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Veiled Patriarchy: Vestal Priestesses as the Ideal Roman Woman

BY
Ashley Burton

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Introduction

The Roman empire spanned the Mediterranean world at the height of its imperial reign in the beginning of the first century A.D., pushing its culture and ideals to lands beyond the reach of previous empires. Unmatched in its military ability, Rome conquered ravenously, funneling wealth into its glimmering capital and nurturing an explosion of art and culture. A central aspect of this cultural growth surrounded the fickle gods, who represented the source of the arts, agriculture, and military success of the Roman people. Among this pantheon sat Vesta. Morphed into her Roman form from the original Greek Hestia, Vesta symbolized the ever-important Roman hearth where family gathered and connected.

Like other gods and goddesses within the pantheon, Vesta required specific religious personnel to serve her alone, namely the Vestal Virgins. The Vestal Virgins occupied an essential role in Ancient Rome's religious hierarchy as Vesta's sole priestesses and acted in this role from Rome's inception to its eventual fall. Despite this impressive timespan, the Vestal cult remained largely uninfluenced by Roman social norms but instead represented the "ideal" Roman woman throughout Roman history, regardless of fluctuating social standards. The Vestals represented this stereotype through their duties, symbolism, and punishment for unchastity; thereby reinforcing the traditional role of the woman as the chaste subordinate to her husband's rules. Despite this representation, the Vestals simultaneously existed outside of Roman tradition for women in the legal, personal, and financial benefits they received through their position, marking them as a unique sect of Roman society with rights that belonged to none but them.

Traditional roles for Roman women originated in Rome's founding myths and legends, creating a foundation for women's expected roles that would last throughout Rome's existence as both a republic and an empire. The legend of the rape of Lucretia marks the distinguishing

characteristics of a model of the Roman housewife in the time of the Republic. This myth played an essential role in the founding of the oligarchical government of Rome that followed the early Etruscan kings. Simply put, this story tells of Rome emerging into a new era of government. The story recounts Lucretia, wife to a soldier, and her steadfast obedience and chastity towards her husband even while he fought in foreign lands.¹ Returning suddenly from war, her husband finds her spinning at her wheel while all other wives ignore their duties and languish with heavy foods and wine.² The traditional virtue of Lucretia, combined with her beauty, spark lust and envy in her husband's friend, resulting in her rape.³ The outcome of this crime is the suicide of Lucretia, who suffered under the weight of her "impurity" until she could bear it no longer.⁴ This myth provided the Roman woman with advice not only on her designated roles in society but also her expected reaction to the loss of her chastity, even if this loss is through force. It is unlikely that this myth suggested suicide for all women who "lost" their virtue, but Lucretia's horrified reaction reminded the Roman woman of the importance of her chastity to the stability of the Roman household, the foundation of the Roman state.

The roles put in place by the foundation myths of Rome do little to provide the modern scholar with information on how Roman women behaved throughout the republic and the empire. These answers instead must be elucidated through satire. While plays such as Juvenal's *Satires* are clearly meant to be humorous, mocking their topic, behind the humor the plays tell a story of what society thought of as major contributors to Rome's success or failure at the time. In "Satire 6" in *Satires*, for example, Juvenal remarks on the fall of the traditional Roman wife.

¹ "The Rape of Lucretia: Monarchy Abolished," in *Readings in Ancient History*, ed. Nels M Bailkey and Richard Lim (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2012) 318-322.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Written in the second century C.E., “Satire 6” provides the reader with the view of the Roman public on the role of the Roman wife and the apparent lack of virtuous women in the Roman empire. Juvenal comments on the departure of chastity with justice in recent years, lamenting on the loss of the values of early Rome.⁵ Furthermore, he mocks marriage to any Roman woman, arguing that “No woman has any regard for the man who loves her” in marriage or elsewhere.⁶ Juvenal lastly remarks on the women of “early days” who protected their virtue and chastity for the sake of early Rome.⁷ Taken together, this narrative should seem familiar, as the supposed lack of morality of women is a common complaint of men throughout not only the Roman world but the modern world as well. In Rome, measuring women based on traditional values remained a common practice used by the patriarchal society in which they lived throughout all stages of a woman’s life. In his work, Juvenal simply provides a concentrated version of the standards a woman in the Roman world was held to, throughout multiple centuries and generations.

The common theme throughout the myths and stories regarding honorable women is the protection of their sexuality at all costs. Like other ancient cultures, the goal of a woman’s life centered around marriage and the rearing of a family.⁸ In contrast to stricter societies, Roman women had the capability to run their own household including finances and household staff, resulting in a complex job especially in wealthier households.⁹ However, the influence a woman had stopped at the door of her estate. In public, she followed strictly enforced rules regarding her demeanor and her costume, keeping both highly secretive and protective.¹⁰ Naturally, women

⁵ Juvenal, *The Satires*, trans. Niall Rudd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁸ “The Legal Status of Roman Women,” in *Readings in Ancient History*, ed. Nels M Bailkey and Richard Lim (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2012) 471-477.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Andrew B. Gallia, “The Vestal Habit.” *Classical Philology* 109, no. 3 (2014): 230.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/676291>

developed ways to express themselves, largely through forming bonds with one another, but the restraints placed on them since the foundation of Rome remained until its fall. The quintessential Roman woman began and ended as a modest, hardworking housewife; however, throughout Roman history there are a handful of exceptions to this rule, the most significant of these exceptions is found in the Vestal Virgins.

Section I: Vestals as the Ideal Woman

Even throughout tumultuous periods of Roman history, Vestals remained relatively stable in their duties and symbolism, regardless of the changing stereotypes for female Roman citizens' ideal characteristics and roles in Roman society. Within this rigidly stratified society was the religious structure itself that the Vestals were placed, a religious structure that was itself organized and patriarchal. The foundations of this structure Plutarch accredited to Numa, one of the ancient kings of early Rome. This ancient structure placed the head of Roman religion, the Pontifex Maximus, as the role of chief priest where he therefore held religious authority over the people of Rome and other priests and priestesses within the hierarchy.¹¹ After Rome's transition from a Republic to an Empire, the emperor assumed this role as primary moderator to the gods for the Roman people.¹² In regards to the Vestals, the Pontifex Maximus oversaw and executed the punishment of the Vestals, should they step out of their assigned role, through flogging behind a screen to protect the Vestal's privacy.¹³ In the case of *incestum*, the loss of a Vestal's virginity, the Pontifex ordered the accused Vestal to be put to death.¹⁴

¹¹ Plutarch, "Chapter IX," In *Plutarch's Lives Vol. I*, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart (London, UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

¹² David Potter, "The Transition from Republic to Principate," in *Ancient Rome: A New History* (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 2009), 184.

¹³ Plutarch, "Chapter X," in *Plutarch's Lives Vol. I*, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart (London, UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

Plutarch, "Life of Numa Pompilius," in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016), 370-371.

¹⁴ Ibid.

