The *Matronae*:
An Assembly of Women in the Roman Republic?

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Honors Thesis

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PASS WITH DISTINCTION
TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:

As thesis advisor for Alexis Ninsworth.

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

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Date
The Roman Republic, which lasted from 509 to 30 B.C.E., witnessed many methodical political and social actions by groups of married women. This level of systematization hints at the possibility of a women's assembly, a group known as the Matrons. Because of the lack of research into the history of women, this possibility has never been fully explored. Within historical studies, the political role of ancient women has largely been ignored; much of the research about women in ancient Rome focuses on their roles as wives and mothers who were mistreated and subjugated. This exploration of the Matrons adds critical information to the view of Roman women, creating a new picture and better understanding of women in the Republic.

Little was written about the actions and functions of women within the limited extant ancient sources. Piecing together scattered and obscure references to women in the writings of authors like Livy, Plutarch, and Dio Cassius resulted in the emergence of a theme of women's organization. Consulting modern historical works, like those of Richard A. Bauman, and their interpretations of the ancient texts was also vital to understanding and reinterpreting the ancient sources. With all the research completed and analyzed, it became impossible to deny that some sort of women's organization existed.

The event in 488 or 487 B.C.E. that dealt with the immanent attack of Rome by Gnaeus Marcius Coriolanus provides a perfect example of this organization. The Matrons of Rome pled with Coriolanus' mother to save the city, and ultimately recruited her to beg her son to halt his attack. More that two hundred years later, in 207, the government put the women's assembly in charge of collecting money to be offered as expiation to the offended gods. The women conferred and ultimately elected twenty-five of their own to
collect contributions from the dowries of the Matrons. This example shows how the women were trusted by the government and given the authority to enact a tax upon themselves. A mere thirteen years later, in 195, the most conspicuous example of a women’s assembly occurred in the Forum during the *contio* to decide if the Oppian law should be repealed. The Oppian law was a sumptuary law that limited, among other things, the amount of gold a woman could own. To encourage the repeal of this law, the women blocked all the entrances to the Forum where the vote would take place, encouraging the men to vote for the repeal before they were allowed to pass. It would have taken extremely precise organization in order for the Matrons to block every entrance, which supports the idea that there must have been an assembly. Thus, while it is impossible to know the exact truth about the Matron’s assembly, especially its particular functions and structure, the examination of ancient texts provides ample evidence that some sort of female political organization did indeed exist.

The next step in this project is to take it to a professional conference. My faculty thesis advisor, Dr. Kathryn Meyer, and I plan to refine it over the next few months and take it to either a joint conference of CAPN (Classical Association of the Pacific Northwest) and CACW (Classical Association of the Canadian West) in Victoria in February, or to the Northwest Regional Phi Alpha Theta (National History Honorary) Conference in Sun Valley in April. Since this topic is academically risky in the traditional world of Classics, input from conference attendees will be constructive. We then plan further revisions before submitting it for publication in a professional journal. Its publication should cause an interesting stir among scholars who research and write about women in the Roman world.
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Historiography

When writing about ancient history, typically historians rely on any original sources that can be found, whether they are historical books, biographies, poetry, drama, epithets, or simply ancient graffiti. The reasons for resorting to these tactics is that most of what was written in the ancient world is now lost. By collecting all the remaining sources that cover similar events, historians can piece together the truth about what may have really happened in ancient times. These extant sources must be analyzed to ensure their reputability. By critically examining these sources, historians can properly use the information they provide and apply it to their research. Many sources are filled with exaggerations or biases that must be properly understood, so one must analyze the motives of the authors and how they affected their works. Through these methods, historians are effectively able to piece together ancient Roman history.

The biggest problem for research on Roman women, however, is the total lack of “women’s voices.” Although some twenty-seven works by women authors survive from the ancient world, the vast majority focus on Christian theology. None of them concerns politics, government, economics, or the role of women in the early Republic. Thus, modern historians must rely almost entirely on the works of male classical historians and biographers, who wrote in either Latin or Greek, depending on whether they lived in the eastern or western half of the Roman Empire. The Greek-speaking historians tended to have a broad world view and a fairly positive view of Rome, surprising as they lived in conquered territories. Roman historians were often
more critical of their own history, and tended to use it for contemporary political purposes. The gender biases of the two societies are clearly evident in the ancient sources. Authors from Greek-speaking territories—where women had fewer rights than those in Rome—either ignored or criticized women’s roles in political events, while Latin-speaking authors recognized the contributions of women more often.

The Roman historian, Titus Livius (c. 64 B.C.E. to 17 C.E.), the author of *Ab urbe condita libri*, offers the most thorough, complete, and useful extant history of the Republic. Livy lived in Patavium (modern Padua) during the reign of the first emperor, Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (later Augustus Caesar). Because the emperor was very concerned about the state of Rome and its declining morals, the artists and writers who lived under imperial patronage, such as Livy, were also concerned. Thus, the historian used his writing to help teach the Romans of his time about the high morals an earlier age: courage, fidelity, honesty, and patriotism. By focusing on the emotions and motives of his historical characters, he was able to give the reader ideals for which to strive. Through a revival of these old virtues, Livy hoped to restore Rome to its former splendor. Compared to other ancient historians, Livy remained mostly objective toward women; however, he did possess the traditional male viewpoint of the time. This perspective—which includes a bias against women and their emotions, reasoning, and basic intelligence—emerges

1 *Books From the Foundation of the City*, a history of Rome from 753 to 9 B.C.E. in 142 books. Unfortunately, only books 1 through 10 and 21 through 45 survive today in their entirety, but the rest exist in one form or another in epitomes or summaries called the *Periochae*.

occasionally in his writing. For example, Livy described a dispute that escalated because of "the hot anger of women." From this excerpt, it is clear that Livy believed that the female nature could lead to a certain level of misguided passion. In another passage, Livy revealed his belief that women should be reserved and shy when he described the Sabine women rushing in to halt a battle because "their women's timidity [was] lost in the sense of their misfortune." This passage also reflects his view of women in his own time, as Livy tended to present morally strong female characters in order to teach women how they should act. Thus, as a source, Livy is relatively reliable with regard to factual information, but his biases toward women cannot be overlooked.

Livy's work served as a source, along with works by other authors like Cicero, for Valerius Maximus when he wrote his Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri IX (Memorable Deeds and Sayings) during the reign of Tiberius (14 to 27 C.E.). When consulting his main sources, Valerius Maximus was not critical and his accuracy varied. Through his writing, he was extremely harsh in his descriptions of the female population in Rome. In his discussion of the repeal of the Oppian law, he characterized the protesting women as mentally infirm. While Livy

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3 Livy 10.23.4 (iracundia muliebri).

4 Livy 1.13.1 (victo malis muliebri pavore).


remains the most reliable source, Valerius Maximus provided an acceptable literary comparison.

Like Livy, Mestrius Plutarchus of Chaeronea (c. 50 to 120 C.E.) emphasized the ideals of the early Republic, but through biography instead of narrative history. He wrote many works, but for this project the most important and helpful of his works was the *Vita Parallelae (Parallel Lives).* The *Lives* are a collection of biographies, grouped into pairs comparing a Roman soldier or statesman to his Greek counterpart.⁸ Such didactic juxtaposition was common, but Plutarch seems to have adjusted his stories to make the lives of his subjects relate to each other. One of his goals was to show through his pairings that the men of early Greece were equally as great as the men of Rome. Like Livy, Plutarch’s purpose in writing the *Parallel Lives* was to inspire morality in the reader by providing suitable models of virtue; however, he was not careful in choosing his sources and therefore accuracy is often varied.⁹ Thus, his information on women is sometimes inaccurate, but he often provided details missing in other sources. More importantly, his attitude toward female participation in government and politics seems slightly less biased than Livy’s. Plutarch was the sole ancient historian, for example, to praise the Egyptian queen and enemy of Rome, Cleopatra; and, although he confused some of the participants’ names, his description of the women’s delegation to Gaius Marcius Coriolanus in

⁷ Valerius Maximus 9.1.3.

