

Priestly and Female Roles in Roman Religion. The *virgines Vestae*

1. Towards a Social History of Cult Protagonists

The investigation of Roman priesthoods is a research project that has been under way for several years now at Tübingen. Its chief categories of analysis derive from the biological and social status of those investigated, i.e. gender, age, social conditions, rank and relations. This type of study may be called the "social history" of religion. It is less concerned with gods, myths or dogma than with people's religious behaviour. Its sources are, principally, not the prescriptions of religious officials but evidence for communication and interaction among "real" men and women.

One of the issues considered in our studies is the connection of gender and religion in Roman society. The evidence that survives for the Vestal Virgins offers an approach to the question of whether assuming the office of a priest allowed women to play a public role in society. To avoid the inconvenience of expressions which are too general, such as "priest", we distinguish the "sacerdotal role" from other parts people may play in the performance of religion, such as those who perform rites, or religious experts (e.g. the *haruspex*), or functionaries (e.g. the *magister* of a *collegium*). Many different elements combine in these functions; they may be combined in many variations to constitute social roles.

Within Roman religion there are a considerable number of cultic acts which do not require a *sacerdos*. Persons assuming a sacerdotal role are entitled to perform or to lead the performance of those rites that cannot be or ought not to be performed by the ordinary members of a given community. For this function a certain "theological" competence may be required, a special lifestyle and commitment; it may be endowed with particular rights and honours. The sacerdotal role of the Vestal Virgins is distinguished from others by three fundamental criteria: their function is public, not private; they are devoted to their task totally, and virtually for their whole lifetime, not occasionally or for a certain time and in addition to other occupations; finally intense commitment is required that enjoys high prestige.

This approach, I think, will shed another light also on a topic which has fascinated many scholars, the crime of "incest" and death-punishment. Horror fantasies about rituals called "archaic" and even

human sacrifice¹ seem to reveal more about the minds of modern authors than about practised Roman religion.

2. The *virgines Vestae* – an Institution of Roman State Religion

There is ample evidence for the importance, the high dignity and the privileges that within Roman religion were bestowed on the group of the six *Virgines Vestae*. As Cicero put it in his speech in favour of Marcus Fonteius:

“If the gods reject their prayers, this state cannot be safe.”²

These words may be considered a summary of the function that the cult of Vesta was held to fulfil in the system of Roman state religion. They accord with third century inscriptions in honour of some *virgines Vestales maximae* found on the bases of their statues in the House of Vesta on the *forum Romanum*.³ At the end of the fourth century, Symmachus, pleading in vain for the old religion, continued to repeat the idea that the commonwealth was still firmly linked with the commitment and service of the Vestal Virgins, and praised “virginity in the service of public welfare”.⁴

2.1 Rules and Rites

Let me recall briefly the essential characteristics of this role.

The girls chosen to be “priestesses” of Vesta are seized (*capere*) by the *pontifex maximus* at an age of not less than six and not more than ten years. From this moment on they have to live at the *Atrium Vestae* for thirty years in absolute chastity. Thereafter they are allowed to quit the service and even to marry.

The “capture” of a girl by the *pontifex maximus* has important juridical consequences, which, as it seems, are codified already in the *lex duodecim tabularum*: from this very moment she is no longer subordinate

¹ See H. Cancik-Lindemaier, Opferphantasien. Zur imaginären Antike der Jahrhundertwende in Deutschland und Österreich, *Der Altsprachliche Unterricht* 30,3 (1987) 90-104; ead., Opfer. Religionswissenschaftliche Bemerkungen zur Nutzbarkeit eines religiösen Ausdrucks, in: H.-J. Althaus, H. Cancik-Lindemaier, K. Hoffmann-Curtius, U. Rebstock (eds.), *Der Krieg in der Köpfen* (Untersuchungen des Ludwig-Uhland-Instituts der Universität Tübingen 73, Tübingen 1989) 109-120. cf. also ead., Eucharistie, in: *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* II (1990) 347-356.