This authority with which the Pontifex ruled over the Vestals is akin to the rule that the *paterfamilias* would have had over the rest of his household during Augustan Rome. Punishment especially of a disobedient wife seems to relate most closely to the punishment inflicted upon an unruly Vestal. A speech given by Marcus Cato during the Republic elucidates the “traditional” methods of punishment of a disobedient and adulterous wife such as beatings and death, which are remarkably close punishments to those handed down to Vestals.¹⁵ This connection highlights the similarities between Vestals and the Roman wife in terms of their place within the patriarchal Roman hierarchy and places the Vestals as models for good behavior as well as the taking of punishment for the betterment of the Vestal order and by extension for the good of Rome.

Furthermore, the duties of the Vestals provide further evidence for their representation of the traditional Roman wife. Throughout Roman history, times of civil strife led to a reversion back to “traditional morals” as popular belief accredited military loss or political upheaval with a fall from the ways of Roman ancestors.¹⁶ These traditional morals almost always include the keeping of the Roman matron, or Roman wife, within the home and performing what is deemed her proper duties, including the preparation and storage of food, the keeping of the hearth, and the protection of her chastity and purity. A survey of the Roman empire in the fourth century A.D. described the duties of the Vestals as existing “for the well-being of the city [the Vestals] perform rites for the gods in accordance with ancestral custom.”¹⁷ As an overview of Vestal duties, this remark is quite accurate. The storage, purification, and keeping of Vesta’s flame

¹⁵ Aulus Gellius, “Attic Nights,” in *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016) 371-372.

¹⁶ “Traditional Standards in a New Age,” in *Readings in Ancient History: Thought and Experience from Gilgamesh to St. Augustine*, ed. Nels M. Bailkey and Richard Lim (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2012), 336.

¹⁷ “Description of the Whole World,” in *Religions of Rome*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 360.

represented duties essential to the continued existence of the Roman state when performed strictly by the Vestals.

The Vestals main duty primarily consisted of keeping the flame alive within the *Atrium Vestae*, or the temple that housed in Vestals within the Forum.¹⁸ Ovid's *Fasti* remarks on the importance of this flame in connection with the Vestal's patron goddess Vesta, and accredited Vesta as the symbol of the hearth and therefore of the Roman home.¹⁹ Vesta existed within Roman mythology principally as the patron goddess of the family hearth, connecting Roman family members with one another.²⁰ Cicero further characterizes specifically the flame of Vesta within the Forum as Rome's public hearth and a symbol of the Roman people.²¹ Vesta's primary flame may have existed solely at the *Atrium Vestae*, but throughout the empire in the homes of Roman citizens and their families Vesta manifested at personal hearths. As women's spheres within the traditional Roman household centered entirely around the home, with the hearth as the focal point, the hearth represented a symbol of femininity and the expectations for women in Roman life. To keep the flame alive in one's family hearth embodied the *materfamilias* quintessential role within her household, as the keeping of the flame within the *Atrium* is the primary role of the Vestal within Rome.

The Vestals second primary duty included the purification and storage of materials produced during sacred rituals. Rituals and religious festivals that the Vestals took part in throughout the year suggest that the Vestals involvement existed largely in the purification of

¹⁸ Robin L. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 1.

¹⁹ Ovid, "Fasti," in *Religions of Rome*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 38-41.

²⁰ Robin L. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 6.

²¹ Cicero, "On the Laws II. 19-22," in *Religions of Rome*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 353-355.

sacred materials and the storage of such materials until their usage later in the year in subsequent rituals.²² To demonstrate the vital nature of this duty is the example of the ritual of the October Horse, performed on yearly on the 15 of October this ritual resulted in the blood of a stallion, drained from the tail, that would later be used in subsequent rituals as a purificatory agent.²³ In her work on the Vestals and their symbolic nature, Robin Wildfang argues that these rituals may symbolize the storage and protection of the food stores of Rome.²⁴ This metaphor suggests that again a duty of the Vestals represented a duty of the Roman woman in her own preparation and protection of the food stores within her family. This action, whether by the individual or by the government, proved essential to the continued existence of the recipients.

Vestal involvement further extends to the Vestals' use of both fire and water in a variety of their rituals. Wildfang argues that both fire and water are pure substances, an argument supported by the Vestals using both fire and water while performing miracles, intended to prove their purity and innocence.²⁵ Furthermore, water is seen in other myths regarding sexuality and sexual purity, specifically the purity of water and its connection with female sexuality. One such myth is the legend of Claudia Quinta. In many accounts Claudia is a matron fallen from grace who bends water to her will to save the ship of the goddess Magna Mater from destruction.²⁶ Water in this legend, in tandem with the legends of the Vestals, is controlled by women to the prove their purity and the protected nature of their chastity. Should the women in these stories prove to be corrupted, the pure nature of the water would resist manipulation and the

²² Robin L. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

²⁵ Krishni Burns, "Constructing a New Woman for the Body Politic: The Creation of Claudia. Quinta." *Helios* 44, no. 1 (2017): 88-89. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hel.2017.0007>

²⁶ *The Miracle of Claudia Quinta*, in *Religions of Rome*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price; 45-46. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998

aforementioned miracles could not have been performed. Thus, the Vestals' usage of water in several of their rites corresponds to the appropriate usage of their own sexuality for the purpose of their sacred duties and can further symbolize the importance of female sexuality as a measurement of the quality of a woman within the standards her society sets for her.

Alongside water, the Vestal often utilized fire as a secondary pure substance within their rites involving sacred substances. Historian Plutarch characterized the fire guarded by the Vestals to be of a "pure and incorruptible essence" to be watched over only by those who are "stainless and undefiled."²⁷ The obvious flame that Plutarch could be referring to is the flame within the *Atrium* but the Vestals used flames in other rituals to further purify sacred objects and prepare them for storage and future use.²⁸ Regardless of its usage, fire in connection with the Vestals categorized it as a purifying agent that, at its core epitomized an incorruptible essence. The purity of the flame matches the purity of the Vestals, further cementing the incorruptible purity of the Vestals as an absolute necessity for their duties.

The final primary duty of the Vestals involved the storage and protection of the sacred objects that the Vestals purified or objects that the Roman people collectively considered sacred. Little is known about this duty, not only by the modern scholar but also the ancient scholar. Rumors flourished around ancient Rome as to what exactly the Vestals stored in their *Atrium*. Suggestions of the will of Julius Caesar, the Trojan Palladium brought to Italy by Aeneas, and the Samothracian gods stoked the curiosity of the Roman people.²⁹ As the Romans considered the objects a topic of mystery, modern scholars cannot know for sure what secrets the Vestals

²⁷ Plutarch, "Chapter IX," in *Plutarch's Lives Vol. I*, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart. London (UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

²⁸ Robin L. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 10.

²⁹ Plutarch, "Chapter XX," in *Plutarch's Lives Vol. I*, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart. London (UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

harbored; however stories of movement of these objects during times of strife within Rome at least give testament to the existence of such objects. Historian Cassius Dio remarks on the Great Fire of Rome in 64 A.D. and the subsequent burning of the Atrium Vestae, accounting for the haste and desperation the Vestals portrayed while removing the sacred objects from Vesta's temple and into surrounding buildings for protection.³⁰ Witnesses tell of the Vestals carrying objects out of Rome, and citizens offering their own form of transportation to the Vestals in lieu of transporting their own families, which demonstrated the importance of the Vestals and of the objects the Vestals carried.³¹ Although not mentioned extensively in ancient sources, the protection of these objects proved vital to the protection of the Vestal's "household" and by extend to the safety of Rome.

