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Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body

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Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State

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[The Pontifices Maximus] was also the overseer of the holy virgins who are called Vestals. For they ascribe to Numa also the dedication of the Vestal Virgins and generally the care and worship of the inextinguishable fire which they guard, either because he considered the nature of fire to be pure and uncorrupted and so entrusted it to uncontaminated and undefiled bodies or else because he compared its fruitlessness and sterility to virginity. In fact, in all of Greece wherever there is an inextinguishable fire, as at Delphi and Athens, virgins do not have the care of it but women who are beyond the age of marriage. (Plutarch, Numa 9.5)

Plutarch seems puzzled. Why did the Vestals have to be virgins? The explanations offered up until recently have tended to be, like Plutarch’s own, unsatisfactory. The work of Mary Beard and Ariadne Staples’s recent Good Goddess to Vestal Virgil represent major advances in our understanding of the cult of the Vestals. I believe we can go even further. By looking to analyses of similar symbolic structures in a variety of cultures, especially in the area of witchcraft, and by drawing on the work of Maureen J. Giovannini, Rene Girard, and Mary Douglas, we can offer not only an explanation of the specific function of virginity in the cult but also at least a partial solution to three other puzzles about the priestesses of Vesta. First, what accounts for their unique legal status? Second, how can these women, vital to the religious and magical functioning of the Roman state, be murdered so routinely at moments of political crisis? Third, what accounts for the odd details of those murders?

I also want to go beyond virginity to look at a wider symbolic role played by women’s chastity. Feminine virtue was used in antiquity as a sign of the moral health of the commonwealth as commonly as it is in some places today. However, for Rome the connection was not merely a rhetorical commonplace but a mythical and historical reality. There is a running theme wherein two specific charges of sexual impurity in women—violation of virginity in the Vestals and adultery in wives—were made responsible for danger to the state. This series of strange incidents, spanning a thousand years of Roman history, reveals a worldview deeply rooted in sympathetic magic, where women in their strictly limited societal roles embodied the state, and where the inviolability and control of women were objectified as the inviolability and control of the community.

Previous Work

Most previous work on the Vestal Virgins has focused not on the function of the cult but on its form. Apart from George Dumézil and a few others, little effort has been directed at explaining the cult’s social functions and ideological purposes. Instead, scholars have been absorbed in etymological speculation about its putative origin in the domestic structures of the early kings of Rome. Thus the question most often posed about the Vestals is whether they reflected the daughters or the wives of a supposed original royal household.

Three brief points should be made about what we may call the ‘paleontological’ approach to the study of religion. First, the preoccupation with origins conceals a methodological bias. This search, though interesting in itself, is firmly rooted in the notion that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. In the sphere of ritual, that is, a rite is taken as primarily an amalgam of earlier rites, while features that seem archaic are explained as ‘survivals’ of an original structure. The nineteenth-century concern with evolution is evident. Second, the search for origins or etymologies does not in itself constitute an explanation of the god, myth, or ritual. The very fact of the ‘survival’ and the reasons for it must be explained. Projecting synchronic facts back onto a diachronic axis simply shifts the explanation a step back. Further, there is considerable range for error in the act of creating a historical event or supposed circumstance out of each individual aspect of a ritual or myth. In particular, this form of historicizing ignores the fact that a myth or rite may not in fact reflect the ‘survival’ of anything but rather may be the narrative or ritual recreation of what the culture assumes or wishes had occurred. Third, the assumption that the origins of the cult must lie in either the daughters of the kings or else their wives shows a desire for a monolithic explanation for the features of the Vestals and obscures the fact that the rituals and persons of the cult of Vesta, as in others, are overdetermined and multivalent.

The emphasis on the putative origins of the cult has led to an obscuring of the role of cult. Oddly enough, little emphasis had been placed on the fact that
the Vestals had to be intact virgins. The usual explanations were that their pure state represented that of the original royal daughters who tended the household fire before their marriage, or, among those who held that the Vestal Virgins came from the king’s wife or wives, some kind of more generalized sexual purity. The first is clearly inadequate. The emphasis of the sources and the symbolism of the cult are not those of youth or girlish innocence but of absolute physical virginity. Virginity as merely a characteristic of youth is clearly inapplicable to Vestals, whose term of service, though beginning at ages six to ten (Gell. 1.12.1), was thirty years and frequently lifelong (Dion. Hal. 1.76.3, 2.67.2). Beard rightly criticized the second explanation:

It is unacceptable special pleading to suggest that the virginity of the Vestal was merely representative of a very generalized form of chastity, comparable to the pudicitia of the Roman matron. Throughout all the ancient sources which deal with the priesthood great stress is laid on the physical virginity of the women and their total abstinence from sexual intercourse during their thirty years or more in the college.

It is true one needed to be sexually pure to perform many rites in both Greek and Roman religion, but sexual purity and virginity are not identical, and Plutarch (Numa 9.5, quoted above) pointed out that virginity was not everywhere required or indeed even the norm. So we may ask with Plutarch, why virgins? If the Vestals represented the wives of the early kings, why was not the pure flame in charge of virtuous matrons, uxorvirae, or widows? If the Vestals represented the original young (and hence virgin) daughters of the early kings of Rome tending the royal fire, why was not the cult of Vesta confined to young girls? For an answer we must look to the symbolic functions of the Vestal Virgins and of virginity itself.

The Virginity of the Vestals

Our understanding of the symbolic role of the Vestals was greatly advanced by Mary Beard’s 1980 paper ‘The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,’ in which she carefully elucidated the fusion of aspects of the two categories of ‘virgin’ and ‘matron’ in the Vestals. More recently, Ariadne Staples’s From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins presented an insight fundamental to a correct interpretation of their role and cult. In brief: the primary role of the Vestal Virgin was to be an embodiment of the city and citizenry of Rome. I have reached similar conclusions by a different route, that of cultural anthropology. Staples’s work rightly returns our focus from putative origin to actual function. This symbolic role of the absolute virginity of the Vestal Virgins was the aspect to which the ancient texts gave the greatest prominence and which they explicitly labelled the most important. Their embodiment of the city of Rome is clear throughout the sources.

Whether or not the cult of Vesta originated in the household of the Roman kings, one fact must be emphasized: from the beginning of the historical record it was not a private but a public cult. The role of Vesta herself in symbolizing Rome is abundantly clear. She was the hearth and heart of Rome. She stood literally at the centre of the city and served to bind the city together. The common hearth and the common wall together signified the unity of Rome. The goddess’s official title was Vesta publica populi Romani Quiritium. The historians appealed to Vesta to demonstrate the impossibility of abandoning Rome. For the poets Vesta was the metonym for Rome.