² Cic. *Pro Fonteio* 46-48; cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1, 2, 25-28; cf. Cic. *Har. Resp.* 37.

³ Cf. e.g. *CIL* VI 32415 e.a., see A.D. Nock. A Diis Electa. A Chapter in the Religious History of the Third Century (1930), in: id., *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* I (Oxford 1972) 267-270.

⁴ Symmachus, *Relatio* III 11, 14.

to the *patria potestas*,⁵ nor to a tutor (*tutela mulierum*);⁶ she may in her will freely dispose of her fortune, she may appear in court as a witness.⁷

This implies that the Vestal Virgins enjoyed a number of civil rights which originally a Roman woman, being as a rule subordinate either to her father or to her husband or to a tutor, did not possess.⁸

The main duties of the Vestal Virgins are well known. They have to protect the holy fire burning in the temple of Vesta which must never go out. They prepare from spelt and salt the *mola salsa*⁹ used in Roman animal sacrifice (*immolatio*).¹⁰ They prepare materials for purification and expiation rites, which they distribute to the people.¹¹ They are said to fetch water from the well at porta Capena and to clean regularly the temple of Vesta.¹²

All these tasks are women's work. So scholars have defined the duties of Vestal Virgins as a kind of housekeeping at the state hearth; we need not repeat here the debate as to whether they represent, in the cult, the king's daughters or the king's wife. The Vestal Virgins were under the control and jurisdiction of the *pontifex maximus*. We hear that he personally was to flog them in case of carelessness. The loss of virginity, called "incest", was punished by death: the Vestal Virgin had to be buried alive, the culpable man flogged to death.¹³

2.2 Public Actions

There is evidence for the presence of Vestal Virgins in public. Their attendance at about a dozen festivals of the Roman calendar is mentioned, nothing, however, is related about their activities. During the

⁵ Gellius, *Noct. Att.* 1, 12, 9; Gaius, *Instit.* 1, 130.

⁶ Gaius, *Ibid.*, 145.

⁷ Gellius 7, 7, 2.

⁸ For the legal responsibility of Roman women see V.M. Kaser, *Römisches Privatrecht* (München⁶ 1968) 63 f.; *tutela mulierum*: p. 248 f. with the most important notes.

⁹ Elements of the recipe are to be found in Festus, s.v. *muries* (pp. 152. 153 Lindsay) and *mola* (pp. 124. 125 Lindsay).

¹⁰ Cf. Serv., *ad Verg. Ecl.* 8, 82.

¹¹ Cf. Ovid., *Fast.* 4, 731 ff. 725 f. 629 ff.

¹² Plut., *Numa* 13; cf. Tac., *Hist.* 4, 53; but cf. also Iuv. 3, 13: the grove of porta Capena is located to Jews: are we to think that the Vestal Virgins continue fetching water there?

¹³ Cf. e.g. Livius 2, 42; 4, 44; 8, 15; 22, 57 and F. Münzer, *Die Römische Vestalinnen bis zur Kaiserzeit*, *Philologus* 92 (1937) 216 ff.; Sueton., *Domitianus* 8; Plin., *Epist.* 4, 11, 5-13. For a period of about 750 years we have the names of 19 priestesses condemned in 11 trials; cf. Cancik-Lindemaier, *Kultische Privilegierung und gesellschaftliche Realität. Ein Betrag zur Sozialgeschichte der virgines Vestae*, *Saeculum* 41, 1 (1990) n. 50.

main festival of Vesta, the Vestalia, celebrated from 7th to 15th of June, the matrons of the city moved barefoot to the temple of Vesta.¹⁴ But neither here nor in other cases of supplications¹⁵ nor in the nocturnal rites for Bona Dea¹⁶ is there evidence for a more intensive communication or cooperation between Roman women and Vestal Virgins.