⁸ Of Plutarch’s original *Lives,* 23 pairs have survived, along with 19 of the comparisons.

488/87 B.C.E. (see pages 14-15) is the most complete account that survives from antiquity.

In contrast, the Greek historian Polybius of Megalopolis (200 to 118 B.C.E.) wrote his major work, the Historiae (Histories), with a more reliable and methodical approach. His work reads like a guidebook for statesmen, putting the growth of Rome into a systematic structure. Polybius, a Greek who admired Rome, wrote the Historiae to explain to the Greeks how Rome rose to greatness. Unfortunately, he disdained women and portrayed them as meek and unintelligent. Compared to Livy and Plutarch, Polybius could be considered misogynistic. An anecdote about the early political life of Gnaius Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus (before he became the conqueror of Carthage) illustrates Polybius’ attitude toward the female sex. In a detailed passage, he described how Scipio tricked his overly emotional and presumably ignorant mother—who is not even named—into preparing for him the toga candida (the white toga of political candidates), even though at 22 he was legally too young to run for office. A careful reading, however, reveals that in the absence of Scipio’s father, Scipio’s mother was in charge of the family finances. Scipio had to ask her permission not only to run for office, but to finance his campaign as well. Polybius did not write about the Matrons of Rome, but his history

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11 Maehle, Female Cult in the Struggle of the Orders, 6-7.

12 Polybius 10.4.4-5.4.

13 Maehle, Female Cult in the Struggle of the Orders, 7.
provides valuable historical comparisons to check the details of major events in
Roman history.

A second Greek historian, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, was born in the middle
of the first century B.C.E. and came to Rome in 30 B.C.E. He spent twenty years
writing the *Roman Antiquities*, and he attempted to enhance Greek pride by
emphasizing the Greek origins of Rome.\(^{14}\) His male Greek perspective appears often
in his writing, such as in a question asked by a woman fearing a destructive attack on
Rome: “What strength so great do we weak and miserable women possess?”\(^{15}\) A third
Greek author, born at the end of the first century C.E., Appian of Alexandria, devoted
his time to writing a Roman History. In his attempt to confine a millennium of history
into one work, Appian was forced to condense and reduce his sources and materials.
Nevertheless, through his work historians have access to sources that are now lost.\(^{16}\)

Finally, a fourth historian from the Greek half of the Roman Empire, Cassius
Dio (c. 164 to after 229 CE), was a distinguished senator as well as an author. His
eighty-book history of Rome begins with the foundation of the city in 753 B.C.E and
ends in 229 C.E. Dio lived during an era of tyrannical emperors and politically
ambitious but unqualified and unscrupulous men and this environment ultimately
affected his view of the past. He tended to view the actions of both men and women
with suspicion and negativity. In addition, his *Roman History* is only partially extant.

For the missing pieces historians must rely on excerpts or epitomes from Johannes

\(^{14}\) James T. Shotwell, *The Story of Ancient History* (New York: Columbia

\(^{15}\) Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 8.39.3 (τίς ή τοσαύτη
περί ήμᾶς τὰς ἀσθενείς καὶ ταλαιπώρους ἐστίν ἵσχυς).

Zonaras or Xiphilinus. Furthermore, although Dio spent ten years researching, he then spent the next twelve years writing from his notes, not the original sources. This method led to many errors and distortions.\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, his work can be valuable in comparing sources and filling in missing bits of information.

Marcus Tulius Cicero (106 to 43 B.C.E.) also provided a valuable body of work through his surviving orations, writings, and letters. Well known for his oratory, Cicero covered a plethora of topics and ultimately preserved them through his own efforts. He entrusted his wife, Terentia, with the management of his accounts while he was out of the city, revealing his trust in and support of the women in Rome.

In modern sources, the topic of women in politics in ancient Rome is almost as scarce as in ancient sources. Modern historians largely failed to recognize the role women played during the Roman Republic until Roman Women: Their History and Habits, by J. P. V. D. Balsdon, was published in 1963.\textsuperscript{18} It was not until twelve years later that Sarah B. Pomeroy wrote Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves,\textsuperscript{19} which seriously and critically looked at the essential position of women in Roman society in ways that Balsdon had failed to recognize. Even with Pomeroy's unique perspective, her emphasis was still on the social and daily lives of women and their subjugation. Numerous historians are now engaged in researching and writing about ancient Roman women, but there are only two who focus their research on the political role

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of women in the Roman Republic, Ingvar Maehle\textsuperscript{20} and Richard A. Bauman.\textsuperscript{21} This probe into the involvement of women in politics creates a better and more precise image of women in ancient history. It is my hope that the publication of this paper will be a much-needed contribution to this field of research.

\textsuperscript{20} Maehle, \textit{Female Cult in the Struggle of the Orders}.

A striking number of bad omens marked the first days of the year 207 B.C.E. In Frusino, for example, a hermaphrodite as large as a four-year-old child was born. As Rome was eleven years into its second war with Carthage\(^1\) and the newly installed consuls—Gaius Claudius Nero and Marcus Livius—were about to set out with their legions, these portents boded ill for the war. Not only did the pontiffs immediately decide that the hermaphrodite should be drowned in the sea, they also mandated nine days of rites to be performed, which included the a hymn composed by the poet Livius Andronicus, sung by twenty-seven maidens. While these maidens were practicing Andronicus’ hymn, however, another omen appeared: the Temple of Juno Regina on the Aventine Hill was struck by lightning. The soothsayers decided that, because of this temple’s connection with the married women of Rome, they themselves should expiate the portent. Thus, all the Matrons who lived in the city of Rome or within ten miles of it were summoned by the curule aediles to the capital. “And from their own number they themselves chose twenty-five, to whom they should bring a contribution from their dowries.”\(^2\) The Matrons then generously chose to enact a tax upon their own dowries in order to appease the goddess Juno Regina. These contributions were put toward a golden

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\(^1\) The Second Punic War, which lasted from 218 to 202.

\(^2\) Livy 27.37.9 (Ipsae inter se quinque et viginti delegerunt ad quas ex dotibus stipem conferrent).
basin that was given to the deity. Following this, a procession was held, sacrifices were made, the maidens at last sang Andronicus’ hymn, and the legions marched out against Hannibal.¹

Livy’s somewhat superficial account of this incident fails to emphasize its four key elements. First, high ranking magistrates of the Roman state sought out the Matrons and specifically gave them the authority to determine how to propitiate omens that had a direct bearing on the military success of Rome. Not only were they authorized to decide what should be done, they were given complete autonomy to implement their plans. Second, summoning all married women who lived within a ten-mile radius of Rome resulted in a large group of women, equivalent in number—and perhaps in function—to three of the four male-only Roman Assemblies. Third, the women elected twenty-five of their number to serve as treasurers, who were responsible for both the collection of funds and their use. Finally, and most important, the women legislated into existence a tax upon their dowries. Granted, this tax affected only the women themselves, but this does not negate the legislative function of the Matrons’ Assembly. In fact, this constraint closely parallels the limited authority of the Concilium Plebis, whose laws were binding only on the plebeian class before passage of the lex Hortensia in 287 B.C.E.

Livy’s account of the legislative activity of the Matrons in 207 is not the only description of group efforts by women, it simply ascribes to them more official power than they had at any other time in Roman history. In the early and middle Roman Republic, groups of women tried to influence affairs of state with varying results. The most famous incident was their successful demonstration in favor of repeal of the Oppian

¹ Livy 27.37.1-10; Richard Bauman, Women and Politics in Ancient Rome (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 27.
law in 195 B.C.E., but there are many other examples. Most historians see events that involved groups of women as spontaneous and sporadic—or limited to religious concerns. Nevertheless, the efficiency with which women were able to achieve specific goals indicates much more, and it points to clear lines of communication and organization on a scale previously unimagined. A focused analysis of group endeavors by women, in fact, suggests nothing less than the existence of a women’s assembly.

