

Accounts of the female priesthood in Greece have failed to account sufficiently for the reasons why old women were chosen to serve in some cults. In the most recent treatment of the Greek priestess, Joan Breton Connelly maintains that an analogous relationship existed between the divinity and her priestess, which determined the gender, age, and sexual status of the priestess (2007). In simple terms, virgins served virgin goddesses and married women served matronly goddesses. However, this theory breaks down when a more complete analysis of older priestesses, those past the age of childbearing, is undertaken, since no Greek goddesses can be identified as “old.” An understanding of the role of older priestesses in the Greek religious system, therefore, necessitates a different methodological approach.

In this paper, I will argue that post-menopausal priestesses were able to achieve a state of ritual purity analogous to that regarded as typical for women who had never had sexual intercourse. This similarity in ritual purity was grounded in a perceived physical similarity between the virginal and the post-menopausal, which can be understood through an examination of the ancient concepts of virginity and the associated physiological ideas. Virginity and gynecological concepts in general hinge on the potential of the female body to be either “open” or “closed.” While the body of a physical virgin was considered “closed,” defloration was understood to “open” it (Hanson 1990). However, an analysis of ancient gynecological theory reveals that the opening of the female body was not a single occurrence, but rather that her body fluctuated between “open” and “closed” throughout life, as she experienced the natural gynecological events of menstruation, conception, pregnancy, and ultimately menopause (Sissa 1990b; Dean-Jones 1994). In addition, prolonged sexual abstinence caused the uterine stoma to close (Hp. *Mul.* 1.2). The closed bodily condition of physical virginity was not a state to which sexually experienced women could never return, in other words. Ancient gynecology also recognized a similarity between the condition of the post-menopausal womb and the womb of a virgin, insofar as they suffered the same sorts of uterine diseases (Hp. *Mul.* 1.7). Medically, the bodies of post-menopausal women and physical virgins were understood to be alike. This idea of “renewable virginity” is also supported by certain practices of uterine magic. For example, amulets have been discovered that depict a womb with a key underneath it. It has been argued that the amulets also articulate the concept of a womb that had the ability to open and close throughout the course of a woman’s life (Aubert 1989; Hanson 1995).

This concept of “renewable virginity” allows for young women who have never experienced intercourse and celibate, post-menopausal women to be understood as ritual equivalents. A physical similarity underlies the similarity in ritual purity that each group was able to achieve through their closed bodies, due to either physical virginity or “renewable virginity.” In turn, this realization enables scholars to understand better the pattern in female priesthoods of changes from young virgins to older women as priestesses. The most notable example of such a substitution is the priesthood of the Pythia of Delphi, which I will discuss in the latter part of my paper. Scholars have continued to argue for the appointment of young, physical virgins to the position of the Pythia, but the conception of “renewable virginity” allows us to acknowledge that Pythias might be post-menopausal women, as Diodorus Siculus (16.26.6) and several inscriptions suggest (e.g. *FD* III 1: 553).

## Works Cited

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