Perhaps we are to take literally the formula written in the epigraphic record of the *hudi saeculares* in 204 AD: the rites were performed *adstantibus virginibus Vestalibus* – in the presence of the Vestal Virgins.¹⁷ Horace, when imagining his fame as a *monumentum aere perennius*, linked it to the very existence of the Roman state and its religion – “as long as the pontifex with the silent virgin ascends to the Capitolium”.¹⁸ Three names here represent the state religion: the Capitolium, the site of the temple of Jupiter, and two outstanding members of Roman clergy: the *pontifex (maximus)* and the Vestal Virgin. There has been a controversy about the word *tacita*; it is, I assume, a precise description of what Vestal Virgins were expected to do: they had to be there in silence.

This brief sketch does not, of course, provide either a survey of our evidence about Vestal Virgins, or an evaluation of the historical setting or the reliability of our sources.¹⁹ Many details seem uncertain and unclear or even contradictory. We do not know e.g. what prescriptions and rules – even if quoted from books of pontifical law – were either valid or practised at the same time. Furthermore, we know that writers like Livy, Dionysios of Halicarnassus and Plutarch favour religious restoration; they try to demonstrate that Roman religion as a whole was founded by King Numa and consequently tend to eliminate all traces of historical alterations. Roman religion, so we are to believe, has been one and the same always and everywhere. Fortunately there are some sources which do not exclusively reproduce the views of religious functionaries, but

¹⁴ Ovid., *Fast.* 6, 401 ff; cf. 4, 731 ff. 725 f. 629 f.

¹⁵ Cf. Appian. *Bell. civ.* 1, 106; Cass. Dio 51, 19, 2.

¹⁶ Plutarch., *Cicero* 19, 3: the women make a sacrifice to Bona Dea “in the presence of the Vestal Virgins”, but Cicero, *Har. resp.* 37: (*sacrificium*) *fit per virgines Vestales*.

¹⁷ *CIL* VI 32329, 1.9 f.

¹⁸ Hor., *Carm.* 3, 30, 6-9: *scandet cum tacita virgine pontifex*. G. Radke (*Zur Entwicklung der Gottesvorstellung und der Gottesverehrung in Rom*, Darmstadt 1987, 273, n. 554) is wrong, in claiming that Horace alludes to Tarpeia's fall from the rock, as R. Schilling rightly points out in his review (*Gnomon* 61 [1989] 198-203). It would, of course, be absurd to presume that Horace could have represented Roman religion by an act of death penalty.

¹⁹ For a “typology” of sources see H. Cancik-Lindemaier, *Privilegierung* (see n. 13) 3-6: “Typologie und Historisierung der Quellen”.

permit a glance at political practice the Vestal Virgins got involved in. Thus we learn from Cicero's speeches that, in 143 BC, the consul Appius Claudius was able to conduct his triumph thanks to the intervention of his daughter, the Vestal Virgin Claudia.²⁰ In 63 BC the Vestal Virgin Licinia supported the electoral campaign of her relative Lucius Murena.²¹

3. Sacerdotal Role and Social Status of Women

3.1 Norms and Ideals

Provided with considerable rights and privileges, furnished with a number of special rules concerning lifestyle and commitment, the Vestal Virgins as a religious institution are distinguished from other Roman priesthoods. Only the famous "taboos" of Jupiter's priest, the *flamen Dialis*, and his wife, the *flaminica*, may be compared, to a certain extent. The fact that this female priesthood, apparently from the beginning, was endowed with outstanding rights – civil rights, and not only cultic honours or taboos – has led some scholars to regard the Vestal Virgins as forerunners of the "emancipation" of Roman women.²² Others pretend that there was cooperation and solidarity between Vestal Virgins and Roman women.²³ But only "presence" is attested, we lack proof for an act of "solidarity".

There is indeed evidence that Vestal Virgins were expected to set an example for Roman women. In his work *De legibus* Cicero drafted a constitution of Roman religion, a series of sacral laws written in an archaising language and accompanied by a commentary. After having dealt with gods, sanctuaries, and festivals, Cicero speaks of priesthoods and, among them, of Vestal Virgins.²⁴ He says: "And there shall be Vestal

²⁰ Cic., *Pro Caelio* 34, cf. T.R.S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic* I (Haverford, Penns., 1951) 471 and 473; cf. Sueton., *Tiberius* 2; Valerius Maximus 5, 4, 6: an example of children's piety.

