

XIII.—Remotum a Notitia Vulgari¹

SUSAN SAVAGE

ROCKFORD COLLEGE

In the religion of Rome, there was always a small *terra incognita* which only privileged priests might explore. So perfectly did they guard it that to this day its boundaries are impregnable. By their deliberate concealment of various documents, rituals, and sacred paraphernalia, the priests were able to keep the prying scholar of to-day as ignorant of their secrets as the man in the Roman street. Here there is no parallel to the mysteries of Greece, called *seclusa sacra* in Latin.² Knowledge of these mysteries could be acquired by initiation. Roman religion, however, fostered a tradition that extreme secrecy and extreme sanctity were inseparable. A special word, *religiosa*, could be used to describe the accumulated secrets or *arcana* of the religious system.³ These *arcana* insured the efficacy and possibly the endurance of the cults of Rome. Vigilant priests and a powerful tradition insured the continuance of the *arcana*.

The secret practices of every Roman religious college and corporation ultimately elude discovery, since our knowledge of them all is hopelessly deficient. Yet enough evidence remains to show that there were esoteric activities by the pontiffs, Vestals, augurs, and *quindecimviri*.

The pontiffs, because of the close connection between religious and public law, were involved in secular affairs more than the other groups, and their voluminous collections like the *annales maximi* or the calendar were too indispensable to civil life to be kept indefinitely as sacerdotal property. The publication of the calendar in 304 B.C. marked the end of the exclusive position of the pontifical

¹ The title is taken from Festus (Paulus); see note 15. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Louise Adams Holland who suggested the subject of this investigation to me.

² Festus 422 L., s.v. "seclusa sacra": Seclusa sacra dicebantur, quae Graeci mysteria appellant; cf. Tertull. *Bapt.* 2.

³ There is no article on *arcana* in any modern dictionary of antiquities. Gellius (4.9.8), quoting Masurius Sabinus, defines *religiosum*: Religiosum est quod propter sanctitatem aliquam remotum ac sepositum a nobis est; verbum a 'relinquendo' dictum. Priscian (*GLK* 3.486, lines 19–20) gives a suggestive definition of *fas*: Inde putant quidam etiam fas et nefas dictum esse, quod iustum est dici vel taceri.

college. Still, the public standing of the priests did not diminish, for their right to possess certain peculiar knowledge was a privilege which Romans had approved for generations; as Cicero states, *maiores nostri vos solos et consuli et scire voluerunt*.⁴ Even in Cicero's day the pontiffs were the custodians of a certain *absconditum ius* which the orator regarded with becoming respect. In the speech *De Domo* he declared what should be the proper attitude of a layman: *Dixi a principio nihil me de scientia vestra, nihil de sacris, nihil de abscondito iure pontificum dicturum. Quae sunt adhuc a me de iure dedicandi disputata, non sunt quaesita ex occulto aliquo genere litterarum, sed sumpta de medio, ex rebus palam per magistratus actis ad collegiumque delatis, ex senatus consulto, ex lege*.⁵ The *absconditum ius* in question could have had no essential importance in secular affairs or necessity would have compelled the pontiffs to reveal it as they had revealed other secrets. The dignity and influence of the pontiffs were too securely established in tradition to be lost simply because they had had to surrender some of their jealously guarded information.

While secret law and ritual appear to have been the prime concerns of the pontiffs, secret objects claimed the attention of the Vestals. The *penus* or *locus intimus in aede Vestae* was probably the greatest repository for sacred paraphernalia in Rome, a sort of religious attic, in fact.⁶ In addition to the sacred fire, the Vestals guarded a hoard of miscellaneous items in the *aedes Vestae*. It was their first desire to save these treasures when the Gallic sack of Rome was threatening. With vexing evasion, Livy calls these objects *sacra*, while Plutarch using the word *ιερά* is equally vague.⁷ Since only the Vestals might see them, it is rumor alone which relates what they were. Speculation was free, to be sure. Two objects traditionally supposed to be among the *sacra* were "Samo-thracian images" and the Palladium of Troy, both allegedly impor-

⁴ *De Domo* 33.

⁵ 138; cf. 121. The whole of the *De Domo* is important for its implications in this matter.

⁶ Festus 296 L., Festus (Paulus) 297 L., s.v. "penus." (The *penus* was opened on *dies religiosi*.) Ovid (*Fasti* 3.143) locates the fire of Vesta *arcana in aede*. Lavinium, as well as Rome, had a collection of *sacra* which it was not *θεῖος* for all to see. Timaeus had heard from the natives that the holy objects at Lavinium were iron and bronze caducei and a clay vase from Troy, for which Aeneas might be held responsible, Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.67.4.

