comparison with the extremely rich and multifaceted compound of Græco-Roman mythology and rituals makes it clear that our ancestors discarded a certain amount of social factors and simplified (or even made banal) the passage from pre-marital to marital status. The basic reason is that pagan gods were sexually active, whereas the monotheistic god is asexual; he can love, but without sex.

To Greeks and Romans it was obvious that Faunus, Mars or Hercules were looking for love and sex with women. It was also thought that several of the goddesses would look for human lovers. Eos-Aurora and Selene-Luna, for example, were famous for having human lovers. In asking how a god could have sex with a human being, the philosophers showed themselves to be much more sophisticated than the common people.¹ On the other hand, Jews (1st book of Enoch) and Christians (Justin’s 2nd apology)² merged the myth of the fallen angels (*Genesis* 6) with the Greek mythology. The pagan gods became thus angels who lusted after women and begot some wild children.

This work will deal with a specific theme, namely premarital relations between the bride and gods. Greek and Roman girls had contact with male gods, who gave them fertility and blessed their earthly union.³ Forms of first fruits offerings were made to the gods, and young women were offered as well. As we will see, ritual and imaginary forms of sexual union or love affairs with a god were thought to be necessary and beneficial for the bride.

We shall look at Rome first by focusing on one of the most important initiatory compounds: the Bona Dea, Faunus, and Bacchus rituals. Then we will select several cultic cycles in Latium, Etruria and other Italic areas, which show simi-

1 See for ex. Plut., *Numa* 4.

2 I *Enoch* 7-8 (Hellenistic age), and Justin, II *Apol.* 5 (2nd century AD).

3 The philosophers of imperial age thought Dionysos as the lord of death and life; see L.Brisson, “Le corps dionysiaque”, in: *Orphée et l’Orphisme dans l’antiquité gréco-romaine*, Aldershot 1995, 488–9.

larities with Roman cults. We shall turn to the Greek world when necessary for a better knowledge of Roman religion.

Roman and Italic women were also accompanied by the gods in other important phases of their life, notably during pregnancy, childbirth and breast feeding. Sometimes the same gods who protected them during initiation into marital status were supposed to protect them during the subsequent phases of marriage. But the task of focusing on the initiation into marriage shall suffice for a single book.

The difference between us and the Ancients makes us deaf or blind even in face of clear information. We are naturally inclined to think of ancient mythology, rituals and iconography as mere fanciful creation. They were actually another way, a complex one, of dealing with transitions in human life.

A second factor which prevents our understanding is the secrecy that surrounded the ritual passage from virginity to adulthood. We find in the pagan authors allusions to rituals, and in the Christian authors other mentions for derogatory purposes. These rituals were for women only; male attendance was completely or almost completely⁴ excluded.

Moreover, the pagan writers were often troubled and uneasy when faced with the sexual themes at the core of such rituals and beliefs. They are, therefore, often reticent about embarrassing realities or else merely allude to them.

4 For several exceptions: Ovid., *Ars amat.* III.633–8: “When Bona Dea bars the eyes of men from her temple, except such as she bids come there herself”.

III. GIRLS AND PAGAN GODS

1. METHOD

The core of this work is formed by a series of passages concerning Bona Dea, dating from the end of the Republican age to the first century AD. Bona Dea, also called Fauna, is an important goddess of Roman women, who shared with Juno and Minerva the role of protecting, educating, and guiding young women towards their marital life. Many evident Dionysiac features and the functions of both Hercules and Faunus in Bona Dea's festivals allow to expand our documentation. Bona Dea, Faunus and Hercules were in fact deeply involved in Dionysiac rituals.

A passage of Ovid (*Fasti* IV.313–30) offers a precise link between a Roman festival of Faunus and the mythical eve of Bacchus' festival. The celebration of this eve is reproduced also on some Roman Dionysiac sarcophagi, where a precise mythical feature occurs, namely Faunus which lusted after Hercules because he was dressed as Omphale. Ovid's episode is precisely centered on the cross-dressing of Hercules and Omphale. Transvestism is a recurrent feature in the cult of Bona Dea. The iconography of Roman Dionysiac sarcophagi does not represent a new form of Dionysism among the Romans, because they did not use carved sarcophagi in the previous centuries. Dionysism was old and only the carved sarcophagi were new. Moreover Dionysiac sarcophagi, the Ovidian myth, and many passages of Roman authors testify of a Lydian or Phrygian style in those Dionysiac rituals for Faunus, Fauna, and Hercules.