²¹ Cic., *Pro Murena* 73. – Most important is the passage in Cic., *De domo* 136 f., concerning a conflict between the pontifical college and the Vestal Virgin Licinia in 123 BC: the political implications are discussed by F. Münzer, *Römische Adelsparteien und Adelsfamilien* (Stuttgart 1920 = reprint 1963) 243 f.; cf. Broughton, *op. cit.*, I 470. 534. 536.

²² See e.g. F. Guizzi, *Aspetti giuridici del sacerdozio Romano: Il sacerdozio di Vesta*, Napoli 1968 (Pubblicazioni della Facoltà Giuridica dell' Università di Napoli) 200; B. Förtsch, *Die politische Rolle der Frau in der römischen Republik*, Stuttgart 1935 (Würzburger Studien 5) 16. 19. 21.

²³ Jean Gagé, *Matronalia. Essai sur les dévotions et les organisations culturelles des femmes dans l'ancienne Rome* (Coll. Latomus LX, Bruxelles 1963) 143: "La solidarité de ces prêtresses (sc. *virgines Vestae*) avec les matrones est attestée dans plusieurs des cultes féminins."

²⁴ Cic., *De leg.* 2, 8, 20.

Virgins in the city to watch over the eternal fire of the public hearth." And he adds the following commentary:²⁵

"Six virgins shall take care of her (Vesta's) cult, in order to make it easier to be awake with watching the fire, and, so that women may learn that female nature is capable of all kinds of chastity."

Cicero gives two reasons for the virginity of the priestesses. The first is a practical one: married women have other duties; the second is inspired by official Roman morality. Cicero imagines the Vestal Virgins as setting a public example for all women, incorporating the role prescribed for a Roman woman by tradition – to be chaste, pure, above reproach. And he apparently feels that this female role has to be severely protected; thus, in another article of his religious constitution, he forbids women's nocturnal cults, "except those which are performed for the people in the correct way."²⁶ The commentary says: "The utmost care is needed to guarantee that the good reputation of women be protected by daylight and the sight of many witnesses."

Cicero's "laws" are not a description of Roman religion, but his own theory of what Roman religion ought to be, i.e.: a theology. Cicero, the theologian, is a person in public life, an orator, a lawyer, a philosopher, a politician, and – as an *augur* – an official of Roman state religion; he wrote lengthy passages about the political importance of the priesthood to which he belonged.²⁷

The task attributed by Cicero to the Vestal Virgins is anything but "emancipation" of women. In view of the social and political situation in the middle of the first century BC we may suppose that there is more wishful thinking than reality in his conception: its restrictive tendencies however fit well the observations which we have from other sources concerning the status of Vestal Virgins.

Their civil rights and privileges are known to have lost, in the course of time, their exclusive character. The virgin's exemption from *patria potestas* was balanced by subordination unto the jurisdiction of the *pontifex maximus*. Furthermore it is hard to see that this exemption could have been of great advantage for the Vestal Virgin once she was grown up. After her father's death an adult Roman woman was not necessarily subordinate to the *potestas* of another man. There is a form of Roman marriage – *matrimonium sine manu* – which allowed women to remain – in a certain sense – independent.²⁸ More important was the exemption of

²⁵ Cic., *De leg.* 2, 12, 29.

²⁶ Cic., *De leg.* 2, 9, 21; 2, 15, 37.

²⁷ Cic., *De leg.* 2, 12, 30.

