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**By the Power Vesta-ed in Me:
The Power of the Vestal Virgins and Those Who Took Advantage of It**

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Classical Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Studies

April 27th, 2022

Abstract

Vestal Virgins were high ranking members of the Roman elite. Due to the priestesses' elevated standing, Romans made use of their inherent privileges. Through analyses of case studies from ancient authors and archaeology, I identify three ways Romans wielded Vestal power: familial connections, financial and material resources, and political sway. I end by exploring cases of *crimen incesti*, the crime of unchastity, which highlight all three forms. The Vestals were influential women who shared access to power in different ways. The Vestals were active participants in the social and political world of Rome.

Table of Contents

1) Acknowledgments	
2) Introduction	1
3) The Vestal Virgins	4
a) Major Ancient Writers	7
b) Archaeology	10
c) Foundations	11
d) Service	12
e) Physical Appearance	14
f) Vesta's Influence	16
g) Ritual Purity vs. Physical Cleanliness	17
h) Physical Space	18
i) Daily Duties	21
j) Vestals at the Festivals	24
k) Punishment	26
l) Scholarly Analyses	30
m) Summary	38
4) Familial Connections	39
5) Financial Power	46
6) Political Power	50
7) <i>Crimen Incesti</i>	59
8) Conclusion	69
9) Bibliography	71

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Introduction

The Vestal Virgins held an abundance of power throughout their duration in ancient Rome. They had very public lives through which they made connections both with their supplicants and the pontifical college. The priestesses of Vesta were respected and served a mighty goddess who was integral to the survival of the city of Rome. The Vestals created public careers, bringing their families and friends good fortune and longevity.¹ The sacred women fostered the public careers and connections which created pathways for people, both outside and inside of the religious order, to take advantage of the variety of Vestal powers. While in many situations it is someone, typically a man or groups of men, looking to wield that power for their personal interests, the Vestals themselves were also able to work their might to their own advantage. “At the very least, the ancient evidence demonstrates that we cannot treat the Vestals as socially constructed ciphers without any individual agency. These women were adept social actors who understood how to use their position and its privileges to their advantages.”² Both Vestals and other citizens of Rome found ways to manipulate the set laws and expectations of the Vestal Virgins for their own benefits. As we shall see in the initial overview of what modern scholars know about the Vestal, they were priestesses who held many social powers.

The Vestal Virgins throughout their tenure were granted special rights and privileges. Due to the high class status of the Vestal Virgins in Rome, family, friends, and Vestals alike used the reputations of the priestesses in order to bring themselves more power. Power in these contexts is very broad. It can be understood as political success,

¹ Megan J. DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar: Priestesses in Republican Rome* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 225.

² DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 238.

financial gain, a boosted reputation, and even divine intervention on a death sentence. Access to Vestal power manifested through the connections people had to the Vestals, be they familial ties or political alliances. The relationships between the Vestal Virgins and the people of Rome led to transactions of powers. The Vestals did have their own access to this power and used it for their own benefit at times as well.

After an introduction into the necessary background information on the Vestals, this paper describes four distinct ways in which the Vestals and their reputations were manipulated by others and even themselves in order to bring power or wealth to a beneficiary. The four ways are familial connections, financial transactions, political leverage, and cases of unchastity. Each of these forms can be seen in the others. They are not secluded within themselves, but overlapping. The most evidence is given to times when family members took advantage of the blessing the *pontifex maximus* bestowed upon their *gens* by appointing their daughter or sister as a Vestal Virgin. Described here is the juxtaposition between the theory of the position of Vestal and the more realistic practice. The theory was that the young girl in question must cut off all relationships with her family upon entrance into the priesthood. She did this in order to prioritize her duties. The realistic practice seems to have contradicted the theory and was supported by inscriptions and written works to say that regardless of the existing rule, the Vestal retained her connections from her past life. In retaining her connections, the priestess was able to bring societal, financial, and political power to her relatives.

The next section examines the financial situation of the Vestals and how money traded hands either for the benefit or detriment of the priestesses. Realistically, the benefits outweighed the costs. The Vestals had an array of ways in which to make money

and not as many ways in which to spend it. Supplicants made a myriad of donations to both the order as a whole and priestesses individually in return for blessings, religious support, and the favor of Vesta. In most instances, these exchanges were mutually beneficial, trading favors from the goddess or her priestesses for financial security. More dire situations occurred when people would attempt to blackmail the Vestals into lowering estate prices. The financial power of the Vestal Virgins gave them the advantages they needed in order to participate in society as elite members. However, that surplus of financial means also made them targets for those who wanted their property. The financial situation of the Vestal Virgins also gave them the agency to form symbiotic relationships.

Another section demonstrates how the political sphere was open to the Vestal Virgins through the nature of their position. They were able to influence the senate and pontifical college through their status as women, through their status as high standing members of society, and even through their status as priestesses of a goddess. The Vestals had a unique relationship with the pontifical college of Rome. Throughout the centuries, people took advantage of those unique interactions and connections in order to gain favor with the political leaders of Rome. By the end of their existence, the Vestals were finding ways to wield their political power for themselves and to create or take advantage of loopholes in their laws. The political authority held by the Vestals was one of the easier forms of power to use to one's advantage because it involved connecting oneself to the goddess and the state.

To cap it off, I place a special emphasis on the Vestals and the trials of the *crimen incesti*, crime of unchastity, and how each of the sections above play into these scenarios.

A Vestal performing her duties in a state of unchastity was a significant event. Her actions affected the entire city of Rome in a negative fashion. Each part of the *crimen incesti* trial process—the accusation, the death, and the salvation of a Vestal—was done for the benefit of a third party. That party could be an enslaved person wanting to be freed, a family member wanting cheaper property, or even the political leaders of Rome needing to show their people that the gods have not left them and that Vesta sends her blessing. These cases very clearly took away the agency of the Vestal, save for a few situations of divine intervention. The instances of *crimen incesti* brought a positive outcome to someone involved each and every single time. Trials of *incestum* are the perfect exemplars of people manipulating the different powers of the Vestals for their own benefits.

The Vestal Virgins

The following pages provide the necessary information to understand the position in society which the Vestals held. This position is seen through many aspects of Roman social life, from festivals to death rituals. It starts by giving a quick overview of who the Vestals were. Then it describes a few key writers and how the ancient sources fit into the Vestal narrative. Alongside the textual evidence, this section demonstrates the importance of the archaeological evidence found on the priestesses. Then there is the background on the foundations of the Vestal Virgins, how and when they entered Roman history, followed by the initiation process, the *captio*, of the young women as they are transformed into priestesses and their service in that role. After the service, the next section paints the image of the Vestal attire. Some of the physical markers of a Vestal were contradictions which came from similar contradictions in their patron goddess,

Vesta. The nuance between ritual purity and physical cleanliness is next. After that discussion, the paper brings the physical spaces of the priestesses to light. Then come the daily duties and responsibilities of the holy women, without which Rome would cease to thrive. Also aiding in the fruitfulness of Rome were the festivals, many of which involving the Vestals were focused on agricultural fertility. Next is a section on the punishments allotted to different infractions on the part of the priestesses. Finally, The paper lays out scholarly takes on the Vestals and their day to day lives and different ways the ancient evidence has been interpreted. All of this information prepares the reader to understand the analyses of Vestal power which this paper demonstrates.

The Vestal Virgins were priestesses of the goddess Vesta, protecting, purifying, and embodying the city of Rome. They were incorporated into Roman culture in the early Kingdom of Rome, 8th-7th century BCE, and lasted until 394 CE when Theodosius I banned all non-Christian cults. Vesta is the goddess of the hearth, home, and family. She was also honored by people involved in the bread industry, such as farmers, millers, and bakers. Fire and the hearth are integral in each step of the bread-making process. The Vestals replicate parts of this process as they prepare *mola salsa*, which will be discussed later. The Vestals harvested, ground, and baked the ingredients for the *mola salsa* which was then used in all state sponsored sacrifices. Therefore, Vesta was pivotal in every Roman home, just as her temple and her priestesses were pivotal to the city. “Without the hearth fire, civilized life as the Romans knew it could not have existed. Vesta and her Vestals preserved the Roman community by guaranteeing the food supply and by facilitating the crucial act of sacrifice.”³ People from every walk of life venerated the Vestals for their duties to Rome.

³ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 211.

The Vestals were erudite and literate women. According to Pliny the Elder, priests throughout the history of Rome had books from which to read during rituals and rites.⁴ The Vestals, as priestesses, were included in this practice. As a part of their training and routine tasks, when one Vestal read her prayers, another Vestal, typically a Chief Vestal, would stand behind the first, listening for any mistakes in the formula of the prayer as written in the prayer book.⁵ Their devotion to Vesta and the religious order gave their prayers for the people of Rome a better chance at getting the blessing of the goddess, at least this was the view of the citizens. The attention to religious detail, while common amongst other religious orders, is a testament of proof that the Vestals were well educated and could not only read and write, but also identify mistakes in a given text.

Another outstanding aspect of the Vestal Virgins was their power within the Roman social spheres. T.J. Cadoux compiled an abridged list of abilities of the Vestal Virgins, including the capacity to appeal in court on behalf of both an accused person and for themselves. The priestesses had so much power within the eyes of the court that by the simple nature of walking past a condemned person, the individual was saved from execution. Removed from the legal world, the Vestals even had the agency to own property outside the *tutela* of another.⁶ Property was not the only thing the Vestals owned.