The Vestals performed their duties in a fluid and fluctuating society, however some characteristics, such as distinction of rank and sex through dress, remained prominent throughout both the Republic and Imperial Rome. Respectful Roman women fell into one of two classes, the *virgins* and the *matrones*, both of which had their own type of dress to showcase admired aspects of their class.³² Scholar Andrew Gallia argues that the Vestals incorporated aspects of dress from both of these classes to outwardly showcase the purity and sexual decorum associated with the Vestal's sanctity.³³ Gallia takes the *seni crines*, an elaborate braided hairstyle, worn solely by Roman brides and the *stola* associated with the Roman matron as examples of the mixing of classes that the Vestals represented. Gallia, however, concludes that these examples, among

³⁰ Cassius Di, "Book LIV," in *Roman History*, compiled by the University of Chicago (Chicago, IL: Loeb Classic Library, 1927), 461.

³¹ Livy, "From the Foundation 5.39-5.41," in *Early Rome: Myth and Society*, edited by Jaclyn Neel (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2017), 268.

³² Robin L. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 7.

³³ Andrew B. Gallia, "The Vestal Habit." *Classical Philology* 109, no. 3 (2014): 223.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/676291>

others, show the absolute sexual restraint of the Vestals rather than their representation of the *virgines* and *matrones* classes.³⁴ The stola, for example, represented matronly chastity that resulted from a husband's, or a state's, ownership of a woman's sexuality.³⁵ Vestals' garments, therefore, combine the markers of chastity from the other classes that allowed Vestals to symbolize their unquestionable purity required of their cult.

Distinction of female rank and symbolization of chastity through clothing and hairstyle has ancient roots, namely the *seni crines* hairstyle worn by both Vestals and brides. In his epic poem *Fasti* Ovid tells the story of the brutal rape of the earliest Vestal Virgin Rhea Silvia by the god of war Mars.³⁶ This story is undoubtedly one of the most formative legends of Rome's history, as the rape and subsequent pregnancy of Rhea Silvia leads to the birth of the first king of Rome, Romulus and his brother Remus. In his story, Ovid makes special mention of Silvia's hair, remarking on her fixing it before she lays down to rest induced by Mars, also noting its disarray after Silvia wakes up and is unaware of Mars' sexual action while she slept.³⁷ This legend not only cements the Vestals within the founding tradition of Rome but also provides an account for the origin of the hairstyle that outwardly showcased the wearer's purity. Gallia concludes that the meaning of the Vestal use of this hairstyle, along with the rest of their garments, placed their sexuality within limits that benefit the whole of Rome as their purity symbolized Rome's good standing with the gods.³⁸ This argument further explains the meaning behind the other two classes of women who shared aspects of dress with the Vestals. Through dress, women's sexuality was outwardly marked and consequently limited into categories that

³⁴ Ibid., 230.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ovid, "Book Three, March," In *Fasti*, trans. Anne and Peter Wiseman (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 41-43.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Andrew B. Gallia, "The Vestal Habit." *Classical Philology* 109, no. 3 (2014): 231.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/676291>

only benefitted Rome, either for their husbands or for their future husbands. The Vestals symbolized the ultimate example in self-control of one's sexuality for the sake of Rome, examples other women would be expected to follow.

The Vestals' virginity hallmarked their sacred position in society and constituted the most well-known aspect of their cult. Due to the importance of this prerequisite, several scholars have attempted to offer explanations to this strictly enforced abstinence. Among these arguments is the necessity of Vestals to remain virgins, and therefore pure, due to their frequent contact with the divine on the behalf of the Roman people. Ariadne Staples argues that Vestal virginity, as well as their separation from the collective society, provided Vestals with the ability to represent Rome as a whole to the divine.³⁹ Within the same vein, renowned scholar Mary Beard argues that Vestals' virginity and separation gave them their sacred power and otherworldliness, as well as the ability to represent several social groups, including the *matrones*, the *virgines*, and men, through not belonging to any category in particular.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Beard emphasizes the importance of Vestal virginity in association with their deep connection to Vesta and how this purity protects them from polluting the divine.⁴¹ A third, albeit controversial, opinion is Holt Parker's argument that the Vestal's virginity separated them from the rest of the community, therefore creating the perfect sacrificial victims upon whom blame could be placed during civil strife.⁴² However, none of these arguments mention the Vestal's virginity as a model for the

³⁹ Ariadne Staples, "The Vestals and Rome," in *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 130.

⁴⁰ Mary Beard. "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 70 (1980): 12.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/299553>

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴² Holt N. Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State." *American Journal of Philology* 125, no. 4 (2004): 576. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/177092>

Holt Parker is regarded as controversial by the author due to his conviction of the possession of child pornography. His work was deemed essential to mention but his crime is taken into account.

<https://nypost.com/2017/01/27/professor-of-ancient-greek-and-roman-sexuality-imprisoned-for-child-porn/>

Roman woman. The purity of Vestals by necessity must be connected to their work with the divine as well functioning as a mark of a holy individual to the rest of the population, but this analogy need not be so singularly focused. Virginity can, and did, symbolize several aspects of the Vestals and their duties, but one function must include the symbolization of chastity as a model and an expectation for other women.

The aforementioned myth of Claudia Quinta further suggests women's interaction with the gods as a reflection of proper female conduct alongside the Vestals. Krishni Burns argues that Claudia Quinta's control of the Tiber in the myth signified Claudia's strength of mind and purity, and is analogous to Roman women's sexuality.⁴³ Claudia Quinta and several Vestals throughout Roman historical myth make use of water in their acts, showing the ability of women to redirect their sexuality away from themselves and towards the betterment of Rome.⁴⁴ This sexual role within society aligned tightly with what it could give back to the Roman state in the production of male citizens. A female citizen's sexuality therefore remained tied to her father as its protector and insurer before she was married and then to her husband where it was used solely at his discretion for the production of male heirs or his own pleasure. The Vestals represented this extreme protection and control in their dress as well as their well-known faultless purity, displayed by Vestals often in the public eye.

The limited power that women had within their world, ironically, also originated from virginity. Within the *virgins* class a young woman would be able to bring her family honor through a prestigious marriage that would benefit both her family and her husband's family. On the other hand, a *matron* brought her husband's family honor through the birthing of male heirs

⁴³ Krishni Burns. "Constructing a New Woman for the Body Politic: The Creation of Claudia. Quinta." *Helios* 44, no. 1 (2017): 89. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hel.2017.0007>

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

as well as the running of her household. Susan Fischler notes that “the ideal woman was noted for her beauty, fertility and faithfulness to her husband.”⁴⁵ A woman’s ability to focus on either her father’s household or her husband’s household needs determined her value. Augustan Rome saw the shift from Republic to Empire, where the imperial family’s household became the whole of Rome and the wife of the emperor, such as Augustus’ wife Livia, could wield power well outside the abilities that her fellow women citizens could.⁴⁶ Vestals held a position not unlike these imperial women, where they consistently spent time in the public spotlight, and therefore represented the standard of the ideal Roman women that the patriarchy demanded.

