

## THE SEXUAL STATUS OF VESTAL VIRGINS \*

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The Vestal Virgins have often been the subject of close scrutiny by classical scholars. Indeed many articles have been devoted to a careful analysis of individual, apparently trivial, aspects of their legal rights, their privileges, their cult obligations and even their dress.<sup>1</sup> In the same tradition I intend in this paper to consider just one element of their priestly position: their sexual status<sup>2</sup> and its relationship to their sacred status. It is however an element which will be seen to have wider implications for their cult as a whole and for ancient religion in general.

My study relies on an explicitly synchronic approach. This is not because I believe that there were no changes in the cult of Vesta between the time of the early Republic and the fourth century A.D., or that those changes were not important, it is simply that the evidence we have for the Vestals (though ample in comparison with that available for most other ancient priesthoods) is not sufficient to draw any but the most banal comparisons between one period and the next.<sup>3</sup> Moreover the ancient source material as a whole does seem to possess some coherence and to be susceptible to an overall analysis, even if this involves such apparent anachronisms as the juxtaposition of material from Cicero and Prudentius.

This synchronic treatment will be combined with various approaches drawn largely from social anthropology to produce an explanation of the sexual status of the Vestals that is far from 'historical' in the usual sense. The logic of their status will be explained but no attempt will be made to account for its development. In fact this paper might best be subtitled 'an analytic description'. I make no claim that this type of approach should supersede the more traditional one; rather I hope to show that, especially in the area of ancient religious practice, they might both be used concurrently to provide an explanation of the same body of material at somewhat different levels.

### I

The debate about the exact sexual status of the Vestals has been a long one; out of it certain areas of agreement have been established though other areas have remained quite unresolved. It seems that consensus has generally been reached over the view that the holiness of the priestesses is to be directly related to their virginity and purity,<sup>4</sup> a view that assumes that the chastity of the Vestals is simply a more extreme example of a phenomenon found commonly in the Greek world. For it is well known that the popular belief that sexual activity was polluting and thus disqualified a person from close contact with the deity found expression in many sets of cult regulations. Indeed several sacred laws surviving from Greece

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, H. Dragendorff, 'Die Amts-tracht der Vestalinnen', *RhM* 51 (1896), 281-302; I. Santinelli, 'Alcune questioni attinenti ai riti delle vergini Vestali: "Vesta aperit" (Cal. Philoc., al 7 giugno)', *Riv Fil* 30 (1902), 255-62; G. Dumézil, 'QII 18, "Te, amata, capio"', *REL* 41 (1963), 89-91. Several more general studies of the priesthood, of course, exist. The most helpful reference works are G. Giannelli, *Il Sacerdozio delle Vestali Romane* (1913) and F. Guizzi, *Aspetti Giuridici del Sacerdozio Romano: Il Sacerdozio di Vesta* (1968). Brief introductory discussions may be found in J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits*<sup>2</sup> (1974) and S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (1976).

My references to modern studies in the notes do not aim to provide a full bibliography of each particular aspect under consideration; rather they aim, individually, to provide brief attestation for each point and, together, give some idea of the range and quality of modern works on the Vestals.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'sexual' will be used throughout this paper to differentiate not only between male and female, but also between different developmental stages of a woman's career, virginal, matronal, post-menopausal and so forth.

<sup>3</sup> A. D. Nock, 'A *Dius Electa*: A Chapter in the Religious History of the Third Century', *HTR* 23 (1930), 251-74 (reprinted in Arthur Darby Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Zeph Stewart (1972) 1, 252-70) tries to draw some potentially important conclusions from an apparent upsurge of interest in the Vestals and the Vesta cult in the mid-third century A.D. This, however, places excessive reliance on negative evidence, especially archaeological. It is surely unwarranted, for example, to draw detailed comparisons between different surviving phases of the Atrium Vestae, when that building suffered so badly from fire during its history. See E. B. Van Deman, *The Atrium Vestae* (1909).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, H. J. Rose, 'De Virginibus Vestalibus', *Mnem.* N.S. 54 (1926), 442-3.

and Asia Minor lay down explicit rules in this area, applying not only to priests but also to the ordinary worshipper. Entry into a temple, for example, might be forbidden to a person for two or three days after intercourse.<sup>5</sup> The analogy with the Vestals is clear: they were in constant contact with the deity and therefore had always to abstain from sexual contact with men. Thus their sacred and virginal status was defined. Up to a point this type of explanation is intuitively satisfying. However, as the final analysis of the holiness of the Vestals, it is inadequate for it fails to take into account several major difficulties which are revealed in those areas of the long debate where consensus does not yet reign.<sup>6</sup>

The crucial point of disagreement concerns the exact relationship of the priestesses to the structure of the royal family in early Rome. For while it is generally accepted that the origins of the Vestal order<sup>7</sup> lie in the hearth cult of the ancient royal household of the city,<sup>8</sup> there is no agreement on whether they should be seen as the wives or rather as the daughters of the early kings. I am not concerned here to speculate on the development of the order, but it does seem that the terms of the debate have important implications for any discussion of the sexual status of the priestesses. In particular it must be considered whether any one exclusive view of their sexuality can be attested from the ancient source material and whether or not some of their characteristics may rightly be seen as belonging to the female sphere at all.

The thesis that the Vestals are to be seen as originating in and later representing the wives of the early kings rests on five major factors. First of all it is thought that several of the ritual tasks undertaken by the priestesses relate closely to those of the early Roman *materfamilias*. It is argued, for example, that the tending of the sacred flame, the most important duty of the Vestals, should be associated with the guarding of the hearth by the matron of the household, which would date from an age when fire was a commodity so difficult to procure that at least one flame in the community had to be kept permanently alight. Similarly the preparation of *mola salsa*, or sacrificial cake, by the Vestals and various of their rituals, such as the annual cleaning out of the *aedes Vestae*,<sup>9</sup> have been connected with the domestic role of the early Roman *Hausfrau*.<sup>10</sup> Secondly it has been recognized that several of the other state festivals in which the Vestals played a part are those which are commonly understood to have their origin in fertility and other agricultural rites. It was the *Virgo Vestalis Maxima*, for example, who burnt the foetus torn from a pregnant cow at the April rites of the *Fordicidia* and at the *Consualia* in August the Vestals, together with the *Flamen Quirinalis*, offered sacrifice at a ceremony originally connected with the storing up of the harvest.<sup>11</sup> This kind of sacral role is thought to accord better with a view of Vestals as wives than with one that sees them as virginal daughters.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly it is pointed out that their costume was not that of a Roman virgin, but rather the dress of a matron, or even, it has been claimed, of a bride on the day of her wedding.<sup>13</sup> And this bridal element extends into the fourth argument, in which a close parallel is drawn between the traditional Roman marriage rite and the so-called *captio*, the ceremony in

<sup>5</sup> F. Sokolowski, *Lois sacrées des Cités Grecques, Supplément* (1962), nos. 54 and 91. More generally, see A. D. Nock, 'Eunuchs in Ancient Religion', *ARW* 23 (1925), 25-33 (reprinted in *Essays* 1, 7-15) and E. Fehrle, *Die kultische Keuschheit im Altertum* (1910). The latter also deals with the notion of the sacred marriage of the priestess to the deity, surely inapplicable in this case (but see pp. 215-17).

<sup>6</sup> One might also note in the context of 'holy virginity' the implicit or explicit comparison of Vestals with Christian nuns (e.g. Sir T. Cato Worsfold Bt., *The History of the Vestal Virgins of Rome* (1932), 11)—or even with dons at Oxbridge women's colleges (Baldson, *op. cit.*, 242).

<sup>7</sup> 'Order' and 'College' are used loosely to refer to the Vestals throughout this article. Strictly speaking they were, if not a subsection of, at least associated with the Pontifical College.

<sup>8</sup> This is not accepted by A. Brelich, who regards the *Vesta* cult as 'public' from its inception. See *Vesta* (1949), esp. 9.

<sup>9</sup> This is the correct term for what is commonly called the Temple of Vesta, for the building was not

in fact an augurated *templum* in the technical sense. See Varro *ap. Aul. Gell.* xiv, 7, 7.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, G. Wissowa in Roscher, *Myth. Lex.* vi, 260 and Guizzi, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 109 (though it will be seen that Guizzi's final solution to the problem of the status of the priestesses is somewhat more subtle than this stress on their marital aspect might suggest).

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of these festivals and a collection of the ancient evidence, see W. Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic* (1899), 71-2 (*Fordicidia*), and 115 and 206-9 (*Consualia*).

<sup>12</sup> Wissowa, *op. cit.*, 266-8. The cult title of the goddess herself, '*Vesta Mater*' (see, e.g., Cic., *Har. Resp.* 12; *ILS* 2942, 4930, 4937), and the presence of a phallos in the temple (Pliny, *NH* 28, 39) have also been adduced in support of this fertile matronal aspect of the priestesses.

