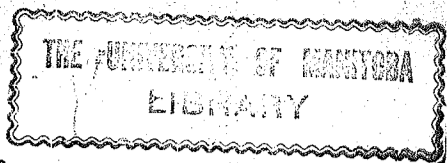


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THE VESTAL VIRGINS.



The flood of light which recent discoveries have thrown on antiquity has fallen with special brilliance upon the religious and political institutions of the Republic and Empire of Rome. Among all the topics of interest thus illumined, few, if any, surpass the Story of the Vestal Virgins, who for more than a thousand years guarded the sacred fire and preserved the treasured relics of the Roman people. The discovery, less than twenty years ago, of the Atrium Vestae, and its careful excavation have enlarged for the student the field of historic investigation, and opened to the reflective and the poetical a rich mine of pathos and sentiment.

As one stands among these ruins lying silent under the shadow of the Palatine Hill, and thinks of what those stones and broken columns have to tell, there is a quickening of the imagination and a stirring of the fancy, till the lofty cloisters and spacious halls arise before the vision of the mind, peopled as of old with white-robed maidens, of noble birth, of stainless character, charged with the most sacred offices, entrusted with the most weighty confidences, and alike in the day of power and in the hour of danger faithful to their trust.

The worship of Vesta, the Greek *Ἑστία*, was brought to Rome says Livy, (l. 20.) by Numa from Alba Longa. Those who content themselves with referring ancient customs to an origin in bare utility find a simple explanation of this cult in the care taken in prehistoric times to keep a fire burning continually in every settlement, from which each household could readily obtain the valued element. The charge of this common hearth, say they, would naturally be given to women, the men being so much away, either hunting, or engaged in agricultural or pastoral pursuits. And among the women, those who were free from the cares of a family would be marked out as the best and most competent custodians. The round shape and small size of the temples of Vesta may perhaps be due to reminiscences of

the small round huts of the ancient Latin race, models of which have been discovered in considerable numbers.

But it may fairly be questioned whether purely utilitarian reasons can account for the persistence, throughout the history of a nation, of so clearly defined and powerful a belief. It is far more probable that the honours paid to Vesta and her priestesses were a survival among the Romans of the ancient, almost universal worship of Fire. This view has been ably maintained by M. Fustel de Coulanges. (La Cité Antique t. 7.) After referring to the custom of keeping fire continually burning on the altar of every house, and to the rules for its maintenance with the proper kind of wood, its extinguishment on the yearly festival of the 1st of March, and its relighting only in the manner prescribed, he goes on to say,—

"Ces différentes règles prouvent assez que, dans l'opinion des anciens, il ne s'agissait pas seulement de produire ou de conserver un élément utile et agréable; ces hommes voyaient autre chose dans le feu qui brûlait sur leurs autels. Ce feu était quelque chose de divin; on l'adorait, on lui rendait un véritable culte.....On réclamait sa protection; on le croyait puissant."

This worship of Fire was probably older by far than that of Zeus or Jupiter. Though in time displaced from its primitive position of supreme religious importance by the elaborate mythologies of the Olympian worship, among the Romans at least it always retained a prominent place. And in the construction of those mythologies the influence of the prehistoric custom and belief is traceable in the dignity assigned to the personification of the divinity of Fire, *Vesta* Vesta, the goddess of the Hearth, as in the practice of later ages it may be seen in the privileges and honours accorded to her representatives, the Vestal Virgins. We may therefore, look upon the statement of Livy regarding the importation of the worship of

Vesta from Alba, as the echo of a well-founded tradition that the ancestors of the Roman people were fire-worshippers, like many other ancient races, and reproduced in their settlement by the Tiber the customs of their former home. Among these was included the custody of a central fire, not simply for utilitarian but for religious purposes, by a band of chosen and separated maidens.

