

Pollution, Appeasement, and Ritual Murder: The Punishment of Unchaste Vestal Virgins

The maintenance of Vestal virginity was crucial not only for the virgins' ability to worship the virgin goddess, Vesta, but also for the well-being of Rome as a whole. Therefore, if a virgin did become unchaste, the consequences would have been severe. Plutarch describes in detail the disturbing ritual of disposing of an unchaste Vestal via live burial, and lists the provisions supplied, which may have kept the accused Vestal alive for a few days (Plut. *Num.* 10. 4-5). In this presentation, I argue that this particular method of removal served as a trial for the accused Vestal virgin, as well as a way to expiate any anger by Vesta against Rome for the virgin's loss of virginity and to avoid culpability for the death of the Vestal virgin.

Recent scholars have attempted to reconcile the strange specificity of the punishment described by Plutarch. Parker suggests that the Vestal served as a sacrifice: the violated Vestal would have been seen as a *prodigium* and therefore, a source of pollution (Parker 2004: 584), as he explains: "The goal... of such rituals is not only to remove the polluting presence of a *prodigium* but to do so without incurring that pollution. Thus, the *prodigium* is burned or abandoned alive. Death is left up to a natural force, and no one is personally responsible for the death and so tainted" (2004: 586). This accords well with Plutarch's claim that Romans were trying to remove themselves from blame of the killing of the Vestal: ὥσπερ ἀφοσιουμένων τὸ μὴ λιμῶ διαφθεῖρειν σῶμα ταῖς μεγίσταις καθιερωμένον ἀγιστείαις: "as though absolving themselves of destroying with hunger a body devoted to the greatest of rituals" (Plut. *Num.* 10.5). Schultz disagrees with labeling an executed Vestal a sacrifice: "Close examination of the sources reveals that the Vestals were not sacrificed - not to Vesta nor to any other god ... unchaste Vestals are never referred to by any source as sacrificial victims, nor is their burial alive ever called a

sacrifice” (2010: 531). Schultz differentiates sacrifice, which takes the form of an offering directed at someone, from more general ritual murder, which she defines as “the killing of a human being for religious purposes, repeated in specific circumstances in a prescribed fashion that marks it off from profane killing” (2010: 518). The execution of Vestal virgins falls under this definition, because it may have been repeated under the circumstances that a virgin committed *incestum*, although it was not part of a religious routine. I argue that whether the execution is considered sacrifice or not, it is clear that the live burial was a method of avoiding Vesta’s anger, and therefore the killing had religious implications.

Another aspect of the burial was that it served as a way for the Vestal to prove her innocence. Although there would have been a trial in front of the *pontifices*, the “execution of a Vestal was in itself her trial by ordeal. If she was pure, Vesta would no doubt rescue her” (Parker 2004: 586). The idea of the execution functioning as a trial would also help the Romans avoid responsibility should the Vestal be innocent, because it gives the goddess the chance to save a wrongly accused priestess. Thus, the life of the priestess is placed in the hands of Vesta. While previous scholars have focused on one aspect of avoiding Vesta’s anger via the burial of the virgin, I aim to show that the various functions of the burial, such as providing opportunity for rescue by the goddess or expunging pollution, are all ways of steering away from Vesta’s wrath.

While the method of execution for Vestals charged with *crimen incesti* is not a sacrifice, I argue that it is primarily aimed at not provoking the anger of Vesta. Pollution is incurred by an unchaste vestal, and so she had to be separated from Rome in order that the city may not become polluted. Those who become personally responsible for the death of the Vestal may also fall under the wrath of Vesta, especially if the Vestal should prove to have been innocent, and they would thus also be polluted. However, I also argue that Schulz may be more accurate in calling

the virgins' execution a "ritual murder" rather than a "sacrifice" due to the circumstances under which the live burial occurred.

Bibliography

Parker, Holt N. 2004. "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State." *The American Journal of Philology* 125: 563-601.

Schultz, Celia E. "The Romans and Ritual Murder." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78: 516-541.