Equally clear is the role of Vesta’s priestesses. The Vestals were ‘taken’ in a complex ceremony, whose formula stressed their service to the Roman people. The Vestals prayed for the people of Rome. Cicero ordained that the Vestal Virgins guard the public hearth of the city. Their temple was explicitly open to all by day, though shut to men at night. Their penus was the storehouse of the state, holding not merely state documents, but also the Palladium, the ‘guarantee of Roman power.’ The Vestals tended the eternal fire, whose extinction was not just unlucky, but a grave prodigy, specifically said to presage the destruction of the city. Rome, said Horace, would stand as long as the pontifex climbs the Capitoline beside the silent Virgin.

It is here that we can seek the symbolic function of the Vestal’s virginity. Just as she embodied the city of Rome, so her unpeneetrated body was a metaphor for the unpeneetrated walls of Rome. This is manifest from the ancient sources. The powers of a Vestal were conterminous with the city walls. Pliny the Elder (NH 28.13) stated: ‘We still believe that our Vestals root to the spot fugitive slaves, if they have not yet left the city’ (cf. Dio 48.19.4). Their lives and deaths were bound by the limits of the city. Vestal Virgins were given the honour of burial within the ponticarium (Serv. Aen. 11.206), most strikingly even when they are buried alive after being convicted of unchastity (see below). However, the Vestals’ virginity was more than merely the symbol of the inviolability of Rome. It was also the guarantee. The whole state depended on the state of being whole. The Vestals did not just hold the repositories of the state; they were the repositories of the state.

Rome and Mediterranean Anthropology

The roles of women as symbolic counters in men’s codes of honour and the special function of virginity within those codes have been a major concern in
what has come to be called ‘Mediterranean anthropology.’ Maureen J. Giovannini’s observations on the function of Woman as Sign in symbolizing and mediating various aspects of the family can help us in understanding this complex of contradictory ideas. Giovannini identified six archetypal categories into which women were placed by the citizens of the Sicilian town that she calls ‘Garre.’ At the centre is the pair of la Vergine (the Virgin) and la Mamma (the Mother) representing woman in her two societally sanctioned roles, unpenetrated and penetrated. Each has an anti-type: la Puttana (the Whore) and la Madrigna (the Step- or Anti-mother). On the supernatural level, just as la Madonna unites the beneficient aspects of woman, so la Strega (the Witch) unites the figures of la Puttana and la Madrigna. The honour of the family is synonymous with the chastity of its women, who, because of their inherent vice of feminine sexual weakness, are in constant danger of becoming whores and adulteresses. For la Vergine, Giovannini notes:

Her physical intactness is also viewed as a sign that her family possesses the unity and strength necessary to protect its patrimony ... As family member, la Vergine can synecdochically (part for whole) convey the message that her family is a viable entity with its boundaries intact ... la Vergine’s (and, as we shall later discover; la Puttana’s) corporal being constitutes a kind of cognitive map for the family unit by concretely representing the boundaries of this social group along with its internal unity.

For ancient Rome, the cult of Vesta was the symbol for the unity of all families. Hence Giovannini’s analysis applies not merely to the individual units but to the Roman state as a collective. Mary Douglas’s remarks on the use of the human body as a microcosm of the social order in various societies, especially those with strong witchcraft beliefs, relate directly to the symbolic value of the Vestal Virgin:

The group is likened to the human body; the orifices are to be carefully guarded to prevent unlawful intrusions ... The most fundamental assumptions about the cosmos and man’s place in nature are coloured by the socially appropriate image of the human body ... The idea of a cherished bodily form vulnerable to attack from without tends to be transferred from one context to another. It can serve as a theory of misfortune by pinning blame on hidden enemies of society; it can serve as a guide to action, requiring the enemies to be unmasked and disabled ... Injustice can be rectified merely by purging the system of internal traitors allied with outside enemies ... Bodily symbolism in the witch fearing cosmology is endlessly rich and varied, but always the emphasis is on valuing the boundaries, guarding the orifices, avoiding improper mixtures.

Magical Virginity

The Vestal was not merely a mode of representation. She was also a symbol that could be manipulated. Archaic Roman religion was based on and steeped in magical practice. By ‘magical practice’ I mean that technology of analogy as defined by Tambiah: ‘Magical acts ... constitute “performatives” acts by which a property is imperatively transferred to a recipient object or person on an analogical basis.’ Magic, since Frazer, has traditionally been divided between the imitative and the contagious. In imitative magic the law of similarity applies: ‘like produces like’; in contagious magic, the law of contiguity applies: ‘objects which have been in contact, but since ceased to be so, continue to act on each other at a distance.’ The Vestal, who preserved the inviolability of Rome by preserving the inviolability of her body, exemplifies both forms of magic and indeed shows their overlap and a certain arbitrariness in the distinction. Imitative magic is perhaps better characterized as metaphoric (similia similibus): as she remained integra, so did the city. The Vestal’s body served as the microcosm of the city.

Again, this is abundantly clear from the ancient sources. The Vestal must not be merely a virgin but physically perfect in every respect. The potential candidate was examined by the Pontifex Maximus to guarantee this. Both parents must be living, and neither she nor her father emancipated, since this would make her technically an orphan and hence imperfect. Her parents’ marriage must have been perfect. Neither of them could be divorced or ex-slaves or found to have engaged in negotia sordida. Should she even fall sick, she must be removed from the aedes Vestae and cared for outside the holy area by a married woman, but not a family member (Pliny 7.19.1). Most important, as we have noted, her life and powers were circumscribed by the walls of the city.

Contagious magic, on the other hand, is metonymic or synecdochic: “The
part is to the whole as the image is to the represented object. The Vestal represents not only the idealized role of Woman—a fusion of the archetypal roles of la Vergine and la Mamma into the figure of la Madonna—but also the citizen body as a whole. Many cities are symbolized by women. Athens, symbolized and guarded by the virgin goddess Athena, is an obvious example. The citizen body as a whole is represented, symbolized, and guarded by a virgin female to represent a citizen body composed of men and their dependents. Pomeroy points towards an answer: 'Since a virgin belongs to no man, she can incarnate the collective, the city: she can belong to everyone.' This insight, however, is incorrect in one important respect: an ordinary virgin in Roman law does belong to a man—she belongs to her father. According to a principle of Roman law, a virgin to incarnate the collective, she must be extraordinary. She must be freed not only from her father but from all possible and catalogued forms of familial tie.