⁴ “*Videmusque certis precationibus obsecrasset summos magistratus et, ne quod verborum praetereatur aut praeposterum dicatur, de scripto praeire aliquem rurusque alium custodem dari qui adtendat, alium vero praeponi qui favere linguis iubeat, tibicinem canere, ne quid aliud exaudiat.*” “We see also that our chief magistrates have adopted fixed formulas for their prayers; that to prevent a word’s being omitted or out of place a reader dictates beforehand the prayer from a script; that another attendant is appointed as a guard to keep watch, and yet another is put in charge to maintain a strict silence; that a piper plays so that nothing but the prayer is heard.” Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), 9.

⁵ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 192.

⁶ T. J. Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 54, no. 2 (2005): 164.

There are funerary inscriptions from enslaved people who name a Vestal as their *domina* or master.⁷ Such was the power of the Vestal Virgins.

Major Ancient Writers

Historians collected the evidence which built the modern understanding of the Vestal Virgins, most of which was literary sources. Despite being literate and well educated, proven by the training mentioned above,⁸ if the Vestal Virgins created texts in their own words, few if any, survive. Therefore, most of the evidence modern historians have on the Vestals comes from the writings of ancient historians and philosophers. The job of scholars is to take a critical look at these works and analyze why the author is saying what he is saying and what effect that had on his audience. Additionally, one must peel back the layers of the text and cross reference the information with other texts in order to ascertain the most historically and culturally accurate depictions of the Vestal Virgins. The majority of extant ancient literature on the Vestal Virgins comes from the Late Republic period of Rome, which gives scholars the clearest picture of the priestesses through to the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Of all of the ancient writers, three are of particular importance to this topic: Livy, Plutarch, and Cicero.

One of the more prolific and verbose writers on the Vestal Virgins was Titus Livius, also known as Livy. He wrote on the Vestals as they were in both the Kingdom and Republic of Rome. More specifically, he wrote stories from the foundation of Rome in 753 BCE until a little after the establishment of the Empire in 27 BCE. Livy himself was alive for the transition from the Republic into the Empire. He is dated between the

⁷ Molly M. Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 65.

⁸ Robin Lorsch Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 67.

mid-1st century BCE to 17 CE. As someone writing centuries later than his content, Livy shared tales of legendary events which lacked proper evidence upon which to draw. He wrote his major work, *Ab Urbe Condita* or *The History of Rome*, under Augustus. In this work, Livy highlighted the great triumphs of Rome throughout its history until 9 BCE with the death of Drusus, the brother of the emperor Tiberius. Livy wrote these stories which reaffirmed the new government instituted by Augustus.⁹ More importantly, he focused on moral teachings rather than on historical fact. In relation to the Vestals, Livy described their induction into the Roman world and some of their festivals, as well as a few cases of a Vestal tried for *incestum* or breaking her vow of chastity. As told by Wildfang, “What we are dealing with... it should be stressed, are the Romans’ own beliefs about their earlier history and the Vestals’ place in it rather than any absolute and factual account of early Vestal activities.”¹⁰ Livy’s contribution to the field of the Vestals is that of their legendary past, not so much of their factual present. His writings thus offer commentary on how those legends were perceived and how the contemporary Vestals were received.

Plutarch, c.45-120 CE was another writer of the Vestals. Plutarch was a man from Greece studying philosophy. Because of his well-established family, Plutarch had connections to the leading senatorial families in Rome. A common topic of writing for Plutarch was the different religions in Greece and Rome.¹¹ Plutarch described the origins of the Vestal Virgins within Roman society and detailed their hierarchy within the religious order, all while laying out the authorized privileges and punishments of the

⁹ Sarolta A. Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 130.

¹⁰ Wildfang, *Rome’s Vestal Virgins*, 76.

¹¹ Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 132.

priestesses.¹² For the purposes of this paper, Plutarch's crowning contribution is his description of a condemned Vestal as she is paraded to her death.¹³ His account is considered to be as factually accurate as it could be, due in part to the present tense of his writing. Given the vivid nature of his writing, scholars¹⁴ believe he was a contemporary of the Vestal—most likely to be the Vestal Cornelia, who was condemned in the year 90 CE. With the detail of the text, Plutarch either saw the processional firsthand or consulted someone who had.

The third prominent writer was Marcus Tullius Cicero. Cicero was active from 106-43 BCE. He held the roles of lawyer and politician in Rome. Eventually, Cicero was exiled due to his stance against Catiline, only to return shortly thereafter. His written works set the precedent for Latin literary prose and detailed a great deal of history in the Late Republic. Cicero wrote on relatively contemporary issues and provided a glimpse into his era of history.¹⁵ In his *Verrines* he brought to light the standing of women testifying in court, from which scholars have been able to juxtapose the court standing of the Vestals; that is, the influence of the Vestals on the jury and their testimonial rights¹⁶ Cicero even brought the Vestals into part of a defense argument in court. He wrote about the Vestals in his philosophical works. The prolific writer even gave potential rationale for the Vestal virginity in his *De Legibus*.¹⁷ In short, Cicero wrote about the ongoing events of Rome as he saw them, and the Vestals were present and active during many of these events.

¹² Plutarch, *Life of Numa Pompilius 9.5-10*, trans. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 288.

¹³ Cadoux, "Catiline and the Vestal Virgins," 164.

¹⁴ Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 288, and Cadoux, "Catiline and the Vestal Virgins," 165.

¹⁵ Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 129.

¹⁶ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 68.

¹⁷ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 52.

In addition to being cited by these philosophers and historians, many Romans writing down histories and histories in the making cited the Vestals. Publius Cornelius Tacitus, who was alive from the mid 1st century CE to the early 2nd century CE, was one such author.¹⁸ Sextus Pompeius Festus, from around the same time period, wrote about the *captio* and its bridal analogies.¹⁹ The *captio*, was a pseudo-marriage ceremony which transitioned a young girl into a Vestal Virgin.²⁰ Also a writer from the 2nd century CE, Aulus Gellius mentioned the Vestal origins and their connection to King Numa as well as their rights and privileges.²¹ Varro talked about the origins of the Vestals and actually named those initial women, in the 1st century BCE.²² There were many others who mentioned the Vestals in order to connect the priesthood to the foundation and importance of Rome.²³

Archaeology

Much of the archaeology on the Vestal Virgins comes from Imperial Rome. These types of material objects include statues and inscriptions on their bases, coins, busts, friezes, and extant parts of buildings. The buildings of the Vestals, such as the *aedes vestae* and the *atrium vestae*, were already long established by the time the statues and other items were installed.

¹⁸ Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 134.

¹⁹ The text of Festus itself is corrupted, and so scholars are left to decipher the meaning. Andrew B. Gallia quotes this text and deciphers it as such: “*Senis crinibus nubentes ornantur, quod [h]is ornatus vetustissimus fuit. Quidam quod eo Vestales virgines ornentur, quarum castitatem viris suis f̄sponoe * * * a ceteris.*” “Brides are adorned with the seni crines because it was the[ir] most ancient form of adornment. Certain (writers have argued?) that they do so because the Vestal virgins are adorned with it, whose chastity (brides emulate?) for their husbands in marriage(?)” Andrew B. Gallia, “The Vestal Habit,” *Classical Philology* 109, no. 3 (2014): 234.

²⁰ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 41.

²¹ Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, trans. John C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1961), 59-65.

²² Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, trans. Roland G. Kent, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1938).

²³ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 2.

“The earliest honorific statues of Chief Vestals were set up in the Atrium Vestae in the last decade of the 1st century or early in the second. Three factors contributed: (1) statues of Chief Vestals brought them up-to-date with other priestesses in Italy; (2) the emperor must have given approval, as emperors did for other honorific statues in Rome; and (3) a larger Atrium Vestae provided the courtyard and covered colonnade for the display of statues.”²⁴

Essentially, the majority of the evidence was literary sources dating until the late Republic and early Empire, but after that, statues became more useful in interpreting the role of the Vestals due to changes in politics and popular styles of representation. By the early Empire, statues as portraiture were a wide-spread form of propaganda.²⁵ Literary sources were more sparse than in the Republic and the dedication of statues remained as a way to mark political favor.

Foundations

According to Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* 1.20, the second king of Rome, King Numa Pompilius, in the 7th or 8th century BCE established the Vestals as Roman priestesses. Unfortunately, this source is not the most factually well founded due to the author, whom scholars now mark as unreliable, and the time period from which he was writing. However, the story seems to hold at least some aspects of the truth because it has been corroborated by another writer. In his *De Lingua Latina* 5, Varro mentions how the Vestals came to be. Varro corroborates that the general understanding of the origin of the Vestals was through King Numa, regardless of the fact that historians now consider those origins to be largely fabled.

There is textual evidence which indicates that the Vestals almost certainly existed before Numa made them Roman. Note that this evidence is also legendary in nature.

²⁴ Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 69.

²⁵ Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 78.

Texts such as the work of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 3.67.3, established that the Vestals were an existing group which did not form from nothing, but were instead repurposed by Numa. Robin Lorsch Wildfang says that the Vestal Virgins were a “non-indigenous cult, one that began elsewhere and only after its arrival in Rome (and Rome’s foundation) became Roman.”²⁶ Foreign entities, better defined as those who would conquer the land as Romans, integrated the Vestals into their culture and made them an integral part of Roman life. Even Ilia, also known as Rhea Silva, the mother of Romulus and Remus, two decidedly Roman figures, was an early Vestal Virgin. Sarolta A. Takács argues that the Vestal Virgins were a part of an unrecorded previous culture before King Numa absorbed the religious order into Roman culture.²⁷ Upon their merge, the Vestals became the most important protective force of Rome.