²⁸ For the construction of the marriage *extra manum* cf. Rudolph Sohm, *Institutionen des römischen Rechts* (Leipzig 51894) 350 ff.; Kaser (see n. 8) 219. – There is a strong

tutela mulierum, which meant complete legal competence, a privilege originally given to Vestal Virgins exclusively,²⁹ but later on extended to other women. Augustus accorded it to every wife who had produced three children. There is no reason to assume that the status of Vestal Virgins had been the model for this.³⁰

3.2 Practice and Sanctions

On the other hand, the Vestal Virgins are subordinate to the jurisdiction of the *pontifex maximus*, a jurisdiction unique in Roman sacral law, which breaks those famous rights and privileges – a fact that is overlooked by many scholars. To appreciate the social role of a Vestal Virgin we have to realize that, in principle, she always was faced with the charge of “incest” and, should she be condemned, with death. As Friedrich Münzer has pointed out, we may presume that many of these trials were instruments in the struggles for political power among noble families. The most spectacular trials, in which three Vestals were in each case sentenced to death coincide with grave military crises: the defeat of Cannae in 216 BC³¹ and the beginning of the war against the Cimbri and Teutons in 114/113 BC.³² Probably these sentences were meant to channel mass hysteria – even by means of judicial murder. In other political circumstances it was apparently possible to circumvent a charge of incest. So we read in Livy that in 206 BC, when the holy fire in the temple of Vesta went out, the *pontifex maximus* explicitly declared it the result of human error and not a sign of the gods' wrath.³³ And we have Suetonius' curious observation that Domitianus punished severely the incest committed by Vestal Virgins which his father and his brother had ignored. Are we to think that Vespasianus and Titus did not prosecute obvious cases of incest or that they did not care about the Vestal Virgins'

argument in favour of this hypothesis, in that the flamen Dialis when taking office is delivered from *patria potestas* as well. He, as a man, will be *sui iuris* automatically by his father's death; so there is no reason to assume that the liberation from *patria potestas* by itself has an effect of “emancipation” in our modern understanding.

²⁹ Gaius, *Inst.* 1,145: already in *XII Tab.* “in honour of the priesthood”.

³⁰ Kaser (see n. 8) 248 f., s. Gaius, *Inst.* 1,190. According to Kaser, the reason for the vanishing of *tutela mulierum* is to be seen in a social progress towards the independence of women (p.248).

³¹ Liv. 22, 57, 2: Livy himself has styled the “incest” of the Vestal Virgins as a sign of the gods' wrath.

³² A critical report in Asconius, *In Milonianam* §32; Münzer (see n. 21) 243 dates the trial to 115, Broughton to 114/113. Cf. Elizabeth Rawson, Religion and Politics in the late Second Century BC at Rome, *Phoenix* 28 (1964) 193-212; cf. p.208 for the political background of the trials of 114/113: the people's claim for controlling important cults.

³³ Liv. 28, 11, 6 f. and Münzer (see n. 13) 199-201.

lifestyle at all? At any rate we have explicit evidence that not all Roman citizens, and not even all emperors, were convinced that controlling the correct behaviour of Vestal Virgins was an important task on which the welfare of the Empire depended.³⁴

Scholars who regard the killing of Vestal Virgins as an expiation ritual – meaning merely a religious rite – do not deal with such historical, political, and juridical arguments. They adopt the categories of what they take to be the Roman religion.³⁵ Thus they fail to recognize that there is a special jurisdiction directed at women, otherwise unknown in the whole sphere of pontifical penal authority.

In case of misdemeanour the *pontifex maximus* can impose a fine on a priest or dismiss him. There are scholars who emphasize that the Vestal Virgin cannot be dismissed, interpreting this fact as a proof of the high rank of her priesthood;³⁶ but they overlook the fact that a Vestal Virgin is dismissed through death. On the other hand, the punishment by death of Vestal Virgins is not listed in the category of pontifical punishments; for these consist in fines or in dismissal.³⁷ Modern scholars thus perpetuate the ideological categories established in the ancient world.

³⁴ Sueton., *Domitianus* 8,3 f. – It is rather difficult to interpret the passage in Plin., *Epist.* IV 11,7, where Pliny himself is ambiguous.