**Legal Status**

In the past the legal status of the Vestal Virgin was not correctly conceptualized, since it was approached almost entirely from a purely descriptive point of view. Her unique legal status should be viewed less as a mark of respect than as a magical function that made it possible for her to incarnate the collective. Once the ritual and symbolic purpose of the laws is considered, the legal status and consequences of that status become clear. Gardner summarizes:

> The oddities of her position seem rather to arise from her position as one in charge of a worship central to the state and not belonging to any one family in the state. She was taken out of her family, with certain legal consequences, but she did not cease to be a woman.

It is necessary to go further. She was taken out of her family and not added to any other. Moreover, she was not just in charge of a worship central to the state; she was also the embodiment of that state. She did not cease to be a woman, but she ceased to be like any other woman.

Roman society was governed by a strict series of exogamic rules, and the principle of Woman as Sign is more visible there than in many other cultures. The exchange of women to seal interfamilial bonds and political ties was a marked feature of Roman society. Thus if the Vestal Virgin were to represent the society as a whole, she must be exterior to all families. Because a basic principle of Roman law was that a woman always belonged to someone, the procedure to free the Vestals from ownership was both complex and comprehensive. The first step in the process was to exempt the Vestal initiate from the power of her father (patria potestas). Since this was normally accomplished by coemptio, a form of sale that merely placed her in someone else’s power, she was specifically said not to have undergone emancipation, which normally simply passed a woman into the tutela of her nearest male relative. She was then freed from any form of tutela, but uniquely without loss of status (capitis minuto) — that is, without falling into the manus of any other man. Though she was under the formal discipline of the Pontifex Maximus, who could scourge her for minor offences, he exercised neither patria potestas nor tutela over her. Thus the complex legal procedure prevented her from being an orphan while still guaranteeing that legally and religiously she had no family. She was completely removed from her agnatic family and yet did not pass to the ownership of any other family.

A Roman woman existed legally only in relation to a man. A woman’s legal status was based entirely on this fact. The act of freeing a Vestal from any man, so that she was free to incarnate all men, removed her from all conventional classifications. Thus she was unmarried and so not a wife; a virgin and so not a mother; she was outside patria potestas and so not a daughter; she underwent no emancipatio, no coemptio, and so was not a ward.

This unique status entailed a number of consequences. Since she had no family, she no longer inherited property; nor did she leave property to her family if she died intestate. Rather than her property reverting to the gens as would be the case for an intestate woman freed by ordinary emancipation, it reverted to the state, of which she was the embodiment. As a free agent, she necessarily acquired the right to dispose of her property by will and the right to be a witness. It is to this unique status that I would assign the ‘male aspect’ that Beard and Dumézil have identified. Her ‘masculine’ rights and privileges were side effects of the act of freeing her from all masculine ownership and not necessarily constructs designed to increase the ambiguity of her classification and thus further mark her out as sacred.

The Vestal was thus the totem of Rome, and her sacred character derives from her status as the embodiment of the clan. Her virginity is a type of binding spell familiar from ritual observances in many cultures. A single totemic item is invested with the safety of an individual or state. As long as it remains unharmed, so does that which it signifies. For Rome there was significantly the Palladium, which the Vestal Virgins guarded and with which they were associated and identified as the ‘guarantee of Roman power.’

Thus, as long as the Vestal remained intact, so did Rome. This symbolic
function is explicitly stated. For example, a Vestal’s epitaph reads: ‘The republic saw with good fortune day after day her exceptional discipline in morals and most exact observance of the rituals.’ Thus the Vestal Aemilia, when the sacred fire went out, prayed to Vesta (Dion. Hal. 2.68.4): ‘If anything unholy has been done by me, let the pollution of the city be expiated by my punishment.’ Most tellingly, the Vestal Cornelia, on her way to be buried alive by the order of Domitian, ties the safety of Rome explicitly to her virginity and reveals the underlying magical logic: ‘Does Caesar think that I have been unchaste, when he has conquered and triumphed while I have been performing the rites?’

The Sacrifice of the Vestal Virgin: A Theoretical Outline

The question now arises: how can a people sacrifice its symbol? How can the incarnation of the state be ritually murdered? Burkert’s explanation for the sacrifice of a virgin in his reconstruction of prehistoric ritual (and perhaps in Greek myth) will not do. He proposes: ‘Man declines love in order to kill: the period of preparation, maiden-sacrifice is the strongest expression of the attempt to renounce sexuality.’ However, there is no necessity for ‘virginity’ in a renunciation of sexuality. Further, there is nothing in the Roman ritual of the sacrifice of the Vestal Virgin to show the connection that Burkert proposed between maiden-sacrifice and hunting or preparation for warfare (as distinct from the threat of external warfare). Rather, to summarize what the Roman sources cited below make clear, the sacrifice of a Vestal Virgin was the sacrifice of a scapegoat, in both the popular and the ritual sense. For it is important to note that the sacrifice of a Vestal Virgin is a ritual, a precisely delineated social construction.

René Girard’s careful exploration of the roles and patterns of sacrifice can aid in isolating elements and functions of the ritual sacrifice of the Vestal Virgin. In turn, by using the society of ancient Rome as a source of anthropological data, we can cast light on and make some corrections to Girard’s theory. Certain features of his analysis illuminate the sacrifice of the Vestal Virgins. A summary of his complex ideas may be presented under the two headings of the nature of the sacrifice and the nature of the victim.

For all societies, says Girard, the greatest danger is that of unchecked reciprocal violence. As the cycle of violence increases, the society reaches a ‘sacrificial crisis,’ which can be, almost miraculously, resolved by further violence, but of a specifically controlled type, namely sacrifice. In sacrifice, ‘society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a “sacrificeable” victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members.’ Through sacrifice and the sacrificial victim, improper violence is channelled into proper violence. All are united in this single act, which Girard defines as ‘the sacred.’

For sacrifice to work in this way, it is essential that the violence be unanimous. Anyone left outside is a potential avenger, a source of new violence. As Girard says, ‘Such an attitude requires absolute faith in the guilt of the surrogate victim.’ To restate Girard’s thesis, no victim is ever sacrificed and then found not to have been guilty.

For Rome, we may note in the historical record the total lack of any protest against the sacrifice of a Vestal Virgin, even from the Vestal’s family. Pliny’s eyewitness account of the murder of Cornelia is revealing. Though Pliny hated Domitian, was deeply suspicious of his motives for attacking the Vestal, and denounced the illegality of her trial and execution, he could not bring himself to believe that the charge was utterly without foundation. He was able only to go as far as writing ‘I don’t know whether she was innocent, but she certainly acted as if she were innocent.’