<sup>13</sup> See Dragendorff, *op. cit.* (n. 1); G. Wissowa, *RK*<sup>2</sup> (1912), 509 n. 5; F. Guizzi, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 111-12; and H. Jordan, *Der Tempel der Vesta und das Haus der Vestalinnen* (1886), 43-56.

which the young Vestal recruit was formally taken into the college by the Pontifex Maximus, who represented in some of his priestly capacities the religious powers of the early kings.<sup>14</sup> In the course of this 'capture' the child was removed from her father and led away by the high priest *veluti bello capta*, a process which resembles the forcible abduction of the bride during a Roman wedding.<sup>15</sup> The young girl was also addressed by the Pontifex as 'Amata' which (if translated as 'Beloved') may suggest a yet closer connection with the marriage ceremony.<sup>16</sup> Finally, after the symbolic wedding, it is argued that the right of punishment exercised by the high priest over the virgins was directly comparable to the disciplinary powers of a Roman man over his wife, and that the action taken when a Vestal broke the rule of chastity was parallel to the action taken by a husband in the case of an adulterous wife and her paramour. The judicial role of the whole pontifical college in such cases is then related to the supposed domestic tribunal which conducted trials within the family.<sup>17</sup>

Vestals were, of course, virgins, and this one factor might seem an insuperable difficulty for any hypothesis which tries to see their origin in the wives of the early kings of Rome. It is a problem, however, which is forestalled by the proponents of a matronal status for the priestesses. For it is argued that the type of virginity represented by the Vestals is not virginity in the sense of total abstinence from sexual intercourse, but rather the chastity (*pudicitia*) of a univariate Roman matron, a quality defined by her fidelity to a single husband and by soberness of conduct and dress.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore the problem posed by the number of Vestals—for it seems hard at first to equate six priestesses with a single wife<sup>19</sup>—is reconciled by considering the whole, as a unity, to be representative of the one individual *materfamilias*.<sup>20</sup>

All these arguments are directly challenged by the opposing hypothesis, which prefers to see the origin of the order in the daughters rather than the wives of the early kings. This view obviously accords more easily with the virginal status and the number of priestesses and might also be supported by their limited term of service in the order.<sup>21</sup> Moreover it is arguable that the domestic tasks in which several of the Vestal ritual duties are thought to originate might just as well have been performed by the young daughters of the household, as by the *materfamilias*, and, indeed, confirmation is found for this in a passage of Plutarch which states that in early Rome wives were not allowed to grind grain or cook,

<sup>14</sup> The fullest ancient description of the *captio* is that of Aulus Gellius (I, 12, 10–14) on which the following account is based.

<sup>15</sup> For the 'capture' of the bride, see Festus p. 364/5L. The comparison between this ceremony and the Vestal *captio* is made, for example, by I. Santinelli, 'La condizione giuridica delle Vestali', *Riv Fil* 32 (1904), 63.

<sup>16</sup> Wissowa, *RK*<sup>2</sup> 510 n. 4.

<sup>17</sup> G. Aron, 'Etudes sur la condition juridique des prêtres à Rome: les Vestales et le Flamme de Jupiter', *Nouvelle Revue Historique de Droit Français et Etranger* 28 (1904), 33; Santinelli, art. cit. (n. 1), 74.

<sup>18</sup> See Guizzi, op. cit. (n. 1), 113 and Fehrle, op. cit. (n. 5), 206–10. It might be adduced in favour of this view that a lack of soberness in dress and manners could itself lead to suspicion of a Vestal's unchastity. See Livy IV, 44, 11, where Postumia comes under suspicion 'propter cultum amoeniorem ingeniumque liberius quam virginem decet' (cf. Val. Max. II, 1).

<sup>19</sup> There were six priestesses throughout the historical period. Earlier there had been fewer, though the exact number is debated. See Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* II, 67, 1 (four) and Plutarch, *Numa* x, 1 (two).

<sup>20</sup> Wissowa, *Myth. Lex.* 264. Alternatively the Virgo Vestalis Maxima alone might be seen in the role of *materfamilias* (Balsdon, op. cit. (n. 1), 235, but note that he (323 n. 3) wrongly quotes Mommsen as a supporter of this view; *Röm. Strafr.* (1899), 18 clearly states that Vestals are to be seen as daughters of the early kings).

<sup>21</sup> Throughout the historical period Vestals were allowed to leave the order after thirty years' service and even marry, if they wished. Apparently few did so and there was a tradition of bad luck associated

with such marriages (Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* II, 67, 2; Plut., *Numa* x, 1–2. For long periods of service within the order, see Tac., *Ann.* II, 86 and *ILS* 4923). H. J. Rose (*Mnem.* N.S. 54 (1926), 446–8) lays great stress on a passage of Dionysius (*Ant. Rom.* I, 76, 3) which states, in the context of the unjust treatment of Rhea Silvia, that the length of service in earliest times was only five years. R. regards this as almost conclusive proof that the Vestals should be seen, in origin, as the daughters of the early kings, serving the cult before their marriage. However, while rightly drawing attention to a neglected passage, R. seems to lay too much stress on such isolated testimony, which seems contradicted by the popular tradition about the Vestals and could well be the product of later rationalizing—on the lines of, 'Originally the Vestals were both fewer in number and served for a shorter period of time'. I would prefer to see the thirty year term not as an extension of an original five years, but as related to women's child-bearing capacity; for it is often found in traditional societies that women undergo a marked change in their religious roles after their years of fertility. (See, e.g., A. and M. Strathern, *Self-Decoration in Mount Hagen* (1971), 104.) Whatever the exact age of menopause in antiquity—on which there is some debate (see, e.g., D. J. Frommer, 'Changing age of the menopause', *British Medical Journal* 2 (1964), 349–51; D. W. Amundsen and C. J. Diers, 'The age of menopause in Classical Greece and Rome', *Human Biology* 42 (1970), 79–86—it is certain that a woman's fertility would have declined markedly by her fortieth year (see in general G. Hawthorn, *The Sociology of Fertility* (1970) and W. Petersen, *Population*<sup>3</sup> (1975), 190–219); thus it is likely that the child-bearing years would be perceived as ending around that time.

two indispensable processes in the preparation of *mola salsa*.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, paradoxical as it may seem, fertility cults in the ancient world were often associated with virginal or chaste priests and priestesses. It seems as if the virgin was not looked upon as sterile but as a mediator of stored up, potential procreative power, a fact that can be adduced against the view that the connection of the Vestals with various ancient fertility cults reaffirms their matronal status.<sup>23</sup> It has also been debated whether in fact the costume of the priestess should be seen as specifically that of a married woman or bride. There are recognizable anomalies, such as the colour of the veil, which was white in the case of a Vestal and red for a bride,<sup>24</sup> and the whole *ensemble* might be regarded as *sui generis*, marking out, by its very peculiarity, the special sacred status of the woman.<sup>25</sup>

The ceremony of *captio* and the relationship of the Vestals to the Pontifex Maximus have also been challenged as firm indications of the matronal status of the priestesses. For the *captio* is not directly parallel to the wedding ceremony in all its details. The girl, for example, is taken by the pontifex from her father, not, as in a wedding, from her mother or closest female relative,<sup>26</sup> and the force of the title 'Amata' is far from clearly understood. It is by no means certain that it should be translated 'Beloved' and there have been many other suggestions as to its meaning, that, for example, it is a proper name (taken from the first Vestal Virgin)<sup>27</sup> or that it represents a Latinized form of the Greek ἀδμήρα, 'unsubdued' and thus 'virgin'.<sup>28</sup> Similar doubt exists over the exact relationship of the Vestals to the Pontifex Maximus, as it is certain that there can be no exclusive equation between the *rex* and *regina* of the early city and the later pontifex and Vestal. For part of the functions of the original royal pair had in later times even more clearly been taken over by the *rex sacrorum* and his wife, and to these the Vestals were themselves related as we can see, for example, in the ritual recorded by Servius in which 'certa die ibant (sc. Vestales) ad regem sacrorum et dicebant: vigilasne rex? vigila!'<sup>29</sup> Moreover the control of a father over his daughter would have been almost identical to the control of a husband over a wife in *manus* and the operation of any *consilium domesticum* has been shown to be quite different from that of the pontifical college in cases of Vestal incest.<sup>30</sup>

However, both these hypotheses are unacceptable in their extreme form. For, without trying to delve into the aetiology of the order or to disentangle the probably irrecoverable significance of such elements as the ceremony of *captio*, we can see that the ancient evidence attests two co-existent and apparently contradictory roles for the Vestals, that of virgins and that of matrons. So far from possessing a single, exclusive sexual identity, they combined aspects of two separate categories that were for the Romans even more distinct than they are for us: the married and unmarried woman.<sup>31</sup> I would also argue that some of their characteristics might perhaps be seen most closely to resemble those of men.

It is unacceptable special pleading to suggest that the virginity of the Vestals 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

<sup>22</sup> Plut., *QR* 85, with H. J. Rose, 'Iterum de Virginitibus Vestalibus', *Mnem.* n.s. 56 (1928), 79-80 and H. Hommel, 'Vesta und die frühromische Religion', *ANRW* I, 2 (1972), 404.

<sup>23</sup> Rose, *Mnem.* n.s. 54 (1926), 445-6 and 'The Bride of Hades', *CPh* 20 (1925), 240-2.

<sup>24</sup> For the red *flammeum* of the bride, see Festus p. 79 and 82L; for the white Vestal *suffibulum*, Festus p. 474/5L and *Suda* s.v. Νουμῆς Πομπήλιος.

<sup>25</sup> This is the view of, for example, C. Koch, *RE* VIII A 2, 1743.

<sup>26</sup> See Rose, *Mnem.* n.s. 54 (1926), 444.

<sup>27</sup> Aul. Gell. I, 19.

<sup>28</sup> A. vom Blumenthal, 'Zur römischen Religion der archaischen Zeit—I. Zur *captio* der Vestalinnen', *RhM* 87 (1938), 268-9. Other solutions include those of G. May, 'Le Flamen Dialis et la Virgo Vestalis', *REA* 7 (1905), 14-15 (that *amata* is the past participle of *emere*, in the sense of 'to acquire') and G. Dumézil, 'QII 18, "Te, amata, capio"', *REL* 41 (1963), 89-91 (that it may be related to

similar titles of affection found in other areas of Indo-European fire cult). For a full bibliography, see Guizzi, op. cit. (n. 1), 130-7.