⁷ Livy 5.39.40; Plut. *Camillus* 20; cf. *CIL* 6.1272.

tations of Aeneas.⁸ Besides these, two small jars, "one open and empty, one full and sealed," which only the Vestals might see, may have been concealed within the *penus*.⁹ The anxiety about these curiosities during the attack of the Gauls is comment enough on their value to the state. Over a century later, when the *sacra* were endangered again in the fire of 241 B.C., a pontifex maximus, Caecilius Metellus, rescued the Palladium from the flames. He was daring sacrilege as he invaded the *penus*, but his heroism was celebrated in literature from Cicero to Augustine.¹⁰ The *penus* in the temple of Vesta, however, was not the only place in Rome to which the Vestals had sole access. A *sacrarium* of Opiconsiva in the Regia was forbidden to all except the Vestals or the *sacerdos publicus*, although there is nothing to indicate why entrance to this shrine was so restricted.¹¹ Secrecy surrounded the priestesses even in death, for when a Vestal had broken her vows and was on the point of being buried alive, the priest who was directing her punishment spoke certain mysterious prayers: *εὐχὰς τινὰς ἀπορρήτους ποιησάμενος*.¹²

Finally, in the rites of the Argei in which the Vestals participated, there is a provocative suggestion of an element of secrecy. The concluding ceremony on the Tiber bridge was visible only to the pontiffs, Vestals, praetors (*στρατηγοί*) and those for whom it was *θέμις* to be present.¹³ Undoubtedly it was this rigid selection of spectators at the rites of the Argei which is responsible for the puzzling tradition about the straw objects which were thrown into the river on this occasion. The exact ceremony on the bridge was not *θέμις* or *fas* for all to know. Consequently the descriptions by observers on the distant river-bank must almost certainly be inaccurate and nearly worthless in any study of the rites of the Argei. The confusion which has characterized so many investigations of

⁸ Serv. Dan. *Aen.* 3.12. Cf. Lucan, *De Bello Civ.* 1.597-598 and 9.993-994; Claud. *In Eutrop.* 1.328-329.

⁹ Plut. *Cam.* 20.

¹⁰ Ovid (*Fasti* 6.437-454) dramatized the incident and made the priest exclaim, "Ignoscite, sacra! Vir intrabo non adeunda viro." See other references cited by J. G. Frazer, *The Fasti of Ovid* (London, 1929) 4.267, n. 3 on *Fasti* 437.

¹¹ Varro *Ling. Lat.* 6.21. Varro specifies that whoever enters the *sacrarium* must wear the *suffibulum*.

¹² Plut. *Numa* 10.

¹³ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.38.3: οἱ καλούμενοι ποντίφικες, ιερῶν οἱ διαφανέστατοι, καὶ σὺν αὐτοῖς αἱ τὸ ἀθάνατον πῦρ διαφυλάττουσαι παρθένοι στρατηγοὶ τε καὶ τῶν ἄλλων πολιτῶν οὓς παρεῖναι ταῖς ἱεροουργαῖς θέμις. . . .

this festival is eloquent testimony to the effectiveness of Roman circumspection.

The augurs, like the pontiffs and Vestals, had their own prerogatives which they held exclusively. Again Cicero's words are instructive. Before he became an augur, he boasted that he had never been unduly inquisitive about the contents of the augurs' secret books: *Venio ad augures, quorum ego libros, si qui sunt reconditi, non scrutor: non sum in exquirendo iure augurum curiosus.*¹⁴ He added that his knowledge of their lore was limited to what they had seen fit to reveal to all the people. It is probable that their books contained nothing more than directions for performing various ceremonies. In their secret meetings on the *arx*, the augurs reached an extreme of wariness in their efforts to achieve a flawless ceremony, *adeo remotum a notitia vulgari ut ne litteris quidem mandetur, sed per memoriam successorum celebretur.*¹⁵ Absolute silence prevailed during a ritual which was never committed to writing but was transmitted by memory to succeeding augurs. Only an expert could comprehend the meaning of silence as the augurs defined it, and this silence was the essential quality of a ceremony which was truly undefiled: *Peritum autem necesse est eum qui, silentium quid sit, intellegat; id enim silentium dicimus in auspiciis, quod omni vitio caret.*¹⁶ *Silentium* here cannot mean abstention from speech, but rather a perfect performance of the rites. It is the converse of *Favete linguis* which did not command silence, but merely appropriate and favorable utterances, while the result was actual, literal silence. As a final precaution against exposure of their secrets, all augurs took an oath of secrecy and nothing but death could terminate their membership in the college.¹⁷

The *quindecimviri*, guardians of the Sibylline Books, shared in the traditions of secrecy which pervaded all possible activities of the pontiffs, Vestals, and augurs. This group, however, lacked

¹⁴ *De Domo* 39. It is possible that *reconditi* may be used here to describe books which were so technical that they were beyond the comprehension of a layman.

