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**Re-reading Vestal virginity. The *virgines Vestales*
at the crossroads of law, literature and religion in Ancient Rome**

Abstract

Roman historians and poets alike have commented on the priestesses of the ancient *Vesta* cult. Authors such as *Dionysios of Halicarnassus*, *Gellius*, *Livy* and *Plutarch* focused on the Vestals' death, their famous *incest* trials, their live burials and the mythical beginning of Rome the making of each *virgo Vestalis* symbolised. Indeed, virginity was at the heart of the cult - *Ovid* described *Vesta* as the invisible virgin goddess. Cultural studies have identified virginity with both bodily and moral integrity, purity/unity and great power. The Vestals' virginity in particular has been a subject of classical, anthropological and gender studies, concentrating on several aspects of this special form of virginity.

The aim of my paper is to put the Vestals at the center of legal, religious and political life in the Roman republic as was done by lawyers, historians and poets. With their virgin bodies they represented the separation of the legal, religious and political spheres of Roman life, the domestication of raw power through division. As sovereign figures, the Vestals would wander freely among the religious world of the *aedes Vestae*, in which they were subject to the sacral jurisdiction of the *pontifex maximus*, the legal world, where they acted as *personae sui iuris* (as unlike other Roman women, they were allowed to speak in court and could not be summoned), and the political Rome, in which magistrates would honour them as symbols of the state, lowering their *fascies* before the Vestals' "public virginity". As a "living constitution" or "totem" (*Parker*) of the republic, the Vestals stood as guardians at the border of civilisation and chaos. With this new interpretation of the Vestals' role I want to give a further perspective to *Mary Beard's* famous remark: "*The Vestals ask us to ask what it is to be Roman, what Rome is.*"