Researches in those fields allow to describe a compound of rituals and beliefs concerning women and their relations with gods. A series of features recurs in those rituals and beliefs, and namely: 1) segregation of women from men; 2) transvestism, disguise, metamorphose; 3) deception, disappointment or mockery of a sexually active male god; 4) symbols of fertility, such as the phallus, or supposed instruments for fertility, such as snakes and whips; 5) relation between father and daughter; 6) prohibition of wine for women; 7) wrong use of wine by men or women; 8) sexual appeal, rape; 9) role of Faunus and Hercules. All those features appear in Bona Dea's cult and myth. Other important features appear besides, and namely: 1) relation between husband and wife; 2) Dionysism.

It is ascertained that the cult of Bona Dea was neither the only one in Rome which women practised in order to obtain fertility nor the one in which groups of women met for ceremonies in Dionysiac style. Moreover it is obvious that in ancient Italy other cults were practised for similar purposes and with similar features, and that the cult of Bona Dea was not a Roman peculiarity. Therefore some cults and myths will be presented and put in comparison, but only those which present many features among those we have mentioned above. For the sake of clarity we will distinguish two forms of cults: those for girls and women, and

those for wives. Marriage was in fact a fundamental passage in the life of a woman and many ancient authors underline the role of cults before and after marriage. Juno Caprotina, Minerva, and Stimula will be studied thus because they concerned mostly girls before their marriage. Italic goddesses such as Cavatha, Vesuna, Pomona, and Marica share with Bona Dea several ritual or mythological features, and therefore they are worth mentioning. Those goddesses appear to be both unmarried girls, living with their father, and wives. Moreover they share with Bona Dea an evident Dionysiac aspect. Transvestism, disguise, metamorphose are also recurring in the myths of those goddesses. Thanks to comparisons with those Italic goddesses it will be possible to recognize some features of cults to Faunus and Fauna in the 5th to 2nd centuries BC. Several phenomena which are described by Cicero or Plutarch seem to be more ancient than the 1st century BC, and namely the Dionysiac form of cults and mythology. Goddesses of women and their female worshippers appear to be similar to Greek Mænads. An opposition between goddesses of women and gods of men appears to be very ancient as well. The same can be said of the image of a primordial world, of primitive men and remote ancestors as an environment in which the myths took place. They will be presented as a comparison to Bona Dea/Fauna and Faunus. The above mentioned features, and not other ones, will be the criterion for comparisons.

The meaning of this religious compound will be clarified thanks to a final comparison with female initiations among native peoples. The initiations are aimed at preparing young women to marriage. Those rituals are shaped with many features we have already met in ancient Italy, and namely: 1) segregation of women from men; 2) transvestism, disguise; 3) deception, disappointment or mockery of sexually active boys; 4) symbols of fertility; 5) relation between parents and daughter; 6) sexual appeal; 7) use of inebriant substances.

2. VIRGINITY WITHOUT HYMEN

The first topic we will deal with is the role of gods in the Roman marriage.

In the Greek and Roman world tradition and laws forbade unmarried women from having sexual intercourse. For example, Solon's laws prescribed that a father could sell his daughter if she had had sexual intercourse before marriage.¹ A great difference between the modern and the ancient understanding of marriage is the concept of virginity. The Ancients seem not to care about it, even though they knew of physical female virginity.

In 1984 Giulia Sissa published a seminal article² in which she shows that the Greek and Roman idea of virginity was not dependent on the hymen. Her re-

1 Plut., *Solon* 23.

2 G.Sissa, "Une virginité sans hymen. Le corps féminin en Grèce ancienne", *AnnalesESC* 39, 1984, 1119–1139. She discusses the same questions also in her book *Le corps virginal. La virginité féminine en Grèce ancienne*, Paris 1987, but here she deals specifically with pagan mythology.

search focuses on Greek and patristic literature. Latin authors were less concerned with this topic, but even in Latin literature, passages concerning the loss of physical virginity are rarely encountered.³ Sissa stressed that the word *parthenos* was specifically (but not exclusively) used to refer to a “woman who was not yet married”. On the other hand, medical literature never speaks of the hymen as a membrane that is ruptured during the first intercourse.⁴

In classical literature, and particularly in comedies, there are no husbands who discover that their brides are not virgins; no passage from the ancient authors deals with checking the physical virginity of girls and brides. The Hymenæum was the traditional hymn for the bridal procession⁵ and a shared opinion held that it was named after a certain Hymenaios of Athens, a hero who rescued a group of girls and was permitted to marry one of them.