¹⁵ Festus (Paulus) 14 L., s.v. "arcani." Tertull. (*Bapt.* 2) quotes this in part. Servius (*Aen.* 1.262) connects *arx* and *arcana*: *Arcana secreta. Unde et arca et arx dictae, quasi res secretae.*

¹⁶ Cic. *De Div.* 2.71. Cf. Festus 476 L., s.v. "sinistrum": *Sinistrum in auspicando significare ait Ateius Capito laetum et prosperum auspicium; a[u]t silentium, [d]ubi dumtaxat vacat vitio. Igitur silentio surgere cum dicitur significat non interpellari, quo minus rem gerat.*

¹⁷ Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 99.

some of the distinction of the other colleges. By 104 B.C., even the membership in the college was determined by popular election instead of by coöptation.¹⁸ Moreover the *populus* itself might take part in the rites which the *quindecimviri* recommended. Like the pontiffs and augurs the *quindecimviri* held office for life and it was their ideal to guard the Sibylline Books with the utmost secrecy. Still it is notable that they were only severely punished for revealing the contents of the Books and not executed for betrayal of their trust.¹⁹ Possibly it was the foreign taint in the origin of the Books which detracted a trifle from their sanctity and kept a treacherous guardian from dying for his crime. Despite this comparative laxity of discipline, the Sibylline Books maintained a venerable reputation as one of the most highly prized secrets of the religious system.

Although the customs of some corporations may appear to defy explanation, there is no reason to believe that they are secret simply because they are inexplicable. At the same time, evidence seems to indicate that the Salian priests of Mars also possessed sacred objects of an indefinable character. Writers, unable to be more explicit in describing the ritual equipment of the priests, used the same loose words, *sacra* or *ιερά*, which described the secret paraphernalia of the Vestals.²⁰

In the cults of various individual deities, there were restrictions which imposed secrecy of a limited kind. Sexual restrictions were of this class. The prohibition of men from the festival of Bona Dea is the most familiar instance. Cicero represented the sacrifice to the goddess as *vetusta occultaque*, a sacrifice hallowed by time which it was supreme impiety for a man to behold when a man might not even know the name of the goddess: Quod quidem sacrificium nemo ante P. Clodium omni memoria violavit, nemo umquam adiit, nemo neglexit, nemo vir aspicere non horruit: quod fit per virgines Vestales . . . fit incredibili caerimonia, fit ei deae, cuius ne nomen quidem viros scire fas est.²¹ Even the impassioned invective of Cicero cannot exaggerate the sacrilege of Clodius when he polluted the rites of Bona Dea in Caesar's house: deorum ignes, solia, mensas, abditos

¹⁸ Th. Mommsen, *Staatsrecht* 23.29.

¹⁹ H. Diels, *Sibyllinische Blätter* (Berlin, 1890) 6-20. There are accounts of a guardian in the regal period who was drowned for betraying secrets entrusted to him.

²⁰ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.70.1: ὧν ἐν Παλατίῳ κείται τὰ ἱερά . . . ὧν τὸ ἱεροφυλάκειον ἐστὶν ἐπὶ τοῦ Κυρηνίου. Cf. *Juv. Sat.* 2.124-126.

²¹ Cic. *Har. Resp.* 37. Cf. *Plut. Caesar* 9; *Dio* 37.45.

ac penetrales focos, occulta et maribus non invisâ solum, sed etiam inaudita sacra inexplabili scelere pervertit.²² Women, on the other hand, were forbidden to participate in the rites of Hercules at the Ara Maxima.²³ In Cato's day women might not attend the sacrifices to Mars Silvanus or even see how the ceremony was performed.²⁴ Impressive similarities in other practices of the cults of Hercules and Mars Silvanus suggest that there may have been some ancient association of the two gods, while Hercules may have been a masculine counterpart of Bona Dea.²⁵ Secret activities existed in the rites of other deities, but their cults were in every case so deeply affected by Greek infiltrations that they must remain outside a count of strictly Roman *arcana*.²⁶