<sup>29</sup> Serv. ad. *Aen.* x, 228.

<sup>30</sup> See Volterra, 'Il preteso tribunale domestico in diritto romano', *RISG* 2 (1948), 103 ff. V. argues that while the existence of a *consilium necessarium* is well attested in the ancient sources, there was no obligation on the *paterfamilias* to consult it, even in the exercise of his powers of life and death over his family. Thus it did not operate as a *iudicium* or court, in the manner of the pontifical college in cases of incest. But cf. Kunkel, 'Das Konsilium im Hausgericht', *ZSS* 83 (1966), 219-51.

<sup>31</sup> For an interesting discussion of the stress placed by the ancients on these separate categories, representing successive stages in a woman's life, see M. Detienne's treatment of the Aristaeus and Orpheus myth ('Orphée au miel' in *Faire de l'histoire* III, ed. J. Le Goff and P. Nora (1974), 56-75).

sexual intercourse during their thirty or more years in the college. It is an element which is integrated into the mythologizing stories of early priestesses, several of whom saved themselves from the charge of unchastity by the performance of miracles aided by Vesta herself,<sup>32</sup> and it recurs in the historical period when we see that serious crisis in the state could give rise to suspicions of sexual activity among the Vestals.<sup>33</sup> The full horror of such a charge and of the punishment meted out to the guilty priestess is well illustrated by the various surviving descriptions of these events.<sup>34</sup> It seems perverse to devalue this most important element in the cult to something that is suggestive of little more than good wifely conduct; the virginal status of the Vestals must remain and be accounted for.

Elements of the matronal status of the priestesses must also be retained. For while the arguments of the counter hypothesis have cast serious doubt on any conclusions drawn from the domestic tasks of the Vestals, from the *captio* or from the position of the Pontifex Maximus in relation to the priestesses, some aspects remain which can only be seen as matronal. The most important of these is the Vestal costume which contains elements so closely related to the dress of a married woman that it cannot, as a whole, be dismissed as merely *sui generis*. Although it is sometimes difficult to relate the evidence of sculptural representations of the priestesses<sup>35</sup> to the literary references to their dress, some points are quite clear. First of all, two items of their clothing, the *stola*<sup>36</sup> (the long dress) and the *vittae*<sup>37</sup> (the bands around the head) were also elements in the traditional costume of the Roman matron and were so specifically associated with that status as to be used as a catchphrase for the legally married woman in the comedians and elegists.<sup>38</sup> They must here be seen as relating the status of the Vestals to that of the *matrona*. Even more striking, however, is the method of hairdressing adopted by Vestals. For we are told in a (partially corrupt) passage of Festus that the priestesses arranged their hair in a style adopted otherwise by Roman women only on the day of their wedding.<sup>39</sup> It might, of course, be contested in this instance that we are dealing with simple conservatism (as is suggested by Festus) and that the early Roman mode of hairdressing had been retained in just two areas, that of the wedding ceremony and the priesthood of Vesta. This, however, would be to ignore the fact that 'initiates' in weddings and other *rites de passage* are commonly marked out by a special form of dress and often by a particular hairstyle.<sup>40</sup> So, while it cannot finally be proved, it seems natural to associate the *sex crines* specifically with the wedding ceremony and to relate the Vestal to the bride.<sup>41</sup>

The matronal status of the Vestals is clearly revealed by two further aspects of their cult and privileges. While one may accept that in antiquity virgins were commonly involved in fertility and agricultural rites and that this fact would explain the part played by the

<sup>32</sup> Tuccia, for example, carried water in a sieve, Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* II, 69; Tertullian, *Apol.* xxii, 12; Augustine, *CD* x, 16.

<sup>33</sup> This seems to have been the case in 216 (Livy xxii, 57, 2-5; Plut., *Fab.* xviii, 3) and 114-113 B.C. (Asc. p. 45-46c; Obs. 37; Mac., *Sat.* I, 10, 5; Dio xxvi, fr. 87; Val. Max. III, 7, 9). The best discussion of the later incident is by J. A. North (*The Interrelation of State Religion and Politics from the Second Punic War to the time of Sulla*, Unpublished DPhil. thesis, Oxford 1968) who relates it convincingly to the situation of increasing anxiety about the Cimbri and Teutones, who invaded Italy in 113 B.C.

<sup>34</sup> See, especially, Pliny, *Ep.* IV, 11. There has been much debate as to whether the burial alive of the guilty priestess should be seen as a punishment for crime or as the removal of a *prodigium*. For the opposing views see Wissowa, *Myth. Lex.* VI, 260-2 and Koch, *RE* VIII A<sup>2</sup>, 1747-52.

<sup>35</sup> The relief sculpture depicting Vestals may conveniently be found in I. Scott Ryberg, 'Rites of State Religion in Roman Art', *MAAR* 22 (1955). The statues from the Atrium Vestae are illustrated by E. B. Van Deman, 'The Value of the Vestal Statues as originals', *AJA* 12 (1908), 324-42. She gives a critical evaluation of their value as evidence in the study of the Vestal order.

<sup>36</sup> This is clearly represented in sculpture, for

example, on the so-called Sorrento and Palermo bases, Scott-Ryberg, *op. cit.*, figs. 26 and 27.

<sup>37</sup> See Ovid, *Fasti* VI, 457; Prudentius, *Contra Symm.* II, 1095; and Daremberg-Saglio, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines* IX, 2, 950.

<sup>38</sup> Tib. I, 6, 67; Plaut., *Miles* 792.

<sup>39</sup> Festus p. 454L: 'Senis crinibus nubentes ornantur, quod [h]is ornatus vetustissimus fuit. Quidam quod eo Vestales virgines ornentur, quarum castitatem viris suis † sponoe \*\*\* a ceteris'. It is unclear exactly how the hair was arranged in this style. Presumably it was tied together into six locks and then in some way intertwined. It is possible that it is represented in a stylized way on at least one of the statues of priestesses from the Atrium Vestae. See Jordan, *op. cit.* (n. 13), tab. x, fig. 11. Note also the illustrations in E. Wüscher-Becchi, 'Die Kopftracht der Vestalinnen und das Velum der "gottgeweihten Jungfrauen"', *Röm. Quartalschrift* 16 (1902), 313-25.

<sup>40</sup> R. Firth, *We, the Tikopia*<sup>2</sup> (1957), 507; idem, *Symbols Public and Private* (1973), 288-90.

<sup>41</sup> It is possible that the bridal parallels extend further than this. For example the cutting of the Vestals' hair has been compared to the touching of the bride's head with the so-called *hasta caelibaris*, though this perhaps is more tenuous. For further discussion and references, see Guizzi, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 110-11.

Vestals in such ceremonies as the *Fordicidia*, nevertheless there are ritual occasions on which the priestesses are closely associated with matrons at specifically matronal rites. For example, they played a leading part in the December festival of the *Bona Dea*, whose celebration was undertaken by the married women of Rome,<sup>42</sup> and it has been plausibly suggested that they are to be seen as associated with the matrons of the city in certain ceremonial within the *Ludi Saeculares*.<sup>43</sup> These kinds of celebration may be distinguished from the previously mentioned type of agricultural festival and the close association in them of Vestal with matron cannot be ignored. Finally in terms which are more strictly defined, Augustus, in A.D. 9, granted the Vestals all the rights of women who had borne children, thus legally assimilating their status to that of the Roman matron.<sup>44</sup>

Their male aspect is much less clear and cannot have the same importance as the virginal or matronal elements I have discussed. However, certain of their privileges are otherwise almost exclusively associated with men, so that it is at least arguable that the priestesses were regarded as playing a male role and were, in part, classified as masculine.<sup>45</sup> They enjoyed, for example, the services of a lictor, a right with specifically male associations;<sup>46</sup> for even if such an attendant was occasionally granted to the wives of emperors, this seems always to have been in connection with their role as priestesses of *divi* and was probably in conscious imitation of Vestal privileges. Thus Livia was in general refused a lictor by Tiberius, although she was attended by one when functioning as *Flaminica Divi Augusti*.<sup>47</sup> By and large, however, it was only men who enjoyed such a privilege and so a lictor would tend to invest the virgins with elements of a masculine status. It seems that Vestals also had certain rights connected with giving evidence in court that were generally associated with men only. Aulus Gellius and Plutarch imply that they alone of all women were *testabilis*, capable of giving evidence.<sup>48</sup> This is certainly not strictly the case,<sup>49</sup> but it is possible that the ancient sources are alluding to some, now unclear, distinction between various types of evidence or methods of submitting it. At the very least it is clear that their privileges in this respect are treated as something specifically unfemale, and thus, most naturally, male. Finally their testamentary powers were defined in male terms, in that, like men, they could bequeath property in their own right, without undergoing the process of *capitis deminutio*<sup>50</sup> and without, of course, the need for a tutor's permission, as they came out of *tutela* when they entered the order.<sup>51</sup> For women in general these requirements represented a possibly serious threat to their freedom of action<sup>52</sup> until Claudius ended

<sup>42</sup> For the matronal character of these rites, see, esp., Plut., *Caes.* ix. Maidservants, flute-girls and the like were, of course, also present, in attendance, and it was through corrupting one of these that Clodius, disguised as a woman, gained admittance in 61. The leading role of the Vestals at the ceremony is indicated by Cic., *Har. Resp.* 37 and *Ad. Att.* i, 13, 1. For an interesting discussion of the significance of the whole cult, see G. Piccaluga, 'Bona Dea', *SMSR* 35 (1964), 195-237.