In my opinion, this difference between the ancient and the modern concepts of virginity stems from the very different way in which the steps leading up to marriage are dealt with. More recently Leena Viitanlemi⁶ has underlined the religious value of *parthenia*, because several Greek ceremonies were devoted to those young girls, the *parthenoi*, or their participation was requested. The Ancients, and in particular the Romans believed that a girl had contact with a male god. This contact was an imaginary rape or some other form of sexual relation. Therefore, the role of husbands in the ancient world is not the same as nowadays.

There is no doubt that the same things happened during the honeymoon in the Greek and Roman age as happen nowadays, but ancient husbands could not claim any right to be the first. The gods went before. In this book we will focus particularly on a meaningful goddess of the Romans, Bona Dea, also called Fauna. She was supposed to be a young woman who could not be seen by men and lived at home with her father Faunus, but experienced the coming of a violent male

3 Ausonius' *Cento nuptialis* is a late exception.

4 Aristotle, in his *Historia animalium*, describes every sort of membranes, but no word of the female hymen; Galen, in his *Anatomicae administrationes*, deals with membranes, which should be respected by surgeons, but apparently ignores the existence of the special membrane of female anatomy. Soranus' treatise on female medicine, *Gynaikieia* (I.16–17 Ilberg) maintains that defloration opened the folds which were squeezed by a vascular net, and caused a small bloody flow. According to him, the vagina was simply narrow, not obstructed by a membrane. He argues against the idea that every woman had a membrane in her vagina, and deals with membranes which obstructed the vagina as pathologies (IV.17). A slightly different approach to those medical texts is that of A.E.Hanson, “The medical writers' Woman”, in: *Before sexuality. The construction of erotic experience in the ancient Greek world*, ed. by D.M.Halperin, J.J.Winkler & F.I.Zeitlin, Princeton 1990, 309–338, who admit that they knew of hymen and its relation to virginity.

5 See K.H.Hersch, *Roman Wedding. Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity*, Cambridge 2010, 239–242.

6 L.Viitanlemi, “*Parthenia* - Remarks on Virginity and its Meanings in the religious Context of ancient Greece”, in: *Aspects of Women in Antiquity*. Proceedings of the first Nordic Symposium on Women's Lives in Antiquity, Göteborg 12–15 June 1997, ed. by L.Larsson Lovén and A.Strömberg, Jonsered 1998, 44–57.

god, Faunus himself, or Hercules. The encounter was shocking to her. Other Roman virgin goddesses experienced similar encounters, and were able to deceive powerful male gods, and even to scorn them. Faunus, Hercules, Mars, Mutinus Titinus and other gods played an important role in the preparation of girls to the marriage.

Some passages of ancient authors are enough to show that the role played by these gods was not physical, but psychological. For example, a passage from Seneca the Elder⁷ portrays a certain Murrelius who condemns a self-professed virgin who applied to become a priestess, and says:

We know the kind of abstinence displayed by husbands who, even if they do not insist on the first night because the virgin is timid...

Here the rhetor is surely alluding to deflowering.

The ritual of Fortuna Virilis, celebrated the 1st April, prescribed a drink with honey, milk, and poppy seeds, which was a calming potion for brides.⁸

Servius⁹ mentions an etymology for *hymen*, i.e. the membrane broken during marriage. The same author¹⁰ explains in different terms why nuts were thrown during Roman weddings, saying that it was because the noise of nuts being thrown made it difficult to hear (the woman crying).¹¹ Ausonius, in his *Cento nuptialis*, describes in detail the honeymoon, but his account dates back to a time when Christianity was gaining the upper hand.

St. Augustine and other Christian writers are the last witnesses of pagan beliefs concerning the passage from virginity to marital status. We will present their accounts in the next paragraph.

3. GODS AND THE IUS PRIMÆ NOCTIS ACCORDING TO ST. AUGUSTINE

The first time that a woman had sexual intercourse concerned not only men but also the gods.

7 Sen., *Controv.* I.2.22.

8 Ovid., *Fasti* IV.133-156; Fest., 35 L; *Fasti Praenestini*, *Inscr.It.* XIII.2, 17; Plut., *Quaest. Rom.* 74 = 281 E; *de Fort.Rom.* 10 = 323 a; Lyd., *De mens.* IV.65. R.Schilling, *La religion romaine de Vénus*, Paris 2nd ed. 1982, 392 ; J.André, *L'alimentation et la cuisine à Rome*, Paris 1961, 141; J.Champeaux, *Fortuna*, EFR 64, Rome 1982, 387; N.Boëls-Janssen, *La vie religieuse des matrones dans la Rome archaïque*, EFR 176, Rome 1993, chap. IV, part. 326-7, 332.