Modern historians have thus far failed to see the obvious clues that point toward the existence of such a group. The most noticeable is the assembly’s name, the “Matronae,” which is used with remarkable consistency by all ancient writers. Modern translators generally interpret it as “matrons,” a simple reference to respected married women, but its use is reserved almost exclusively for descriptions of political activity by groups of prominent women. In exactly the same way, ancient writers used the term Patres (the Fathers) when discussing the Senate, Plebeia (the Plebs or the People) for the Concilium Plebis (the Assembly of the Plebeians), and Tribus (the Tribes) for the Comitia Tributa (the Assembly of the Tribes). Ancient audiences understood the implied meaning of these terms, but somewhere along the way the meaning of Matronae was lost. In addition, at least one ancient historian, Valerius Maximus, wrote about the order of women, the Ordo Matronarum.4 The word ordo is significant here, as it refers to an official body or class of the Roman citizenry, subject to censorial assessment and taxation.5 Finally, the number of incidents in Roman Republican history in which groups of women play a pivotal and essential role is simply too large to ignore.

4 Valerius Maximus 8.3.3.

5 Bauman, Women and Politics in Ancient Rome, 212.
Precedent for women's involvement in the affairs of state may have begun at the onset of the Monarchy, with the famous story of the "rape" of the Sabine women.\(^6\) According to the traditional foundation legend of Rome, not long after its establishment in 753 B.C.E.,\(^7\) the first king, Romulus, concerned that Rome's population was predominantly male, devised a plan to abduct the young women of a neighboring tribe, the Sabines. After inviting them and their parents to the festival of the god Consus, the Roman men snatched up the Sabine maidens,\(^8\) carried them home, and forced them to become Roman wives. Plutarch said that the number of women abducted could have been anywhere between 30 and 683.\(^9\) The result, of course, was war, as the Sabines and their allies attempted to reclaim the women. At least two battles were fought against the allies, which the Romans won. At this point, Romulus' wife, Hersilia, was approached either by a delegation of the brides or a series of individuals who apparently begged her to intercede with her husband. Their chief concern was that Romulus forgive their parents for attacking Rome and incorporate them into the city.

\(^6\) The original meaning of the modern word "rape" was the Latin *rapto*, to steal or to carry off.

\(^7\) According to Plutarch (*Romulus* 14.1), the abduction of the women took place on August 18, during the *Consualia* (a festival in honor of the god Consus), four months after the foundation of Rome in April; Livy, however, implied that a number of years passed first, perhaps as many as thirty-four (1.8.5-9.9).

\(^8\) It is possible that young wives as well as unmarried women were seized. Plutarch (*Romulus* 18.4-5) said that Romulus' wife, Hersilia, was the widow of the Sabine king, Hostilius, who fell in battle after the abduction of the Sabines; and both Plutarch (*Romulus* 19.1) and Livy (1.13.3) made it clear that a number of the women had children during the war between the Romans and the Sabines. This could, however, merely indicate that a significant period of time passed before the Sabines attempted to reclaim their daughters, even though tradition implies otherwise.

\(^9\) Plutarch, *Romulus*, 14.6. Roman tradition believed that the thirty *curiae*, or tribes, of Rome were named after thirty Sabine women.
Romulus quickly agreed to the women’s suggestions, but not in time to prevent a third attack on Rome, this time by the Sabines themselves. During fierce fighting, the Sabine daughters (whose husbands’ tenderness had supposedly gained the affection of their new spouses) rushed into the fray:

...with loosened hair and torn garments, ...[they] dared to go amongst the flying missiles, and rushing in from the side, to part the hostile forces and disarm them of their anger, beseeching their fathers on this side, on that [side] their husbands, that fathers-in-law and sons-in-law should not stain themselves with impious bloodshed, nor pollute with parricide the suppliants’ children, grandsons to one party and sons to the other. “If you regret,” they continued, “the relationship that unites you, if you regret the marriage tie, turn your anger against us; we are the cause of the war, the cause of wounds, and even death to both our husbands and our parents. It will be better for us to perish than to live, lacking either of you, as widows or as orphans.”

The women’s pleas halted the battle, the leaders were soon able to reach a truce, and the Sabine women were finally able to introduce their fathers and brothers to their new families. The Sabines also agreed to merge with the Romans, instantly doubling the size of the city.

Significantly, the Sabine women—the first matrons of Rome—were able to use their numbers to work together to save the lives of both their husbands and their Sabine families. It was the women’s idea to merge the two tribes, and their efforts to prevent bloodshed could not have been accomplished without organization and communication. Also worthy of note was Romulus’ willingness to take his wife’s advice and to consider

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10 Livy 1.13.1-4 (crinibus passis scissaque veste...ausae se inter tela volantia inferre, ex transverso impetus facto dirimere infestas acies, dirimere iras, hinc patres hinc viros orantes ne se sanguine nefando soci et generique respergerent, ne parricidio macularent partus suos, nepotum illi, hi liberum progeniem. “Si adfinitatis inter vos, si conubii piget, in nos vertite iras; nos causa belli, nos moverum ac caedium viris ac parentibus sumus; melius peribimus quam sine alteris vestrum aut orbae vivemus.”)

11 Livy 1.9-13; Plutarch, Romulus, 14-20.
the opinions of the Sabine women. Obviously, respect for the efforts of women, whether in a group or as individuals, was an early and important characteristic of Roman society. Seven centuries later, the Roman orator and writer, Marcus Tullius Cicero, recognized both the women's importance in this episode in Roman legend and their connection to the women's assembly. Romulus' alliance with the Sabines, said Cicero, was the "result of the petitions of the matrons who had been stolen." 12

By the turbulent early years of the Republic, the Matrons may have been a more formalized group. In 488 or 487, Gnaeus Marcius Coriolanus, a disgruntled Roman exile and commander of the army of a neighboring tribe, the Volscians, encamped his men outside the walls of Rome and threatened to attack. After envoys from the Senate failed to persuade him to consider a peace agreement, a large number of Roman women gathered in front of the Temple of Jupiter Capitoline. One of their leaders, Valeria, made an impassioned speech from its topmost step. Encouraging the Matrons not to be alarmed at the danger that threatened, she assured them that there was "just one hope of safety for the commonwealth, and that this hope rested in them alone, if they would do what the gods required." 13 When a woman in the crowd asked what strength the women could use, Valeria replied, "A strength that calls not for weapons or hands—for nature has excused us from the use of these—but for goodwill and speech." 14

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12 Cicero, De Republica, 2.7.13 (foedus icit matronis ipsis, quae raptae errant, orantibus).

13 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 8.39.2 (ἐπείτα ὑπέσχετο μίαν εἶναι σωτηρίας ἐλπίδα τῇ πόλει, ταύτην δ' ἐ αὐταῖς εἴναιμόναις καταλειπομένην, ἔαν ἐθελήσωσι πράττειν ἃ δεί).