<sup>43</sup> J. B. Pighi, *De Ludis Saecularibus* (1965), 189 (with 151, ll. 35-6). It is also suggested by Wissowa (*Myth. Lex.* vi, 267) that they should be seen as associated with the *matronae* in the procession that went out from Rome to meet Octavian on his return from Actium (Dio LI, 19, 2).

<sup>44</sup> Dio LVI, 10, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Of course, a rejection of these admittedly tentative arguments concerning the masculine status of Vestals does not involve the devaluation of the clear ambiguity I have established between their virginal and matronal roles.

<sup>46</sup> Plut., *Numa* x, 3; Dio XLVII, 19, 4. Dio dates the grant of a lictor to the Vestals to 42 B.C., while Plutarch ascribes it to their ancient privileges. Mommsen's reasons for preferring the account of Dio (because of the unlikelihood of a woman having a lictor in early Rome) seem inadequate in this context (*Röm. Staatsr.* 1, 391, n. 3).

<sup>47</sup> Tac., *Ann.* i, 14, 3; Dio LVI, 46, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Aul. Gell. VII, 7, 2; Plut., *Publ.* VIII, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Evidence given by women is attested at Cic.,

*Verr.* i, 37, 93-4; Suet., *Claud.* xv, 2 and xl, 2. The whole issue is complicated by Tac., *Ann.* ii, 34, a passage concerning Urgulania, the friend of Livia, whose influence in the state was great: 'Ceterum Urgulaniae potentia adeo nimia civitati erat, ut testis in causa quadam, quae apud senatum tractabatur, venire dedignaretur: missus est praetor qui domi interrogaret, cum virgines Vestales in foro et iudicio audiri, quotiens testimonium dicerent, vetus mos fuerit'. If it can be assumed that Urgulania was, at least, an ex-Vestal, then this passage would support the views of Aulus Gellius and Plutarch (n. 48). If, however, she never had any connection with the Vestal order (and there is no evidence for this) the sense of the Latin would have to be, 'although it is the custom even for Vestal virgins (sc. who are very special, holy people) to give their evidence openly in court'. This, of course, does not accord well with the position of Gellius and Plutarch.

<sup>50</sup> Aul. Gell. i, 12, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Gaius, *Inst.* i, 145.

<sup>52</sup> Cic., *Top.* iv, 18 concerns the invalidity of a woman's will made without *capitis deminutio*. Of course women did manage to fulfil all the requirements and bequeath property during the Late Republic. See, e.g., Cic., *Ad. Att.* vii, 8, 3; *Pro Cluentio* XIV, 41; *2 Verr.* i, 43, 111. For further discussion of the testamentary restrictions on women, see A. Watson, *The Law of Succession in the Later Roman Republic* (1971), 22-3 and W. W. Buckland, *A Textbook of Roman Law* (rev. P. Stein, 1963), 288.

the system of agnatic *tutela*<sup>53</sup> and Hadrian abolished the necessity for *capitis deminutio*.<sup>54</sup>

This last point raises one of the problems of a synchronic approach, for as the rights and privileges of ordinary men and women changed, so might the sexual associations of the Vestals alter. Thus, here, a privilege that would originally have marked out the priestesses as male, was redundant for most of the imperial period, when their testamentary rights did not differ substantially from the rest of the free female population of Rome. It seems legitimate to argue, however, that the various sexual aspects of the Vestal were well enough established through a number of different characteristics for the overall picture to remain substantially unchanged by minor alteration within a limited sphere.

This threefold aspect of the Vestals' status, the virginal, the matronal and the male (or, to be more sceptical, their dual role as virgin and matron), seems to me to be crucial to any understanding of their sexual identity; no explanation of their position or cult can be convincing if it rests exclusively on one of these aspects. The Vestals were not *either* virgins *or* matrons; they were both, and, I have argued, they were also men. To leave aside for the moment, however, this final element, which, as I have admitted, is less well-defined and has rarely formed part of the debate,<sup>55</sup> we might consider some of those solutions to the problems of the Vestals which have rested on a compromise between their two major status types and have accepted them as in some way both virgins and matrons. For in the modern literature it has occasionally been recognized that a denial of one of their sexual aspects entails serious distortion of such evidence as we have.

The classic essay on Vesta and the Vestals by Koch in Pauly-Wissowa comes close to such a recognition. For, although ultimately he puts his weight on the side of Mommsen (for whom the origins of the priesthood lay in the daughters of the early kings) and while the explanatory opposition he attempts to set up between the Flamen Dialis and the Vestal Virgins clearly depends on their status being seen as *solely* virginal, he was aware that the whole problem of the cult could not be solved simply on the basis of a decision about their position in the primitive royal family.<sup>56</sup> Others have gone further, to the point of an explicit acceptance of a dual sexual role for the Vestals. Brelich, for example, when discussing the position of Vesta herself (to which he closely relates the position of her priestesses) rightly rejects any exclusive solution, especially one based on merely etymological considerations; while he accepts that the words *casta* and *mater*, when applied to the goddess, can both have a wider significance than mere physical virginity and motherhood, he refuses to allow a vagueness in terminology to be seen as a solution to a problem 'das nicht auf Worten, sondern auf Tatsachen beruht'.<sup>57</sup> His own explanation of the paradox of the Vestals, however, has found little support, at least in its fullest form.<sup>58</sup> For he tries to see the figure of the goddess within the cosmic sphere and he relates her own sexual ambiguity, and that of her priestesses, to her role as an almost mystical virgin mother of the pre-cosmos. In this she is directly compared to Fortuna, who appears in ancient sources as both the mother and daughter of Jupiter and whose cult-title, 'Primigenia', is held to

<sup>53</sup> Gaius, *Inst.* I, 157 and 171. From then on any woman was free to change her tutor if she was inconvenienced by him.

<sup>54</sup> Gaius, *Inst.* II, 112-13.

<sup>55</sup> It is alluded to by Dumézil, who points out (*Archaic Roman Religion* (English ed., with revisions, 1970), 587) that among primitive peoples virginity is often conceived 'as an intermediate stage between femininity and masculinity' and refers in this context to some of the Vestals' male characteristics.

<sup>56</sup> *RE* VIII A<sup>2</sup>, 1717-76. Koch's attempt to demonstrate a fundamental relationship but consequent crucial opposition between Vestals and Flamen Dialis is, of course, of great interest, especially in the context of recent anthropological work on the role such oppositions play in the religion of many traditional societies. However, while the broad similarity of some of the privileges of these two early priesthoods has long been recognized, it seems to me dangerous to overstress the relationship—as K. tends to. For example, while it is correct to point out that

both Vestal and Flamen came out of *patria potestas* on entry to their priesthood, the significance of this privilege was surely much greater for a girl (under the age of ten) than for a male (and adult) Flamen. Similarly, although the praetor's edict united the two priesthoods in the following way, 'sacerdotem Vestalem et flaminem Diale in omni mea iurisdictione iurare non cogam' (Aul. Gell. x, 15), as K. himself admits (1736), there were occasions on which the Vestals were compelled to take an oath (Plut., *Numa* x), while the Flamen never could. Doubts must also exist over some of the postulated ritual connections between the two priesthoods. Dumézil, for example, has shown that the role of the Vestal Virgin along with the Flamen Dialis at the ceremony of the Equus October is little more than wishful thinking (*Archaic Roman Religion*, 220-4).

<sup>57</sup> Brelich, *op. cit.* (n. 8), esp. 58.

<sup>58</sup> See, e.g., the reviews by S. Weinstock (*JRS* 40 (1950), 150-1), J. Bayet (*REL* 28 (1950), 452-4) and H. J. Rose (*CR* N.S. I (1951), 107-8).

mean not 'first born of somebody' but, absolutely, 'the first born'.<sup>59</sup> Brelich's study relies heavily on the assumption of a large degree of assimilation between Vesta and Fortuna, yet insufficient evidence is adduced in support. This inadequacy, together with his preoccupation with the cosmic, seriously undermines his conclusions. However, his study of individual elements of the cult, such as the opposition found there between fire and water, the procreative aspect of the flame and the associations of Vesta with aggressively male phallic deities, does make clear just how deeply sexual ambiguity runs through this whole area of Roman religion and belief.<sup>60</sup>

Brelich's view that the dual role of the priestesses is to be explained first of all on the assumption that they are living copies of the goddess is supported by Guizzi. For while he lays great stress on the maternal role, he is aware that the virginal aspect has to be retained.<sup>61</sup> This in effect, however, merely disregards the problem; for, unlike Brelich, Guizzi seems to make no serious attempt to explain why the goddess herself might be so ambivalently categorized. A new approach is taken by Hommel, who divides the Vesta cult into two separate spheres, the *Naturaspekt* and the *Sozialaspekt*.<sup>62</sup> The former is concerned with fire as the key element in the cult, and this is related to procreation and the sex act primarily through the metaphorical associations of the primitive method of ignition. For the production of a spark by the boring of one stick into a flat wood base is said to be a powerful symbol of sexual intercourse and this might be used to explain such elements as the presence of the *fascinum* (phallos) in the temple of Vesta and the relationship of the Vesta cult with fertility ritual.<sup>63</sup> The *Sozialaspekt* is seen in origin as separate from this and later in development. Here the virgins are held to represent, along the usual lines of argument, the daughters of the early royal household, who tended the palace hearth and through whom virginity became institutionalized within the Vestal order.<sup>64</sup> This is hardly more satisfactory than the cosmic approach of Brelich, for it seems quite clear that we are dealing here with an ambiguity that, as Brelich showed, forms the basis of the whole cult. It is thus no solution merely to disentangle the different strands, for the key must lie not in any attempt at separation, but in the reason for the entanglement.