Further, to eliminate the possibility of a new cycle of revenge, the sacrificial act must be sharply marked off from any non-sacred act of violence. The nature of the sacrifice must be in some form, as Girard says, ‘disguised’: ‘A properly conducted ritual killing is never openly linked to another bloodletting of irregular character.’ The murder of the Vestal was a precise form of sanctioned human sacrifice: violence broke out in a predictable pattern and the sequence of events that led to the accusation of a Vestal was as formalized as the details of her trial and execution.

It is clear that the victims in Girard’s analysis must possess a stringent set of qualities if their deaths are to unite the society in a unanimous act of sacrifice. First, since ‘sacrifice is primarily an act of violence without risk of vengeance,’ all sacrificial victims ‘are invariably distinguished from the nonsacrificeable beings by one essential characteristic: between these victims and the community a crucial social link is missing, so they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal. Their death does not automatically entail an act of vengeance.’ However, the exact opposite must also be simultaneously true. Since the victim ‘is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves,’ the victim must also be similar to and part of the community it represents. Therefore, says Girard, ‘the proper functioning of the sacrificial process requires not only the complete separation of the sacrificial victim from those beings for whom the victim is a substitute but also a similarity. This dual requirement can be fulfilled only through a delicately balanced mechanism of associations.’ Anthropological data reveal that the human victims share a common status: [They] are either outside or on the fringes of society: prisoners, slaves, pharmakos... What we are dealing with, therefore, are exterior or marginal individuals, incapable
of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants. Their status ... prevents these future victims from fully integrating themselves into the community.\textsuperscript{76}

Following this pattern, the Vestal Virgin is both interior and exterior. She is the child of citizens, originally confined to the upper classes, perfect to represent the whole citizenry.\textsuperscript{77} Yet at the same time she is carefully segregated, legally removed from all familial ties, as outlined above.

Likewise, the victim must be innocent – for vengeance on a guilty party may lead to another act of vengeance – and at the same time guilty, since only a collective belief in guilt can guarantee the necessary unanimity.\textsuperscript{78} Ritual measures are taken in order to increase the future victim’s guilt. The victim is frequently charged with the most hideous crimes, violating the society’s most basic taboos, notably incest.\textsuperscript{79} I use the words ‘charged with’ in two senses: both charged with sin and charged with power. One form of charging the victims with magical power (the familiar Polynesian \textit{mana}) is to force the members of the group of potential victims to violate taboos (as done by the kings in various African cultures). The other is its opposite: a strict and compulsive guard on the victims, but with the purpose of holding the victims all the more guilty for violating these taboos. Thus the Vestals were bound by a complex series of duties and prohibitions. The lesser violations were punishable by a scourging from the Pontifex Maximus, but the most awesome violation, accusation of the loss of virginity, by burial alive.

The Vestal Virgin as Victim

The Vestal Virgin thus provides a perfect example of the \textit{pharmakos}, as known from Greece, as described by Frazer, and as analysed by Girard.\textsuperscript{80} Even as she was a physically perfect priestess, so she can become a sacrificially perfect victim. However, Girard notes a striking exception in his description of the marginality of the victim:

\begin{quote}
It is clearly legitimate to define the difference between sacrificeable and nonsacrificeable individuals in terms of their degree of integration, but such a definition is not yet sufficient. In many cultures women are not considered full-fledged members of their society; yet women are never, or rarely, selected as sacrificial victims.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

This statement is contradicted not only by the analogous worlds of myth and Greek tragedy to which Girard applies his theory, but also by a wide range of cross-cultural data.\textsuperscript{82} He has neglected, in particular, evidence from anthropological discussions of witchcraft (see below).\textsuperscript{83} Girard, however, offers an argument for his exclusion of women:

There may be a simple explanation for this fact. The married woman retains her ties with her parent’s clan even after she has become in some respects the property of her husband and his family.\textsuperscript{84} To kill her would be to run the risk of one of the two groups interpreting her sacrifice as an act of murder committing it to a reciprocal act of revenge.\textsuperscript{85}

Girard need not have confined himself to married women. The deaths of women in their role as daughters are equally subject to revenge.\textsuperscript{86} To restate, though Girard does not use these terms, the role of Woman as Sign makes the use of Woman as Sacrifice dangerous. Women, however, are the most obviously sacrificeable class of victims; indeed they are the perfect victims. Better than any other group, they have been endowed with the marginality crucial to sacrifice. Yet it appears they cannot easily be sacrificed. Girard’s own remarks point the way to the solution that culture after culture has found. If Woman as Sign prevents her use as victim, she must be made to be a sign for something else; she must be exempted from vengeance and removed completely from all social bonds.

Thus, the special status of the Vestal Virgin made it possible for her to be this perfect victim. The sacrifice of the Vestal Virgin reveals a deeply rooted cultural technology of the \textit{pharmakos}. The magical ways of thinking are evident from the sources. A single example may suffice. Livy (2.42.9–11) described the sacrifice of the Vestal Oppia in 483 BC:

\begin{quote}
War with Veii then broke out and the Volsci resumed hostilities. Roman resources were almost more than sufficient for war against an external enemy, but they were squandered by the Romans fighting among themselves. Adding to everyone’s mental anxiety were heavenly prodigies, occurring in Rome and the countryside, which showed the anger of the gods almost daily. The prophets, after consulting first the entrails and then the birds about both the public and the private omens, announced that there was no other reason for the gods being so moved, except that the sacred rites were not being performed correctly. These terrors finally resulted in the Vestal Virgin Oppia being condemned for \textit{incestum} and executed.\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

Note the flat narrative tone, the logical sequence of events. Girard writes: ‘Whenever violence threatens, ritual impurity is present.’\textsuperscript{88} As Livy and the other sources make clear, this magical law is both resulative and causal. The logic runs: We are in trouble; therefore, the rites designed to protect us are not being performed properly; therefore, those entrusted with those rites
have betrayed us; therefore, the way to restore safety is to sacrifice those who have betrayed us.80

Vestal Virgin as Witch

Throughout his work, in my opinion, Girard overemphasizes the role of internal violence at the expense of external threats. Here the Roman data can qualify his broad formulations. As various historians ancient and modern have noted, the sacrifice of the Vestal Virgin occurs primarily in times of extreme religious hysteria and political crisis.81 The crisis, however, is not exclusively one of internal dissension but also external military threat (see Appendix). As an example, note the emphasis that Livy places on both elements in his account of the sacrifice of Oppia. Girard, however, rightly links internal and external threats by identifying an element of ‘betrayal.’