Service

At any one time, there were six Vestals serving Vesta. While the Vestals were undoubtedly devoted to the goddess, they were also servants to the city of Rome. When one Vestal finished her career or died, another was selected by the *pontifex maximus*.²⁸ According to Aulus Gellius in *Attic Nights* 1.12, the women who made up the Vestals were chosen between the ages of six and ten. Originally, they had to be freeborn daughters of freeborn parents, citizens of Rome, from families of good standing, and have no physical or mental deformities. “The Vestal must be not merely a virgin but physically perfect in every respect. The potential candidate was examined by the Pontifex Maximus to guarantee this.”²⁹ As time passed, the requirements for candidacy for the Vestal order

²⁶ Wildfang, *Rome’s Vestal Virgins*, 77.

²⁷ Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 3.

²⁸ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 163.

²⁹ Holt N. Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State,” *The American Journal of Philology* 125, no. 4 (2004): 571.

loosened and by the Late Empire even freedwomen could become Vestal Virgins.³⁰ While the virginity requirement was never removed, by the end of the Republic, the Vestal were advocating for fewer restrictions surrounding their chastity regulations, including their attire. Around that same time, if few families presented Vestal candidates, the pontifical college gave a bribe of undefined large sums of money to the family of the chosen Vestal.³¹ About twenty families brought forward their daughters and the *pontifex maximus* chose the new Vestal from the twenty.

The girls had no choice in their selection. The decision was left to the families of the girls and the *pontifex maximus*. After a girl was chosen, a ceremony occurred where the soon-to-be Vestal sat on her father's lap and the *pontifex maximus* took her hand and brought her to the other Vestals, thus removing her from *gens*, her family clan. This ceremony mirrored that of the *cum mano* ceremony, a marriage ceremony.³² In weddings, the bride sat on her father's lap, representing her membership to her past *gens* and social family. Then the groom took the bride away to be wed, thus introducing her into her new *gens*, which is, of course, the *gens* of the groom. A Vestal went through the first half of this process. She sat on her father's lap as the *pontifex maximus* removed her, but she never entered into a new *gens*.

Plutarch wrote in *Numa* 9.5-10 that the minimum duration for the position of Vestal Virgin was thirty years. Each Vestal spent ten years under the *tutela* of an elder Vestal, learning her duties; then ten years as an independent Vestal, doing as she has been taught; and then ten years as an elder Vestal, teaching the youngest priestesses their

³⁰ José Carlos Saquete, *Las vírgenes vestales: un sacerdocio femenino en la religión pública Romana* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000), 5.

³¹ J. P. V. D. Balsdon, "Holy Women," in *Women: From the Greeks to the French Revolution*, ed. Susan Groag Bell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 43.

³² Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 13.

responsibilities. After completing her thirty years of service, each priestess could choose to return to civic life or continue on as a Vestal Virgin.³³ There are more recorded instances of Vestals choosing to remain within the religious order than instances of a Vestal returning to a civilian lifestyle. These priestesses dedicated their lives to the purification, protection, and care of Rome and its people.

Physical Appearance

The bridal analogy was mimicked through the attire of the Vestals. The Vestals wore clothing representing a mixture of a bride and a faithful matron. During festivals, the priestesses wore special garments which identified them in their position. These holy women were held to a higher *pudicitia*, the moral and sexual standards than those which other women were expected to uphold.³⁴ Each article of the Vestal festival attire demonstrated the status of either a young girl or a married matron. The Vestals wore their hair in *sex crines* or *seni crines*, six braids.³⁵ This hairstyle is considered by scholars to be one of, if not the oldest recorded hairstyles of ancient Rome.³⁶ The Vestals were not the only women to lay claim to the *sex crines*. Brides also styled their hair in the six braids fashion. The hairstyle was meant to signify the *castitas* or purity of both groups.³⁷

Vestals also donned the *stola* and *vitta*. The *vitta*, a special type of headdress which rested across the shoulders in cloth loops, was a garment which marked faithful wives. Dionysius of Halicarnassus wrote that during a war in which the Romans were

³³ Plutarch, *Life of Numa Pompilius* 9.5-10, 288.

³⁴ Guy de la Bédoyère, "Virtue, Honour, and Chastity," in *Domina: The Women Who Made Imperial Rome* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2018), 17.

³⁵ According to DiLuzio, the Vestals very likely followed a tradition upheld by the *flaminica Dialis*. After haircuts, the priestesses would bury their hair under a fruitful tree. This was called a "hair tree." DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 159-160.

³⁶ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 13, and Mary Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 70 (1980): 16.

³⁷ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 11-12.

losing in 483 BCE, the pontiffs discovered through torture that the Vestal Opimia (or Oppia, according to Livy) had acted with unchastity. Before her death, the pontiffs removed the headdress of the Vestal and then buried her alive.³⁸ The removal of the headdress was also a visual representation of the loss of purity on the part of Opimia.

The *suffibulum* and *infula* accompanied the *vitta*. The *vitta* attached to the *infula*, a style of headband which covered the *sex crines*. The *suffibulum* went over the entire ensemble.³⁹ The *stola* was a traditional robe worn by matrons. Those who wore the *stola* represented neither prostitutes nor freedwomen.⁴⁰ These women represented matrons, wearing the *stola* as opposed to the wider-cut and bridal *tunica recta*.⁴¹ In one instance, Cicero equated a *stola* to the departure of prostitution.⁴² Such articles of clothing acted as indicators of *pudicitia* for the Roman public. These bridal and matronly signifiers confine the Vestals to the liminal virgin-versus-matron space.

The virginal priestesses also wore the white robes and veils during sacrifices. White was a color of purity which all holy leaders performing religious rites

³⁸ “While these things were happening in the camp, in Rome itself many prodigies in the way of unusual voices and sights occurred as indications of divine wrath. And they all pointed to this conclusion, as the augurs and the interpreters of religious matters declared, after pooling their experiences, that some of the gods were angered because they were not receiving their customary honours, as their rites were not performed in a pure and holy manner. Thereupon strict inquiry was made by everyone, and at last information was given to the pontiffs that one of the virgins who guarded the sacred fire, Opimia by name, had lost her virginity and was polluting the holy rites. The pontiffs, having by tortures and other proofs found that the information was true, took from her head the fillets, and solemnly conducting her through the Forum, buried her alive inside the city walls. As for the two men who were convicted of violating her, they ordered them to be scourged in public and then put to death at once. Thereupon the sacrifices and the auguries became favourable, as if the gods had given up their anger against them.” Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Roman Antiquities*, trans. Edward Spelman, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann LTD., 1962), 278-279.

³⁹ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 140.

⁴⁰ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 13.

⁴¹ Gallia, “The Vestal Habit,” 229.

⁴² “*Sumpsisti virilem, quam statim muliebrem togam reddidisti. primo vulgare scortum; certa flagiti merces nec ea parva; sed cito Curio intervenit, qui te a meretricio quaestu abduxit et, tamquam stolam dedisset, in matrimonio stabili et certo conlocavit.*” “You took up the toga of a man, which you promptly rendered womanly. At first, you were a common whore; the price of your shame was fixed, and it was not small. But soon Curio came along and took you out of the prostitute’s trade, as if he had given you a stola and settled you in a stable and steady marriage.” Gallia, “The Vestal Habit,” 229.

demonstrated. While not a representation of uncorruption, the shoes worn by the Vestals were indicators of their social status. They wore a type of shoe which archaeologists, looking at statues of the Vestals, identified as “soft shoes”.⁴³ DiLuzio claims that almost every social class in ancient Rome had a classifying shoe. The Vestal Virgins were no different. The attire through which the Vestals were identified helped secure their status as ritually pure. Each aspect of the physical appearance of the Vestals was an outward designator of *castitas* and their status as citizens.

Vesta’s Influence

The contradictory maiden and matron aspects of the Vestals are echoed in the difficult-to-categorize aspects of Vesta herself. These nuances were reflected in the few stories that were told of her. Vesta herself was a maiden. She was the alleged inspiration for the customs of the Vestals. The praised goddess fit into her own liminal spaces. In her family dynamic, Vesta was both the oldest and the youngest of her godly siblings, according to Ovid’s *Fasti*. She was the first child of Saturn and Ops,⁴⁴ but when Saturn ate all of his children, Vesta was the last to be released from his stomach.⁴⁵ Another contradiction is that the goddess was referred to by humans as both *casta* and *matrona*, that is chaste and matron. She was not “either/or” but “both/and.” Even though Vesta was a virginal deity, matrons prayed to Vesta for her powers as the goddess of the hearth and home.⁴⁶ Such contradictory roles created the lore surrounding the Vestals. Their

⁴³ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 182-183.

⁴⁴ Saturn and Ops are the Roman gods which have been juxtaposed to the Greek gods Kronos and Rhea.

⁴⁵ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 19.

⁴⁶ For Roman matrons, Vesta represented domestic tranquility. After both Apollo and Neptune fought to be with Vesta, the goddess implored Jupiter for the right to remain a virgin. As a thanks for her new status, Vesta took over the responsibility of caring for Jupiter’s hearth and home. The hearth itself was important to Roman families because it was the center of the home, both physically and spiritually. The hearth became a convenient place for families and for household *lares*, shrines to the gods the house worships. Lauren Hackworth Petersen, “Introduction: People, Places, and Rituals in the Religions of Rome,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 56/57 (2011): 7.

juxtaposed characteristics were a part of the Vestal identity. Just as Vesta had contradicting spaces, so did the Vestals.