The motives that underlie these attempts to explain the sexual status of the Vestals, without the denial of one of its major elements, are wholly admirable. They fail, however, for the various individual reasons that I have outlined and, more crucially, I would argue, because of the prevailing desire to provide an explanation that will merely accommodate the ambivalent status of the priestesses, rather than seeing the ambiguity of the Vestals themselves and the layers of ambiguity running through the whole cult as the central element and the key to any explanation.<sup>65</sup>

## II

The concept of ambiguity and the related idea of mediation have been the subjects of a considerable amount of recent work in anthropology. Out of this some conclusions may be drawn and some approaches suggested which will be helpful in illuminating and perhaps explaining the ambiguous status of the Vestal Virgins. This might best be undertaken in two stages, the first of which will demonstrate at the very least that an ambiguity of sexual status is unsurprising in the context of sacred priestesses, while the second, with a greater element of speculation, will attempt to explain that ambiguity further by relating it to the

<sup>59</sup> Brelich, *op. cit.*, esp. chap. 6., 'Mutterschaft und Jungfräulichkeit', 57-67.

<sup>60</sup> These ideas are most fully discussed in chapters 5-7 ('Die "Elemente"', 'Mutterschaft und Jungfräulichkeit' and 'Das Männliche'), 48-85.

<sup>61</sup> Guizzi, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 106-8. See also G. May, *art. cit.* (n. 28), 4-14.

<sup>62</sup> Hommel, *art. cit.* (n. 22).

<sup>63</sup> See, esp., 406-16.

<sup>64</sup> Esp. 403-5. The two aspects are conveniently summarized at 416-19.

<sup>65</sup> I have not here considered discussions of the Vestals which do not relate their position to the traditional family structure of Rome. One might

note in passing, however, the views of Dumézil and Lambrechts. D. (*op. cit.* (n. 1), 585-7), while mentioning the intermediate status of the virgin, lays greatest stress on the connection of virginity to royal power. L. ('Vesta', *Latomus* 5 (1946), 321-9) recognizes the apparent contradictions inherent in their dress and privileges, but regards them as brides of the god of the underworld. (Similarly, W. B. Kristensen, 'De Antieke Opmvatting van Dienstbaarheid', *Mededeelingen D. K. Acad. van Wetenschappen—Letterkunde* 78 (1934), 83-114.) For Dumézil's view of the position of Vesta herself, see *Tarpeia* (1947), 100-09.



structure of the whole cult. Thus the status of the Vestals will appear as not merely understandable in a sacred context, but as logically predictable in this particular case.

Probably the simplest treatment of ambiguity in animate and inanimate objects is that of Mary Douglas in her classic study, *Purity and Danger*.<sup>66</sup> In this she claims that creatures or things which are interstitial, which fall somehow between those categories we generally use to structure our environment or partake of more than one such category, are looked upon in traditional societies as particularly powerful, sacred or dangerous—or a combination of the three. Her most famous example concerns the Abominations of Leviticus where her discussion shows that the taboo animals, those which it is forbidden for the Jew to eat, are those 'which are imperfect members of their class or whose class itself confounds the general scheme of the world'.<sup>67</sup> Thus the pig is forbidden food as it is cloven-hooved yet does not chew the cud, the hare because it is not cloven-hooved yet does chew the cud and similarly any animal that lives in the water but does not have fins and scales or that has four feet yet flies, and so forth.<sup>68</sup> Conversely, the anomalous pangolin or scaley ant-eater, 'a fish-like creature which lives on dry land', far from being abhorred is revered by the Lele tribe of the Kasai district, and forms the centre of a cult.<sup>69</sup>

In such a crude form this approach may be of little help in understanding the problem of the Vestal Virgins; for, while they can certainly be termed ambiguous, there seems to be a great difference between the priestesses, whose ambiguity of status is created by man, and the animals, whose position is naturally ambiguous according to primitive perceptions. However, recent work developing Mary Douglas' original theory (and now largely accepted by Douglas herself) has shown that no such straightforward opposition exists between the man-made and the natural and that, in fact, all types of ambiguity must be seen as humanly constructed.<sup>70</sup> In other words interstitial status is purposefully created and consequent on, rather than prior to, notions of sacredness or taboo. It serves to mark out the sacred rather than, in the first instance, to cause it.<sup>71</sup> Thus, for example, Bulmer, after a study of animal classification among the Karam, which shows that the animal world is structured by the tribesmen according to the dictates of their own social and religious system, returns to consider the original position of Mary Douglas and concludes, 'It would seem equally fair to conclude on the limited evidence available that the pig was accorded anomalous taxonomic status because it was unclean as to argue that it was unclean because of its anomalous taxonomic status'.<sup>72</sup> The stress remains on interstitiality but the primary causality is reversed.<sup>73</sup>

This more subtle development on the original theory of Mary Douglas, with its stress

<sup>66</sup> *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1969).

<sup>67</sup> *Purity and Danger*, 55.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 41-57. See also, J. W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (1978), 112-14. The traditional theological position on the Abominations of Leviticus and other such prohibitions may be found conveniently in *Encyclopædia Judaica* (1971) s.v. Dietary Laws.

<sup>69</sup> 'Animals in Lele Religious Symbolism', *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (1975) (reprinted from *Africa* 27 (1957), 46-57).

<sup>70</sup> R. Bulmer, 'Why the cassowary is not a bird', *Rules and Meanings: The Anthropology of Everyday Knowledge*, ed. M. Douglas (1973), 167-93 (reprinted from *Man*, N.S. 2, 1 (1967), 5-25); S. J. Tambiah, 'Animals are good to think and good to prohibit', *Ethnology* 8, 4 (1969), 423-59 (partially reprinted in *Rules and Meanings*, 127-66). Douglas discusses these contributions in 'Self Evidence', *Implicit Meanings*, 276-318.

<sup>71</sup> Of course, the frequent association of the anomalous with the sacred may well mean that the former is, in certain cases, generally perceived to cause the latter. Indeed the complex nature of the layers of causality in individual instances is perhaps not adequately treated by any of the writers referred to.

<sup>72</sup> *Rules and Meanings*, 191-2 (= *Man*, N.S. 2, 1 (1967), 21). He regards the explicit statements in

Leviticus that the taboo on certain animals results from aspects of ambiguity as 'rationalization' by 'sophisticated professional rationalizers'. While accepting the validity of his basic position I feel that the real intricacies of cause and effect are perhaps being oversimplified.

<sup>73</sup> The advantages of this modified approach are evident in several areas of the study of taxonomy. For example, it enables mythical hybrids to be analysed in much the same way as the interstitial pig or pangolin. These were problematic on Douglas' original theory, which considered that the protection of the taxonomic system was the ultimate cause of the special treatment of the anomalous. For, as Dan Sperber has pointed out ('Pourquoi les animaux parfaits, les hybrides et les monstres sont-ils bons à penser symboliquement?' *L'Homme* 15, 2 (1975), 5-34. Rev. version to appear in translation in *French Anthropology since Lévi-Strauss*, ed. J. Pouillon (Cambridge, forthcoming)), why, in that case, would men have invented new hybrids (the centaur or the sphinx) 'qui ne font que compliquer la tâche'?

Sperber provides a useful bibliography on animal classification (to which add J. Soler, 'La nourriture dans la Bible', *Annales ESC* 28, 4 (1973), 943-55). He himself tries to institute a yet more rigorous enquiry into the whole field of primitive taxonomy and outline a possible explanation for symbolic animals on the basis of the relationship between taxonomy and norm.

on the *creation* of anomaly, can now usefully be applied to the difficulties surrounding the status of Vestal Virgins, who could never have been seen as naturally interstitial. Thus the ambiguity of their sexual status, the way they share the characteristics of virgins, matrons and even men need be regarded no longer as an awkward aspect somehow to be accommodated in any explanation of their position, but as a crucial element in designating their sacredness. In this light we may reject as a final overall solution the notion that their status as 'holy women' is solely dependant on their purity and virginity. For while this view is obviously partially acceptable within the context of Greco-Roman cult regulations, it is nevertheless almost impossible to reconcile with their matronal and male aspects. Rather, just as the perception of the pangolin as interstitial (falling between mammal and fish) must be closely related to its sacred role, so the highly ambiguous status of the Vestal Virgins must be seen as playing an important part in their symbolic position. The fact that, through various aspects of their dress, their cult obligations and their privileges, they may be perceived as falling between several categories of sexuality, marks them out as sacred.

This basic notion may be further developed in two ways. Firstly, we may refine the concept of ambiguity slightly and suggest that in the case of the Vestals we are not only dealing with figures that partake of several sexual categories but also with figures that in some sense stand on the brink between categories. For that is surely the significance of the *sex crines* and any other of their properties which might best be seen as bridal. It is a rather more subtle way of marking them out as interstitial than the simple attribution of characteristics from two different statuses; like the girl on the day of her wedding, they are seen as on the brink between virginal and marital status, but perpetually on the brink, perpetually fixed at the moment of transition from one category to another.