Suppression of a god's true name, an eccentricity by no means limited to the Romans, was the rule in the worship of a few of the most ancient deities in the state religion. Apparently the prescription of this partial anonymity originated in the college of pontiffs: et iure pontificum cautum est, ne suis nominibus dii Romani appellarentur, ne exaugurari possint.²⁷ Cato's prayer to be used when thinning a grove was typical of the oldest formulas which reveal by their generality a cautious determination to avoid any possible error in address: Si deus, si dea es, quoniam illud sacrum est.²⁸ A sacred shield on the Capitol was inscribed: Genio urbis Romae, sive mas, sive femina.²⁹ From Festus' phrase, indigetes dii,

²² *Har. Resp.* 57.

²³ Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 60; Macrobi. *Sat.* 1.12.28. The cult of Silvanus similarly appears to have excluded women, Schol. Juv. *Sat.* 6.446: Silvano mulieres non licet sacrificare.

²⁴ Cato *De Agr.* 83: Mulier ad eam rem divinam ne adsit neve videat quomodo fiat.

²⁵ On the parallels of the cults of Hercules and Mars Silvanus, see Warde Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic* (London, 1899) 194-195. On the relationship of Hercules and Bona Dea, see Fowler, 102-103.

²⁶ For example, there is allusion to the *arcana sacra* of Diana, Hor. *Epod.* 5.51-52; Ovid. *Met.* 10.436; *Epist.* 12.79. The secret practices which abounded in the mysteries of Ceres were, as Cicero states, sacra . . . a Graecis adscita et accepta, Verr. 2.5.187. One god bore the epithet *arcanus*, Jupiter Arkanus of Praeneste, certainly an oracular deity; *CIL* 14.2852, 2937, 2972; L. Preller, *Römische Mythologie*³ (Berlin, 1881) 2.191, n. 2; G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*² (Munich, 1912) 260. The culture of Praeneste was predominantly Hellenistic, not Roman.

²⁷ Serv. Dan. *Aen.* 2.351. Warde Fowler (*The Religious Experience of the Roman People* [London, 1911] 138 n. 8) states that the actual reason for the secret name may be "only an inference from the want of substantial names in so many Roman deities." He adds that in the ancient formula of *devotio* the gods were addressed by their own names (Livy 8.9).

²⁸ *De Agr.* 139. Cf. also *CIL* 6.110, 111, 632; 14.3572.

²⁹ Serv. Dan. *Aen.* 2.351.

quorum nomina vulgari non licet, it would seem that the names of the *di indigetes*, though not expressly secret, were not to be bruited about by the masses.³⁰ The correct epithet to use in addressing Jupiter himself seems to have been perplexing even to the pontiffs.³¹ According to one tradition, the subterranean altar of Consus in the Circus Maximus was erected to a divinity who guarded hidden counsels and whose very name might not be spoken.³² The *di penates* suffered the same anonymity and their cult was so completely secluded that their images might not be seen by anyone but a priest.³³ A desire to conceal the precise names of the gods, ne exaugurari possint, was certainly the alleged motive which prompted later pontiffs to decree that some divinities should not be known by their true names. The actual and compelling motive can only have sprung from the common conviction of primitive peoples that knowledge of a name signified a consequent power over the possessor of the name; in the case of a god this was a humiliation that obviously might become preposterous.³⁴

The secret names of places with their tutelary deities were comparable to the hidden or doubtful names of other gods. The mode of address was recorded in the Acts of the Arval Brethren.³⁵ In Rome the reason for secrecy was to prevent an enemy from capturing the city's guardian god by calling him by his correct name.³⁶ The formula for *evocatio* disclosed the Romans practicing their own principles and with characteristic caution addressing the tutelary god of a hostile city, si deus, si dea es.³⁷ The true name of Rome itself was a cherished secret and there was a moral for meddlers in

³⁰ Festus 94 L., s.v. "indigetes."

³¹ Serv. Dan. *Aen.* 2.351: Iuppiter optime maxime, sive quo alio nomine te appellari volueris.

³² Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.31.3. It is interesting to note that the Vestals were present at the traditionally secret rites of Consus. On August 21, the Vestals and the flamen Quirinalis sacrificed together at the altar, Tertull. *De Spec.* 5.

³³ Serv. Dan. *Aen.* 3.12. The etymology which the scholium gives indicates something of the remote character of the *di penates*.