The sisterhood thus coeval with the earliest days of the traditional Roman monarchy outlived both royal and republican rule, and even the three glorious centuries of the Empire. Vestals tended the deathless fire, and guarded the sacred symbols, while Rome slowly grew in power and wealth till she ruled the world. Only when the ancient religion came into mortal conflict with the resistless power of Christianity did the venerable order pass away, its work done, its purpose fulfilled, leaving the honoured memory of an ideal well preserved.

The number of the Vestals was limited to six. When a vacancy occurred among them, usually through the death of one of the sisters, it was filled by the Pontifex Maximus. Candidates for the office were to be between six and ten years of age, daughters of freeborn parents living in Italy, both of whom were alive at the time of the election, and both free from the imputation of public or private blame. The importance attached to this qualification of parental blamelessness illustrates the anxiety of the Romans to maintain the purity of the Vestal order, and may itself be illustrated by the account given by Tacitus, (Ann. 2. 86.) Tiberius, who as Emperor held the office of Pontifex Maximus, gave the Senate the privilege of choosing a candidate to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Occia, who for 57 years, (B. C. 38 to A. D. 19), had been a member of the sisterhood. The candidates were the daughters of Domitius Pollio and Fonteius Agrippa, and the Senators elected the former, in Tacitus' phrase, "non ob aliud quam quod mater ejus in eodem conjugio manebat: nam Agrippa discidio domum imminuerat". Thus

the shadow of dissension between the parents of one candidate was enough to turn the scale against her.

From Aulus Gellius we learn many interesting particulars of the formularies of institution into the duties of the Vestals. The ceremony was performed by the Pontifex Maximus, and was preceded by the shearing of the girl's hair. This was made into a plait and labelled with her name, and then brought as a votive offering to the tree called "Lotus Capillata", which is said by Pliny to be over 500 years old, and is supposed to have stood within the precincts of the House of the Vestals, where now a turf space is left. The child Vestal, clothed in white, was then led to the threshold of her new dwelling by the Pontifex Maximus, who addressing her by the name, "Amata", "Beloved", admitted her to the sacred order with an ancient formula of initiation.

The vows were taken only for a period of thirty years, at the expiration of which the Vestal was free to return to her home, and to marry. Advantage was rarely taken of this permission, partly, it would appear, from a natural disinclination to so complete a change of habit and occupation, but probably yet more because the advantage of the position outweighed so clearly any derivable from domestic life.

The wealth of the Vestals was great. From the earliest times the order had been endowed by the State, and in course of time it seems to have accumulated a large amount of landed property. Among other indications of the wealth of the order it may be noted that the Emperor consoled an unsuccessful candidate for membership, the daughter of Fonteius Agrippa before mentioned, with a gift of "decies sestertii", which if we reckon "centena millia" at £1,080 sterling, would amount to well over \$50,000. To Cornelia, elected in place of Scantia, (A. D. 24) he gave "vicies sestertium", over \$100,000. (Tac. An. 4. 16.) Many Vestals also received allowances from their families, and it was not uncommon for those whom they had befriended to requite the kindness by gifts or bequests.

But the honours and privileges accorded the priestesses of

Vesta were more desirable than their possessions. Admission to the order conferred at once exemption from all rule, paternal or civic, save the authority of the Pontifex Maximus. Its members might drive in their own carriages through the Roman streets, preceded by a lictor, when even the consuls must yield them precedence. Their horses were free from what we have learned to call "commandeering", (which, under the name "collatio equorum", prevailed in Ancient Rome, as in modern South Africa,) whereas those of ordinary citizens might be taken for State purposes in case of need. An interesting example of the knowledge of Roman life which has come to us from unexpected quarters is afforded by the discovery which demonstrated this privilege. A bronze tablet was found at a farm near Frascati, inscribed "Calpurniae Praetextatae V. V. Maximae immunis in iugo". Two other similar tablets have been discovered, of which one is inscribed with the name of Flavia Publica and one with that of Sossia, both Vestales Maximae. Places of honour were assigned to the Vestal Virgins in the theatres and in the Circus. By a decree of the Senate in the reign of Tiberius it was enacted "quoties Augusta theatrum introisset, ut sedes inter Vestalium consideret". (Tac. An. 4. 16.) So that their dignity was enhanced by the presence among them of the Empress. And to these marks of respect in life was added a rare and significant honour after death,— they shared with the Emperors themselves the right of burial within the walls of Rome.