14 Ibid. (Ὅχι δπλων μὲν γὰρ ἀπολέλυκεν ἡμᾶς ἡ φύσις, ἀλλ' εἰνοίας καὶ λόγου).
The Matrons approved Valeria’s plan unanimously, putting it into effect immediately. They gathered their children and proceeded to the home of Coriolanus’ mother, Veturia, and his wife Volumnia.15 The women begged Veturia and Volumnia to take Coriolanus’ two young sons to the Volscian camp and convince him not to attack his native city. “Since the swords of the men could not defend the city,” they said, “women should defend it with their prayers and tears.”16 The Matrons then accompanied Veturia and Volumnia to see Coriolanus, and stood, some weeping, while Veturia sternly berated her son. She and the delegation were successful, and Rome was spared. The city built a temple to *Fortuna Muliebris* (the goddess of Women’s Fortune) and dedicated it to preserve the memory of the Matrons’ accomplishment.17

It is clear that these women represented—or constituted—the women’s assembly. They gathered in a public outdoor space, as did the male assemblies. They also met for a definite purpose—the crisis facing Rome and the men’s failure to deal with it. Male assemblies likewise did not meet on a regular basis, but only when the necessity arose. The assembly of women listened to speakers; and they apparently voted on at least one, if not several, proposals. Livy admitted that they could have had an official function when he complained that he was unable to find out if the women’s delegation to Coriolanus

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15 Livy 2.40.1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 8.40.1. In Plutarch’s account (Coriolanus 33.2-3), Coriolanus’ mother’s name was Volumnia and his wife’s name was Vergilia.

16 Livy 2.40.2 (*quoniam armis viri defendere urbem non possent, mulieres precibus lacrimisque defenderent quoniam armis viri defendere urbem non possent, mulieres precibus lacrimisque defenderent*).

17 Livy 2.40.3-12; Plutarch, *Coriolanus*, 37.2-3; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 8.40.1-56.4.
was the result of public policy or *muliebris timor* (women’s anxieties).\(^{18}\) According to Plutarch, however, they clearly organized on their own initiative. “We have come as women to women,” their leader, Valeria, originally announced to Veturia, “obeying neither senatorial edict nor consular command.”\(^{19}\) Clearly they acted on their own authority. At the very least, this story is strong evidence that the Matrons existed as a recognized group in Rome, that they were capable of taking political/military matters into their own hands, that the men did not prevent the women’s intervention and, in fact, may have welcomed it.

Forty years later, the Matrons appeared in another famous incident that had far-reaching political ramifications. In 449, a large number of Matrons accompanied the schoolgirl Virginia and her nurse to a trial to determine whether Virginia was freeborn or slave. The girl was the victim of a plot concocted by the decimvir, Appius Claudius, and his client, Marcus Claudius, to remove her from her father’s protection so that Appius Claudius could take advantage of her sexually. Marcus Claudius claimed that Virginia was a slave who had been stolen from him as an infant, and that she had been falsely passed off as her father’s daughter.

Throughout the trial, the women wept quietly, probably attempting to influence the verdict. “Their silent tears,” said Livy, “were more moving than any voice.”\(^{20}\) When the judge—none other than Appius Claudius himself—ruled in his client’s favor, the Matrons protested noisily, encircled Virginia, and attempted to prevent Marcus Claudius

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\(^{18}\) Livy 2.40.1.

\(^{19}\) Plutarch, *Coriolanus*, 33.3 (Αὐταὶ...γυναῖκες ἡκομεν πρὸς γυναῖκας, οὔτε βουλὴς ψηφισμένης οὔτε ἄρχοντος κελεύσαντος).

\(^{20}\) Livy 3.47.4 (*plus tacito fletu quam ulla vox movebat*).
from taking custody of her. Through their group organization and effort, the Matrons endeavored to save a member of their own sex from dishonor. Appius Claudius was not able to resolve the situation until he threatened to set armed men against the women. They drew back, but with an unexpected result: they unwittingly allowed Virginia’s father, Lucius Virginius, access to his daughter. Rather than turn her over to Marcus Claudius and certain dishonor, Virginius stabbed her to death.²¹

At this point, the Matrons publicly began to express their grief to such a degree that Livy dismissed their complaints as “women’s anguish,” reinforced by their lack of self-control. Yet their complaints had more impact than Livy realized; they helped convince the men of Rome to initiate the second landmark secession of the Conflict of Orders (a plebian struggle for political rights that lasted for approximately two centuries). The result of the Matrons’ support of Virginia was the imprisonment of the tyrannical and unjust Appius Claudius, the exile of the other nine decemvirs, the restoration of republican government, and the codification and publication of Roman law: the Twelve Tables.²³

Women’s influence in political affairs continued to be appreciated by Roman men, especially in times of crisis. In 390, the Matrons of Rome supposedly cut their hair for Roman archers to use as bowstrings against the invading and attacking Gauls. Successful in taking all but the Citadel of Rome, the Gauls began to suffer from heat and disease, and the Romans still holding out in the Citadel began to suffer from hunger. The

²¹ Livy 3.48.5; Orosius 2.13.

²² Livy 3.48.8 (muliebris dolor).

²³ For the entire story of Virginia, see Livy 3.44–49.
ailing Gauls promised to leave Rome if the Romans gave the Gauls 1,000 pounds of gold—an amount that exceeded what the Roman treasury contained. One option, judged unacceptable, was to use some of the "sacred gold"\textsuperscript{24} that belonged to the temples. Instead, the Matrons of Rome made up the difference, gathering enough gold to meet the demands of the Gauls. How they accomplished fundraising on this scale is unknown, especially given the situation; but it is likely that the women’s assembly was responsible for its planning and implementation.

After the gold was collected and as it was being weighed—but before it was turned over to the Gauls—the exiled Roman dictator, Furius Camillus, suddenly appeared with an army and defeated the Gauls in two quick battles: one in the half-ruined city of Rome and a second eight miles outside the city. The gold gathered by the women was therefore never needed, but their efforts were appreciated: the Matrons received an official vote of thanks and the right to have eulogies at their funerals, just like politically or militarily important men. In addition, the Roman "People" (a standard reference to the Plebeian Assembly, the Concilium Plebis) voted the Matrons the privilege of being able to ride through the streets of the city in chariots.\textsuperscript{25} This clearly indicates that special honors were given to certain women who had made important contributions to the welfare of Rome.

The Gauls had invaded Rome in the middle of a period of political and social change, the Conflict of Orders, that lasted over two centuries. Before this, the Matrons' activities had usually focused on the welfare of the Roman state, but now—just like the

\textsuperscript{24} Livy, 5.47.1-.50.7 (\textit{sacro auro}).

\textsuperscript{25} Livy 5.49.1-7, 5.50.7; Diodorus Siculus 14.116.9.
plebeians who were agitating for increased participation in government for members of their class—the women appear to have turned their attentions to improving the specific rights of women, especially marriage laws. Roman law declared that the *paterfamilias* (male head of an extended family) controlled his female relatives, including the right of life or death over his household. When a daughter wed a man *cum manu* (with hand) this control over her life passed from her father’s hand to her husband’s hand. The daughter relinquished her *gens* (clan) and took on that of her husband. After the *lex Canuleia* was passed in 445, plebeians were allowed to enter a marriage with patricians. Thus, when a patrician woman married a plebian man *cum manu*, she forfeited her patrician status. By 200, a different and looser form of marriage—*sine manu* (without hand)—had emerged as an alternative to *cum manu* marriage. In marriage *sine manu*, the wife’s original family retained control over her and she remained legally a part of her father’s family. This allowed the new wife to keep the status and opportunities attached to the social class in which she was born.\(^\text{26}\) Historians have been unable to document the process by which this significant change in marriage customs was accomplished, but it is likely that marital rights and laws were a major concern for the Matrons during the two preceding centuries.