Ritual Purity vs. Physical Cleanliness

Both modern scholars and ancient writers deploy the words “pure” and “clean” with frequency when describing the Vestal Virgins. In such conversations, “purity” has to do with ritual purity.⁴⁷ Ritual purity is the state of being in which one can access sacred spaces or objects and perform sacred actions so as to not upset any gods or goddesses. If someone were to perform a ritual while in the state of ritual impurity, there would be negative impacts from the ritual itself. The purpose of ritual purity is to keep the integrity of the ritual and to enact the desired outcome. For the Vestals, ritual purity was important because they were representations of the city itself.⁴⁸ As indicated by their name, the Vestal Virgins were expected to remain celibate for the duration of their service to the goddess. If situations of unchastity occurred, it was thought to sully the acts of the Vestals, anger Vesta, and put the city of Rome and its people at risk of her wrath.⁴⁹ Performing sacred rites while ritually impure poisons the purposes of the religious actions.

Physical cleanliness, while desirable, is different from ritual purity. In many scenarios, people do not have to be pristinely clean in order to perform sacred duties or interact with the godly. The Vestals are distinct in the sense that part of their daily responsibilities involved the cleaning of the *sacra*, sacred objects. These objects were held in the *pena* where no one was allowed to enter. The Vestals did not even grant permission to see the objects except when brought out by a priestess during special

⁴⁷ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 12.

⁴⁸ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” 563.

⁴⁹ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 14.

occasions. Nevertheless, the sacred objects were washed everyday.⁵⁰ These items were then considered “cleansed” and could be used in rituals if need be. The mixing of physical cleanliness and ritual purity brings the *sacra* to a new level of purification. If a Vestal were to perform her duties while ritually impure, these objects would be tarnished and would not hold the same power, but there is no such ramification for a lack of physical cleanliness.

Physical Space

The importance of the Vestals is exemplified in the physical spaces which they occupied. Within the city of Rome itself, the *aedes vestae* and the *atrium vestae* were at one end of the Roman Forum. The *aedes vestae* was the temple of Vesta. The *atrium vestae* was the home of the Vestals which remained directly behind the *aedes vestae*. These buildings were placed near the *regia* and *domus publica*, the headquarters and official residence of the *pontifex maximus*.⁵¹ Through the physical presence of the religious building adjacent to the center of political life, senators, orators, and the people of Rome had easy access to the Vestals and vice versa. The “topography and archaeology of the political space of the Forum, at least in the Republican period, suggests an open and accessible multipurpose square which was not defined by architectural barriers and was available to all.”⁵² The proximity of the *aedes vestae* to the *pontifex maximus* demonstrates the power the Vestals had within the hierarchy of the Roman elite. In fact,

⁵⁰ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 192-194.

⁵¹ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 188-190.

⁵² Amy Russell, “On Gender and Spatial Experience in Public: The Case of Ancient Rome,” in *TRAC 2015: Proceedings of the 25th Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference*, ed. Matthew J. Mandich, Thomas J. Derrick, Sergio Gonzalez Sanchez, Giacomo Savani, and Eleonora Zampieri (Oxford; Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2016), 167.

the emperor Augustus later donated the *domus publica* to the Vestals, therefore further establishing the intertwined nature of the two offices.⁵³

Within the *aedes vestae* was the eternal fire of Vesta.⁵⁴ At the center of a typical temple in ancient Rome stood a statue depicting the god or goddess to whom the temple was dedicated. Those statues had the spirit of the depicted god or goddess and people were welcome to pray to that deity. In the case of Vesta and her temple, her spirit was in the fire. The fire was Vesta and she was present at the center of the building. The eternal flame was the “physical and symbolic heart of the city.”⁵⁵ The Romans built the *aedes vestae* to accommodate it. The temple was a circular edifice with Corinthian columns, a sacrificial altar, and a vent at the top of the structure in order to let out the smoke from the fire. When Augustus donated the *domus publica* to the Vestals in 12 BCE, he established a statue of the goddess Vesta in the center of what was the official residence of the *pontifex maximus* which “intensified the relationship between that religious office, the imperial household, and the goddess Vesta.”⁵⁶

Alongside the fiery embodiment of Vesta in the *aedes vestae* was the *penus vestae*, the sacred storeroom also called the *pena*, which held all of the *sacra*, the sacred objects which were sprinkled and purified with the fresh spring water daily.⁵⁷ Historians and contemporary writers alike are unsure of all of the objects within the storeroom. Only the Vestals were allowed inside the *penus vestae*. However, some objects, such as the *fascinum*, a small amulet in the form of a penis with arms and a loop at the head which functioned as a talisman of protection, were intentionally taken out and shown to the

⁵³ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 190.

⁵⁴ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 6.

⁵⁵ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 189.

⁵⁶ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 218.

⁵⁷ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 193.

public as proof that sacred objects did actually exist and were in the possession of the Vestals. The secrecy of the items in the *pena* added a sense of mysticism to the lore of the Vestals, even in their own eras.

Another aspect of mysticism surrounding the Vestals came from their removed position in society. The physical space which the Vestal Virgins occupied in the public eye was an indicator of *castitas* and citizenship. The Vestals were frequently seen at gladiator games, but they had their own row from which to view the games. There were seats to honor various deities and the Vestals, as priestesses to a goddess, fell into that category.⁵⁸ Obviously, the gladiator spectacles routinely had large audiences. Such an appearance in front of the crowds of people from every social standing in Rome acted as a reminder to the Roman public of the important religious work the Vestals performed, but also of their higher social status. Senators and other prominent people in Rome had similar privileges, putting the Vestals in the same social standing. By having their own separated seats, the Vestals were inaccessible during these events.

This public seclusion is reminiscent of their space in the Roman Forum. Even though the *aedes vestae* was in that very public location, men were not allowed inside and maidens were only permitted on special occasions and were required to be barefoot. Amy Russell in her article "On Gender and Spatial Experience in Public: The Case of Ancient Rome," says the following:

Of course factors like religious architecture, or the presence in the Forum of Rome's ambiguously gendered Vestal Virgins (Beard 1980; Parker 2004), or the use of political spaces for games and other spectacles might alter this image, though there is no space to treat them in detail here. But many of the tropes of Roman public architecture worked because they reminded the viewer of his status as citizen.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 32.

⁵⁹ Russell, "On Gender and Spatial Experience in Public," 168-169.

Placing the Vestal Virgins in seats detached from the public while still in full view of all those attending the games distinguished between the sacred Vestals and the profane public. The Vestals may have interacted with the people of Rome, but in every official circumstance the Vestal Virgins were an integral part of Rome while seemingly detached from its public.

Daily Duties

The responsibilities for the role of a Vestal were focused primarily on purification. Meghan J. DiLuzio does a wonderful job of listing the other responsibilities of the Vestals. As mentioned earlier, one of the daily rituals of the Vestal Virgins was to gather and carry water in order to cleanse the *sacra* in the *pena*. Other duties included tending to the sacred fire of Vesta, preparing the *mola salsa*, and performing rites during Roman holidays. Each of these events reestablished the standing of the Vestals within the Roman society. Without these Vestal rituals, Rome would not have remained agriculturally bountiful or under the protection of Vesta.

The life of a Vestal was, in every way, centered around her routine religious responsibilities. That quotidian journey from the *forum romanum*, where the Vestals fetched water from a spring to cleanse the objects in the *penus*, put the Vestals in the public eye on a regular basis. This journey to the spring of Egeria ultimately brought about the physical and ritual purity of items in the *penus vestae*. The Egeria Spring was dedicated solely to the supply of the Vestals.⁶⁰ The Vestal Virgins took this trip with

⁶⁰ Egeria was a nymph who counseled King Numa as he was making laws for Rome. Juvenal labels the two in a form of sexual relationship as well. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when Numa died, Egeria liquefied with her tears and became a spring. The Ninfeo di Egeria, a fountain dedicated to the nymph Egeria is roughly where the Vestals would have collected water. It is roughly an hour long walk from the Roman Forum to the Ninfeo di Egeria today according to Google Maps. "Directions from the Roman Forum to the Ninfeo di Egeria Walking," Google Maps, accessed November 16, 2021, [Roman Forum to Ninfeo di Egeria - Google Maps](#).

twofold results. One result was that the water was pure and would purify the items in the *pena*. The other outcome was the daily reminder of the work of the Vestals to the people of Rome. The priestesses brought the water back from the sacred spring in “special containers that could not be set down... Thus the water could never become still before it was used, nor could it come into contact with profane earth.”⁶¹ This diurnal journey took the Vestals through Rome for all the public to see as a constant reminder of the presence and dedication of the Vestals to their goddess, their city, and to the people of Rome. This physical path reaffirmed the devoted and tireless work of the Vestals to protect and purify the city.⁶² Romans saw firsthand the commitment of the Vestals to Roman life and security in the nature of the way the Romans viewed the Vestals at gladiatorial games. This iterative path to fetch water was a public indicator of the cleansing of the secretive *sacra* in the *pena*. Even this ritual, which took place in a private room, opened the doors to the perception and participation of the Roman inhabitants. In the end, this restricted ritual was not all that restricted. By opening the doors to commentary, the actions of the Vestals also opened the doors for others to use the status of the Vestals for themselves.

