

# Notes on Quiz #9

*Women in Antiquity • Fall 2022*

## 1. Why were women particularly associated with the cult of Vesta? How was the cult important in Rome?

Vesta was goddess of the hearth, as so was associated with the privacy of family and survival and therefore persistence into the future; the private and the future were the aspect of society with which women were most associated in the ancient world.

The public cult of Vesta was responsive for the Eternal Fire, which represented Rome's unending existence, persisting into the future. This persistence would again be associated with the women of Rome.

Most of all, the purity of the Roman maiden was of immense symbolic and superstitious importance. The hands of men were stained with blood, because Roman men did what must be done to save and protect Rome. Only the unmarried, virginal woman was pure enough to be an absolute, ceaseless protection for the Flame.

Romans truly the Flame going out, or its protectors becoming corrupted, as a terrible omen portending catastrophe or even destruction for Rome. For this reason, violation of a Vestal Virgin was one of their very few capital crimes; according to religious law, the Vestal was to be buried alive and the offending male scourged to death in the Forum.

## 2. Why was Isis attractive to women? Why does this Egyptian deity end up as a Roman goddess?

Like Athena, Isis was both empowered and independent; and while Athena was one of many Greek goddesses, in the Egyptian pantheon Isis stands above the other female deities. In some ways Isis even transcends Horus and Osiris; the two male gods are connected with the cycle of the death and rebirth, which Isis, unchanging facilitates and ensures.

The Roman local pagan religion did not export well: the chief god, Juppiter, was the patron god of the city of Rome, and the other public gods, Mars and Quirinus, were closely tied to the Roman army and citizenry. Consequently, the Romans had a long tradition of co-opting foreign gods from the lands they grafted onto the empire. Isis was unlike any goddess the Romans had in their extended pantheon; adopting her cult into the Roman religion was a useful way of Romanizing the people of Egypt and others drawn to Isis as a powerful and distinctive goddess of perpetuity and rebirth.

### EC1. All of the following were true of Vestal virgins EXCEPT:

(b) They were still legally under the power of their biological family's pater familias

### EC2. In the selected letters assigned for today, Pliny the Younger speaks of various women. From your impression, what kinds of womanly attributes does he seem to call out or admire in these individuals?

Calpurnia Hispulla's niece is praised as worthy of her father, her grandfather, and Calpurnia because she is "incomparably discerning, incomparably thrifty; while her love for her husband betokens a chaste nature", and for her appreciation of reading and of Pliny's own verses.

Numidia Quadratilla, in contrast, is rebuked for being devoted to "the pleasures of the town" and for keeping a set of actors on retainer; her grandson is praised for not following her example.

The 14-year-old daughter of Fundanus was cherished for being cheerful, a loving daughter, and unfailingly respectful to her nurses and tutors, and to her doctors during her illness; for being an eager reader; and for taking "few amusements", and those moderation.

Arria is praised for her bravery in not only urging her husband, the defeated rebel Paetus, to fall on his sword, but providing an example by doing so herself, and other brave acts of devotion to her husband and to family honor.

Cornelia, a Chief Vestal wrongfully condemned by the emperor Domitian, maintained her modesty to the end, even falling into the pit with dignity, after bravely calling on Vesta to acknowledge that Rome's success under Domitian attested to her and her Vestals' purity.