For the first time, however, the Matrons were acting in their own self-interest, rather than the needs of the state as a whole. The men of Rome do not seem to have found the women’s actions laudable, or even acceptable. Thus the prominence and the influence of the Matrons now began a downward spiral, especially after a bizarre episode in the last third of the fourth century. In 331, more than 190 Roman women were accused of poisoning a large number of leading male citizens of Rome, probably their own

husbands, whose deaths initially had been attributed to a mysterious plague. After an anonymous slave woman led an aedile, Quintus Fabius Maximus, to a group of Matrons found in the act of brewing mysterious potions, the homes of twenty of these women were searched and similar suspicious substances discovered in each. The women were summoned to the Forum, and a large crowd gathered. When the group’s patrician leaders, Cornelia and Sergia, argued that the mixtures were not poisons but beneficial drugs, the informant challenged them to prove their claims by ingesting the substances. They conferred first with each other, then with the other eighteen women, reaching what was apparently a unanimous decision. Cornelia, Sergia, and the other women drank—and died, perishing by “their own deceit,” according to Livy.27

This event led to the prosecution of “a large number” of additional women,28 who were identified as poisoners by their attendants, presumably other women. Livy implied that some of the women were found innocent, but he stated clearly that 170 of the group were found guilty.29 Orosius, writing in the fifth century C.E., claimed that the number was as high as 370,30 but Livy’s figure is probably more accurate. However many were involved, a large number of women were probably condemned to death, although their actual fates are unknown.

27 Livy 8.18.9 (suamet ipsae fraude omnes interierunt); Orosius 3.10.

28 Livy 8.18.10 (magnum numerum).

29 Livy 8.18.10; Valerius Maximus 2.5.3. Not only were these the first recorded trials for poisoning in Rome, they were also the first recorded cases in which women were tried under public criminal law instead of in family courts.

30 Orosius 3.10.
Livy attributed no motives to these women, but two historians believe that the women's decision to kill their husbands en masse may have been part of the Conflict of Orders. It is possible, of course, that these women were simply incompetent practitioners of folk medicine, but it is more likely that they were seeking political reform through unconventional channels—perhaps after failing to achieve change through conventional ones. Just as a faction of progressive male patricians during the Conflict of Orders championed democratic political change for disenfranchised male plebeians, so might female patricians—the original twenty women, led by Sergia and Cornelia—have been trying to secure increased marriage rights for another disenfranchised group: women.  

The Romans, meanwhile, interpreted the affair as a prodigy, dictated by insanity rather than criminal intent. Historian Robert Palmer believes that, in keeping with Roman custom, a new shrine was built to atone for the women's crimes. He maintains that Quintus Fabius Maximus Rullianus, the head of the special commission that condemned the 170 women, subsequently founded a shrine to Pudicitia Patricia (Patrician Chastity) in the Forum Boarium. Worship was limited to patrician univirae (women who had been married only once and to patrician husbands.) Since the women's assembly had previously met in front of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, a god important to both male and female Romans, the Matrons' relocation significantly reduced the importance of


33 See *Livy* 8.18.12.
women to the political and religious life of the city. Not only was this shrine dedicated to a newly created goddess—significant because the Romans had little respect for deities whose origins were not lost in the distant past—but the shrine’s location in the Forum Boarium moved the women’s activities from the center of the city to an area dominated by a cattle market and river trade on the Tiber. Furthermore, the exclusion of plebeian women from “worship” at this temple effectively meant that they were no longer included in the assembly of women, the Matrons.

Thirty-five years passed before patrician domination of the women’s assembly was challenged. In 296 B.C.E., Verginia—the patrician daughter of Aulus Verginius—was prohibited from worshipping at the Temple of Pudicitia Patricia because she had married a plebeian, albeit a high-ranking plebeian politician, Lucius Volumnius Flamma. 34 This was, of course, not just simple exclusion from a temple; it was exclusion from the temple whose worshippers comprised what was left of the Matrons. In retaliation, Verginia founded the Altar of Pudicitia Plebeia (Plebeian Chastity) in her own home in the Vicus Longus. In imitation of its counterpart, only plebeian women who had been married to one husband were admitted. Verginia encouraged plebeian women to compete with each other in modesty just as men competed with each other for valor in

34 Verginia is also known to have practiced trinocatum, an informal practice through which a plebeian woman or the patrician wife of a plebeian could prevent her husband from acquiring manus (the legal power of a guardian) over her. A wife who desired to avoid her husband’s control and remain in her father’s simply absented herself from her husband’s bed for three consecutive nights each year.
battle. She also urged plebeian women to worship at the plebeian altar with so much reverence that it would become more important than the patrician altar.35

In the context of the Conflict of Orders, it appears that Verginia was trying to create a second assembly of women, one for plebeians only, similar to the establishment of the Concilium Plebis, the Plebeian Assembly, in 494.36 According to Livy, the cult included “women of every order,” which he labeled “polluted worshippers,”37 revealing his strong feelings against the idea of a female plebeian assembly. Although both the altar and its cult eventually disappeared, Verginia’s attempt to create a place for plebeian women to gather was not forgotten, and married plebeian women were eventually readmitted to the group known as the Matrons.

The snub offered to Verginia by the Matrons might have prompted the curule aedile, Quintus Fabius Gurges,38 to retaliate against them by bringing charges of stuprum (illicit sexual intercourse) against a large number of prominent women the following year, 295.39 More likely, however, it was a final blow directed against the continuing—though decreasing—power of the Matrons. Once again, the appearance of a number of

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36 An alternative date for the establishment of the Concilium Plebis is 471.

37 Livy 10.23.10 (*Volgata dein religio a pollutis, nec matronis solum sed omnis ordinis feminis*).

38 Gurges was the son of Quintus Fabius Maximus Rullianus, who had presided over the poisoning trials of 331 and may have founded the Shrine of Pudicitia Patricia.

39 Palmer, “Roman Shrines of Female Chastity,” 134.
prodigies— as well as "pestilence" — was used to justify drastic action against the Matrons. To resolve these problems, Gurges consulted the Sibylline books and, by inference, the ten-man college of priests that was in charge of interpreting these oracles. On their advice, Gurges charged a number of Matrons with stuprum. As stuprum in the legal sense referred to structured fornication rather than occasional adulteries, Gurges was accusing these Matrons of organized prostitution. The women were convicted in the public courts — as opposed to family courts that traditionally dealt with women — and were forced to pay a fine. The money collected from them was used to build a large temple to Venus Obsenquens, the Obedient Venus. Although the number of women found guilty of stuprum is unknown, the fact their fines were able to finance such a large project suggests that a great number were involved. More importantly, once convicted of this crime, the women lost their status as univirae (women who had been sexually intimate with only one man), so they were no longer able to worship at the Shrine of Pudicitia Patricia. Thus, Gurges deprived the Matrons of a large number of their most prominent leaders.

Following this attack on female leadership in Rome, seventy-nine years passed before history recorded further activity by the Matrons. The crisis of the Second Punic War (218-202) and Hannibal’s seemingly endless occupation of Italy, however, prompted

40 Showers of earth were reported to have fallen in various places, and lightning struck a number of soldiers in the army of Appius Claudius.


42 Bauman, Women and Politics in Ancient Rome, 16.

43 Livy 10.31.8-9.
the Roman government to seek their aid on a number of occasions. Several incidents during the early years of Second Punic War illustrate how low the Matrons' influence had fallen by the onset of the war, but their willingness to put the good of the state ahead of their own interests gradually resulted in an increase in their power, until ultimately they became—albeit briefly—a fully legislative body.

The first such incident occurred in 217, a year in which an extremely large number of alarming prodigies appeared and, of course, the year in which Hannibal and the Carthaginian army began its fifteen-year depredation of Italy. The Senate decreed that men and women of all classes in Rome should make animal sacrifices and sizeable monetary offerings to various gods to propitiate these omens. The Matrons were specifically required to focus their attention on Juno Regina and Juno Sospita, and even freedwomen were ordered to make offerings to Feronia. Unlike other historians, Richard Bauman does not see this Senatorial mandate as discrimination against women, but as a progressive equalization of class differences among women. Either way, it marked the beginning of a twenty-two-year period of increased activity by the Matrons.