Tending to the sacred fire of Vesta and performing sacrifices in it was another daily duty for the Vestals. It was mandatory to always have at least one Vestal watching over the flame. Some scholars have noted an assistant could be utilized for this task when all six Vestals were away performing other duties.⁶³ The only permissible time for the

⁶¹ Celia E. Schultz, “On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins,” in *Rome, Pollution, and Propriety: Dirt, Disease, and Hygiene in the Eternal City from Antiquity to Modernity*, ed. Mark Bradley and Kenneth R. Stow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 123.

⁶² Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 30.

⁶³ These assistants could very well have been *servi publici*, public slaves. These enslaved people or assistants were important when the Vestals had out of town festivals to partake in or other religious duties outside of Rome. If the flame flickered out while the Vestals were away and a non-Vestal worker worked, the Vestal responsible for the worker would be the one receiving punishment. DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 191.

flame to go out was the festival on March 1st, the Roman New Year, during which the Vestals performed a rite to extinguish and relight the fire. If the fire went out any other time, it was a sign of the goddess withdrawing her protection from the city, and would likely be perceived as indiscretion by one of the Vestals.

The Vestal Virgins were also responsible for preparing and distributing the *mola salsa*. *Mola salsa* was a mixture of “ground *far* (spelt) and salt.”⁶⁴ Romans used this blend of ingredients during festivals, especially during the public sacrifices. The Vestals were involved in each step in the production process of the *mola salsa*. The priestesses harvested the grain prematurely, roasted it, and then ground the heads of grain with a mortar and pestle. Once the *far* was prepared, the priestesses stored it in the *penus exterior*⁶⁵ until one of the festivals in which the *muries*, hard salt which has been ground up, was added.⁶⁶ Each step was part of a ritual to uphold the purity of the ingredients. Even the choice in ingredients had significance to Roman society. To this day, *far* is the oldest grain cultivated in Italy. Similar to the *sex crines*, the *far* and its antiquity reinforce the authority linked to antiquity of the Vestals.

Mola salsa could be used in different ways. Most commonly, the mixture was sprinkled over the head or between the horns of an animal as it was prepared for sacrifice. Every time a priest or priestess made a public sacrifice, they had to incorporate *mola salsa*. In some situations, if no animal was fit to present to the gods at an event, a *mola salsa* substitute was offered instead. In the latter case, the Vestals added a bit of water to the mixture, shaped and flattened the dough, and baked it. Because of the versatility of

⁶⁴ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 195.

⁶⁵ This was an imitation of the *penus vestae* inside the Temple of Vesta. This storeroom was also called the household storeroom because it was in the home of the Vestals and not the temple. The *penus exterior* was an auxiliary storage room which kept the items used for rituals and festivals. DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 197 and Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 165.

⁶⁶ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 196.

the mixture, the Vestals were pivotal in order to foster the connection to the gods of almost every religious faction in Rome.

Mola salsa, and by extension the Vestals who had manufactured it, unified an otherwise disparate and seemingly chaotic collection of religious rites. As Ariadne Staples has written, because the Vestals belonged to and represented the Roman community, *mola salsa* served “to make every sacrifice, however exclusive in other respects, nevertheless representative of the collectivity.”⁶⁷

Religious rites upheld the social and agricultural future of Rome. The Vestals were the glue which connected all of these rites together. The work of the priestesses, specifically the preparation and distribution of the *mola salsa*, was paramount for the process of sacrifices in Roman festivals. The labor intensive work and antiquity of the grain itself reinforced the importance of the Vestals and their interaction with public life.

Vestals at the Festivals

The Vestals frequently interacted with Roman public life in the form of festival-centered rituals. There were nine annual festivals in which the Vestals participated.⁶⁸ The Romans celebrated the new year on March 1st. It was on this occasion that the Vestals would intentionally extinguish and relight the fire of Vesta as a ritual symbol of renewal.⁶⁹ Next was the Fordicidia. In Ovid’s *Fasti*, he describes the role of the Vestal in this festival. The *virgo vestalis maxima*, the senior Vestal or Chief Vestal Virgin, burned the remains of the sacrificial calves in the Vesta’s hearth. It was unlikely that the calf was considered a sacrifice because it was already dead by the time it reached the Vestal. The Vestals distributed to the public the ashes from the burned calf. The priestesses paired blood from the sacrifice of the October Horse festival and the ashes

⁶⁷ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 197-198.

⁶⁸ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 199-214.

⁶⁹ Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 41.

along with *durae fabae*, stalks of hard beans, when they passed the ritual remains out. The people used them a few days later in the Parilia festival.⁷⁰ The purpose of the Vestal Virgins during the Parilia was purely one of purification. The materials from the last festival purified both the urban and rural people of Rome.⁷¹ During the Argei, the Vestals assisted the pontiffs, the praetors, and an elite group of citizens in casting the twenty seven or thirty *argei*, straw effigies, into the Tiber. Plutarch describes it as “the greatest ceremony of purification.”⁷²

Possibly one of the most important festivals for the Vestal Virgins is that of the Vestalia. This time was especially focused on three groups of people: the Vestals, professional bakers, and Roman *matronae*. In this festival, women had access to the *penus vestae*. This week-long celebration involved the preparation of the *mola salsa* and incorporated the bread baking process.⁷³ Right after this time, the Vestals carried out all of the trash and unclean items that were brought into the *penus* and brought it to a road along the Capitoline Hill in an event called *Quando Stercum Delatum Fas* (Q.ST.D.F.).⁷⁴ During the Consualia, the Vestals gave sacrifices at the underground altar of Consus on behalf of the Roman public.⁷⁵ Consus is the god of grain storage and the partner of the goddess of abundance, Ops. The October Horse was dedicated to plentiful harvests and military success. During this event, the Vestals received the leftovers from the sacrifice. In other words, the priestesses received the blood from the tail of the October Horse which was poured onto the hearth.⁷⁶ The December Rites of Bona Dea, the good goddess

⁷⁰ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 201.

⁷¹ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 202.

⁷² Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 46.

⁷³ Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 50.

⁷⁴ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 208. This phrase can be translated as “When the waste can be lawfully removed.”

⁷⁵ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 22.

⁷⁶ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 211.

“whose name men may not even know” according to Cicero, was celebrated by the elite *matronae* in Rome. The Vestals presided over the religious components of the celebration, such as sacrificing a sow.⁷⁷ Finally, the Parentalia closed the ritual year by honoring the dead. The 4th century CE calendar of Philocalus has a brief entry on the participation of the Vestal Virgins in this event which leaves many unanswered questions. A Vestal made an offering to the dead on this day, although to which ancestors is unknown, given that it would be unlikely for a Vestal to honor her old family clan.⁷⁸ The festivals during Roman holidays were busy times for the Vestals because they were necessary for the purifications, preparations, and sacrifices which kept Rome running smoothly.

Punishment

The Vestals held a large amount of power, so much so that a Vestal could pass judgment of a member of the elite and repeat rites and rituals without requesting permission from the *pontifex maximus*. Despite such power, the priestesses were not free from reprimand or repercussions. Any infraction by a Vestal was met with punishment. The most common error, the dousing of the sacred flame, was punishable by whipping. An accidental extinguishing acted as a sign that one of the Vestals behaved in a ritually impure way.⁷⁹ Whoever was on duty when the flame went out was punished by whipping. The *pontifex maximus* would strike the Vestal in question across her back with a special rod.⁸⁰ To inflict the appropriate amount of pain, the Vestal had to strip to her waist. In order to keep the *castitas* of the Vestal, the *pontifex maximus* would lash at her in a dark

⁷⁷ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 213.

⁷⁸ Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 35.

⁷⁹ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 190.

⁸⁰ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 164.

room from behind a curtain. The severity of the crime against the city called for an equally severe ramification.

T.J. Cadoux and Erich S. Gruen delineate the events that took place when a Vestal was accused of being unchaste. The crime was called *incestum* or *crimen incesti*.⁸¹ If such an accusation occurred, the leaders of the city held a trial. The pontifical college stood as the jury and appointed an orator to defend the Vestal. It was not as common for a man to be included in the accusation with the Vestal.⁸² The allegedly *incesta* Vestal was not allowed to speak, but her own words were read as testimony at the time. The Vestals were the only women whose words the court admitted as testimony in cases. Therefore, despite being silent, these priestesses had voices.⁸³

The only way to find a Vestal guilty was for there to be evidence. Some such proof was pregnancy, a direct witness, or a type of clinical exam. Cadoux is doubtful of the medical test and does not know what this would have entailed or how accurate the results would have been.⁸⁴ Julia Kelto Lillis wrote in her dissertation that “The methods people imagined for testing sexual virginity relied not on the appearance of sex organs, but on ordeals, verbal testimony, or other forms of proof.”⁸⁵ If the Vestal was acquitted, no action was taken against her or her co-conspirator.

⁸¹ The English word “incest” comes from this as well. The latin word is *in + castum*, that is “not” + “chaste.” When using “incest” in this paper, I am not be talking about the modern understanding of sexual familial relations. I will be referencing the act of being unchaste and impure. Additionally, *incestum* has both religious and legal repercussions for every party involved. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 56.

⁸² Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 168.

⁸³ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 67.

⁸⁴ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 164.

⁸⁵ Julia Kelto Lillis, “Virgin Territory: Configuring Female Virginity in Early Christianity” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2017).

Gruen goes into detail regarding what happened to a man associated with an *incesta* Vestal. He was considered an “enem[y] of the *pontifex maximus* and his clan”⁸⁶ because the *incestus* man put all of Rome in danger by sullyng the purity of a Vestal Virgin. If the man was accused, he also received a trial and, when convicted of *incestum*, was scourged to death in the Roman Forum by the *pontifex maximus* or a pontifical servant.⁸⁷ It was a very public event with the purpose to warn others away from committing the same crime.