9 Serv., in *Aen.* IV.99: *est etiam alia ratio vocabuli: nam hymen quaedam membrana quasi virginis puellae esse dicitur: qua rupta quia desinat esse virgo, hymenaei nuptiae dictae.*

10 Serv., in *Buc.* VIII.29.

11 *fiat strepitus, ne puellae vox virginitatem deponentis possit audiri.* See K.H.Hersch, *Roman Wedding. Ritual and Meaning in Antiquity*, Cambridge 2010, 156-158.

There is a clear statement of this pagan belief in St. Augustine's critical account.¹²

When a male and a female are united, the god Jugatinus presides. Well, let this be borne with. But the married woman must be brought home: the god Domiducus also is invoked. That she may be in the house, the god Domitius is introduced. That she may remain with her husband, the goddess Manturna is used. What more is required? Let human modesty be spared. Let the lust of flesh and blood go on with the rest, the secret of shame being respected. Why is the bed-chamber filled with a crowd of deities, when even the groomsmen have departed? And, moreover, it is so filled, not that in consideration of their presence more regard may be paid to chastity, but that by their help the woman, naturally of the weaker sex, and trembling with the novelty of her situation, may the more readily yield her virginity. For there are the goddess Virginiensis, and the god-father Subigus, and the goddess-mother Prema, and the goddess Pertunda, and Venus, and Priapus. What is this? If it was absolutely necessary that a man, laboring at this work, should be helped by the gods, might not some one god or goddess have been sufficient? Was Venus not sufficient alone, who is even said to be named from this, that without her power a woman does not cease to be a virgin? If there is any shame in men which is not in the deities, is it not the case that, when the married couple believe that so many gods of either sex are present, and busy at this work, they are so much affected with shame, that the man is less moved, and the woman more reluctant? And certainly, if the goddess Virginiensis is present to loose the virgin's zone, if the god Subigus is present that the virgin may be got under the man, if the goddess Prema is present that, having been got under him, she may be kept down, and may not move herself, what has the goddess Pertunda to do there? Let her blush; let her go forth. Let the husband himself do something. It is disgraceful that anyone but himself should do that from which she gets her name. But perhaps she is tolerated because she is said to be a goddess, and not a god. For if she were believed to be a male, and were called Pertundus, the husband would demand more help against him for the chastity of his wife than the newly-delivered woman against Silvanus. But why am I saying this, when Priapus, too, is there, a male to excess, upon whose immense and most unsightly member the newly-married bride is commanded to sit, according to the most honorable and most religious custom of matrons?

We are observing the birth of Christian civilisation and the end of paganism. Augustine chuckled at the ridiculous rituals of the pagans, which he knew by reading the works of pagan authors, and especially Varro. He was criticizing them because pagan rituals and beliefs were still living among the families. When he was young, Augustine himself attended to pagan rituals.¹³ One can be sure that in every family there was the latest woman who was educated in a pagan way. Her daughter, on the contrary, followed a Christian path.

On the other hand, someone like Martianus Capella (4th–5th cent. AD), who was nostalgic for paganism, made Venus rebuke the wedding divinities, namely Voluptas, Cupidon, Flora, the Charites, Melpomene, Suada, and Stimula, who had abandoned their duties.¹⁴

12 *De civ. Dei* VI.9.25–26, transl. J.F.Shaw. On virginity in the early Christian thought see the recent work by Ch.Munier, *Mariage et virginité dans l'Église ancienne (I–III siècles)*, Frankfurt 1987.

13 *Augustin., De civ. Dei* I.4.

14 *Mart.Cap.VIII.887*.

Some of the gods mentioned were perhaps unfit for the purposes they were supposed to fulfil. Manturna was an Etruscan goddess of the underworld, not the goddess of the *manere* (to stay, to remain in a place); Stimula was the goddess who excited the Roman Mænads,¹⁵ even though she could have something to do with sexual stimulation.¹⁶ Augustine's bias against the pagan gods, his possible inaccuracies, and his manipulation of works by Varro do not rob his account of its value. It shows that consummation of the marriage was prepared and accompanied by many pagan gods and rituals. In particular, the husband was not alone in his task. This can help to explain the absence of questions about the hymen in ancient pagan societies.

Christian writers were greedy to unveil the secrets surrounding some mysterious pagan rituals to make them seem ridiculous or shameful.