³⁵ See e.g. Förtsch (see n. 22) 15; K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (München 1960, 21967) 110, n.2; partly also Guizzi (see n. 22) 156; recently A. Fraschetti, *La sepoltura delle Vestali e la città*, in: *Du châtement dans la cité. Supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique* (Collection de l'École Française de Rome 79) Roma 1984, 99 in spite of his agreement with C. Koch, *Vesta*, in: *RE* VIII 2 (1958) 1717-1776. – Koch, c. 1750 f. gives a particular interpretation of the death punishment; according to him burying alive was an archaic form of punishing female members of royal families.

³⁶ G. Giannelli, *Il sacerdozio delle Vestali Romane* (Firenze 1913) 57; cf. p.80 an interpretation of death punishment.

³⁷ By introducing the criterium of deliberateness Tim J. Cornell (Some Observations, on the Crimen incesti, in: *Le délit religieux dans la cité antique* (Roma 1981) 35 f.) interprets the so-called incest of Vestal Virgins as the religious delict of impiety for which there is no *piaculum*. But even so he does not succeed in defining their condemnation as fitting the system of Roman sacral law. Neither is there evidence that persons guilty of impiety were killed, nor was this a particular punishment for priestly impiety. As Cornell himself admits that no case is known, he returns to the mythical person M. Atilius who is said to have been punished by the *culteus* for having betrayed the secrets of the Sibylline Books (sources: Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4, 62; Zonaras 7, 11; Valerius Maximus 1, 1, 13). It is amazing to see how much scholarly effort is spent in order to integrate this extraordinary punishment rather than to admit that it is a unique measure directed against women.

3.3 *officium pontificis*

Among the letters written by Aurelius Symmachus, in approximately the last decade of the 4th century AD,³⁸ two unique documents about pontifical provision for Vestal Virgins have come down to us.³⁹ It is from the very end of ancient Roman religion – and never before – that we hear an official's own voice calling for punishment.

Symmachus informs the *praefectus urbi*⁴⁰ that his *collegium*, following the tradition of the ancestors, has made an investigation and discovered the “incest” of Primigenia, the Vestal Virgin of Alba; the confessions made by herself and her accomplice, a certain Maximus, have been recorded. The public ceremonies being polluted by an abominable crime, the prefect has only one thing to do, says Symmachus: in the public interest he has to punish the crime, as severely as it has been punished in the past.

The prefect, however, was obviously not convinced that this was his duty. So Symmachus had to write another letter,⁴¹ this time to the

³⁸ Symmachus, *Epistulae* 9, 147 and 148; there is no exact dating, neither in the edition by O. Seeck, *Q. Aurelii Symmachi quae supersunt* (Berlin 1883) p. CCIX, nor in S. Roda, *Commento storico al libro IX dell'epistolario di Q. Aurelio Simmaco* (Pisa 1981).

³⁹ Cf. also the letter Symmachus addressed to a Vestal Virgin who was said to leave her priesthood prematurely (*Epist.* 9, 108: *Omnia, quae sine auctore iactantur, incerta sunt; sed ego in sacrae virginis famam nihil patior licere sermonibus. quare officio pontificis, fide senatoris admoneor proferre conperta. diceris ante annos legibus definitos vestali secreto velle decedere. nondum credo rumori, sed adsertionem tuae vocis expecto, quae opinionis dubium aut agnoscat aut respuat. Vestali secreto* – the expression otherwise unknown may allude to the *pignora imperii* hidden (still?) in the temple of Vesta, cf. *Epist.* 9, 148: *quae pudici numinis maculavit arcana*, it could also be erroneously written instead of *sacerdotio*). As to the argument that there should be no suspicion in the reputation of a priestess cf. Caesar's words in Plutarch., *Caesar* 10, 6.