As Vestals held a powerful and prominent position within the Roman world the Roman patriarchy considered them role models for other Roman women, not necessarily a model that all Roman women intended on following but models, nonetheless. In dress alone the Vestals represented both classes of women, wearing aspects of clothing from each class that clearly spoke to the wearer’s chastity, specifically on occasions that marked a change in one’s life. For instance, within the *virgins* class the Herculean knot used only on a young woman’s wedding day could be untied solely by her husband.⁴⁷ The intricacy of this knot symbolized the protected nature of the wearer’s virginity, so it is unsurprising that this article of clothing worn strictly by the Vestals or brides. In his closing remarks on Vestal dress, Gallia states that “At the very least, this vestimentary conservatism presented men with an ideal against which to measure the conduct of their own wives and daughters.”⁴⁸ Whether or not women wanted to adhere to this

⁴⁵ Susan Fischler. “Social Stereotypes and Historical Analysis: The Case of the Imperial Women at Rome.” *Women in Ancient Societies* (1994): 117. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-23336-6_7

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

Anthony Barrett, “Wife of the Emperor,” in *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 116.

⁴⁷ Andrew B. Gallia, “The Vestal Habit.” *Classical Philology* 109, no. 3 (2014): 223.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/676291>

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

measure is unfortunately unknown, but the Vestals themselves provided a holy criterion with which to measure one's wives and daughters.

Beyond being representative of Roman women, Vestals also represented the Roman state as a whole. Vestals symbolized the hearth of Rome, the heart of the Roman home, and therefore the extended family of Rome and her people.⁴⁹ When strife occurred within Roman borders, the Vestals and their connection with the gods often fell into suspicion by the Roman people. The Vestals held a position of power beyond the average priest or priestess, but that power also came with responsibility. The failure to keep their virginity protected, whether through alleged or actual allegations, signified the danger of the fall of Rome.

Section II: Like Mother like Daughter, like Vestals like...no one?

Despite the commonalities between Vestals and the quintessential Roman wife, Vestals occupied a place in society that exhibited stark differences from any other woman in Roman society. A Vestal came to her vocation through the choice of powerful religious men, namely that of the Pontifex Maximus, who selected a new Vestal solely from a wealthy, powerful, and influential Roman family.⁵⁰ Therefore, Vestal by necessity began her life with a status that already exceeded the majority of other women before she began her work in the public eye as a religious figure. So long as a possible initiate met several physical and familial stipulations, she had the possibility to be hand selected by the Pontifex Maximus, to later be put within a lottery draw of other possible new Vestals.⁵¹ This lottery system ensured that although the Pontifex Maximus

⁴⁹ Cicero, "On the Laws II. 19-22," in *Religions of Rome*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 353-355.

⁵⁰ The Pontifex Maximus ranked highest in the religious hierarchy, overseeing all religious events in Rome. In imperial Rome this job would be transferred to the emperor, resulting in the emperor controlling state religion.

⁵¹ Aulus Gellius, "Attic Nights," in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016), 371-372..

chose Vestal candidates believed by him to be worthy of the post, the gods made the final decision about who they wished to serve them.

To be selected as a Vestal initiate a young girl between the ages of six and ten had to be free from physical deformities and come from living, socially significant Roman parents.⁵² These stipulations likely ensured that the new Vestal's family had not promised her in marriage, nor would the Vestal be too young to perform her required duties in speaking to and performing rituals for the gods. Furthermore, both parents of the potential initiate needed to be living to assure that the Vestal remained free from bad omens, such as the death of a parent, before her entrance into an esteemed religious house.⁵³ In sum, a Vestal needed to represent the most perfect form of a young Roman woman both legally and socially to be able to serve as a representative of the Roman people to the gods.

Once chosen as the newest Vestal, the initiate began her introduction through the rite of the *captio*. In this ceremony the Pontifex Maximus took the hand of the young girl and dedicated her to Vesta and to the Roman people.⁵⁴ In many ways the *captio* was reminiscent of the marriage ceremony in the taking of a young woman from her past family, or her past life, and placing her into a new life and guardianship.⁵⁵ However, modern scholars often refute this argument, suggesting instead that the *captio* placed the Vestal not into the guardianship of another family but rather into the guardianship of the Roman people.⁵⁶ This transfer of guardianship further suggests

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Meghan DiLuzio, "The Vestal Virgin," in *A Place at the Altar* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), , 123-125. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1xr91.

⁵⁴ Aulus Gellius, "Attic Nights," in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016), 371-372.

⁵⁵ Meghan DiLuzio, "The Vestal Virgin," in *A Place at the Altar* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016) , 123-125.. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1q1xr91.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

the symbolism of the Vestal as the embodiment of the Roman people, who collectively symbolize the Vestal's *protestas* or guardians in Roman society.

Lack of any *protestas* starkly separated the Vestals from other Roman women of the time. Since the founding of Rome, women existed only under the watchful eye of their *protestas*, often their father or husband, due to their believed levity of mind, suggested by scholars to be precarious and flighty in comparison to men.⁵⁷ Written onto the Twelve Tables, the founding laws of Rome, a law requiring a *protestas* for all female citizens defied all forms of dispute with the only exception found in the Vestals. Augustus himself changed this law only slightly, allowing for women who bore three or more children to be free of a *protestas* but still refused to allow unmarried women to receive inheritance.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, women held extraordinarily small power over their lives in the Augustan era, with their realm of influence condensed to their household alone. This dissimilarity between the Vestals and the average female citizen did not go unnoticed, in 180 AD jurist Gaius pushes back against the lack the female autonomy, arguing that Vestals' mentality could be no less scatterbrained than the average Roman woman.⁵⁹ Whether the general population of Roman women resisted the enforcement of a *protestas* remains unclear, but Gaius' argument, at the very least, suggests that this discrepancy between citizens and Vestals did not go unnoticed. Even with scattered resistance against these laws, women's rights remained minimal and restrictive throughout Roman history, while the Vestals remained largely legally autonomous.

The Vestals' legal standing derived from King Numa's original creation of the Vestal order and not only separated the individuals within the cult from the rest of female society based on a

⁵⁷ "The Twelve Tables," in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016) 120-121.

⁵⁸ Judith L. Sebesta "Women's Costume and Feminine Civic Morality in Augustan Rome." *Gender and History* 9, no. 3 (1997): 529-541. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/1468-0424.00074>

⁵⁹ Gaius, "Institutes 1. 144-4, 190-1," in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016) , 123-124.

lack of *protestas* but through the Vestal's ability to conduct business and own land as well. Laws such as the ones written on the Twelve tables forbade the average Roman woman from owning her own land, making her own will, nor acting as a beneficiary in any will; however Vestal Tarquinia is noted in Plutarch's *Lives of Illustrious Men* to have given large swatches of her land for public use in the beginning of the first century AD, resulting in praise and honor from the collective Roman people.⁶⁰ In contrast with the law on the Twelve Tables blocking ordinary women from land ownership, the Vestals seemingly conducted business, owned land, and made their will without any guidance or supervision whatsoever.⁶¹ Moreover, Tarquinia, and other Vestals throughout Roman history, received summons to act as witnesses in court and gave evidence considered viable by the jury.⁶² The belief of women's "scatterbrained" mentality made them undesirable as witnesses in court and yet Vestals appeared several times to give evidence, suggesting that the elevated and sacred position they occupied granted them legal benefits far beyond other women.