Girard writes on African magicians:

As soon as the community becomes aware of a backlash of violence, it will shift the responsibility to those who led it into temptation, the manipulators of sacred violence. They will be accused of having betrayed a community to which they only half belonged, of having used against this community a power that had always been mistrusted.81

Those who work with and are in contact with the sacred are especially likely to become its victims. The primary notion is that of contagion. This fear of the contaminated insiderabetting an external enemy is crucial to the thinking of many societies, and anthropological analyses of witchcraft can help illuminate how this fear manifested itself in Rome as well. Thus Philip Mayer in a famous article describes the witch as 'The Traitor within the Gates':

The figure of the witch, clearly enough, embodies those characteristics that society specially disapproves. The values of the witch directly negate the values of society . . . However, I think that another or a more particular kind of opposition is also vitally involved. I mean the opposition between 'us' and 'them' ... The witch is the figure who has turned traitor to his own group. He has secretly taken the wrong side in the basic societal opposition between 'us' and 'them.' This is what makes him a criminal and not only a sinner.81

These remarks cast an important light on the Vestal Virgin.81 For the Vestal accused of incestum was held not only as a sinner but as a criminal as well, and the worst criminal of all: a traitoress. The specifically feminine form is significant. In undoing herself, she has undone Rome.

I say ‘undoing herself’ in the same sense as ‘got herself pregnant.’ The entirely optional presence of a man is a feature usually unnoticed or unremarked by both ancients and moderns. The sequence of events is inconsistent: misfortune results in suspicion of unchastity; unchastity implies a seducer; one is occasionally sought and found. While we know the names of several men executed or exiled for having had intercourse with Vestal Virgins,81 and while such a charge clearly might be used for political purposes,81 Vestals were most often tried for unchastity quite by themselves, with no male co-defendants, or (just as revealing) the existence of male co-respondents was not considered worthy of record.81 There is no case recorded of a Vestal Virgin suspected or convicted because she was pregnant or any case where a Vestal was charged with unchastity because she had been raped.87 Vestals always sinned willingly. It was necessary for them to do so.

In Giovannini’s analysis, just as la Vergine serves to mark the family’s boundaries, so her anti-type, la puttana, can act as a synecdoche (part for whole) for her family’s weakness in the face of external threats . . . Also, because she was willingly penetrated, this female figure connotes individual disloyalty to the family. In fact, people commonly referred to such a woman as una traditrix (a traitor).82 Likewise, the supernatural Witch (la Strega), who unites Whore and Stepmother, ‘while actualizing the penetration of Woman,’ is called upon ‘to represent the uncontrollable forces that undermine family unity.’88

Thus the penetrated Vestal Virgin becomes a witch – that is, when a witch was needed, a Vestal was deemed to have been penetrated. Here we see one of the most frequent uses of witchcraft: to protect other value systems. The failure of sacred ritual can be attributed to witchcraft, specifically to betrayal by those very technicians of the sacred whose duty it was to perform the rituals that protect society.89

This linking of betrayal and unchastity in the figure of the traitoress (traditrix) ran deep in the Roman mind. It is an intimate part of the cultural encyclopedia. It features prominently in myth and mythical history (Horatia and Tarcha) as well as rhetoric and rhetorical history (Sempronilla).80 It is also enshrined in law which allows the torture of slaves to provide evidence against their masters only for cases of incestum and for treason.101

The Trial: Legal Status

The ambiguous legal status of the trial for incestum of the Vestal Virgin has excited the curiosity of many commentators. Two divergent views are held: one, that the trial of the Vestal was a purely secular procedure; the other, that it was a purely religious matter. Koch and others have claimed that Roman
had no procedures for dealing with offences against the gods. This is not precisely correct but leads them, nevertheless, to view the trial of the Vestal Virgin as a strictly criminal matter, with the Pontifex Maximus exercising a purely judicial and paternal authority in a trial for incestum. 

Coch believed that the Vestal was held guilty of incest (in the English sense, German Blutschande) since all Romans were somehow the brothers of the Vestal. He then likened it to a trial by a father for a daughter’s adultery. Coch, however, misunderstood the very nature of the term incestum. Incestum was not just ‘incest,’ nor was it the same as stuprum (sexual defilement, which covers adultery and rape). Both familial incest and the Vestal’s incestum were types of a specific genus of un-chastity, united by the fact that each involved, unlike stuprum, not just legal but religious consequences, and so danger to the state as a whole. Likewise, the trial of a wife accused of adultery before the family tribunal and the trial of a Vestal accused of incestum before the entire pontifical college differed in numerous aspects, most importantly in the unique specification of the Vestal’s death by being buried alive.

Wissowa and others, noting the obvious ritual significance of the trial and punishment of a Vestal, argued that they were not criminal procedures at all but the purely religious matter of the discovery and purification of a prodigium (procuraturo prodigiorum). Cornell objects that the unchastity of a Vestal was not itself a prodigium, but a crime that a series of prodigia served to disclose. This is not quite correct. Rather, it is the case that prodigies give rise to prodigies. The accused Vestal shared with other prodigia the essential feature of pollution. She was a contradiction in terms, a penetrated virgin, the impure pure, and so a miasma. Like a hermaphrodite, she crossed boundaries that must not be crossed, and so she must be removed and destroyed. The details of her execution were those of the expiation of a prodigy.

Again, each single explanation is inadequate. The crime of the Vestal was neither against the gods alone nor against the Pontifex Maximus alone. The trial and execution of the Vestal Virgin was unique because it was simultaneously both a religious rite to drive out the pollution of incestum and a judicial rite for the punishment of treason. The penetrated virgin was a monster and so must be expiated as a prodigium. Yet she sinned willingly and so was a traitor. The trial therefore had two corresponding functions. First, the trial guaranteed the unanimity of the sacrifice, the ‘absolute faith in the guilt of the surrogate victim.’ It separated the Vestal Virgin from the community and increased the sacrificially necessary guilt. She was made responsible for all the evils that occurred in the time of crisis, especially sterility of women and diseases of cattle – common witchcraft charges. Second, the trial served as the disguise necessary to the proper functioning

of the sacred. The Greek and Latin sources themselves carefully distinguished between the execution of the Vestals in 215 and 113 B.C. and the sacrifice of the two Greeks and two Gauls along with them (see Appendix). The disguise has worked extraordinarily well. Pliny is not the only one to be unable to convince himself of the possibility of wrongful conviction. Modern authors commenting on the historical texts hold to an oddly naive and credulous style of reporting. The trials and executions of the Vestals are never referred to as – what they so palpably are – human sacrifice.