⁴⁰ Symmachus, *Epist.* 9, 147: *More institutoque maiorum incestum Primigeniae dudum apud Albam Vestalis antistitis collegii nostri disquisitio deprehendit; quod et ipsius quae contaminavit pudicitiam sacram, et Maximi, cum quo nefandum facinus admisit, confessionibus claruisse, gesta testantur. restat, ut in eos, qui caerimonias publicas abominando scelere polluerunt, legum severitas exeratur, quae tibi actio de proximi temporis exemplo servata est; et ideo dignaberis, reip(ublicae) utilitatem legesque considerans facinus cunctis usque ad hunc diem saeculis severissime vindicatum competenter ulcisci. vale.*

⁴¹ Symmachus, *Epist.* 9, 148: *Secundum proximae aetatis exempla clarissimo et excellentissimo viro fratri nostro praefecto urbi Primigeniae virginis, quae sacra Albana curabat, a collegio nostro vindicta delata est; sed quia litteris eius causas probabiles adseruntur – quod neque muros urbis aeternae tanti criminis ream fas sit intrare, neque ipse ad longinqua possit occurrere, cum facinus, ubi admissum est debeat expiari – necesse esse perspeximus, potestatem finitimam convenire et cui provinciarum iura*

praefectus praetorio Italiae. He points out that the *praefectus urbi* had plausible reasons for not carrying out the college's sentence: neither was it possible to make the culprit enter the Eternal City, nor was he able to travel in order to make expiation at the scene of the crime. Consequently the college felt that it was the *praefectus Italiae* who was competent to do what always had been done in such cases, says Symmachus, to expiate the crime by putting the couple to death.

We are not told whether Symmachus was successful; as it seems the authorities were not willing to meet the excited call for revenge. The language of these letters resembles the fanatical laws of Christian emperors against "pagans" and "heretics" laid down in the Codex Theodosianus. Symmachus himself has given the interpretation of what he has called "virginity in the service of public welfare".⁴²

The mechanisms of Roman state religion no longer guarantee those silent and spectacular actions to which we are accustomed by our republican sources. Now, in the age of Symmachus, a Roman senator and pontific had to seek for somebody to carry out his sentence. His very piety is an indication of the end of Roman religion.

4. Scholarly Visions of Vestal Virgins

There are, nevertheless, continuities in the "imaginaire". It is instructive to analyse the ideas of Vestal Virgins formed by modern scholars. The history of research thus turns out to be a history of images of women generated by historians of religion.

4.1 Nineteenth Century Dreams

Rodolfo Lanciani, who directed the excavations of the Atrium Vestae in the winter of 1883/84, has provided an interesting evaluation:⁴³

"In my long experience and practice of archaeological research and literature, never have I met with a subject more delightful and interesting.

mandata sunt, ut in Primigeniam, quae pudici numinis maculavit arcana, corruptoremque eius Maximum, qui quidem flagitium non negavit, severitas semper his adhibita criminibus exseratur. dignaberis igitur consideratis confessionibus, quae nefandi criminis tragoediam prodiderunt, iniuriam castissimi saeculi reorum supplicii vindicare.

⁴² Fraschetti (see n. 35) 120 reports Symmachus' intentions as if they were historical data. The very fact, however, that Symmachus had to write a second letter shows that obviously the *praefectus urbis* was neither obliged nor willing to carry out Symmachus' sentence. Symmachus insofar as a religious official pretends, of course, that the "customs and laws of the forefathers" had to be obeyed but we have to ask whether there were other people besides him which shared his opinion.

⁴³ R. Lanciani, *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries* (London 1889), 134-135.

Historical accounts of this lovely sisterhood have a charm of their own, which we fail to recognize in other Roman religious corporations. In speaking of the Vestal Virgins, in describing their house, – the secrets of which, from the foundations of Rome to the fall of the Empire, were never revealed to mankind, – it is impossible not to give the reins to imagination and sentiment. Let us recall to life the silent ruins; let us vivify these halls, these porticoes, with the presence of maidens clad in snow-white garments, which reflected, as it were, the purity of their minds and souls; in the very prime of beauty, youth, and strength; daughters of the noblest families; depositaries of state secrets, confidants of the imperial household, and faithful keepers of the sacred tokens of the Roman Commonwealth. The very faults committed by a few Vestals in the lapse of eleven centuries, and the penalties they underwent to expiate their shame, quivering under the bloody rod of the high-priest, or breathing their last breath in the solitude of the tomb, in which they had been buried alive, – these sins and these expiations, I say, deeply affect the minds of visitors to the house, and still more, the minds of those who have selected it as a special subject of investigation.”