If a Vestal was convicted of *incestum*, the pontifical college condemned her to die in one of a few ways depending on her time period. Takács summarizes Livy who wrote that originally, during the Sabine Wars, as a repercussion for betraying the Roman men to the Sabines, the weight of the shields of the Sabine women crushed one of the Vestals.⁸⁸ This Vestal was Tarpeia. That spot is called Tarpeia’s Rock.⁸⁹ Tarpeia’s Rock is the same cliff edge from where *incestae* Vestals during the early Kingdom of Rome would throw themselves in an act of suicide. Somewhat concurrently, the Vestals charged with *incestum* were stoned to death by the pontifical college. Then, in the 6th century BCE, Tarquin the Elder changed the punishment to live internment so no one would spill the blood of a sacred woman, which was a grave offense.⁹⁰ The punishment was so severe because the unchastity of a Vestal broke the *pax deorum*, peace of the gods. By performing a ritual in honor of a god while unchaste, the god does not receive the proper

⁸⁶ Erich S. Gruen, “M. Antonius and the Trial of the Vestal Virgins,” *Rheinisches Museum Für Philologie* 111, no. 1 (1968): 63.

⁸⁷ Once again, “servant” may also be read as “enslaved person.” Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 165.

⁸⁸ Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 36.

⁸⁹ “*Hic mons ante Tarpeius dictus a virgine Vestale Tarpeia, que ibi ab Sabinis necata armis et sepulta: eius nominis monimentum relictum, quod etiam nunc ripes Tarpeium appellatur saxum.*” “This hill was previously called the Tarpeian, from the Vestal Virgin Tarpeia, who was there buried; of her name a reminder is left, that even now its cliff is called Tarpeian Rock.” Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, 39.

⁹⁰ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 165.

respect and reference. The god then has the authority to retaliate and make life more difficult for those who attempted to honor the god in question. The severe ramification of a Vestal convicted of *crimen incesti*, live internment, is one of the few scenarios of what could be described as human sacrifice in ancient Rome.

The event of the burial itself was respectful, despite leading a woman to her death. In fact, the sacrificed Vestals were moved from the tomb after burial and placed within the *pomerium*, within the boundaries of the city of Rome.⁹¹ Burial within the *pomerium* was a sign of respect reserved only for the most important people of Rome. Plutarch in *Numa* 10 describes the burial process in graphic detail.

She that has broken her vow is buried alive near the gate called Collina, where a little mound of earth stands, called in Latin *agger*; under it a narrow room is constructed, to which a descent is made by stairs; here they prepare a bed, and light a lamp, and leave a small quantity of victuals, such as bread, water, a pail of milk and some oil; so that the body which had been consecrated and devoted to the most sacred service of religion might not be said to perish by such a death as famine. The culprit herself is put in a litter, which they cover over, and tie her down with cords on it, so that nothing she utters may be heard. They then take her to the Forum; all people silently go out of the way as she passes, and such as follow accompany the bier with solemn and speechless sorrow; and indeed, there is not any spectacle more appalling, nor any day observed by the city with greater appearance of gloom and sadness. When they come to the place of execution, the officers loose the cords, and then the pontifex maximus, lifting his hands to heaven, pronounces certain prayers to himself before the act; then he brings out the prisoner, being still covered, and placing her upon the steps that lead down to the cell, turns away his face with the rest of the pontiffs; the stairs are drawn up after she has gone down, and a quantity of earth is heaped up over the entrance to the cell, so as to prevent it being distinguished from the rest of the mound. This is the punishment of those who break their vow of virginity.⁹²

⁹¹ In Roman tradition, burial within the city walls was rare. Such an event was reserved for prominent people and their relatives. By the Imperial period the practice continued in order to honor Vestals and emperors. Schultz, "On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins," 133.

⁹² Plutarch, *Life of Numa Pompilius* 9.5-10, 289.

The Vestal was tied up and carried through town, but also covered. Parading the Vestal through Rome was a ritual killing intended to remove the plague she brought upon the city by means of her unchaste actions and to expiate the anger of the goddess Vesta.⁹³ As a visual representation of social rejection, a distancing from the *incesta* Vestal, the people watching the procession would turn away from the Vestal as she passed. In the quote from Plutarch above, he remarked that they covered the disgraced priestess and did not allow her to make any sounds. This was not to hide the identity of the Vestal for there were only six Vestals at any given time and the public would have been witness to the public accusation and trial. Instead, the subduing of the Vestal worked to further remove her from a position of honor and praise in the eyes of Rome.

Plutarch listed the items left in the tomb: bread, milk, water, and oil along with a bed, blankets, and a lighted lamp.⁹⁴ These items displaced the blame from any of the people of Rome for killing a priestess of Vesta, even one who angered the goddess through ritual impurity. Killing a priest or priestess of a deity was considered to be an act which could receive retribution by the god or goddess.⁹⁵ The Vestal did not die by human hands, but by an act of a god. It was an act of a god rather than an act of nature, because if Vesta looked kindly upon her priestess, the goddess could easily save the Vestal, which occurred in a couple of cases, as will be explored below.⁹⁶

Scholarly Analyses

Scholars have investigated the Vestal Virgins for many years. Debates regarding the different Vestal spaces in society, the purpose of the virginity of the Vestals, and the

⁹³ Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?" 587.

⁹⁴ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 59-60.

⁹⁵ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 60.

⁹⁶ Two cases in which the goddess Vesta saved the life of a charged Vestal were in the cases of the Vestal Tuccia in 230 BCE and the Vestal Aemilia sometime around the 1st century BCE. I will be talking about these women and their circumstances later in this paper. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 83 and 85.

intent of the Vestal ritual actions during festivals have been evolving among historians. Such debates even evolved amidst the writings of a single historian over a period of fifteen years, as seen in the case of Mary Beard:⁹⁷ the following summary is not comprehensive, but attempts to shed light on the field of study regarding the Vestal Virgins as it stands today.

Outside of the physical spaces which the Vestal Virgins occupied, the Vestals also existed in gendered societal spaces. There is a plethora of research into how these virginal priestesses represented both matrons in the home of a husband and daughters in the home of a father, all while living separately from either circle of society. Robin Lorsch Wildfang wrote her 2006 book, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire*, primarily on this topic, placing the Vestals in spaces of transitions between the two social groups. She deals with the contradictions of the Vestals' lives and motivations as seen through their *captio* and clothing.

One physical representation of a contradictory space is that of the *captio* of the Vestals. As previously discussed, the selection process of a Vestal Virgin included a pseudo-marriage ceremony. Marriage for Romans marked a woman's transition from one family clan to the next. As mentioned above, a Vestal went through half of this ceremony with the *pontifex maximus*. Essentially, each Vestal started the procedure to marry the state. Wildfang argues that through this incomplete process, the Vestal Virgins remained in that space of transition.⁹⁸ The Vestal existed outside of a family structure indefinitely, or at least for the duration of her office as priestess.

⁹⁷ The 1980 work of Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," and the 1995 work of Beard, "Re-Reading (Vestal) Virginité."

⁹⁸ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 51-61.

Hand in hand with the bridal ceremony was the attire of the Vestals. They wore the *sex crines* as did brides. The Vestals also wore the *stola* and *vitta*. These garments were representative of both well-respected, faithful wives and young maidens. The Vestal Virgins, according to Wildfang, were stuck between these two categories never to fall completely into either one.⁹⁹ DiLuzio, on the other hand, has the theory that the Vestals did not wear the *stolae*, but *togae* instead. She defends this by indicating that there were many other items on the body of the Vestals which designated their *castitas*.¹⁰⁰ Both Wildfang and DiLuzio agree that the clothing of the Vestals was representative of their chastity. Nevertheless, the two academics differ on which items of clothing specifically do so.

One of the heavily cited articles talking about the Vestals and their liminal space is that of Mary Beard titled “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins.” Beard performed a synchronic analysis of the Vestals and their sexual status in relation to their sacred status. At the time, a theory existed that the Vestal Virgins and their characteristics were symbolic of a relationship with the early kings of Rome. The relationship could be that of either a wife or a daughter. Beard describes the research of some scholars who believe a *materfamilias* portrayal would be more accurate, “for it is argued that the type of virginity represented by the Vestals is not virginity in the sense of total abstinence of sexual intercourse, but rather the chastity (*pudicitia*) of a univirate Roman matron, a quality defined by her fidelity to a single husband and by soberness of conduct and dress.”¹⁰¹ This claim is corroborated by Guy de la Bédoyère who attests that the Vestals followed

⁹⁹ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 13.

¹⁰⁰ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 172-182.

¹⁰¹ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 14.

more than just *castum* expectations, but also the *pudicitia* to which matron women were socially required to conform.¹⁰²

According to Beard, the other side of the argument cites Plutarch stating that early Roman wives were not permitted to cook or grind grain, two of the Vestal tasks.¹⁰³ Beard very firmly declares that the Vestals do not obey just one definition with their sexuality, but both of virgin daughter and matron wife. Beard also argued that outside of sexuality, the Vestals had certain male privileges. Where Wildfang places the Vestal Virgins in the liminal space of transition, Beard places the priestesses in multiple categories at once.

Another scholar who aligns with this analysis by Beard is Deborah F. Sawyer in *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries*. She says that the position of the Vestals was created by and for men and their male privileges, such that any benefits the Vestals had would actually support the elite men of society.¹⁰⁴ Sawyer reaffirms Beard's initial argument that the Vestals kept a status which was defined in relation to men.

