

Where were the priestesses of Bona Dea?  
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Every year in December a festival of Bona Dea was celebrated in Rome. This event is unique in Roman religion in that it was an act of state cult celebrated in a private setting by a small number of elite women. The celebrations were held in the house of one of the leading magistrates in Rome, but it was his wife (or mother) who was in charge of the proceedings. The other participants were women of good standing and the Vestal Virgins. For the secret ceremony all things male—human as well as object—had to leave the house or be covered, although male worshippers took part in the cult throughout the rest of the year. In addition to these peculiarities, the most striking feature of the December festival is the absence of the priestesses of Bona Dea. Priestesses, called *sacerdotes*, have been attested for this goddess in the city of Rome and elsewhere, but they are not mentioned in our sources as being involved in the December festival. The social status of these *sacerdotes* is low, and this has been advanced as a major reason why they were not involved in the festival. However, this explanation does not address the core of the problem, because why did Bona Dea have religious personnel of such low status in the first place?

We seem to have a division based on the status of the participants between the everyday cult activities of Bona Dea and her annual ceremony. What does it say about Roman religion and society that the very priestesses of Bona Dea were not important enough to lead—and likely even attend—a festival for their own deity? Why are the *sacerdotes* enough for the state worship of Bona Dea everyday of the year save one when their responsibilities were assumed by a few noble matrons and another organization of state priestesses? This paper will examine how social status may or may not have limited the participation of the priestesses of Bona Dea and how the Romans may have understood this phenomenon.