Nor were these privileges empty honours. They were the outward sign and concomitant of a powerful influence in political affairs. Important state documents were entrusted to their care, as, for instance, the will of Augustus. (Tac. 1. 8.) Their intercessions in civil dissensions were always received with respect. When, for instance, the army of Vespasian was nearing Rome, Vitellius desired a suspension of hostilities, and prevailed upon the Vestal Virgins to bear his dispatch to the generals of the advancing force. Though the request was refused, Tacitus tells us of the messengers, "Vestales cum

honore dimissae"— (Tac. Hist. 3. 31) Caesar's life was spared in the Sullan prescriptions, at the request of a Vestal. Even the infamous Messalina, when her crimes were discovered by Claudius, sought the powerful intercession of the venerable Vestalis Maxima, Vibidia, who undertook the thankless task of imploring mercy for the shameless culprit. So great was her influence that Narcissus himself, utterly bent upon the destruction of Messalina, ventured only to give her an ambiguous reply.

But this power of intercession reached its climax in the custom by which if a condemned criminal on his way to punishment happened to meet a Vestal, she might grant him a full and free pardon. To guard against the possibility of abuse, this privilege only extended to accidental meetings.

One more instance of the respect accorded to the Vestal priestesses may be cited; the curious story given by Suetonius of the triumph of Appius Claudius. His request to be granted a triumph had been refused, but nothing daunted, he persuaded his daughter, who was a member of the order, to enter the triumphal chariot with him. No one dared stop the honoured Vestal; and under her protection he attained his desire, and drove unhindered up to the Capitol.

A position of such privilege, honour and influence was not lightly to be vacated, and we need not wonder that we hear little of a return from the peace of the Vestal order to the busy ways of men.

The obligations incurred by these honoured maidens were the care of the sacred fire (Cic. de Leg. 2. 8.) — that duty from which the order probably originated— the offering of daily prayers and sacrifices for the welfare of the State— the ceremonial cleansing of the Temple of Vesta, which involved drawing water daily from the sacred Spring of Egeria— and the custody of the ancient relic known as the Palladium. This venerated image, which was said to have been brought from Troy by Aeneas, was never shown to eyes profane. But in one of the most spirited passages of the "Fasti" (6, 369–399,)

Ovid tells us of an occasion when the House and Temple of Vesta were on fire and L. Caecilius Metellus, then Pontifex Maximus, saved the Palladium from destruction. More than 400 years later another conflagration destroyed the Atrium Vestae, and the Virgins fled to the Palatine, carrying with them the sacred relic. It is told of Helagabalus that in his insane attempt to enforce the worship of himself to the exclusion of all other divinities, he forcibly took the Palladium from the Aedes Vestae and chained it with golden fetters within his own temple.

It has been argued, from the words of Servius (in Aen.7, 188.) that all the seven sacred tokens of the prosperity of the Roman people were in charge of the Vestals, but of this there is no actual proof. The balance of probability inclines to the view that only the Palladium was kept in the shrine of Vesta. When, for instance, the Gauls appeared before the walls of Rome in 364 B. C. the Vestals and Flamen Quirinalis fled to Caere, but buried the sacred relics in jars, near the house of the Flamen, from which the name, Doliola, a little jar, was given to the spot, and a superstition prevailed forbidding anyone to spit upon it. (Livy 5. 40.) Hence it is clear that the sacred tokens kept by the Vestals were of small size, as they could be hidden "in doliolis".

The fate of these relics, or this relic, if we conclude the Palladium to have been the only treasure contained in the penetralia Vestae, affords another interesting subject of speculation. At the discovery of the Atrium Vestae great hopes were entertained that the shrine itself might be found. But the only trace of it that remains is the octagonal foundation, in the very centre of the building, built of simple bricks, the superstructure having been carefully levelled to the ground. The conjecture is not unnatural that the deliberate destruction was the act of the last members of the order, on the eve of its dissolution, at the close of the fourth century, A. D., in which case the secret of the final disposition of the "sacra fatalia" perished with the last surviving Vestal.