In 216, following extremely high losses to Hannibal's forces at the battle of Cannae and the capture of between 7,000 and 8,000 men, a group of women "mingled in the Forum with the crowd of men" in order to influence the Senate's decision on

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44 Livy (22.1.8-13) listed sixteen different prodigies, including four instances of spontaneous combustion and six atmospheric phenomena.

45 Livy 22.1.17-18.

46 Bauman, Women and Politics in Ancient Rome, 23.

47 Livy 22.60.2 (quoque metus ac necessitas in foro turbae virorum immiscuerat).
ransoming the prisoners. The women stood at the edge of the Comitium, the open area next to the Curia (Senate house), holding out their hands and beseeching the senators "to give them back their sons, their brothers, and their kinsmen." The women's presence in the forum en masse does not necessarily mean that the assembly of the Matrons had re-entered the political arena, however. At no point in his narrative of this event did Livy refer to the Matrons; instead he spoke generally of women. Nevertheless, their actions imply some sort of organization, at the very least an extensive network of communication. The women's efforts did not succeed and the Senate voted against ransoming the prisoners, but this may have been a failed effort to reconstitute the women's assembly.

A second setback for women occurred the following year when the lex Oppia was proposed by the tribune Gaius Oppius. This law stated that "no woman should possess more than a half an ounce of gold, or wear a parti-colored garment, or ride in a carriage in the city or in a town within a mile thereof, except on the occasion of a religious festival." The standard explanation for the enactment of this sumptuary law rests on the extremely high casualty rates suffered by the Romans in the first three years of the war.

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48 Livy 22.60.1 (sibi liberos fratres cognatos redderent).

49 Livy 22.61.1-4.

50 According to Livy, the lex Oppia was proposed and ratified during the consulship of Quintus Fabius and Tiberius Sempronius. The two served as co-consuls in 215 B.C.E., but Sempronius also served as co-consul with Fabius' son—by the same name—in 213. Modern historians favor the earlier date. See E. Sage, translator, Livy, vol. 9, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 412, n. 1.

51 Livy 34.1.3 (ne qua mulier plus semuniciam auri haberet neu vestimento versicolori utereturneu iuncto vehiculo in urbe oppidove aut propius inde mille passus nici sacrorum).
of the war. As a result, many people inherited large sums of money from their fathers or brothers who had perished in battles. This increase in wealth was apparently flaunted by men and women alike, who began wearing expensive jewelry and opulent clothing. Although sumptuary laws were enacted to regulate the behavior of both sexes, the women’s behavior was deemed particularly inappropriate.

A second motive for the Oppian law might have been to punish the women who had dared to demand that the state ransom their male relatives from Hannibal the previous year. Of particular note were the limits placed on women’s ownership of gold, which must have severely reduced any political influence that individual women were still able to exert. It must be remembered that effective power in Rome relied on exchanging a constant stream of appropriately graded gifts with social superiors, equals, and inferiors, as well as making public benefactions. Another important feature in the Oppian law was its cancellation of the Matrons’ right to ride in carriages in Rome, which had been granted to them in 390 as a reward for their efforts against the Gauls.

Despite the restrictions placed on their behavior—as well as their probable loss of power—when the Oppian law was passed, women readily adopted a more subdued and appropriate appearance in order to support the war effort. Their willingness to put the good of the state ahead of their own self-interest, which demonstrated a return to the

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52 At the battle of the Trebia River (218), the Romans lost 30,000 men; at Lake Trasimene (217), 15,000; and at Cannae (216), 50,000. In addition to the total of 95,000 dead, another 25,000 men were taken prisoner. See the Oxford Classical Dictionary, 3rd edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 286, 1547, and 1548.

character of the Matrons during the Early Republic, continued to characterize their activities throughout the duration of the war.

As the Second Punic war dragged on with no victory in sight, the Romans began to lose faith in their traditions and looked to new sources of assurance. In the year 213, the sudden popularity of foreign superstitions led to the neglect of the Romans’ traditional rites and the adoption of new cults.\footnote{Bauman, \textit{Women and Politics in Ancient Rome}, 25.} Livy noted that “in the Forum and on the Capitol there was a crowd of women who were following the custom of the fathers neither in their sacrifices nor in prayers to the gods.”\footnote{Livy 25.1.7 \textit{(sed in publico etiam ac foro Capitolioque mulierum turba erat nec sacrificantium nec precantium deos patrio more)}.} Eventually the city praetor was forced to use his \textit{imperium} (military authority) against the new imported cults. Anyone in possession of prophetic books or ritual writings was required to turn them over, and he also ruled that “no one should sacrifice in a public or consecrated place according to a strange or foreign rite.”\footnote{Livy 25.1.12 \textit{(is et in contione senatus consultum recitavit et edixit ut quicunque libros vaticinos precationesae aut artem sacrificandi conscriptam haberet, eos libros omnis litterasque ad se ante kal. Apriles deferret, neu quis in publico sacrove loco novo aut externo rito sacrificaret)}.} For some reason the Matrons did not protest the termination of their new religious practices, perhaps because men’s foreign cults were also prohibited.\footnote{See Bauman, \textit{Women and Politics in Ancient Rome}, 25.}

Perhaps the women’s willingness to cooperate with the state for the benefit of all, especially their willingness to curb any behavior that threatened the war effort, led the state to trust the Matrons in 207 with more power than they had wielded for many years—indeed, perhaps more power than they had ever wielded (see pages 9-10). Gone
were attempts to prevent patrician and plebeian women from meeting together, and gone were attempts to undercut the power and prestige of the patrician leaders of the Matrons. In fact, the election of twenty-five women as treasurers probably enhanced the power of certain women leaders; and, significantly, the state did nothing to prevent this. Likewise, the obvious legislative activities of the women’s assembly of 207 were a clear recognition of their importance to the state and the men’s willingness to accept the Matrons’ help.

The Senate turned to the Matrons again in 204 for help in importing the worship of the goddess Cybele, although Rome had prohibited the worship of foreign deities only nine years earlier. The decision to seek the help of the great mother goddess from Asia Minor had been made the previous year, in 205, after plague had struck the army and, not surprisingly, a series of alarming portents had appeared. When the Sybilline Books revealed that introducing the worship of Cybele to Rome would result in Hannibal’s expulsion from Italy, the Senate sent five ambassadors in quinqueremes to Pessinus, the site of her sanctuary in Phrygia, a small kingdom in Asia Minor. Cybele, who was often referred to as the “Mother of the Gods,” was one of the most powerful goddesses in the Mediterranean East. She was a goddess of fertility, sent and cured disease, and protected her people in war. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Romans would have sought her

58 Livy 29.14.3. In addition to frequent portents like meteors and lighting that struck important structures, two suns were seen at the same time, a light appeared at night (perhaps the Aurora Borealis), and there was a shower of stones.

protection; neither is it surprising that, given the size of the five Roman warships, the Phrygians readily turned over the sacred cult stone of Cybele to the Romans.

When the ship bearing Cybele’s stone reached the mouth of the Tiber River at Ostia, it was met by “all the Matrons.” According to Livy, the Senate had appointed Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica to oversee the Matrons and had ordered him personally to take the cult stone off the ship, give it to the Matrons, and escort it and them by land back to Rome. The importance of the women and their mission is clear from Livy’s description of the fourteen-mile procession back to Rome: “The matrons passed the goddess from hand to hand in an unbroken succession to each other, while the entire city poured out to meet her. Censors had been placed before the doors along the route of the bearers, and kindling their incense, people prayed that gracious and benignant she might enter the city of Rome.”

This episode indicates quite clearly that the women of Rome had the full support of the Senate and People. It also suggests that the Matrons supported a controversial plan for the Romans to attack Carthage itself and that they may in turn have had the support of the general who proposed it, Publius Cornelius Scipio (later Africanus). Unfortunately, there is no way to determine whether the decision to import the worship of Cybele was originally the brainchild of the Matrons, who needed senatorial support for its implementation; the Senate, who needed the Matrons to carry the goddess to Rome; or

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60 Livy 29.14.10 (omnibus matronis).