Execution and Burial: The Vestal as Prodigium, Pharmakos, and Devotio

As Prodigium

The execution of the Vestal followed the same magical and religious logic as the expiation of a prodigium. In each case the first principle was to remove all traces of the prodigium. Thus two oxen that had climbed up the stairs to the roof of a block of flats were burned alive and their ashes scattered in the Tiber (Livy 36.37.2). A person who had changed sex is said by Pliny the Elder to have been left on a desert island (Hist. Nat. 7.36). A hermaphrodite was sealed alive in a chest and set adrift at sea. Cornell rightly compares the hermaphrodite with the case of M. Atilius, who was convicted of revealing parts of the Sibylline books on the testimony of a slave, sealed in a sack, and thrown alive into the sea: The ritual purpose of [this] cullus is clearly to remove all trace of an unholy and polluting object. The goal, however, of such rituals is not only to remove the polluting presence of a prodigium, but to do so without incurring that pollution. Thus the prodigium is burned or abandoned alive. Death is left up to a natural force and no one is personally responsible for the death and so tainted. No one, therefore, is the object of a further act of vengeance for that death. Girard explains the mechanism in these terms:

It is best, therefore, to arrange matters so that nobody, except perhaps the culprit himself, is responsible for his death, so that nobody is obliged to raise a finger against him. He may be abandoned without provisions in mid-ocean, or stranded on top of a mountain, or forced to hurl himself from a cliff ... the object is to achieve a radically new type of violence, truly decisive and self-contained.

Thus the details of the Vestal’s execution. She was uniquely buried alive, yet provided with a small amount of food, which Plutarch explicitly said was done to prevent the death of a sacred person from being attributable to
anyone but herself (Quaest. Rom. 96, Numa 10). The execution of a Vestal was in itself her trial by ordeal. If she were pure, Vesta would no doubt rescue her. Since the goddess never did, the Vestal’s guilt was proved.\textsuperscript{123}

As Pharmakos

The Vestal Virgin was the symbol of the city, specially set apart in order to incarnate the impregnable boundaries of Rome. When Rome was subject to violence, it was because the Vestal had been violated. Yet it was this very status that made it possible for her to be used as a witch figure whose sacrifice averted the anger of the gods. She could become a \textit{pharmakos}.\textsuperscript{124}

Like the \textit{pharmakos}, she was a ritually pure victim. Seneca (Cont. 4.2) explicitly compared the physical perfection of the sacrificing priest to the physical perfection of the sacrificial victim. Yet we hear of no examination to determine a loss of virginity, apart from the trial by ordeal of burial alive. To have definite medical evidence one way or the other would destroy that precarious balance that Girard points out, since the victim must be simultaneously pure and yet guilty. Like the \textit{pharmakos}, she was paraded through the town in order ‘to absorb all the noxious influences that may be abroad.’\textsuperscript{125} She partook therefore of the dual nature of the \textit{pharmakos}, even as \textit{pharmakon} has a dual sense. The ritual victim is both disease and cure. Dion. Hal. 9.40.1 (on the murder of Urbina in 472) makes the mechanism clear: once the Vestal was buried alive, the plague that had afflicted the women with sterility and miscarriages ceased (again, note the standard association of witchcraft with plague).

As Devotio

The Vestal Virgin’s status as \textit{pharmakos} means that after her execution, she was paradoxically a protection to the city. She was a prodigy: sacred before as Virgin and Mother, she was still sacred (that is crossing category boundaries) when defiled, as both penetrated and unpenetrated. Like Oedipus, the presence of her body helped guard the very city that she was held to have betrayed. This explains the fact that not only were the bodies of Vestals ordinarily given the honour of burial inside the city walls, but even Vestals found guilty of \textit{incestum} were buried alive within the \textit{pomerium}. Most important, this explains the fact that yearly sacrifices were made on the now holy site of the burial, the \textit{campus sceleratus}.\textsuperscript{126} Plutarch expressed astonishment that the site of the burial of a traitorress should receive yearly sacrifices. Only the Vestal’s status as \textit{pharmakos} can explain this.

The Vestal Virgin was thus the most magically effective form of \textit{devotio}.\textsuperscript{127}

Why Were the Vestals Virgins?\textsuperscript{83}

Just as the Roman general could devote any soldier from the army as a substitute for himself, and as a representative of the army and the Roman people as a whole, so the Vestal Virgin was devoted as sacrifice for the Roman people to expiate the anger of the gods.\textsuperscript{128} Indeed, only comparison with the \textit{devotio} explains the fact that the Vestal was \textit{buried} alive. The standard punishment for both treason and incest was to be thrown off the Tarpeian rock.\textsuperscript{129} However, if someone survived after being made an involuntary \textit{devotio}, an image had to be buried seven or more feet deep and the spot was declared sacred (Livy 8.10.2). The Vestal was thus an image of the Roman people and a \textit{devotio} for them.

Death and the Matrons

The Vestal Virgin functioned as Sign, Stranger, and Sacrifice. She was the Sign for the Roman people, incarnating the collective. Yet in order to serve as the totem of Rome, she was made a Stranger, removed from all familial ties. This combination made her the ideal Sacrifice: both interior and exterior, she could serve as \textit{prodigium}, \textit{pharmakos}, and \textit{devotio} to expiate and protect the city.

These uses of women were not confined to the Vestal Virgins. Rather, Roman society reveals a deep misogyny, erupting at times of crisis into murderous fear directed against its own matrons, against women in their roles as wives and as mothers.

Again, the logic of sympathetic magic is evident. The emphasis is on the element of control. Even for the Vestal Virgins, the sources are emphatic that although the Vestals no longer belonged to any man, they were still under the discipline of the Pontifex Maximus, whose punishments extended to beatings for minor infractions and to execution for \textit{incestum}. To control women and their sexuality was to control the state. As the state escaped control, among the omens was the escape of women from proper male control. The danger to the \textit{Urbs} could only be warded off by the punishment of women and the subsequent foundation of public cults of chastity with admonitory and apotropaic functions.\textsuperscript{130} Again this was a common ploy of rhetoric and is reflected in a number of historical or quasi-historical events (see Appendix for the sources).