Mary Beard argues that this legal standing bestowed upon the Vestals from their very conception served to identify the Vestals as a symbol not only of the two female classes within Roman society but also to allow them to represent the male class.⁶³ While this argument is tempting given the Vestals' symbolism of the Roman people, the legal position of the Vestals is better explained by Inge Kroppenber, who suggests this position granted the Vestals sovereignty from masculine ownership as well as solidifying their symbolization of the independent Roman

⁶⁰ Plutarch, "Chapter VIII," in *Plutarch's Lives* Vol. I, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart (London, UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

⁶¹ Gaius. "Institutes 1. 144-4, 190-1." in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016) , 123-124

⁶² Plutarch. "Chapter VIII." , in *Plutarch's Lives* Vol. I, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart (London, UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

⁶³ Mary Beard. "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 70 (1980): 15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/299553>

state.⁶⁴ As a symbol of Rome the Vestal could not be “owned” by any one person but instead must belong to the people as a collective whole. Taking this analogy farther, the Vestal’s legal status separated her from the public while also recognizing and honoring her position within the priestly class.

A Vestal’s status benefitted more than just herself, and her influence extended to benefit her family as well as other citizens, even criminals. Curiously the Vestals’ wielded the ability to pardon a convicted criminal should the criminal cross paths with a Vestal on their transport to execution. If she deemed them worthy of release, the Vestal only had to assure the court that she did not plan this encounter, and the criminal would be free.⁶⁵ Vestals resolved other legal issues as well, Vestal Claudia, for example, used her religious authority to resolve her father’s disputed political victory, allowing celebrations in his honor to commence.⁶⁶ In addition to her ability to speak in court, a Vestal held a considerable amount of influence over legal proceedings within the Roman world, extraordinarily so when compared to the complete lack of legal power other women had. While this legal power naturally contributed to the Vestal’s own wellbeing, her realm of influence extended beyond her personal life and into the lives of those around her and those she chose to assist. In short, the Vestals’ legal status gave them tremendous power beyond that of even imperial women.

Beyond legal assistance, Vestals have often been recorded extending their influence in helping a family member rise through the ranks of society. Inscriptions on dedications to Vestals

⁶⁴ Inge Kroppenbergh. “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins.” *Law and Literature* 22, no. 3 (2010): 423-424. <https://doi.org/10.1525/lal.2010.22.3.418>

⁶⁵ Plutarch, “Chapter X,” in *Plutarch’s Lives* Vol. I, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart (London, UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

⁶⁶ Andrew B Gallia. “Vestal Virgins and Their Families.” *Classical Antiquity* 34, no. 1 (2015): 78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ca.2015.34.1.74>

located throughout the Forum suggest that Vestals stayed connected with their families throughout their lives, even though they no longer lived under their father's protection. One such inscription praised Chief Vestal Terentia Flavula for her dedication to her duties and to Vesta, an endearment commissioned by her brother after her death.⁶⁷ Another dedicated to Vestal Flavia Publicia commemorated her duty to Vesta as well as her loyalty to her family.⁶⁸ Vestals clearly remained connected with their family enough to be mentioned by them in death, but they also retained a high enough position within Roman society to warrant a dedication that connected their name to the commissioner of the inscription. As Andrew Gallia argues in his work on Vestals and their families, through these dedications family members celebrate "the virtue and religious authority of their kinswomen" and thereby "lay their claim to some share of it."⁶⁹ Although praised and honored in their deaths, few virtuous women provided a connection to powerful society like a Vestal did; therefore, family members sought to glean power and prestige through the position of their female relative.

A Vestal's most remarkable power came not from any law, however, but rather resided in the reputation that she held in society. Their public protection provided an excellent example of this reputation. Due to the standing of the Vestals, appearing in public unaccompanied meant scandal and danger, not only for the Vestal's safety but also for the sake of her reputation in regards to her virginity. A Vestal alone could be more likely to be accused of *incestum* should a witness not be present. To remedy both issues, while still representing the elevated position of the Vestal, lictors protected the women when out in public. Like the bodyguards of modern day, lictors

⁶⁷ "ILS 4927 CIL VI.2144," in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016), 373.

⁶⁸ "ILS 4930 CIL VI.32414," in *Religions of Rome*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 204.

⁶⁹ Andrew B Gallia. "Vestal Virgins and Their Families." *Classical Antiquity* 34, no. 1 (2015): 88. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ca.2015.34.1.74>

protected powerful figures from those who wished to cause their charges harm. In the case of the Vestals this harm most likely came in the form of forced *incestum*, or rape. Lictors themselves conclusively represented a mark of office and power of person they were protected.⁷⁰ Due to the rare use of lictors in Roman society, the average Roman would have no trouble recognizing a Vestal and her elevated position in a crowd.

Even in death a Vestal stood apart from the average Roman citizen. Curiously, a Vestal who had been accused and convicted of *incestum* received her punishment of burial alive within the city limits. The Twelve Tables, forbid the burial of bodies within the city's boundaries.⁷¹ Ariadne Staples points out that the blatant disregard for this founding rule with the body of a *convicted* Vestal, as well as Vestals not charged with *incestum*, makes this exception even more remarkable. A Vestal, Staples argues, who had placed the city at risk with her *incestum* nevertheless retained the same honors her colleagues received, although her fellow Vestals kept these honors through the protection of their chastity rather than the destruction.⁷² Notwithstanding their loss of virginity, these accused women suffered from the importance of their reputation even in death, as the placement of all deceased within the city marked convicted Vestals as impure in a blatant fashion that citizens would remember them for centuries.

The Vestals' connection with the gods gave them authority akin to the rest of the priestly class, though not quite on par with the Pontifex Maximus. This authority granted them high enough standing for them to be placed in a prestigious position beyond that of the everyday Roman. This prestige drew the envy of dangerous men, as historian Cassius Dio remarked in regard to emperor

⁷⁰ Ariadne Staples, "The Vestals and Rome," in *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 145.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/up/detail.action?docID=178599&pq-origsite=primo>

⁷¹ Ariadne Staples, "The Vestals and Rome," in *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 134.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/up/detail.action?docID=178599&pq-origsite=primo>

⁷² *Ibid.*

Elagabalus' disastrous decision to marry a Vestal regardless of the backlash by the general public at the end of the second century.⁷³ Elagabalus defended this blasphemous marriage to the holy virgin, stating "I did it in order that godlike children might spring from me, the high priest, and from her, the high priestess."⁷⁴ Elagabalus's defense suggests that the Vestals retained a strong enough personification of power that Elagabalus, the most powerful man in Rome, likened the Vestals not only to a deity but also to himself. Imperial women wed to the emperor came from powerful families as a necessity, but not even they could bestow upon the emperor "godlike" children.