4.2 A Twentieth Century Ideal

Lanciani's vision of the lovely, white-clothed priestesses evokes the perfumes of nineteenth century bourgeois dreams. In the middle of the 20th century another task is bestowed on the Vestal Virgins: According to Carl Koch they are to represent the Female as such in her distinctive affirmation of the Common Goal making a religious contribution of her own to the well-being of the state (*salus publica*).⁴⁴ The Vestal Virgins, he says, “are there before their goddess as the representatives of all women, keeping female nature pure and unadulterated, just as it came out of the maternal womb, similar to the water of a spring in the moment when it comes to light. Their service thus may be understood as the original tribute of the female part of the population to the religious safeguarding of public welfare.”

4.3 Death Fantasies

The recent study by Augusto Frascetti, entitled “La sepoltura delle Vestali e la città”, is less interested in the life than in the death of Vestal Virgins. His concerns are – I attempt to summarise them – the mechanisms which determine the relationship between the effectiveness of the

⁴⁴ Koch (see n. 35) 1770.

community's ritual practice and the unspoilt chastity of the Vestal Virgins.⁴⁵

Fraschetti conceives of a "conceptual field where personal guilt and collective impurity inevitably tend to mingle". Wherever this field extends, it is certainly not the realm of history, or society. In this system there are neither acting persons nor interests, but only sacral mechanisms functioning by themselves. And this is considered valid in a historical period, where even the names are known of those men who were judges in the Vestals' trials, names that represent the political programmes of their *gentes*.

The result of this type of investigation is striking: A Vestal Virgin condemned, according to Fraschetti, is "godless", "not capable of expiation", "a crime", her body is "a contagion for the city". For the city it is, "as if this body had already died" and therefore, so we obviously have to conclude, the body has to be buried alive.

With a kind of religious fervor the author conducts a crusade for the purity of the city and the people. If we imagine the lack of chastity of Vestal Virgins as the pollution and their elimination as the salvation of the people, politics and judiciary can easily be ignored. What reasons are there for modern scholars to isolate some extreme characteristics of Roman religion, and only to combine them to form an archaistic picture?

Why do they lend weight to its misogynistic elements, evoking instincts of a witch-hunt in the medium of the history of ancient religion? There is, so it seems, some research into the psychology of religion that remains to be done and applied to the theories of historians of religion.

5. Conclusion

a) Social History of Roman Religion

The Tübingen project claims to do research in the social history of Roman religion, that is, we are concerned primarily with the communication among men and women that happens in ritual practise. Theological concepts or myths are, of course, not to be neglected, but they range on a secondary level.

Since this is a rigorously historical approach it implies, therefore, a careful evaluation of the sources; it is, for instance, important to determine as precisely as possible the period they account for.

Current terms in religious studies, such as "priest" or "sacrifice", have to be reconsidered; they are "deconstructed" in order to know how the different elements they are composed of combine to form a particular

⁴⁵ Fraschetti (see n. 35) 110, cf. 118. 121. 125.

role in a particular historical and social context. Gender is, of course, an important category in this methodological framework.

b) Vestal Virgins

As to the case of the Vestal Virgins we have seen – I hope – that high privileges and extraordinary civil rights can combine with the severest restrictions. The very construction of this sacerdotal role reveals it as fitting the frame of female roles in Roman society and as specifically distinguished from male ones.

c) History of Scholarship

In the last part of my paper I tried to show how, in the history of religious studies, different visions of the subject have been created which testify to a strong impact of their own time and – this notwithstanding – tend to continue a rather old pattern.

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Общественный статус весталок характеризуется наличием особых привилегий и чрезвычайных прав в сочетании со строжайшими ограничениями. Такое положение вещей органично вписывается в общую систему разграничений мужских и женских ролей в римском обществе.