As in the case of the murder of the Vestals, these outbreaks of witch-hunts against the matrons of Rome cluster around times of external threat and internal danger. Thus in 491 BCE, the cult of Fortuna Muliebris was founded, open only to \textit{univira}, celebrating the salvation of Rome by the mother and wife of Coriolanus. In 331, a year of plague, twenty patrician wives were charged with a city-wide poisoning conspiracy.\textsuperscript{131} The women were forced to
drink the drugs that they claimed were beneficial and of course died — an obvious trial by ordeal. A further 170 matrons were executed as a result of the subsequent investigation. In 296, the cult of Plebeian Chastity was founded. In the following year an unknown number of matrons were found guilty of adultery, fined, and the money used to build the temple of Venus Obsequens as a warning to adulteresses. In 215, following the disaster at Cannae, the Oppian law was passed, the temple of Venus Verticordia dedicated, and the Vestal Virgins Floronia and Opimia executed, together with more explicit human sacrifice. In 213, there was a suppression of foreign cults and an unspecified number of wives exiled for adultery. In 204, there was the trial by ordeal of Claudia Quinta, charged with adultery. In 186, the Bacchanalia crisis erupted, when unknown numbers (in the thousands) of women were executed by family tribunal or the state. In 184, there was a further series of poisoning trials, including both men and women. In 180, Hostilia Quarta was condemned for poisoning her husband in order to advance her son by an earlier marriage, while in Rome and environs three thousand people were found guilty of poisoning. In 154, Pubilia and Licinia were accused of poisoning their husbands, tried by family tribunals, and strangled. In 113, following the condemnation and execution of the Vestal Virgins, the temple of Venus Verticordia was rededicated.

Two questions arise: Why was this fear directed against matrons, women at the centre of society, rather than solely against the old, the widowed, the unprotected, or other societally marginal women, as in the European witch craze? And why was the charge of adultery the expression of that fear? These eruptions of rage against women reveal a profound fear at the core of Roman society. In brief, the role of Woman as Sign has led to the role of Woman as Stranger: the very interchangeability and exchangeability on which Rome was based necessitated that a woman still be attached to, and a step-mother, was not confined to her. Rather, since for Rome the children were the husband's, both legally and biologically, all mothers were step-mothers, fostering another's children. Anthropological data from a variety of cultures demonstrate the way in which accusations of witchcraft are frequent against brides brought into virilocal or patrilocal villages. For Rome a single example may serve to illustrate this nexus of adultery, poisoning, and betrayal. According to Plutarch (Rom. 22.3), the laws of

Romulus specified that a husband may divorce his wife only for poisoning his children, counterfeiting his keys, or adultery.

This very marginality of women, as we have seen, makes them the perfect victims. In times of panic, the society can easily be restored to health by the sacrifice, exile, or punishment of wives, who are central to the family, yet not fully members of it; who are necessary to produce children, yet expendable; who are, in short, human but less than human. Yet why do Girard's objections to women as the ideal sacrificial victim not apply? The execution of a wife would appear to be fraught with the dangers of reciprocal violence from either her birth family or her marriage family that Girard noted. Here we can see the role that the charge of adultery played. Adultery of a wife was the betrayal of all her male relatives, both by birth and by marriage. Only for adultery did both husband and father have the right, indeed the duty, to kill a matron. Only the charge of adultery could sever a woman from both her agnatic and her marriage families.

The list in the Appendix makes clear the prevalence of the theme of conspiracy. We hear not of individual women put on trial, but masses. We are told of monstrous women acting not alone, but in concert, and not merely with adulterers, but more terrifyingly with the other outsiders, with slaves and foreigners, and most terrifyingly with each other. They formed an anti-society, an underground where women were adulterous and poisoned their husbands, even their children. They created a witch-world whose values were distorted parodies of the values of patriarchal society: women as active, rather than passive; as sexual subjects, rather than sexual objects; as murderers, rather than victims.

Thus the magical and liminal functions of women were not confined to the Vestal Virgins. Female sexuality under male control was the basis of and the paradigm for keeping society under control. Yet in times of crisis, the society turned on those elements which it feared would threaten social stability, the very categories it created in order to have stability at all. The unpenetrated virgin and the well-regulated wife both embodied the city, in the symbolic universes of sympathetic magic and ideological praxis.

Appendix: Chronology

c. 750 BCE (traditional): Vestal Tarpeia. Only three sources call her a Vestal: Varro LL 5.41, Prop. 6.4; Plut. Numa 10.1. The rest merely label her virgo or parthenos: Livy 1.11.5–9; Ovid F. 1.261–2; Dion. Hal. 2.38 (citing Piso, Fabius, Cincius); Val. Max. 9.6.1; Plut. Rom. 17–18.1 (citing Juba, Sulpicius Galba, Simylus, Antigonus of Carystus); Festus 496L (464L, frg.).
c. 616–579 (traditional): Vestal Pinaria (under Tarquin Priscus). Dion. Hal. 3.67.3, Zonar. 7.8 (no name).

491: Foundation of Fortuna Muliebris, open only to women and others excluded since they were unlucky: Dion. Hal. 8.56.4; Tert. Monog. 17. Livy 2.40.12; Festus 2821; De Vir. Ill. 19; Val. Max. 1.8.4, 5.2.1, 4.1; App. 2.5; Plut. Cor. 1.2, 4.3–4, 34–6.

483: Vestal Oppia (during the Volscian War, with signs of ‘divine anger’). Dion. Hal.

420: Vestal Posrumia (spoke and dressed too freely; acquitted). Livy

472: Vestal Orbinia (during a year of plague which caused miscarriages).

337: Vestal Minucia (same charge as Posrumia: condemned). Livy 8.15.7–8

331 (a year of plague): 20 patrician wives executed for a poisoning conspiracy. Further 170 matrons subsequently executed. Livy 8.18 (170), Val. Max. 2.5.3 (170), Oros. 3.10 (370).

296: The cult of Plebeian Chastity founded. Livy 10.23; Prop. 2.6.25.

275: Vestal Sextilia. Livy

295: Matrons found guilty of adultery, fined and the money used to build the temple of Venus Ossequens. Livy 10.31.9.

275: Vestal Sexilia. Livy Per. 14; Oros. 4.2.8.

266: Vestal Caparrella (plague). Oros. 4.5.6–9.

c. 250: Vestal Tuccia. Livy Per. 20: Tuccia, virgo vestalis, incesti damnata est; all others know her as proven innocent by the trial of the sieve: Dion. Hal. 2.69; Val. Max. 8.1 abs. 5; Pliny NH 28.12; also Aug. Cit. Dei 10.16. 228: Sacrifice of two Gauls and two Greeks for the first time; in the Forum Boarium.

215: (following Cannae) Vestals Floronia and Opinia.

a) One Vestal executed, the other commits suicide, together with more explicit human sacrifice. Livy 22.57.2, Per. 22; Plut. Fab. 18.3 (no names).


207: Lightning strikes Temple of Juno (among other proditions). Matrons summoned and fined. The occasion of Livius Andronicus’s hymn. Livy

27.37.8–10.


186: Bacchanalia suppressed; women are executed by family tribunal or the state. Livy 39.8–18.

184: Poisoning trials involving both men and women. Livy 39.41.5–6.