Beyond their legal and social allowances, Vestals involved themselves in politics far more than Roman women were normally allowed. Inscriptions given to the Vestals by family members suggest that Vestals could leverage a raise in social hierarchy and subsequent political capacity through the influence a Vestal had over political figures.⁷⁵ Additionally, in times of political crises and change, a political party tried to have the support of the Vestals to further sway the Roman public to their cause.⁷⁶ The Vestal's representation as an efficacious state symbol allowed political parties to use Vestal support as the figurative support of the state. Vestals also voyaged as representatives of the Roman people on diplomatic missions, placing forth petitions and messages to foreign governments.⁷⁷ As a figure of the Roman state, Vestals had the capability to partake in politics far beyond the reaches of the average Roman woman and in a different sense than the sway an imperial Roman wife held over her husband.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Cassius Dio, "Book LXX," in *Roman History*, compiled by the University of Chicago (Chicago, IL: Loeb Classic Library, 1927), 461.

⁷⁵ "ILS 4929 CIL VI.2131," in *Religions of Rome*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 204.

⁷⁶ Inge Kroppenbergh, "Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins." *Law and Literature* 22, no. 3 (2010): 421. <https://doi.org/10.1525/lal.2010.22.3.418>

⁷⁷ Ibid., 421.

In comparison to a Vestal's political and social influence, an imperial wife's influence lay largely in the hands of her husband. The Roman wife's sphere of influence remained entirely within the people of her family and the running of the household. With the shift of Rome from a Republic to an Empire this sphere widened for imperial women, as their "household" suddenly broadened to include the entirety of Rome. The imperial wife held perhaps the greatest power a woman could hold within the confines of her gender's designated role; she had the capability to bend the ear of the emperor towards her will, whether that be for benefit of the state or for a particular political candidate. While of course not all Roman imperial wives desired to be immersed in Roman politics, several fostered political ambitions that reached beyond the boundaries of their sex and were somewhat able to be satisfied through their husbands.⁷⁸ Additionally, the imperial wife simply could not be ignored by the public eye and as such represented the ideal woman to the public as the Vestals did.⁷⁹ Unlike the Vestals however, the imperial woman represented solely the role of the Roman *matron* in a stricter sense, not a hybrid of female roles as the Vestals did. The wife of the emperor represented the traditionally defined roles, duties, and actions of a *matron* throughout the duration of her life, even behind closed doors. The Vestals, on the other hand, held the freedom of not belonging to any one class and as such retained the autonomy to hold their power due to their own station in life rather than that of their husband or father.

Vestal's differed from other Roman women, even imperial women, in diverse ways, but the underlying argument is simply that Vestals represented not only the ideal woman, but the ideal state as well. In her work on Vestal's legal status, Inge Kroppenbergs suggests that "in the political

⁷⁸ Susan Fischler. "Social Stereotypes and Historical Analysis: The Case of the Imperial Women at Rome." *Women in Ancient Societies* (1994): 125. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-23336-6_7

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

sphere, [the Vestal] acted as a public person and as a state symbol; in matters of civil law, she was a person with full capacity to act; and in the area of religion, she was integrated in the sacred order of the temple and in the organizational structure of the Roman college of priest.”⁸⁰ The Vestal existed as a complex and intriguing figure even to the Romans, but she doubtlessly held influence and autonomy that several in her society, both men and women alike, could only dream of. Her autonomy in nearly all areas of her life, partnered with her purity and absolute dedication to the betterment of Rome, made her representative of the Roman state in its autonomy in legal and political matters in the Mediterranean world as well as its dedication to its people and its gods.

Section III: Roman Impurity and the Punishment for Unchastity

Purity in the eyes of the Roman patriarchy connected the Vestals with other female citizens of Rome, yet the importance of the protection of chastity placed on the Vestals by this patriarchy resulted in harsher punishment for impurity than among Roman women. To the Roman wife, or Roman citizen in general, chastity simply involved obedience and loyalty to one’s father or one’s husband, but to the Vestals chastity represented a cornerstone of their rank. To engage in premarital sex as a *virgins* or to commit adultery as a *matrones* crossed the boundary of chastity set by Roman society and resulted in punishment.⁸¹ The Vestals’ chastity, however, represented an ideal even more potent than the purity of the Roman wife.

Just prior to the turn of the century, Cicero wrote about an “ideal state”, including the political, social, and religious structure of such a state. Cicero comments on the importance of purity of those within the religious hierarchy that were entrusted with approaching the gods. He

⁸⁰ Inge Kroppenber. “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins.” *Law and Literature* 22, no. 3 (2010): 418-439. <https://doi.org/10.1525/lal.2010.22.3.418>

⁸¹ Ariadne Staples, “The Vestals and Rome,” in *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 134-135. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/up/detail.action?docID=178599&pq-origsite=primo>

uses the Vestals as an example for this strictly enforced purity that he suggests should be followed by all religious personnel, remarking in their piety and chastity in comparison to the rest of the Roman public.⁸² As stated previously, several modern scholars argue for the importance of chastity in the Vestal cult, with a general consensus on the importance of chastity in the Vestals work with Vesta. The following analysis of the punishment of impurity, or *incestum*, in the Vestal cult and its differences to the punishment of female citizen impurity will therefore consider the reasoning of Vestal chastity to be in line with Cicero's description, as a way to respectfully encounter the deities that held influence over Roman life.

Besides their enforced chastity, the extensive trial and subsequent execution of a Vestal through live burial remains a distinguishing factor of the cult. By failing her sanctified oath through sexual misconduct a Vestal allowed herself to be seduced from her sacred oath to Vesta and the Roman people, thereby committing *incestum*.⁸³ In the words of Ariadne Staples, once a Vestal committed *incestum*, she not only ceased to be a virgin but she ceased to be a Vestal.⁸⁴ A Vestal accused of *incestum* faced punishment for an offense against the gods, her conviction therefore began by a convention of the college of pontiffs and the Pontifex Maximus to judge the case of the accused.⁸⁵ This form of trial by no means represented the trial given to cases of adultery or premarital intercourse, of which neither received legal attention. Instead, trial through the college of pontiffs and the Pontifex Maximus, the emperor in later years, pointed to the extremity of the crime. Furthermore, the involvement of the Pontifex Maximus brought the

⁸² Cicero, "On the Laws II. 19-22," in *Religions of Rome*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 353-355.

⁸³ Plutarch, "Life of Numa Pompilius," in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016), 370-371.

⁸⁴ Ariadne Staples, "The Vestals and Rome," in *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 135..

⁸⁵ Inge Kroppenbergh, "Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins." *Law and Literature* 22, no. 3 (2010): 426. <https://doi.org/10.1525/lal.2010.22.3.418>

attention of the Roman people, elevating the Vestal's trial into the realm of public spectacle. The accused Vestal received little sympathy from her religious superiors nor her fellow Romans, suggesting that her broach of her power and authority with the gods offended all citizens equally.

The method of execution of a Vestal served as another reminder of her offense against the Roman state and her betrayal of the Roman people. Plutarch wrote in detail on the process of execution of a Vestal, beginning with the transport of a Vestal to her designated execution location. A Vestal accused of *incestum* and sentenced to death started her journey to her execution first by a parade through the Forum. Plutarch described the Vestal as anguished as the accused hid herself from the public in a litter, an enclosed form of transportation used to hide the shame that the Vestal had brought to her position and her people.⁸⁶ Furthermore, she is bound and gagged to silence her. Plutarch described this procession as a "fearful sight" on a day when the city is "plunged into deeper mourning" than ever before.⁸⁷ The shame a Vestal had brought upon herself, and her city could only be overshadowed by the deep sadness felt by citizens for the transgressions against themselves and the gods.