But almost more important than even the care of the sacred tokens was the observance by the Vestals of the vow of chastity. Their dwelling was "non adeunda viro" (Ov. l. c.). Men were absolutely excluded from its threshold. Not even a physician was allowed to enter, although its situation under the slope of the Palatine made it peculiarly unhealthy. In any case of illness the Vestal was removed to the care of her parents or of some trustworthy matron, and a careful watch was kept upon all who visited her. The strictness of the precautions taken to guard against temptation may be estimated from the fact that while, as we have seen, places of honour were reserved for them at the theatres and at the Circus, the Vestals were excluded from the nude athletic contests. A vigilant watch was also kept upon their behaviour at home, by means of spies among their attendant women. Livy tells us (4. 44.) that the Vestal Postumia was suspected of a breach of this vow "propter cultum amoeniorem ingeniumque liberius quam virginem decet" — and though finally acquitted was ordered by the Pontifex Maximus to give up jesting and to dress "sancte potius quam scite". Again, (8. 15.) he tells how the Vestal Minucia was accused to the Pontifex Maximus "propter mundiorem justo cultum", and being put on her trial was found guilty and was condemned to the awful punishment reserved for such a fall,— burial alive at the spot known as the Sceleratus Campus, near the Porta Collina. A few other cases are alleged of an accusation of breach of the vow of chastity, the accused, if found guilty, meeting with the same terrible fate. But it is noteworthy that the evidence against the Vestals seems to have been always that of slaves, which was notoriously untrustworthy. And certainly in the case recorded by Pliny (Ep. 4. 2.) there seems no doubt that the unfortunate Cornelia, then Vestalis Maxima, whose tragic fate he narrates, was an innocent victim to the tyrannical whim of the blood-stained Domitian, who according to Pliny had conceived the despicable plan of signaling his reign by the conviction of a Vestal Virgin. But whether the accused were guilty or innocent, the condemned Vestal endured the most horrible punishment. At the Campus Sceleratus was a

vault, dug deep under the Agger of Servius Tullius, and after flogging by the Pontifices, the unfortunate woman was brought hither on a veiled hearse, surrounded by weeping relatives and horror-stricken crowds of citizens. Into the crypt she was made to pass down a ladder, which was then removed. Within were a bed, a lamp, and a small store of provisions. After the entrance of the culprit the vault was covered with a large stone, and earth heaped upon it till all trace of the execution disappeared. With so dreadful a penalty did the guardians of Rome's honour and Vesta's worship fence about the purity of her priestesses.

It was not with the Vestal Virgins as with so many religious orders — that their end came in consequence of their own declension from the moral standard with which the order began its life. The conversion of the Empire to Christianity, slow and partial as it long was, inevitably tended to the suppression of all forms of the ancient pagan worship. But it was not until the close of the 4th century, as a consequence of the support given Eugenius by the leaders of the old religion, that Theodosius finally suppressed the existing associations of pagan priests and priestesses, and among them the sisterhood of the Vestal Virgins. The question naturally suggests itself whether among those whose standard of life was so lofty, whose surroundings were so conducive to deep and high meditation, some may not have pondered and accepted the new religion of purity and love which was undermining the ancient myths. If anywhere there was preparation for the Gospel, surely one might have expected it among the Vestal maidens. ^{And} ~~But~~ it is not unlikely that among the discoveries made in the excavation of the Atrium in 1883, one may refer to such an event. In November of that year there were discovered a number of pedestals and fragments of statues to different Vestales Maximae, twenty-eight in all, which with eight found in other parts of Rome make a total of thirty-six inscriptions. Several of these, however, are to the same lady, as in the case of Flavia Publica, to whom six statues at least were erected. But besides those which bear the name of one of the Vestals, there is a particularly