Secondly the ambiguity of their sexual position may be seen to act as an isolating agent in their relationship to the traditional family and social structure of the Roman community. Their status as both virgins and matrons and men (in other terms, daughters and wives and, perhaps, husbands) removes the possibility that they could play any conventional role within the family structure. Thus at the most obvious level, they did not any longer live with their families, but from the moment of their selection as Vestals moved to the Atrium Vestae, the house attached to the temple at the South East end of the Forum.<sup>74</sup> But their separation was, in fact, more legalistically defined than this simple physical movement might suggest. For example, at their entry to the college they officially came out of *patria potestas*, without entering the *manus* or *tutela* of anyone else, and so were immediately isolated from any family group.<sup>75</sup> Moreover their rights of inheritance also emphasized their separation from their original family, in that they were not allowed to inherit if a close relative died intestate, and if they themselves died without making a will their property reverted to the state.<sup>76</sup> It is interesting also to note that in the case of illness, if they had to leave the Atrium, they did not return for nursing to their family, but to the house of a chosen matron.<sup>77</sup>

In this way the crucial sexual ambiguity is emphasized by the marginality of the Vestals, in their position of perpetual *rite de passage*, and by their isolation from the traditional family and social structures of the state. There might, however, appear to be some problems concerning the genesis of such anomalies within the perceptions of the Romans. Without entering into any full discussion of the origin and development of the order, it is probably useful to point out that one does not of course imagine a ludicrous situation in which the early Romans sat down and created a consciously formulated ambiguous priesthood, carefully adding new elements of ambiguity to reinforce the sacred status of the women. The development of the ambivalence must rather be seen within the framework of the unconscious—or, at least, unformulated—where, out of a vast range of possible evocations, one imagines a certain group being consistently stressed, while others are consistently cut off.<sup>78</sup> More specifically I would suggest that the greater number

<sup>74</sup> Aul. Gell. I, 12, 9.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *idem*, I, 12, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* VII, 19, 1–2. In this case the matron was an *affinis*, a relation by marriage, but the situation

is still clearly to be distinguished from the return of the Vestal to her agnatic family.

<sup>78</sup> For the nuances of this useful term 'evocation', see Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (English ed. 1975).

of strictly defined physical stages in the life of a woman, compared with those in a man's career, itself encourages the kind of subtle play of ambiguity that we see in the case of the Vestals. One need only think of the barriers crossed by a woman in the course of her life (menarche, first intercourse, first parturition, menopause) and the way these, in many societies, are visibly signalled by costume or involve different forms of title and address, to understand the greater versatility in the figure of the woman for the creation of a sacred status through a confusion of standard categories.<sup>79</sup>

This view is supported by a few items of evidence from the Greek world, through which we may spot apparently similar types of ambiguity inherent in the figures of other priestesses. The clearest example is the Pythian priestess at Delphi, about whom, for all her importance, we know surprisingly little.<sup>80</sup> We do, however, have two crucial facts, first that she was a woman of over fifty and sometimes one that had been married, and secondly that, despite her age, she was dressed in the costume of a young virgin.<sup>81</sup> We need know no more than that to recognize immediately that we are in the same area of ambiguity, of manifest codebreaking, as we were in the case of the Vestals. In this case one cannot detail further aspects of the ambiguity or draw further conclusions. One may only guess that if we had more information these would emerge and that it would become clear that the Pythia was, at one level, made sacred in the same way as the Vestals.

Another example may be reached through the aetiology provided for the Pythia's costume by Diodorus Siculus.<sup>82</sup> For he tells the story of some young virgin serving, in early times, as the mouthpiece of the god, who was wickedly seduced by a man from Thessaly who had been overcome by her beauty. The Delphic authorities decided it was not to happen again and quickly saw a solution. For they chose a much older woman, supposedly no longer attractive to men, to serve as the priestess, but they continued to dress her as the original young maiden. Now this same aetiology recurs in Pausanias with reference to the aged priestess of Artemis Hymnia from Mantinea, though without the detail of the dress being made explicit.<sup>83</sup> It seems highly likely, though it is impossible to prove, that this same story indicates a similar type of ambiguity in the status of the priestess.

Finally one might consider a mythical woman, but one closely related to the category of sacred women, that is Electra. For even though she is not strictly a priestess, the wealth of descriptive information concerning her, even in the work of just one dramatist, Sophocles, makes her worth considering. Here once again one is struck by the contradictions inherent in her sexual status. For she is, at once, most obviously, Orestes' virgin sister, and yet she also played the role of his mother when he was young, in a way that Clytemnaestra never did. She herself says:

For you were never your mother's love as much as mine and you had no nurse in the house except for me.<sup>84</sup>

And in addition to this, in the action of the play she takes on a strikingly male role, so that Chrysothemis can say to her:

Do you not see? You are a woman and not a man.<sup>85</sup>

As Vernant has pointed out,<sup>86</sup> such ambiguities in her status cannot be ignored, and I would find it easiest to see her as belonging to the same kind of interstitial category as do the Vestals and the Pythia and perhaps many more Greco-Roman priestesses, for whom the evidence is simply lost. It is a category whose exact details vary, as different aspects of female status (and the negation of it) are combined, but its function is, at least in part, always the same, namely to mark out the subject as important and sacred.

<sup>79</sup> For an interesting series of papers on women's position in various religious and social groups, see Shirley Ardener (ed.), *Perceiving Women* (1975).

<sup>80</sup> See H. W. Parke and D. E. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (1956), I, 34-41.

<sup>81</sup> Diod. Sic. xvi, 26, 2. For the Pythia portrayed as old, see Aesch., *Eum.* 38.

<sup>82</sup> Diod. Sic. xvi, 26, 2.

<sup>83</sup> Paus. viii, 5, 11-12.

<sup>84</sup> Soph., *El.* 1145-7.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, 997.

<sup>86</sup> J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et Pensée chez les Grecs* (1965), 110-11.

## III

Many problems inherent in earlier discussions are resolved by this demonstration that the ambiguous status of the Vestals is not only central to their sacredness, but also paralleled in other priestesses in the ancient world. One would like to go further however, and show why, out of all possible methods of designation of sacred status (for obviously not all priests and priestesses are seen as interstitial), the marks of ambiguity should be particularly appropriate in these cases. Consideration of such a question will involve a greater degree of speculation than has been necessary up to this point and will demand a more precise examination of the exact relationship of the priestesses to the other elements of their cult. For the Greek examples, given the amount of evidence available, this would seem an almost impossible task. On the Vestal Virgins, however, we are much better informed and I believe that some plausible hypotheses may be made through a study of the ambiguity of the cult at its widest level, and in particular the relationship of the figure of Vesta herself, and of the Vestals, to the mediating force of the central element in the cult, the sacred fire.

Like ambiguity, the concept of mediation is a common topic in anthropological literature. Though sometimes rather hazily defined, it is clearly treated in the writings of Lévi-Strauss and Leach. In an essay entitled 'The Structural Study of Myth' the former argues that it is a distinguishing feature of mythical thought that fundamental oppositions (life/death, nature/culture, etc.) are set up within the framework of the myth and are then resolved by the introduction of a third element, which, through its character as an intermediary, seen to partake of features of both extremes, forms a bridge between them or, in other words, acts as a mediator. Thus in North American mythology, for example, a basic opposition between life and death is first translated into an opposition between agriculture (the supporter of life) and warfare (the bringer of death) and is mediated through the introduction of hunting, a means of providing food (as agriculture) through killing (as war).<sup>87</sup> Moreover, outside the realm of myth itself, Mary Douglas has shown in her study of the pangolin among the Lele that a mediating creature may form the focus of religious cult practice.<sup>88</sup>

Confusion tends to enter into discussions of mediation where its relationship to the allied term of ambiguity is under consideration.<sup>89</sup> In the context of this present study it seems sufficient to regard ambiguity as the adjectival, descriptive term and mediation as the active, verbal form. Many objects, both animate and inanimate, may be perceived to fall between categories and thus be designated ambiguous. Most of these, however passively, evoke some kind of special response in us, a response directly dependant on their ambivalence. This is true even on the most mundane level, as Mary Douglas has shown by her discussion of various 'household ambiguities'.<sup>90</sup> A smaller group of ambiguities,

<sup>87</sup> In *Structural Anthropology* (English Ed., 1968), 224. A clear discussion of this, based on the principles of Lévi-Strauss, may be found in E. Leach, 'Genesis as Myth' (in *Genesis as Myth and other essays* (1969), reprinted from *Discovery* vol. 23, May 1962): 'In every myth system we will find a persistent sequence of binary discriminations as between human/super-human, mortal/immortal, male/female, legitimate/illegitimate, good/bad . . . followed by a "mediation" of the paired categories thus distinguished. "Mediation" (in this sense) is always achieved by introducing a third category which is "abnormal" or "anomalous" in terms of ordinary "rational" categories. Thus myths are full of fabulous monsters, incarnate gods, virgin mothers. This middle ground is abnormal, non-natural, holy. It is typically the focus of all taboo and ritual observance' (p. 11). See also the discussion of the structuralist analysis of Greek myths by M. Detienne in *Dionysos mis à mort* (1977, English trans. *Dionysos Slain*, 1979), chap. 1, 'Les Grecs ne sont pas comme les autres', 17-47. His criticism of Leach (among others), however, seems extreme. It is surely not true to say that 'Leach en a conclu abusivement que l'aspect médiateur du mythe était sa seule fonction' (p. 20,

my italics). More wide-ranging criticisms are made by G. S. Kirk in *Myth, Its Meaning and Function in Ancient and Other Cultures* (1970), esp. chap. 11, 'Lévi-Strauss and the Structuralist approach', 42-83.