Upon reaching the Colline Gate, located inside the city's limits, the Vestal emerged and was brought to a small hole prepared in the earth. Her execution chamber lay waiting below the ground, having been built prior to her arrival. The chamber contained a bed with bedding, a burning lamp, some bread, water, milk and oil.⁸⁸ The addition of life giving materials such as milk and water, Plutarch argues, allowed her executioners to avoid "the pollution of one who had been consecrated with such holy ceremonies dying of hunger."⁸⁹ The Vestal death would truly be

⁸⁶ Robin L. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 55.

⁸⁷ Plutarch, "Chapter X," in *Plutarch's Lives Vol. I*, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart (London, UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

in the hands of the gods, or more specifically the goddess she served, rather than in the hands of the mortals who accused her. Robin Wildfang describes the reasoning for this act of live burial as giving what is Vesta's back to her.⁹⁰ Vesta is an extraordinarily complex and multifaceted deity, but one of these many personas lay in Vesta as a chthonic goddess, or one associated with the underworld. In burying a Vestal underground, the Roman people are returning Vesta's servant back to her within Vesta's realm.⁹¹ In balance with a Vestal being chosen by the gods, the Romans placed the guilty Vestal's punishment and subsequent death in the hands of the gods, allowing the Roman people to be clean of the death of a holy individual.

A Vestal's status in life extended beyond her burial, and into the placement of her final resting place. Despite the manner of her death, an accused Vestal's burial chamber lay within the boundaries of the city limits, by the Colline Gate.⁹² Seldom, if ever, would any member of the Roman citizenry be buried within the city limits with the exception of the Vestals. As previously mentioned, all Vestal remains lay within city limits, but curiously even Vestals accused of *incestum* received their punishment of burial alive within Rome's boundaries. Why would an impure Vestal be allowed to remain in a place of honor that her sisters also enjoyed? Ariadne Staples suggests that this burial place is a remnant of the Vestal's position and rank in life, regardless of the death the Vestal received. Staples furthermore argues that although *incestum* made a Vestal unfit to perform her duties it did not make her lose her sacredness, thus the

⁹⁰ Robin L. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 59.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Plutarch, "Chapter X," in *Plutarch's Lives Vol. I*, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart (London, UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

continued burial within the city limits, a place of honor bestowed only on her fellow Vestals.⁹³ A Vestal may cease to be a Vestal but her consecration to Vesta could never be diminished.

The sacred position of the Vestals further points to their influence in the fickle moods of the gods. Vestals held a direct line of communication with the gods through the rituals they performed, thus the Roman people relied on them to keep Rome and her endeavors in the gods' good graces. While this prestigious duty led to benefits among the Vestals, it also came with immense drawbacks. When the peace of the gods became disrupted disasters such as civil wars or plagues broke out amongst the population, with blame directed to the religious workers in the Roman hierarchy. Vestals often dealt with heavy blame for such disruptions, not only because their job revolved around keeping the gods pleased but also because they represented the entirety of the Roman state to the gods and to the public. The citizens of Rome therefore came up with a fitting solution, the gods would be appeased by the death of one whose main responsibility centered on serving them.

This storyline plays out several times in the history of Rome, where civil strife led to the death of either one or several Vestals. Ancient historian Livy recounts the death of a certain Vestal Oppia amidst political strife in roughly 483 BC, implying that a multitude of "portents implying the anger of the gods" led to the death of Oppia.⁹⁴ Political unrest, civil war, and the misuse of power by military officials manifested in general unease amongst the civilian population, increased by the portents announcing the dissatisfaction of the gods.⁹⁵ Furthermore, Plutarch recounts the threat of Hannibal outside the city of Rome in the end of the second

⁹³ Ariadne Staples, "The Vestals and Rome," in *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 151.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/up/detail.action?docID=178599&pq-origsite=primo>

⁹⁴ Livy, "Book 2, Chapter 42," in *The History of Rome*, compiled by Benjamin Foster, PhD (Cambridge, MA: Annenberg CPB/Project, 1919).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

century B.C., the stress of which resulted in the death of two Vestals.⁹⁶ Curiously, one Vestal did not make it to her execution and instead resigned to death by her own hand. Plutarch describes this action as evidence for the Vestal's guilt against Rome and the people of Rome, but it is difficult to understand the motives behind her premature death.⁹⁷ In short, Vestals existed as potential sacrificial lambs for the gods should the need arise.

Connecting these accounts is the disruption of the peace between the gods and the Romans, manifesting in strife that caused general upset among the Roman people. Similar to the Vestals' virginity, modern scholars have argued over the purpose of the death of a Vestal during these times. On one hand is what seems to be the straightforward reason, to appease the gods a dedicated servant of the gods should be sacrificed. Holt Parker argues this point, suggesting that the Vestals remained separated from their community for the purpose of molding them into the ideal sacrificial victims.⁹⁸ He further argues that the chastity of the Vestals created the perfect pure victim to pacify the gods during times when the peace of the gods was threatened.⁹⁹

In analyzing the Vestals as sacrificial victims Parker portrays the cult in a highly symbolic light that is inconsistent with the Vestals involvement in the public sphere. Furthermore, historical records suggest little to no sacrificial victims throughout the entirety of Roman history, with the supposed exception of the Vestals. Opposition to this argument would point to the sacrifice of two Gauls and two Greeks at the end of the second century B.C., but Plutarch himself confesses confusion over this apparent sacrifice.¹⁰⁰ This "sacrifice" occurred

⁹⁶ Plutarch, "Chapter XVIII," in *Plutarch's Lives Vol. I*, trans. George Long and Aubrey Stewart (London, UK: George Bell and Sons, 1894). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14033/14033-h/14033-h.htm>

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Holt N. Parker. "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State." *American Journal of Philology* 125, no. 4 (2004): 563. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/177092>

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Plutarch, "Roman Questions 83," in *Religions of Rome*, ed. Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 158-159.

after the condemnation and execution of three Vestals, whose list of offences covered a vast array of men. Due to the extensive nature of this list, religious authorities consulted ancient texts to determine the right course of action to appease the gods, and decided on the sacrifice of two Gauls and two Greeks to foreign spirits.¹⁰¹ Clearly this story raises several questions regarding Roman sacrifice, but Plutarch's confusion to these sacrifices is most applicable to the argument of Vestals as victims. Plutarch considered this sacrifice an anomaly in Roman custom, and while it is difficult to determine how many and what type of ritual killings the Romans performed, it is evident that they performed next to no human killings that the Roman people considered to be "sacrificial."