After the discourse regarding the topics mentioned above took place, in 1995 Beard wrote an article, "Re-Reading (Vestal) Virginité," which circled back and edited her past commentary. Beard described her main concern as an incorrect methodology of investigating the Vestals. "Re-reading the Vestals would necessarily involve a reinstatement of this kind of text at the centre of the argument, a reinstatement of virginité and its transgressions above the neat schematics of ambiguity."¹⁰⁵ By looking at the sexual status of the Vestals from an anthropological perspective, Beard placed the holy women in each of the three categories: virgins, matrons, and men. With the 1995

¹⁰² De la Bédoyère, "Virtue, Honour, and Chastity," 17.

¹⁰³ Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 15.

¹⁰⁴ Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 127-128.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Beard, "Re-Reading (Vestal) Virginité," in *Women in Antiquity: New Assessments*, ed. Richard Hawley (London: New York: Routledge, 1995), 173.

article, Beard stated that she should have started by defining “gender” as it was classified in ancient Rome.

Put simply, the Vestals constructed Roman gender, as much as gender (and its ambiguities) constructed the Vestals...¹⁰⁶ Roman identity is shown to be debated, debatable, negotiated, negotiable. This is a story not just about gender and its ambiguities (though it is no doubt partly that); it is a story about gender (and its uncertainties) mapped on to other cultural categories (and their uncertainties) — civic identity, nationhood, and imperialism. The Vestals ask us to ask what it is to be Roman, what Rome is.¹⁰⁷

As a result of her second article, Beard revised her previous pivotal arguments. In doing so, she pushed other scholars to rethink the manner through which they investigate the Vestal Virgins and their contradictory spaces.

The scholarship by Wildfang presents that the Vestal Virgins purified Rome with their rituals. Before this, other scholars understood the purpose of Vestal rituals as fertility. Wildfang argues that the fertility aspect was merely tied into cleansing the land and agricultural fertility and reproduction. While research in works by Takács, DiLuzio, and Cadoux state the purpose of some rituals as fertility, Wildfang stresses that the fertility is not directed at rational beings such as Romans. The fertility rites pertained to agricultural fertility, bringing forth plentiful grain and other materials which could be harvested, processed, and distributed to the Roman public.¹⁰⁸ This theory coincides with the worship of Vesta by those involved in the agricultural and bread making process. In essence, the purificatory rites prepared the soil for a fertile yield. However, while agricultural fertility was a desired byproduct of these rites, the main focus for the priestesses was the purification of the city as a whole.

¹⁰⁶ “What should lie at the heart of the ‘problem’ is not (as I chose to stress) the ‘sexual status of Vestal Virgins’, but of the very terms out of which that ‘sexual status’ was defined: man, woman, virgin and matron.” Beard, “Re-Reading (Vestal) Virginité,” 170.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰⁸ Wildfang, *Rome’s Vestal Virgins*, 65.

Some of the most recent scholarship investigating the Vestal Virgins has been on their live internment after the charge of *crimen incesti*. There is a scholarly divide between those who argue for a sacrifice versus ritual murder categorization of the live internment of a Vestal. Parker, Wildfang, and Thompson all agree that the promenade to a Vestal's tomb and her subsequent death was considered part of a sacrifice. It can be described as a sacrifice because the offending person affected Rome in her ritual impurity and the wrong needed to be righted by means of her death.¹⁰⁹ When discussing the purpose of the death rites of the priestesses, Parker says that in modern scholarship, "The trials and executions of the Vestals are never referred to as what they so palpably are-human sacrifice."¹¹⁰ Thompson argues that when making references to the *crimen incesti*, Greek texts use terminology which was affiliated with priesthoods and sacrifices.¹¹¹

These scholars claim that the death of a Vestal acted as a scapegoat for the city of Rome and that her life was offered up in exchange for a better future, as a sacrifice. Parker used the term *φαρμακός* "pharmakos" to describe a Vestal who was put to death on the basis of her possibly fabricated crimes against the state, in order to fix whatever was going wrong at the time. A "pharmakos" defines a person who has already been condemned to death as a sacrifice. Wildfang and Staples would agree, saying that the Vestal was being offered up to the gods in appeasement for her errors. Parker finds that the sacrifice is a just ending to a cycle of improper violence or misconduct by means of proper violence.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?" 583.

¹¹⁰ Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?" 585.

¹¹¹ Lindsay J. Thompson, *The Role of the Vestal Virgins in Roman Civic Religion* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 95.

¹¹² Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?" 575-576.

Celia E. Schultz's 2012 work "On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins" contradicts these arguments. Schultz conducted an analysis on the language of the event, stating that the typical sacrificial language is missing.¹¹³ The article also points out the lack of an offering to a specific deity. As there is no godly recipient of the Vestal's sacrifice, she cannot be a sacrifice, according to Schultz.¹¹⁴ Additionally, this scholar illustrates that because the *incesta* Vestal was convicted of misconduct, she was no longer pure and therefore not fit to be a sacrifice.¹¹⁵ Schultz takes a strong stance on this point, arguing instead that the death of a Vestal in such a manner was a ritual murder and not a sacrifice.

Schultz has done research into the language used when describing the death of a Vestal. Her research included an investigation of the famous quotation from Plutarch which was mentioned above.¹¹⁶ She declared that the language used for contemporary sacrifices in ancient Rome is not found in those sources.¹¹⁷ Schultz states that the live internment of a Vestal Virgin should be defined as a ritual murder and not a human sacrifice.¹¹⁸ The difference between ritual murder and human sacrifice being that "ritual murder is a rite performed repeatedly in specific circumstances in a prescribed fashion

¹¹³ Schultz, "On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins," 125.

¹¹⁴ Schultz, "On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins," 125.

¹¹⁵ Schultz, "On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins," 135.

¹¹⁶ Page 29.

¹¹⁷ Schultz, "On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins," 125.

¹¹⁸ Schultz relates the ritual murder of the Vestal Virgins to that of the ritual murder of intersex people. While understanding the implications of the word "hermaphrodite," I will be keeping it in the text when seen through quotations. However, I will be using "intersex" to describe people who were born with both male and female reproductive organs or biological traits. In Schultz's argument, she lays out how both intersex people and unchaste Vestals represented a violation of multiple sexual categories. Those who were intersex were executed as a way to eliminate an impure aspect of Rome, just as *incestae* Vestals were. Schultz defends this stance saying, "The very presence of hermaphroditic children and Vestals no longer virgins tainted the Roman state as a whole. Such polluting presences needed to be removed permanently and bloodlessly so that the contagion they harboured could spread no further." This connection is further extrapolated in the work of Schultz but the parallels are easily seen here as well. Schultz, "On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins," 135.

that requires the killing of a human being... A sacrifice must be offered to some being or other. In sum, all human sacrifice is ritual murder, but not all ritual murder is human sacrifice.”¹¹⁹ This quote perfectly encapsulates the crux of the debate. Sacrifices are undoubtedly ritual, but uncertainty resides in defining the live internment of the Vestals as a sacrifice.

There was an equal exchange with regards to sacrifices in the past. The sacrifice would have to be done with a pure being as an offering in order to appease a god or receive an equally beneficial outcome. If a Vestal was convicted of *incestum*, she was no longer pure. Parker counters by reminding the reader that the Vestals were still buried in the *pomerium* as a sign of respect because they remained sacred to the goddess.¹²⁰ The end result for this debate is that the Romans found the *incesta* Vestal to be unfit for service and, for the fortuitous longevity of Rome, they needed her to be eradicated and no longer take up space reserved for purity or contribute to any rituals.

In the world of archaeology, Molly M. Lindner has added valuable contributions in her 2015 book *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*. She analyzed the multiple Imperial statues of Chief Vestals found in the *aedes vestae* and reintroduced incense burning into the discussions regarding visual identifiers of Vestal Virgins. Objects related to the burning of incense were frequently placed with the images of Vestals in the Empire.¹²¹ Other identifiers include indications of a woman of mature years, imagery describing a life of marriage or virginity mixed with iconography of chastity, and the very telling Vestal headdress.¹²² Lindner’s additions into the

¹¹⁹ Schultz, “On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins,” 125.

¹²⁰ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” 568.

¹²¹ Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 263.

¹²² Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 257.

archaeological field investigating the Vestals have opened up the conversation amongst scholars to better analyze Vestal portraits and similar statues.

Summary

The previous sections provided a glimpse into the daily life and duties of the Vestals. Also included above were the scholarly debates regarding the information on the priestesses accepted as fact. The Vestal Virgins were priestesses who lived lives of devotion, contradiction, and purification; this much is obvious. Every aspect of their existence was designed to reflect some part of their identity. The exact purpose of these representative characteristics, such as Vestal attire, daily duties, or their political sway, remain up for debate and discussion. The second half of this paper now turns to how individuals and the collective Roman society used these characteristics of the Vestal Virgins for their own gain.

The sections that follow pertain to the four ways in which Vestals granted access to their privileges and powers. The first way demonstrated here is through familial connections. The Vestals kept close ties to the members of their prior families. Those connections then paved the way for nepotism by means of public Vestal support. Following that are a few pages on the financial situation of the priestesses. The Vestal Virgins acquired considerable sums of money through a variety of means. The people of Rome frequently added to those sums through donations. However, at times, people tried to obtain Vestal property through blackmail. Next comes the section on the political influence of the holy women. The priestesses changed the course of politics by sharing their opinions with both the people of Rome and select members of the elite class. Finally, a section devotes itself to the *crimen incesti* of the Vestals. The result of such a

crime is not only death, but also social manipulation, for the state of Rome created a narrative surrounding each case of *incestum* and used it to the state's own advantage.