³⁴ For illustrations of this belief, see J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*³ (London, 1911) 3, chap. vi, "Tabooed Words," esp. 318 and 387-391.

³⁵ *Acta Fratrum Arvalium*, ed. W. Henzen (Berlin, 1874), 146: Sive deo sive deae in cuius tutela hic lucus locusve est oves II. Cf. also 144.

³⁶ Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 61, "The Romans held that the safest and surest way of guarding a god was to keep him unnamed and unknown," trans. H. J. Rose (Oxford, 1924); Pliny *Hist. Nat.* 28.2.18; Macrobian *Sat.* 3.9.2 f.; Serv. *Aen.* 2.351.

³⁷ Macrobian (*Sat.* 3.9.7-8) records the entire formula of the *evocatio* before Carthage.

the tale of the magistrate who was crucified for uttering the real name of Rome.³⁸

This spirit of prudent secrecy which dominated the religious life of Rome reveals in part the activity of priests who were often shrewd, circumspect lawyers at the same time.³⁹ It was the same spirit which demanded constant *instaurationes* of games and a scrupulous performance of every ceremony.⁴⁰ Such perfection required a priest who was an expert in ritual and participants whose blundering would not destroy the effects of his skilful management. Hence came the oft-quoted formula of admonition, *Favete linguis*, a phrase which teems with implications.⁴¹ An obstreperous theatre audience is a vivid reality after the frequent complaints of Terence, and it seems improbable that the Roman *plebs* would behave any more properly at an entertaining religious spectacle. For sheer efficiency total silence was necessary; otherwise an entire performance might be inadvertently ruined by words of ill-omen. So the pious covered their heads and a din of flutes and cymbals arose to drown out all inauspicious sounds from the irreverent.

However much the priests may have supported and strengthened the traditions of secrecy, these traditions must be older than any priest and represent a fundamentally Italic trait which persisted in the religion of Rome. It is remarkable, for instance, to discover that equivalents of the phrases, *tacitus precator* and *murmurans precator* occur with monotonous frequency in the Iguvine Tablets, while the priests of Iguvium pray constantly *pro arcis nomine*, *pro civitatis nomine*.⁴² Ancient Rome apparently shared with pre-

³⁸ Pliny *Hist. Nat.* 3.5.65; Solinus 1.4; Serv. *Georg.* 1.498. Conjecture about the true name was admitted, of course; Johannes Lydus (*De Mens.* 4.50) records three guesses. The guarding of this secret name may have been entrusted to a special deity, Angerona. Since she was shown in her statues with bound lips or with her finger at her lips, she seemed the perfect *praesul silentii*, Pliny *Hist. Nat.* 3.5.65; cf. Solinus 1.6; Macrobian *Sat.* 3.9.4. Cf. Mommsen's restoration of the Fasti Praenestini for December 21, *CIL* 12. pp. 238, 337.

³⁹ Warde Fowler, *Rel. Exp.* 138 n. 9.

⁴⁰ On Roman circumspection in religious observances, see, for example, Gellius 2.28.2. On *instaurationes*, see Livy 5.52.9, quia aliquid ex patrio ritu negligentia casu praetermissum est. The speech of Appius Claudius on *auspicia polluta* under plebeian magistrates is also relevant to this point; Livy 6.41.4 f.

⁴¹ For a full collection of references to the custom of silence at sacrifices, see Frazer, *The Fasti of Ovid* 2.84, n. 3 and n. 4 on *Fasti* 1.71. Cf. also *supra*, 160.

⁴² For the text of the Iguvine Tablets, see C. D. Buck, *A Grammar of Oscan and Umbrian*² (Boston, 1928) 260–300. Throughout the Iguvine Tablets there is constant emphasis on correct performance of ceremonies; see Irene Rosenzweig, *Ritual and Cults of Pre-Roman Iguvium* (London, 1937), *passim* and esp. 116.

Roman Iguyium an appreciation of the value of silence, optimum ac tutissimum administrandarum rerum vinculum.⁴³ Secret practices invariably distinguished the most ancient religious organizations of Rome. There is always a strong coincidence of antiquity and secrecy, the coincidence which Cicero calls *vetusta occultaque*, as if the combination were intimate and natural. But the last secret of Roman religion perished with the last priest, and modern scholars occupy the same position as the *vulgus* of Rome; they know only that there were secrets, not what the secrets were. The legacy that remains is a dearth and inconsistency of evidence which have plagued and fascinated scholars to this day.

⁴³ Val. Max. 2.2.1.