61 Livy 29.14.13-14 (Eae per manus, succedentes deinde aliae aliiis, omni obviam effusa civitate, turibulis ante ianuas positis qua praeferebatur atque accenso ture, precantibus ut volens propitiaque urbem Romanam iniret).
Scipio, who needed successful omens and the support of both groups to take his army to Africa.

In addition, the story illustrates the importance of unblemished reputations among those who were leaders of the women’s assembly, the “Matronae primores.” A woman named Claudia Quinta, whose reputation was described by Livy as “previously dubious,” used the situation to clear her name. When the ship bearing Cyble’s cult stone ran aground at the mouth of the Tiber, Claudia called on the ship to follow her—unless she was unchaste. The ship moved and proved Claudia’s chastity. Had it not, the whole affair would have been tainted by a bad omen. Henceforth, Claudia’s reputation—and perhaps her influence as well—was so great that Suetonius included her in his discussion of the emperor Tiberius’ illustrious ancestors.

After Scipio’s victory at the Battle of Zama (in 202) put a quick end to the Second Punic War, Rome rapidly recovered its former economic prosperity. Several sumptuary laws were quickly repealed, and men were able to flaunt their wealth once again; but women remained restricted by the Oppian law. The injustice festered among the women for a number of years, and the repeal of the law was not proposed until 195. A controversy of immense proportions erupted. The usually concise Livy, in fact, devoted nine long paragraphs to it. For days on end the women, he said, made their position on the inequality of the law very clear by demonstrating in the streets.


63 Ibid. (dubia...antea).

64 Suetonius, Tiberius, 2.

65 Probably located twenty-five miles or less southeast of the city of Carthage, in modern Tunisia.
The matrons could not be kept at home by advice or modesty or their husbands' orders, but blocked all the streets and approaches to the Forum begging the men as they came down to the forum that, in the prosperous condition of the state, when the private fortunes of all men were daily increasing, they should allow the women too to have their former distinctions restored.\textsuperscript{66}

With each successive day, the numbers of protesting women grew, as women “from the towns and rural districts” \textsuperscript{67} joined the women of Rome. “Soon they even dared to approach and appeal to the consuls, the praetors, and the other officials.”\textsuperscript{68}

On the last day of the month-long dispute, during the \textit{contio} that preceded the official vote of the \textit{Comitia Tributa}, strident speeches were given for and against the proposal to repeal the law. In general, they described the great deeds done by the Matrons, as well as the serious faults that had troubled the group’s history. Marcus Portius Cato (the Elder) spoke first, raging against women in general for their greed, their immorality, and their audacity in trying to influence the decisions of men. Such “female anxiety,” he opined, would bring shame upon the state.\textsuperscript{69} Next to speak were the tribunes Marcus and Publius Iunius Brutus, who threatened to veto the proposal to repeal the

\textsuperscript{66} Livy 34.1.5 (\textit{Matronae nulla nec auctoritate nec verecundia nec imperio virorum contineri limine poterant, omnes vias urbis aditusque in forum obsidebant viros descendentes ad forum orantes ut florente re publica, crescente in dies privata omnium fortuna, matronis quoque pristinum ornatum redid paterentur}).

\textsuperscript{67} Livy 34.1.6 (\textit{ex oppidis conciliabulisque}).

\textsuperscript{68} Livy 34.1.7 (\textit{iam et consules praetoresque et alios magistratus adire et rogare audebant}).

\textsuperscript{69} Livy 34.2 (\textit{consternatio muliebris}). For Cato’s entire speech, see Livy 34.2.1-4.20.
Oppian law. Finally, Lucius Valerius spoke on behalf of himself and Marcus Fundanius, the authors of the bill.\textsuperscript{70}

The threat of veto increased the already considerable outrage among the women, large numbers of whom may have been listening to the speeches in the Forum.

The next day an even greater crowd of women appeared in public, and all of them in a body beset the doors of the Bruti, who were vetoing their colleagues’ proposal, and they did not desist until the threat of veto was withdrawn by the tribunes. After that there was no question that all the tribes would vote to repeal the law.\textsuperscript{71}

With the visible return of women’s wealthy status, which included the power associated with money, no further sumptuary laws against women were passed.\textsuperscript{72}

According to Livy, Cato—who was undoubtedly one of the harshest critics of the Matrons and their actions—ultimately admitted that the Matrons had been an integral part of Roman politics. Indicating that the Roman gods were not happy, he said that the Romans now suffered women “to busy themselves in the business of the Republic and mingle [with men] not only in the Forum but also in the contiones and comitiae.”\textsuperscript{73} While he seems to represent the male opinion that women did not belong in politics, Cato stated that women had participated in debates and elections within the Forum. He even

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{70} For Valerius’ entire speech, see Livy 34.5.1-7.15.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Livy 34.8.1-3 (aliquanto maior frequentia mulierum postero die sese in publicum effudit, unoque agmine omnes Brutorum ianuas obsederunt, qui collegarum rogationi intercedebant, nec ante abstiterunt quam remissa intercessio ab tribunes est). See also Valerius Maximus 9.1.3.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves, 182.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Livy 34.2.11 (iam etiam rem publicam capessere eas patimur et foro quoque at contionibus et comitiis immisceri).
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\end{footnotesize}
described the Matrons at the Forum that day as an “army of women,” which testifies to both the size of the group and its effective organization.

Group activities by women, however, seem to have peaked in 195 with their successful demonstrations in favor of repealing the Oppian law. In the 130 years that followed, the Matrons disappear from historical accounts of the Republic. Perhaps they were satisfied with their restored place in government and society; or perhaps they went too far with their protests against the Oppian law, so men no longer turned to the Matrons for help or advice during times of crisis. Nevertheless, as group efforts by women declined, individual women took a more prominent role in influencing public affairs. Aemelia Tertia, the wife of Scipio Africanus, may have been a transitional figure in this process, as she was very likely one of the leaders of the women who opposed the Oppian law. She was also the first woman known to have had her own group of clients, dependents who received legal and economic assistance from a patron in exchange for political support. Her daughter, Cornelia, exemplified a new generation of women who eschewed public group action in favor of working through the individual male members of their families to achieve their goals. The Late Republic (133 to 33) saw individual women playing highly visible roles in the political maneuverings that ultimately destroyed representative government in Rome, but the Matrons involved themselves in politics on only three further occasions, none of which equaled their previous efforts in either scope or result, and two of which were byproducts of religious rites that initially were not connected directly to business of the state.

74 Livy 34.2.8 (agmen mulierum).

75 Bauman, Women and Politics in Ancient Rome, 33.
Over the centuries, the Matrons had often met under the auspices of religious observance. In the early fifth century, they had met in front of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, and in the late fourth century, their meetings were relegated to the Shrine of Pudicitia Patricia. An attempt by plebeian women to establish a similar venue for themselves in the home of Verginia ultimately failed, but their effort could have inspired the Matrons to hold their meetings in private homes as opposed to public temple areas after their public support began to wane. The goddess around whom they began to gather in the first century was one of the oldest and most important of Roman deities. Her name is not known, because men were not allowed to know it or speak it, so the women referred to her as the Bona Dea, the good goddess. Men were likewise prohibited from entering her temples or shrines. Nevertheless, her worship was considered vital to the state, and great importance was placed on two annual rituals: one on May 1 and a second ritual that took place on a December evening in the home of a chief magistrate’s wife, who was also probably considered one of the chief leaders of what remained of the women’s assembly. In addition the Vestal Virgins were also included.\(^\text{76}\) Significantly, the ancient historians do not pair the Vestals with the Matrons until this period, although the six priestesses are generally considered to have been the most powerful individual women in the Roman Republic.