Plutarch's retelling of the foreign sacrificial victims brings a further question to light, how did the men accused of committing sexual misconduct with the Vestals receive punishment, or did they receive punishment at all? The answer is often these men did not receive punishment at all because the Vestals simply did not actually commit sexual misconduct, thus making these men imaginary. Vestals accused of *incestum* may have not committed any unchaste act at all, but rather faced execution due to disruption of the peace. Evidence for this argument is found with the alignment of civil unrest and a death of a Vestal in the Roman timeline. As the decision of a Vestal to have an affair only during civil strife is implausible, this timing suggests the manipulation of a Vestal's trial. Often no man is mentioned at all, in Livy's account of the Vestal Oppia's death he simply states that unrest "resulted in the condemnation of Oppia, a Vestal virgin, for unchastity, and her punishment."¹⁰² Other ancient sources corroborate this narrative, with extraordinarily few male perpetrators mentioned. While these source may seem to support

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Livy, "Book 2, Chapter 42," in *The History of Rome*, compiled by Benjamin Foster, PhD (Cambridge, MA: Annenberg CPB/Project, 1919).

the argument of Vestals as sacrificial victims, it is important to remember not only that sacrifice was rare within the Roman world, but also that Vestals stood as representation of the Roman people. Should a Vestal perform poorly in her job as a symbol of the faultless Roman state she received punishment and replacement by another Vestal who represented the state in a better light to the gods.

On the other hand, in a select few sources men are mentioned in connection with the accused Vestal. In this case, even the wealthiest and influential Romans could be implicated. During Rome's transition from Republic to Empire, Crassus emerged as one of the apex members of Roman civil and political society, yet Plutarch wrote on his supposed affair with Vestal Licinia.¹⁰³ On several occasions he visited her at her villa, resulting in both Licinia and Crassus condemnation for *incestum*. Only Crassus plea that he frequented Licinia's villa because he desired to purchase it freed both parties from punishment.¹⁰⁴ The purpose behind this accusation likely stemmed from political or civil rivals who wished to tarnish Crassus' reputation. Evidence of allegations leading to political determent faced by convicted conspirators in *incestum* are further highlighted by Plutarch, who tells of a slave who wished to destroy his master's reputation through starting a rumor of his affair with a Vestal.¹⁰⁵ However, no matter who faced conviction with a Vestal their punishment resulted in the polluting of their reputation, but even this rebuke pales in comparison to the punishment faced by the convicted Vestal.

Beyond the conviction of Vestals due simply to civil unrest, Ariadne Staples argues that Vestals could also be convicted due their pushing of social boundaries. Livy recounts that Vestal

¹⁰³ Plutarch, "The Life of Crassus," in *The Parallel Lives*, compiled by the University of Chicago (Chicago, IL: Loeb Classic Library, 1927), 315.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Plutarch, "Moralia," in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016), 373.

Postumia went to trial due to her apparent “attractive appearance and free and easy manner” that “had aroused suspicions of unchastity” among the people of Rome.¹⁰⁶ Postumia’s flagrant disregard for social boundaries placed on women, and the even stricter boundaries placed on her due to her post, led to her conviction, but resulted only in a rebuke to dress and behave as her post demands.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, not all Vestals perished at the hand of religious officials attempting to appease the gods, but also received rebukes based on their manners and attitudes put in place and monitored by the same religious officials. It is easy to recognize the Vestals as sacred figure, but it is vital to understand Vestals in the crossroads of sacred figure and women in a patriarchal society to fully understand the limitations and expectations placed on the priestesses.

Burial alive is clearly a drastic option for the punishment of a Vestal, and ancient sources do not recount how often this ritual took place, however Vestals, alongside all other Roman women, dealt with punishment less severe than death often. Unlike the Vestals, the loss of chastity among the general population of women within Rome received little to no attention by the Roman people, who regarded such an act as a domestic issue to be handled by the woman’s father or husband.¹⁰⁸ Aulus Gellius in the second century A.D. remarked on the proper handling of adulterous women, drawing from a speech given by the influential figure Marcus Cato several years before him. As Marcus Cato believed strongly in the “traditional” roles expected of Roman citizens during his lifetime, his speech portrayed the roles defined by traditional Roman households remarkably well. Regarding the treatment of adulterous wives, Marcus Cato advocated for the killing of the wife by the husband without any interference from the law.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ariadne Staples, “The Vestals and Rome,” in *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge Press, 1998), 138.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Susan Fischler. “Social Stereotypes and Historical Analysis: The Case of the Imperial Women at Rome.” *Women in Ancient Societies* (1994): 125. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-23336-6_7

¹⁰⁹ Aulus Gellius, “Attic Nights 10.23,” in *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, ed. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2016), 122.

This remark is an extraordinary double standard, as Marcus Cato further insisted that a woman “cannot dare lay a finger” on her husband should he be unfaithful.¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, due to the domestic nature of adultery it is difficult to understand how wives received punishment, but Marcus Cato’s speech suggests that, at the very least, punishment lay within the discretion of the husband, with little interference from the law.

Both Vestals and women outside of the priesthood often struggled under the strict evaluation of their worth based on their ability to be chaste. On one hand, the Vestals seemed to receive harsher punishments due to the sacred nature of their chastity, but in reality, both sacred and ordinary women lived in a society that punished any expression of female sexuality that did not directly benefit the state. The punishment for expression in both categories ranged from a simple rebuke to a painful death, but the fact remains that regardless of the severity of the supposed crime, women received little room for their own voices or their own stories regarding convictions. Limitations put in place by the same patriarchy that enforced them resulted in a world that silenced women’s voices on issues that greatly, and often disproportionately, affected them.

Conclusion

Vestals held an unparalleled place within a society that demanded specific roles and actions of its women, gaining power through performing the actions expected of them. Nevertheless, Vestals existed outside of the realm of the average woman and her roles in many ways, from the Vestals’ ability to perform legal action to their influence on politics. Yet this power came not from the Vestals themselves but rather through the society that created them and restricted other women’s power. This dichotomy made the Vestals the unique historical figures

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

that are studied today and remains to make them a multifarious and complex character. Vestals existed as the ideal woman in the strict and overarching protection of their chastity, literally the protection of their chastity with their lives. The Roman people believed the fall of this chastity to be representative of the fall of their state and treated the *incestum* of a Vestal with the upmost brutality. Likewise, the chastity of the Roman woman persisted as her defining feature throughout Roman history, while the destruction of her purity may not have resulted in a brutal death it meant her social death and public shame. The Vestals existed as servants to Vesta, but also provided a patriarchal society with a standard with which to hold all other women to, an impossible standard that would always remain out of reach.

On the other hand, Vestals received benefits beyond what any woman, and the majority of men, would ever be able to achieve. Their legal and public freedom suggests that their compliance with the roles placed on them granted them rewards and benefits. Emperor Augustus extends this idea to Roman civilians when he provided mothers with multiple children with advantages beyond those given to other women. Compliance and work towards a better Rome, therefore, resulted in benefits that could allow a woman to move further up her social ladder or simply make her life more comfortable. In this as well the Vestals are hallmarks, as their extreme chastity protected the state and complied with the heavily enforced restriction placed on women.

All women in Rome without a doubt existed in a male dominated society, bombarded with restrictions and ideals placed on them that benefitted the protection and furthering of this patriarchy. The Vestals, however, represented a contradiction of this patriarchy. On one hand they complied so heavily with the desire for Rome's women to be under the control of men that they left their former lives and devoted themselves solely to the bettering of this society, paying with their lives should they falter and act out in autonomy. Despite this submission, Vestals

wielded influence into realms of society that woman could only infiltrate through their husbands or male relative. Vestals represented a unique position within their society, one that provided the patriarchy with an unrealistic standard with which to judge other women, but they also forced society to recognize women as a necessary aspect to a functioning state.

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