<sup>88</sup> See, esp., *Implicit Meanings*, 282-7 and 297-302.

<sup>89</sup> M. Douglas seems to veer between overschematization and confusion in her discussion, *Implicit Meanings*, 287-9 (and see n. 64 above).

<sup>90</sup> See e.g. *Purity and Danger*, 2. In the course of an interesting discussion of 'dirt', which deals with its opposed definitions, based, on the one hand, on considerations of hygiene and, on the other, on the concept of matter out of place—or the confusion of categories—she adduces the example of an ambiguous bathroom. This had been formed out of a piece of corridor and, while it included all the correct bathroom fittings and was perfectly clean, it still remained partially in its old use with its line of gumbots, stacked up gardening tools and old prints. In fact it fell between the categories of bathroom and corridor, partaking of each, and for this reason could not be used, at least by the author, without a feeling of great discomfort.

however, has a more active role to play, positively reconciling the two extremes they partially represent, as the huntsman in American mythology reconciles his two component oppositions, life and death. These are the mediators, for their ambiguous status is not merely passively evocative, but is an active unifying force. Thus in short one might offer the following formulation: mediation is ambiguity in action.

Returning to the Vestal cult itself, it is quite clear, as Brelich has shown, that ambiguity is not restricted to the virgins alone.<sup>91</sup> One might remember that it has previously been argued that the Vestals were merely living copies of their goddess.<sup>92</sup> This I rejected as an adequate solution of the paradoxical status of the priestesses but it does at least serve to illustrate the similar ambiguity evident in the position of Vesta herself. One may document this further quite simply, for like her servants she was on the one hand, by definition, a virgin,<sup>93</sup> yet on the other was addressed properly and formally as 'Vesta mater'.<sup>94</sup> Moreover she can be treated in literature as ultimately associated with the sterility of flame,<sup>95</sup> though in cult she has close links with the ass, an animal with active sexual overtones.<sup>96</sup>

Less obvious, at first sight, but in fact much more important in the context of the whole cult, is the ambiguity of the fire itself, which can be documented both from within the Vestal context and outside it. The most striking ambivalence once again concerns sexuality, for the flame is seen paradoxically as both pure and sterile on the one hand and male and procreative on the other. The former aspect is stressed, for example, by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who refers to the flame as 'incorrupt' and 'the purest of divine things';<sup>97</sup> the latter, strictly incompatible, side is attested in Varro, who states explicitly, 'mas ignis, quod ibi semen',<sup>98</sup> and in several myths concerning the conception and birth of early Roman heroes. Servius Tullius<sup>99</sup> and, in some variants, Romulus<sup>100</sup> owed their parentage to a phallos that came out of the hearth, and the mother of Caeculus was directly impregnated by sparks of flame.<sup>101</sup> The connection of Vesta and the Vestal cult to these stories is well illustrated by that concerning Romulus; for after the appearance of the phallos in the hearth, interpretation was offered by the oracle of Tethys, to the effect that a virgin should be made to have intercourse with the object and from her a most illustrious son would be born. The king of the time, Tarchetios, ordered one of his daughters to comply with the voice of the oracle, but she preferred to send a servant in her place. Such disobedience enraged the king, who determined to put both girls to death. They were saved, however, by the appearance of Vesta, who came to the king in a dream to prevent the murders. Similarly it cannot be without significance that in the variant versions of Romulus' birth, his mother, Ilia or Rhea Silvia, is a priestess of Vesta.<sup>102</sup>

More wide ranging facets of the ambiguity of fire can easily be demonstrated. Spatially, for example, it can be seen on the one hand as a substance of the earth or of below the earth. It spews out of volcanoes and fissures in the ground and, generally, it may be thought to underlie the whole earth.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, it is an element of the sky and the heavens, for it is the material of the stars and of the lightning sent by the gods.<sup>104</sup> More strikingly its relationship to mankind has always two aspects, for it is both a necessary tool of civilized life and also the potential destroyer of that civilization. This is expressed, in general terms, by the character of Cleanthes in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, when he says:

<sup>91</sup> See above n. 57.

<sup>92</sup> See above p. 18, with n. 58.

<sup>93</sup> Prop. II, 29, 27; Ov., *Fasti* III, 417.

<sup>94</sup> Cic., *Font.* 47; *Dom.* 144; *Har. Resp.* 12; *ILS* 2942, 4930, 4937.

<sup>95</sup> Ov., *Fasti* VI, 291-2.

<sup>96</sup> For the cultic connection of Vesta and the ass, see Ov., *Fasti* VI, 319-48. Asses were decorated with garlands of loaves during the Vestalia.

For the recognition of the ass' blatant sexuality, see SHA, *Commodus Antoninus* x, 9; *Antoninus Elagabalus* VIII, 7; Apuleius, *Met. passim* and esp. x, 19-23. Also Brelich, op. cit., chap. 5, 'Der Esel', 85-95. (Esp. 86-8. Much of the rest of the chapter is concerned with a cosmic analogy, a comparison of the turning of the ass around the millstone and the rotation of the heavens.)

<sup>97</sup> Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* II, 66, 2.

<sup>98</sup> *LL* v, 61.

<sup>99</sup> Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.* IV, 2; Pliny, *NH* XXXVI, 70, 204; Plut., *Fort. Rom.* 323. On this and all the related stories, see L. Euing, *Die Sage von Tanaquil* (Frankfurter Studien zur Religion und Kultur der Antike, Band II, Frankfurt 1933), chap. III, 'Die Stellung der Tanaquil in den Geburtsmythen des Königs Servius Tullius', 20-40.

<sup>100</sup> Plut., *Rom.* II, 3-5.

<sup>101</sup> Serv., *ad. Aen.* VII, 678.

<sup>102</sup> Plut., *Rom.* III, 2-3.

<sup>103</sup> Lucr. II, 593; VI, 639-702; Cic., 2 *Verr.* IV, 106; Pliny, *NH* II, 193.

<sup>104</sup> Lucr. II, 214-15; Cic., *Rep.* VI, 15; *Nat. Deor.* II, 118; Verg., *Aen.* I, 42; Pliny, *NH* XVIII, 277.

Atqui hic noster ignis quem usus vitae requirit confector est et consumptor omnium, idemque quocumque invasit cuncta disturbat ac dissipat; contra ille corporeus vitalis et salutaris omnia conservat alit auget sustinet sensuque adficit.<sup>105</sup>

More specifically we may see its beneficial, civilizing aspects in, for example, its provision of heat for cooking<sup>106</sup> and for metallurgical processes,<sup>107</sup> in its light, which dispels darkness,<sup>108</sup> and in its healing powers, both in general and specifically cauterization<sup>109</sup>—all features which can be seen as opposed to its destructive qualities, its use in war,<sup>110</sup> the pain it can cause<sup>111</sup> and its final removal of the lifeless body from the world in the process of cremation.<sup>112</sup>

If then, as is clear, the ambiguity of the status of the Vestals is mirrored by the ambiguity in the two other major elements of the cult, Vesta and fire, some further explanation of the first element may be obtainable through a consideration of its relationship to the other two, and more particularly, through a consideration of which area of ambiguity might be thought to have logical priority in the cult or to be the most 'active' element. It is, in fact, hardly debatable that this priority must be accorded to the sacred flame. For this forms the centre of the cult and the focus of the day to day activities of the Vestals. Moreover the siting of the image of the deity, firmly designates it as the prime object of worship, over and above any anthropomorphized conception of godhead.<sup>113</sup> The figure of Vesta in fact derives all its strength from the sacred flame but never supersedes it in importance. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the wide range of oppositions associated with the fire (life/death—in its procreative and destructive elements; heaven/earth—in its spatial division between the sky and the ground; nature/culture—in the contrast between its civilizing domestic role and its wild destructive properties) reveals it to be a classic mediating force in the centre of a cult, reconciling apparently irreconcilable extremes.<sup>114</sup>

To be more specific about the exact relationship of these elements, I think one should imagine a continually reinforcing triangle of associations. At the apex stands the real impetus of the ambiguity, the mediating force of the fire. Below this, to the left and dependant on it, is the figure of Vesta herself, a figure almost anthropomorphized out of the flame and assimilated to it in ambiguity, while on the lower right are the priestesses, who tend the flame and are so closely associated with it that any extinction may lead to suspicions of their unchastity. They too are assimilated with the ambiguous status of the prime element. Beyond this, however, the third side of the triangle is completed by the clear links between Vesta and the Vestals—for the latter may be seen in some sense to 'worship' the former and the two are seen as physically merged in several sculptural representations where Vestals appear as identical to Vesta, or Vesta to the Vestals.<sup>115</sup> Thus in this overschematic way we may appreciate both the ultimate impetus to the ambiguity of the priestesses and the way it may be continually reinforced within the cult.

If one is to accept, therefore, that the ambiguity of the sexual status of the Vestals is of crucial importance in marking them out as sacred but that a further question remains, namely, why it is that out of all possible methods of designating holiness ambiguity should be particularly appropriate in this case, it seems reasonable to offer a speculative answer on the basis of the ambiguity of the other cult elements. For at one level, as I outlined

<sup>105</sup> Cic., *Nat. Deor.* II, 41.

<sup>106</sup> Cato, *Ag.* 81; Ov., *Fasti* V, 515-16; VI, 381-2.