Although epigraphical evidence for worship of the Bona Dea abounds, the first literary mention of the annual rites does not appear until descriptions of the Catilinarian

Conspiracy (63-62 B.C.E.). The December rites for 63 were held the same day on which the Senate found a number of supporters of Lucius Sergius Catalina guilty of conspiracy. Terentia, the wife of the consul, Marcus Tullius Cicero, was that year’s hostess, so she had sent her husband away, as no man or male animal was allowed in the house during the festivities. Thus, Cicero was elsewhere, trying to decide the fate of the convicted conspirators. Toward the end of the evening, after the altar fire had died down, “a high and bright flame leapt up...from the hot embers and charred bark.” The Vestals interpreted this as an omen that Cicero should convince the Senate to pronounce a capital sentence, and they sent Terentia to her husband to relay the message. He seized upon the news as a divine mandate, sent troops to Forum to prevent the conspirators’ from escaping from the Capitol, and they were executed following the Senatorial vote the next day. Whether or not a “miracle” took place, it is clear that the women were sacrificing on behalf of the state, that they favored the execution of the Catilinarian conspirators, and that they used their influence—and possibly their ingenuity—to influence Cicero, and through him, the Senate.

The very next year, the rites of the *Bona Dea* were again worthy of notice by the ancient historians. In December of 62, the celebration of the *Bona Dea* was held at the home of Gaius Julius Caesar, whose mother Aurelia and wife Pompeia were hostesses. A young aristocrat named Publius Clodius Pulcher, who had not yet grown facial hair, dressed in women’s clothing in order to infiltrate the women’s meeting and perhaps to


79 Plutarch, *Cicero*, 19.3-20.4; Dio Cassius 37.35.3-5.
rendezvous with Pompeia. Aurelia discovered his deception and immediately ordered the rites to be discontinued, for a gross sacrilege had been committed, with serious ramifications for the well being of the state. The women who had participated in the interrupted rituals went home and informed their husbands of the sacrilege. Word spread rapidly, and by the next day the tribunes of the plebs and many prominent senators were demanding that something be done to punish Clodius. Strangely, Caesar was not one of them. In fact, he refused to testify against Clodius when the trial commenced. Both Plutarch and Appian seem to have believed that, because the *populus* supported Clodius, Caesar refused to aid the prosecution in order to enhance his own popularity and advance his career. Another explanation, however, might be that the Matrons did not want Clodius prosecuted, perhaps preferring to deal with his sacrilege without the help of men. The lack of testimony against Clodius supports this view. Of all the women present at Caesar’s house on the night of the rites, only Aurelia testified against Clodius. Moreover, if the Matrons’ wishes were ignored in this matter, it would be an indication that their influence had waned significantly by mid-century.

The Matrons, however, might have had the last word after all. Although Clodius was acquitted, 31 votes to 25, ten years later he was murdered. A band of clients

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80 Suetonius (*Julius Caesar* 6.2) reported that Caesar suspected his wife of adultery with Clodius and so divorced her. See also Brouwer, *Bona Dea*, 150.


83 Cicero, *Ad Familiares* 1.9.15, *Scholia Bobiensia*, frgms. 6 and 28; and Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*, 16.97.2. Both Cicero and Seneca claimed that the jury had been bribed.
belonging to his political opponent, Titus Annius Milo, attacked Clodius on the Via Appia, approximately ten miles outside of Rome. Although there are no obvious connections between Milo and the Matrons, it is ironic that Clodius was killed suspiciously near a Bona Dea sanctuary. Cicero gloated over Clodius’ death, saying that it took place “before the very eyes...of the Bona Dea herself.” It was, he claimed, an “extremely appropriate punishment.” Cicero’s comments hint that Bona Dea worshippers—perhaps even the Matrons—were behind the death of Clodius.

The last historical appearance of the Matrons during the Republic took place in the year 42, during the reign of the triumvirs Marcus Antonius, Gaius Octavius, and Marcus Lepidus. In need of funds to finance their military efforts against Caesar’s assassins, the three issued an edict that burdened “the order of matrons” with “a heavy tax” that would require 1,400 of the wealthiest women to contribute a portion of their properties. Special actions were even taken, in the form of rewards for informants and fines for perjurers, to ensure that the women remained honest in reporting the size of their properties and the percentage they contributed. After the women affected by this edict unsuccessfully attempted to recruit the triumvirs’ female family members to argue their side, they staged a demonstration in the Forum during a tribunal held by the triumvirs. Hortensia, the daughter of the great orator Quintus Hortensius, was chosen as the

84 Cicero, Pro Milone, 31.86; Asconius, In Milonianam, 27; Plutarch, Cicero, 35.1.

85 Cicero, Pro Milone, 31.86 (ante ipsam...Bonam Deam cum proelium commimisisset).

86 Ibid. (hanc insignem poenam).

87 Valerius Maximus 8.3.3 (ordo matronum...gravi tributo).
spokeswoman for the Matrons. In her speech, Hortensia argued that, after the proscription of many of their husbands, the tax would diminish the women’s status. She further questioned, “Why should we pay taxes when we have no part in the honors, the commands, the policy making...?” Through Hortensia, the women avowed their support of Rome in wars against other nations, but they refused to support a civil war. After the conclusion of Hortensia’s speech, the lictors were ordered to drive the women away, but the crowd protested. The next day, the triumvirs gave in and reduced the number of women taxed from 1,400 to only 400. The richest women—probably the leaders of the protest—did not escape the tax, but one thousand of their group did. As in 195, their victory was followed by a long period of inactivity, perhaps the result of a backlash against the women’s perceived selfishness.

After the fall of the Republic in 30, the Matrons appear only briefly in the pages of history. They may have feted by the empress Livia and her step-daughter Julia in 9 B.C.E., when the two hosted a dinner for the women of Rome. Two years later, Livia gave a second banquet for the wives of senators, who may have constituted what was left of the Matrons. In 2 B.C.E., some of these same women were no doubt involved in staging a demonstration that protested the banishment for adultery of a group of women

88 Bauman, Women and Politics in Ancient Rome, 81.
89 Appian, The Civil Wars, 4.33 (Τί δὲ ἐσφέρωμεν αἱ μήτε ἀρχῆς μήτε τιμῆς μήτε στρατηγιὰς μήτε τῆς πολιτείας ὅλως).
90 Appian, 4.32-34; Valerius Maximus 8.3.3.
91 Dio Cassius 55.2.4.
92 Dio Cassius 55.8.2.
that included Julia, but it was not successful. Finally, in 40 or 41 C.E., in front of a “meeting of the Matrons,” the mother-in-law of Servius Sulpicius Galba publicly scolded and slapped Agrippina the Younger, who had been trying to lure the future emperor into marriage even though he was an avowed widower. The reason for this meeting is unknown; Bauman suggests that it might have been an organized morals court, but it also could have been politically or religiously motivated. None of these incidents displayed anything resembling the importance of earlier meetings of the Matrons. They seem to have gradually faded into oblivion. That is hardly surprising, however, given the congruent dissolution of the four male Roman assemblies during the early Principate.

Despite its obscure demise, the women’s assembly played a vital role in the Roman Republic. The ancient sources clearly show that the Matrons’ involvement in government affairs was relatively frequent and often successful, despite occasional backlashes against them. Likewise, the ancient authors’ use of the word *Matronae* to describe the activities of groups of women is too consistent to be a coincidence. The ultimate conclusion must be that—despite modern assertions to the contrary—the women of Rome were not merely wives and mothers who supported their men from behind the scenes. Instead, they participated in the political life of the state, not only at the behest of men, but also in pursuit of their own interests and agendas.

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93 Dio Cassius 55.10.16.

94 Suetonius, *Galba*, 5.1 (*conventu matronarum*).

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