180: a) Trial and execution of Hostilia Quarta for poisoning husband C. Calpurnia Piso (cos. 180) in favour of her son from a previous marriage, A. Fulvius Flaccus. Livy 40.37.1–7 (184: Hell. Oxy. 39).

b) 3000 people found guilty of poisoning. Livy 40.43.2–3.

178: Vestal Aemilia: fire went out, and eventual miracle proving her (or her disciple’s) innocence. Dion Hal. 2.68.3–5; Val. Max. 4.1.7. Cf. Livy Per. 41, Obseq. 8.

154: Pubilia and Licinia accused of poisoning their husbands, tried by family tribunals, and executed by strangling. Livy Per. 48, Val. Max. 6.3.8; see Licinius 178, RE XIII.196.

114 (Dec.): (a) Helvia, a girl, blown up by lightning. (b) Vestal Aemilia condemned (16 Dec.), but apparently not executed immediately; Saturnalia intervened (17 Dec.); Licinia tried (18 Dec.) but found innocent.

113: (a) The other two Vestals, Licinia and Marcia, condemned, again with more explicit human sacrifice. (b) The temple of Venus Verticordia rededicated. Maec. Sat. 1.10.5 (citing Fenestella, our source for the dates); Dio 26 (frg. 87); Ascon. Milo 45–6 (§32) Clark; Oros. 5.15.20–2; Plut. QR 83; Obseq. 37; Livy Per. 63; cf. Cic. Nat. Deor. 3.74. For Venus Verticordia: Val. Max. 8.15.12; Ov. F. 4.157–60, (Val. Max. 3.7.9, 6.8.1, cited by MRR L336 and others, concern a vague charge of incestum against the orator M. Antenius.)

73 (a) Accusations against Licinia (Licinius 185, RE XIII 498) for intercourse with Crassus (charge brought by Plotius; see MRR II.114). Plut. Crass. 1.2, Mor. 89e.

(b) Accusations against Fabia for intercourse with Carline. Cic. Cat. 3.9, Brut. 236; Sal. Cat. 15.1; Plut. Cat. Mit. 19.3; Oros. 6.3.1.

83 ce: Trials of the Vestals by Domitian: Oculata, Varronilla, Cornelia. According to Suetonius, Oculata and Varronilla were allowed to choose the methods of their deaths; their lovers banished. Chief Vestal, Cornelia, buried alive; her lovers beaten to death, with the exception of one ex-praetor who was exiled. According to Pliny, Cornelia buried alive; her
(possible) lover, Licinianus, exiled; other accused lover, Celer, scourged. According to Dio, many Vestals (no names) put to death, but not by being buried alive. Suet. Dom. 8.3-5; Plin. Ep. 4.11; Dio 67.3.

213: Caracalla said to have raped Clodia Laeta; she was buried alive, protesting her innocence; Aurelia Severa and Pomponia Rufina buried alive; Cannutus Crescenzia committed suicide. Dio 77.16, Herod. 4.6.

219: Elagabulus ‘lives with’ the Vestal (Iulia) Aquilia Severa (Dio 77 [78], 16): incestum (SHA Ant. Elag. 6.6-8). His marriage to her is known only from coins: see PW Iulius (Severa) 557. Dio 77 [78], 16, SHA Ant. Elag. 6.6-8, Herod. 5.6.2, Zonar. 12.14.


NOTES

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1 Cf. Dion. Hal. 2.66.1.
2 Staples (1998).
3 For example, Aristotle points to the luxury of Spartan women as revealing an essential weakness in their constitution: Pol. 2.6.5-11 (1269b-70a). Cf. Ath. 12.517. For Roman examples: Juv. 6, Livy 1.37.6 (Roman vs. Etruscan), Tac. Germ. 19. See Pomeroy (1975, 211-12). Modern parallels are discussed later in this article.
4 In the anthropological sense as defined by Turner (1985, 57): ‘a postulate or position … usually controlling behavior or stimulating activity, which is tacitly approved or openly promoted.’
5 An Appendix lists the chronology and sources.
6 For criticism of previous work, see Dumézil (1970, 311-26); Beard (1980, esp. 15-16) and Beard (1995) (a self-criticism); Staples (1998, 135-8, and 182 n. 13 for some of Beard’s previous positions).
8 This idea of a ‘creative era,’ familiar from the Australian Aborigines’ ‘dream time,’ has found its principal proponent in Eliade (1954) and (1961). For a brief outline and criticism see Kirk (1974, 63-6). For its application to the status of women in various societies and myths, see Bamberger (1974).
9 For the first idea, see Hommel (1972, 403-5, 415-17); for the second, see Guizzi (1968, 113).
11 See Rose (1926, 442-3), who relates the virginity of the Vestals to this notion.
12 Cf. the kastorphoi for Athena, or the arktoi for Artemis Brauronia (Thuc. 6.56-8, Arist. Const. Athens 18, Ar. Lys. 641-5).
13 One of the purposes of this paper is to follow Beard’s recently expressed desire (1995) to see how Vestal virginity functioned within the play of gender at Rome. Her wish to subject these categories themselves to analysis is a major concern of most feminist anthropology. For cross-cultural examples, see below.
15 As Breilich (1949, 9) points out, ‘We know nothing of a cult of Vesta that is older than the public Roman cult, whether it is at Rome or elsewhere’: cf. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf (1931, 1: 158); so too Koch (1958, 1762). The cult of Vesta was sacra publica, rites performed for the Roman people as a whole, rather than sacra privata, private or household rites. Further features of public cult are that the temples or buildings stood on public land that had been made sacred (locus sacer) by the Roman people (or later the emperor) and that the cult was funded from the state treasury. For this distinction, see Beard, North, and Price (1998, 251); Rüpke (2001, 26-31).
16 Dumézil (1970, 1: 315): ‘The continuous fire of the aedes Vestae, the ignis Vestae, is indeed the hearth of Rome, and hence one of the guarantees of the city’s being rooted in earth, of its permanence in history.’ Cf. Koch (1958, 1737).
17 Dion. Hal. 2.66.1; Wissowa (1925, 247-53).
18 See Wissowa (1912, 158) and (1925, 247-8); Koch (1958, 1766) for examples.
19 E.g., Livy 5.52.6-7.
20 Hor. Odes 3.5.11-12; Verg. A. 1.292.
21 Gell. NA 1.12.14: ‘sacerdotem Vestaalem, quae sacra faciat, quae iussit sacerdotem Vestaalem facere pro populo Romano Quiritibus’ (‘As a priestess of Vesta, to perform the rites that it is right for a priestess of Vesta to perform for the Roman people, the citizens’).
23 Leg. 2.8.19-22.