<sup>107</sup> Lucr. VI, 968; Ov., *Fasti* IV, 785-6; Sil. It. I, 429-30.

<sup>108</sup> Lucr. V, 244-9; Cic., *Ac.* II, 61.

<sup>109</sup> Pliny, *NH* XXXVI, 202-3; Prop. I, I, 27.

<sup>110</sup> Lucr. V, 1283-5; Verg., *Aen.* II, 664-5; Caes., *Bell. Alex.* XIV; as signal, Caes., *Gall.* II, 33; Liv. XXV, 9, 10.

<sup>111</sup> Cic., 2 *Verr.* V, 6, 14; *Top.* XX, 74; Tac., *Ann.* XV, 57.

<sup>112</sup> Ter., *Andr.* 129; Ov., *Am.* I, 15, 41.

<sup>113</sup> For the absence of a cult image, see Ov., *Fasti* VI, 295-8. The primacy of the element of fire is supported by a wide range of comparative evidence. See G. Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, 311-26 (with references).

<sup>114</sup> It might be argued that these oppositions are already accommodated in ancient thought by the opposition of Vulcan and Vesta and thus our cult would merely concern the civilizing aspects of fire. This is hardly plausible in the light of, for example, Vulcan's metallurgical function. However, even if it were so, I would argue that it was impossible for one side of the element to be evoked without the other. Thus, I am in opposition to G. Dumézil (*Fêtes romaines d'été et d'automne* (1975), 61-77), who attempts to draw a sharp distinction between the fields of Vesta and Vulcan. In general terms, however, he demonstrates convincingly the ambiguity inherent in the basic element of fire.

<sup>115</sup> Scott Ryberg, op. cit. (n. 35), 49-53 with figs. 26 and 27.

above, the ambiguity of the priestesses can stand on its own, but one may plausibly see as an additional and perhaps overriding factor the ambivalence and assimilating properties of the central cult element, the sacred flame. This further strong impetus towards ambiguity, in addition to a natural and common tendency to define sacred women through a confusion of categories, might adequately, if speculatively, account for the particular appropriateness of sacred ambivalence of the priestesses in this case.

Three final topics remain to be considered: the compatibility of this kind of approach with the Romans' own perception of the Vestals, the relationship of this study of one restricted aspect of the priestesses' status to a wider overall view of the Vestal cult and the possible extension of an approach of this type to other areas of ancient religion. On the first question, I would not, of course, try to claim that this kind of view was ever adopted by the Romans themselves. In fact we know certainly that it was not.<sup>116</sup> However the underlying logic behind a particular cult practice need not be, and often is not, appreciated in the conscious thought of the actors themselves, yet this apparent unawareness does not invalidate the type of explanation I have undertaken. A modern parallel may make this clearer: if we were to ask ourselves today why nuns are thought to be particularly holy, our answers would probably stress their sacred virginity and their devotion to worship. If we were to think more carefully about their sexual status, however, we would see that there too was an underlying ambiguity which, it might plausibly be argued, acts more specifically to define a nun's status as special and separate from the secular world. For not only is the nun a virgin (or at least chaste) but she is also maternal, as we can see from her designation as 'Bride of Christ', her wearing of the wedding ring and the title 'Mother', which, though sometimes restricted to the head of a religious community, sometimes spreads throughout the order. There is also the male aspect, as is clear from the fact that a nun will often take her religious name from a male saint, Mother Paul, for example, or Sister Thomas More. Now each of these elements, taken individually, has a theological explanation that is perfectly adequate, but taken together they surely form the same kind of overall ambiguity as I have shown in the case of the Vestals, and are susceptible of the same kind of interpretation.<sup>117</sup> It also becomes demonstrably clear that we need not always (and perhaps should never) accept exclusively the consciously formulated explanations of cult practice offered by contemporary observers or the actors themselves.

Secondly, to consider the religious position of the Vestals outside the limits of my interests in this paper, one would need to range more widely and dig more deeply. It has been only a first step to elucidate this one small area of misunderstanding and return the ambiguity of the sexual status of the priestesses to the centre of the stage. It is a first step upon which others should follow. For example, developing the idea of mediation outside my apparently self-sufficient triangle, it is arguable that the virgins themselves are acting as independent mediators between the opposed terms of 'man' and 'woman', setting up a 'chain of mediation' similar to those described by Lévi-Strauss.<sup>118</sup> This needs investigation in relation to the whole range of possibilities for negotiation between the sexes in ancient Rome.<sup>119</sup> More generally, the role of the Vestals in their ritual duties outside the service of the sacred flame demands close examination, especially in the light of the ambiguity that has been revealed in their own cult. It is possible that this might help to explain some, as yet, unexplained features of their wide ritual involvement, such as (most problematically) their part in casting the rush puppets off the Pons Sublicius at the festival of the Argei or their role in the rites of the Bona Dea.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, the treatment of Ovid (*Fasti* vi, 249-460, on the Vestalia) and Dion. Hal. (*Ant. Rom.* ii, 64, 5-69, 3).

<sup>117</sup> As with the Vestals, one might suggest that there is a further trigger to ambiguity, in this case in the figure of the virgin mother of Christ.

R. Schilling, in an article entitled, 'Vestales et vierges chrétiennes dans la Rome antique' (*RSR* 35 (1961), 113-29, repr. in *Rites, Cultes, Dieux de Rome* (Etudes et Commentaires 92, 1979), 166-82) has attempted to draw a sharp distinction between Vestals and nuns. Some points of difference that he has demonstrated between the two categories of

women seem perfectly valid, but do not directly challenge the notion of a deeper level of similarity. I would not, of course, accept his view that, while nuns were in a sense Brides of Christ, Vestals should be seen simply in the context of ritual purity.

<sup>118</sup> *op. cit.* (n. 87), 224-7.

<sup>119</sup> For an interesting study of this type, see Vernant, *op. cit.* (n. 86), 97-143. He is concerned with the hearth cult in Greece and discusses such aspects as the relationship of Hestia to marital exchange and the position of women in their role both as moving 'commodities' and as symbols of the permanence of the house.

The question of how far this type of approach can be extended to other areas of ancient religious practice is obviously more complex, so I intend to concentrate on what seem to me to be the two most crucial aspects of the problem, the nature of the explanation that is here offered and the use of anthropological categories within an investigation of this kind. For, while no highly particularized methodology developed for treating a single problem can easily be transferred *en bloc* to another specialized area, there would naturally be cause for concern if its basic framework could not be applied elsewhere. Now the development of any systematic methodology will demand, at least implicitly, consideration of the types of conclusion that might possibly constitute an explanation of the phenomena to be examined. Traditionally within the study of Roman religion the demands on those conclusions have been light, namely that either the origin of the practice should be illuminated (as with the debate on the original position of the Vestal Virgins within the royal family) or that each individual feature should be explained in a way that seems *a priori* satisfying, without necessarily producing a picture of the whole. The approach that I have developed here is markedly different, in that it attempts to produce an explanation which reveals an inner coherence and logic within a large body of apparently disparate material. Though each of the individual aspects of Vestal status may possess an interpretation that is, on its own, intuitively satisfying (as one might argue that the lictors were granted to the priestesses for their protection) for the first time all their different facets may be seen to represent a clearly coherent whole, and a whole that may be related to other areas of the Vestal cult. In so far as such an approach is more rigorous (for each new piece of evidence may test and be tested against the whole) it may surely be helpful in other areas of ancient religious study, not necessarily to supersede the traditional methods of approach, but as an alternative type of analysis, especially for subjects long recognized as problematic. One thinks immediately here of such difficulties as the group of taboos surrounding the Flamen Dialis or some of the more obscure areas of the ritual calendar, where in fact some profitable work along these lines has already been done by Dumézil. For, resisting the temptation to resort to the individual *a priori* type of explanation, and taking all the evidence for certain periods of the year as a whole, he has revealed a coherent pattern (and thereby explanation) in such notorious problems as the Lucaria and Furrinalia, which had remained, on any traditional methodology, completely mysterious.<sup>120</sup>

More specifically, my approach has made use of a category rarely utilized in Roman religious history, the anomalous. While it has been recognized among anthropologists that ambiguity and anomaly afford important focuses of religious attention in traditional societies and much symbolic energy can be expended in negotiating around such elements, historians of Roman religion have tended to deny the anomalous any role within the state cult (allowing it a place, if at all, within the so-called mystery religions). My study of the Vestals would suggest, however, that, within the Roman state system also, the anomalous and ambiguous might well form an important focus of attention, whether that attention is honour (as in this case), or the equivalent of taboo. For, as has been shown in an interesting recent study by Olivia Dix, the perception of ambivalence or interstitiality may be regarded as a crucial factor in the designation and recognition of some prodigies, thus seen not simply (or even necessarily) to be 'nasty', but rather, within the creation of a category system, to be interstitial.<sup>121</sup> Without further research, it is, of course, difficult to be specific about other areas in which the concept of anomaly might prove a helpful tool in investigation. One might suggest that various practices of divination and (once again) the complex of prohibitions surrounding the Flamen Dialis could be usefully approached in this way. However, without such detailed further analysis, I hope my approach to the Vestal cult, which cuts through the traditional difficulties by admitting and stressing that very paradox which was so problematic, has demonstrated the potential value to the study of Roman state religion of the notion of ambiguity and the related concept of mediation.

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<sup>120</sup> G. Dumézil, *Fêtes romaines d'été et d'automne*.

<sup>121</sup> O. Dix, Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of East Anglia, 1978. I am very grateful to Ms Dix

for allowing me to consult an early version of this dissertation.