For certain aspects, Arnobius (3rd–4th cent. AD) is even more explicit than St. Augustine:

Is there one Perfica of the crowd of deities, who causes those base and filthy delights to reach their end with uninterrupted pleasure? Is there also Pertunda, who presides over the couch when husbands penetrate into the virginal way? Is there also Tutunus, on whose huge member and horrent *fascinum* you think it auspicious, and desire, that your matrons should be borne as on horseback?¹⁷

Tertullian (3rd cent. AD) makes a similar criticism of marriage gods:

Shall I speak of the time of marriage? Afferenda presides over the dowry. After her comes Mutunus, Tutunus, Pertunda, Subigus, Prema... Shameful gods, let me speak no more of them. At the end, the spouses are left to act themselves, and the people leave wishing them shameful things.¹⁸

Lactantius (3rd–4th cent. AD) confirms this and says:

Tutinus, in whose shameful lap the brides sit, so that the god appears to have picked up at first their chastity.¹⁹

Here is what a pagan writer like Verrius Flaccus (Augustan age) writes on this phallic god:

There was at Rome a small sacred place of Mutinus Titinus on the Velia, close to the Mustelinus wall, in a narrow way.

There was at Rome a small sacred place of Mutinus Titinus. The matronæ, clothed with the *toga prætexta*, offered sacrifices in his honour.²⁰

15 O.de Cazanove, "Lucus Stimulae. Les aiguillons des Bacchanales", *MEFRA* 45, 1983, 55–113.

16 de Cazanove, "Lucus Stimulae", 69.

17 Arnob., *Adv.nat.* IV.7.

18 Tert., *Ad nat.* II.12.

19 Lact., *Div.inst.* I.20.36: *Tutinus, in cuius sinu pudendo nubentes praesident, ut illarum pudicitiam prior deus delibasse videatur.*

20 See Fest. and Pauli ep., 142–3 L. On this transvestitism: G.Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, Munich 1912, 243 and n.4 (they dedicated the clothes of childhood); on Mutinus Titi-

Pagan women offered their virginity to the gods; Christian women offered it to their husbands. The pagan offering was mainly symbolic, but was enough to prevent husbands arguing over virginity.

Maybe this sentence is risky, and ought to be based on solid documentary evidence, but it is useful to open our ears to accounts that appear to be odd, weird or impossible. Our culture evolved after the Roman Empire, became Christian and is very distant from the bridal customs of the ancient paganism.

4. PAGAN GODS AND THEIR IUS PRIMÆ NOCTIS

The second topic we will discuss is that of relations between sexually active gods and women, in order to prove that several gods had rights concerning virginity of young women or brides.

From the ancient authors it appears that no husband ever complained about his bride not being a virgin, but there were gods who did complain. Those complaints concern priestesses, who performed rituals on behalf of the community. Propertius²¹ reports the following:

Lanuvium from of old, is guarded by an ancient serpent: the hour you spend on such a marvellous visit won't be wasted; where the sacred way is dragged down through a dark abyss, where the hungry snake's tribute penetrates (virgin, be wary of all such paths!), when he demands the annual offering of food, and twines, hissing, from the centre of the earth. Girls grow pale, sent down to such rites as these, when their hand is rashly entrusted to the serpent's mouth. He seizes the tit-bits the virgins offer: the basket itself trembles in their hands. If they've remained chaste they return to their parents' arms, and the farmers shout: 'It will be a fertile year.'

The chastity of those priestesses was not a generic abstinence from sex before a ritual, but a condition on which the success of the ritual depended. They were young and not yet married, for their parents (not their husbands) congratulated them after passing the trial.

Ælianus²² (end 2nd century AD – first decades of the 3rd) adds other elements to this story:

In Lavinium there is a large and thick sacred grove, and close to it a temple of Hera Argolis. In the grove there is a big and deep cave, the den of a snake. On some certain days sacred virgins approach the grove carrying a barley-cake and having their eyes covered by bandages. A divine spirit takes them directly to the snake's den. They march quietly step by step as if their eyes were not veiled. If they are virgin, the snake goes to the food as pure and suitable

nus, the *sodales Titii* and the *gens Titia*: B.Combet-Farnoux, *Mercurie romain*, Paris 1980, 121–2; on Mutinus and Roman wedding: Hersch, *Roman Wedding*, 269–272.

21 IV.8.3–14, transl. Kline. See A.E.Gordon, *The Cults of Lanuvium*, Berkeley 1938, 23–42.

22 *Hist.anim.* XI.16; instead of Lanuvium Ælianus (or his manuscript tradition) speaks of Lavinium, and the involved goddess is called Hera Argolis. See J.-M.Pailler, “La vierge et le serpent: de la trivalence à l'ambiguïté”, *MEFRA* 109, 1997, 513–575. One can not accuse Ælianus to be ignorant: he was born in Præneste, in Latium and he was a priest. Therefore the mistake probably depends on the manuscript tradition.