CHAPTER FIVE

THE PROPAGATION OF THE CULT

It is not difficult to give a survey of the geographical distribution of the Bona Dea cult. To answer the question why the cult is found in a certain place, on the other hand, seems to raise more problems. The number of documents, both literary and epigraphic-archaeological, is relatively small. Furthermore, the cult is concentrated in a small number of places or regions. As these concentrations are anything but uniform the question why (and how?) is not answered by making a survey.

The more comprehensive the data concerning a certain region the easier a study will be. The greatest difficulties will be found when incidental finds are to be interpreted. We may assume that those places whence more comprehensive information originates were established cult centres. When incidental finds are concerned we sometimes may conclude that the cult of the worshipper in question had been brought by himself from one of these centres when migrating to the place where the individual piece was found. However, such clear conditions are seldom encountered.

Italy, with Latium (especially Rome and Ostia) as the principal centre, easily comes first among the parts of the Roman Empire where the existence of the Bona Dea cult may be proved. Rome, most important by far, experienced the most intensive worship of the goddess. Finds in town are proof of this; and documents from the vicinity of Rome—partly of a sepulchral nature and for that very reason found outside town—more often refer to the cult in town than to that outside it, as e.g., may be demonstrated by the titles of the people mentioned in the inscriptions. When a magistra of the goddess is found in a sepulchral inscription we may conclude that the woman was magistra of a collegium under the patronage of the goddess in a centre more densely populated than the site of the grave (a grave in the vicinity of Rome indicating that town). When a sacerdos is found, it appears highly probable that the sacerdos was attached to a sanctuary in town, since it is hardly likely that smaller chapels in the country had their own priestesses. These small sanctuaries are to be represented as shrines, small chapels, intended for individual worship or as mere monuments erected because of favours rather than as centres of worship.

But there also exceptions in the immediate vicinity of Rome. Fidenae, for example, seems to have known its own organized cult, independent of Rome. Such a fact at once evokes questions as to the why and wherefore, and one is inclined to attach due value to the former independence of Fidenae—in this
case—where religious aspects are concerned, and not to think of outside influences.

Ostia, also close to Rome, makes a chapter apart. Notwithstanding the great Roman influences upon the pattern of this town, the Ostian cult organization differs from that in Rome. Though the information concerning Ostia is plentiful and documents have been found referring to both the official cult and the expressions of individual Bona Dea worship, we are told nothing about the existence of the semi-official cult with its collegia, magistrae and ministrae, so characteristic of Rome and known elsewhere too (cf., e.g., Aquileia).

Literary sources refer to Rome only—apart from an incidental reference to the Bovillae sanctuary already discussed,¹ and from the remark by Lactantius that most cities had a Bona Dea cult.² In literary sources we find the further restriction that interest is centred upon the official cult with its authorized celebration; references to other aspects are merely incidental and are only found in connection with the State cult. Consequently, thanks to the literature, we are fairly well informed about the Roman State cult. From this, of course, we may draw some conclusions about the practice of the official cult in the rest of the Empire. All the other data, both concerning Rome and concerning the remaining area of distribution, are to be found in epigraphy and archaeology.

Just as the literary sources are practically silent about the Bona Dea cult, except for the official cult, so the epigraphic and archaeological sources do not tell us anything directly about the State cult. However, this does not mean that Bona Dea does not emerge from these sources, occasionally, as an official goddess. A number of inscriptions inform us that temples were consecrated to her by the authorities. These texts are couched in official terms, with consular dates and similar impersonal information. Nevertheless, there is no recognizable conformity of the cult as known from literary sources to that known from epigraphy and archaeology, apart from representations of the goddess sometimes corresponding to descriptions of her appearance in ancient literature. Thus, Bona Dea with the serpent, or the sceptre, who is met with in the texts, may be said to be the counterpart of the goddess as represented in the plastic arts.³

Where Rome is concerned, at least, one would expect the two categories, i.e. literary and epigraphic sources, to correspond and the potential discrepancies to become more explitit as the distance between Rome and another town

¹ Ch. II, No. 24; cf. No. 38.
² Ch. II, No. 64.
³ Cf. Macrobius (ch. II, No. 67) and the usual representations with cornucopia and serpent and bowl; for the sceptre, cf. the Wilton House relief (ch. I, note 29).