Familial Connections

The Vestals, in theory, cut ties to their *gens* and relinquished the right to nepotism and favoritism. In practice, this was not the case. The family members of the Vestal Virgins, due to their proximity with their daughters and sisters in the order, received access to many of the privileges the Vestals possessed. This section focuses on some of the instances in which the Vestals had full agency in gifting their previous *gens* with some of their priestly privileges. The family members of the priestess truly reaped the benefits of affiliation and relation to a Vestal Virgin. This relationship was cultivated throughout the Vestal's term as priestess. The familial connection went against the legal custom, but it fit perfectly with the social customs of kinship. The priestesses wielded their powers, which came from the high class status of the Vestal Virgins, in order to positively affect their familial connections.

Upon entering the priesthood of the Vestal Virgins, as a part of the *captio* ceremony, the *pontifex maximus* took each girl from her father or the *paterfamilias*. This significant ritual indicated the separation of the soon-to-be Vestal from her *gens*. Without her family, the Vestal claimed all of the powers and privileges which befitted the priestesses. Many Vestals conformed to what the state expected of them. In fact, if a Vestal left the order, it was very common for her to move into the home of a matron of her choosing as opposed to moving back in with her *gens*.¹²³ The structure of the order established a basis for familial disconnect.

¹²³ Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 21.

Despite this custom and theoretical guideline set up by the Roman state, some Vestals did not renounce their connections to their kin.¹²⁴ It is significant that it was the choice of the Vestal to even temporarily bestow her influence and power on her relatives. One popular example of this gift was to leave estates and property to blood relatives in the will of a Vestal. The irony of the matter is that the Vestals created wills because they did not have any descendents. Theoretically, by cutting off any ties to her previous *gens*, a Vestal would not have anyone to take care of her estate. As such, the priestesses had wills. If they did not create a will it was called dying intestate and all of the belongings and properties of the dead Vestal would go to the state instead of to their next of kin.¹²⁵ However, because the Vestal did keep up their connections with families, they would leave parts of their estates, whether it be land, objects, or enslaved people, to their kin.¹²⁶ There were no direct consequences to upholding the connections between family members. The Vestals could even flaunt their well-kept connections in public. In the cases seen below, each Vestal Virgin helped either her *gens* as a whole or just one individual member.

DiLuzio remarks that the priestesses imitated other elite Roman women in the way in which they kept loyalties to their kin. Both groups would even go to creative extremes in order to provide political or social success for said relations.¹²⁷ In order to provide this success, the holy women used their transition from private citizens to public priestesses. In doing so, they had to leave their families to help their families. Focusing

¹²⁴ Staples, *The Good Goddess to the Vestal Virgins*, 144.

¹²⁵ Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 61.

¹²⁶ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 65.

¹²⁷ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 238.

on this transition of positions, the Vestals had the higher social standing from which to provide greater support and assistance to the lives of their relatives. Lindner says that,

Textual evidence from Roman authors and inscriptions cut into large marble bases set up in the Vestals' residence suggest that individual Chief Vestal Virgins had powerful connections to their families of origin and used their power to help their relations. Inscriptions bespeak gratitude not only of families but also of clients for interventions and munificence.¹²⁸

The public affiliation between Vestal and family provides historians with plenty of evidence, both textual and archaeological, from which to draw upon. The public trusted the Vestals, knowing that the priestesses would only support a cause beneficial to Rome. The people of Rome must have been accustomed to the common occurrence of Vestals deploying nepotism, and took stock in the public perception of the opinion of the priestess, through her shows of support towards her *gens*.

In the first half of the 1st century BCE, the Vestal Licinia was a perfect example of the facts above.¹²⁹ There is ambiguity regarding the exact year in which this occurred, but at a gladiatorial show, Licinia vacated her seat for a Licinius Murena.¹³⁰ Due to the shared "Licini-us/a" name, it is very likely that the two were related in some form or another. Jerome S. Arkenberg argues that the Vestal was not a close relation of Licinius Murena because Cicero, the writer who gave this account, did not call her an aunt, sister, or cousin. Arkenberg does not believe her to be the daughter of the man either.¹³¹ In and

¹²⁸ Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 2.

¹²⁹ According to Cadoux, it is possible that this Vestal Licinia is the same Vestal accused by Plotius who was tried and acquitted with the Vestal Fabia in a case of *crimen incesti*. The years and names line up with each other, but scholars are not positive. "It seems that both Fabia and Licinia continued as Vestals for some years. In 63, L. Licinius Murena was helped in his candidature for the consulship by a relative who was a Vestal, and this could well have been our Licinia." Cadoux, "Catiline and the Vestal Virgins," 178. Arkenberg says that there is no actual evidence to connect the two Licinias. Jerome S. Arkenberg, "Licinii Murenae, Terentii Varrones, and Varrones Murenae: I. A Prosopographical Study of Three Roman Families," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 42, no. 3 (1993): 340. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436295>.

¹³⁰ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 231.

¹³¹ Arkenberg, "Licinii Murenae, Terentii Varrones, and Varrones Murenae," 340.

of itself, a Vestal relinquishing a seat in her segregated area at a gladiatorial game was already a significant move. The action showed that the person for whom the Vestal yielded her seat was someone deserving of the praise and kindness of the Vestal. It indicated to the public that the man was worthy of the attention of a Vestal and therefore worthy of the support and interest of the people of Rome. Licinia ceded her seat to Licinius Murena right as he was running for consul. With no evidence of coercion, Licinia chose to give up her seat to her relative, fully knowing the beneficial effects it would have. When election time came around, Licinius Murena was elected by the people. The impact of the preference of a Vestal went beyond the individual, it also affected everyone who was able to see the support and act accordingly. Licinia gave her support to Licinius Murena, thus convincing the people of Rome to give him their political support.

Between the scholars Cadoux, DiLuzio, and Arkenberg there is some scholarly debate on who exactly the Vestal Licinia helped to consulship. All three agree that the relative years in which Licinia held the position of Vestal were from sometime before 73 BCE until sometime after 63 BCE. Cadoux and DiLuzio write that Licinia assisted L. Licinius Murena into his consul position in 63 BCE by giving up her seat at a gladiatorial show.¹³² Arkenberg lists P. Licinius Murena, an older man with an unknown connection to L. Licinius Murena, as the man who secured consulship through the public show of preference by Licinia.¹³³ He continues with the paraphrased words of Cicero, who attributed that L. Licinius Murena received his position through “the lavish games he gave as praetor, his liberality to his troops, his general goodwill to Romans in Gaul, his

¹³² Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 177. DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 231.

¹³³ Arkenberg, “Licinii Murenarum, Terentii Varrones, and Varrones Murenarum,” 339.

reputation in Asia, and the presence in the city of Lucullus's troops, there to celebrate the latter's long-delayed triumph,” and not through *ambitus*, political corruption, as he was accused.¹³⁴ Regardless of *who* the Vestal Licinia assisted, the familial connection remained present no matter how distant her relation to the soon-to-be consul was. Such acts of nepotism were prevalent within the lives of the other Vestals as well.

Another case of a Vestal giving her public approval for the benefit of a family comes from Cicero as well. In this instance from 69 BCE, the Vestal Fonteia became the crux of the argument for the acquittal of her brother, M. Fonteius.¹³⁵ Fonteius was on trial for extortion, of which the conviction would result in death, with Cicero as his defender. The orator used the purity and innocence of the Vestal sister to play upon the emotions of the jury.¹³⁶ He argued that if that brother were to die, Fonteia would become so distraught that her tears would extinguish the sacred hearth of Vesta. The argument of Cicero thus created the implication that the safety of the entire city of Rome rested on the acquittal of M. Fonteius. He said, “What protection, what comfort is left to the poor woman, if this man is lost? Other women, for their part, can bear guardians for themselves, and have at home an ally and participant in all of life’s fortunes. But for this virgin, what can be either dear or pleasant except her brother?”¹³⁷ Cicero portrayed the Vestal Virgins as the modest and chaste women as which they presented themselves. The success of the defense depended on the jury believing that those qualities existed in the Vestals.

The jury empathized with the Vestal and her grief over the potential loss of her brother, a human emotion that resonates throughout every social class. That grief was

¹³⁴ Arkenberg, “Licinii Murenæ, Terentii Varronæ, and Varronæ Murenæ,” 339.

¹³⁵ Allen M. Ward, “Cicero’s Support of Pompey in the Trials of M. Fonteius and P. Oppius,” *Latomus* 27, no. 4 (1968): 802. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41525720>.

¹³⁶ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 224.

¹³⁷ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 224.

amplified by the innocence of a priestess who “has been, on behalf of you and of your children, occupied for so many years in propitiating the immortal gods.”¹³⁸ Cicero represented Fonteia both as a tireless devotee to Vesta and as a woman ready to grieve her brother. Not only would the death of Fonteia’s brother have devastated the Vestal herself, but it would also have devastated the entire city. Cicero remarked her grief stricken tears would have doused the hearth of Vesta, thus removing the blessing of Vesta from Rome and affecting everything from agriculture to milling. The fault, as Cicero made clear, would not have been on Fonteia, but on the jury for setting these events into action by convicting Fonteius. Fonteia’s emotions were assumed based on her status, stripped bare, and projected in front of a jury waiting to be manipulated by Cicero. Cicero took hold of the public perception of the position of the Vestal Fonteia, specifically the perception that the Vestals were ritually pure beings devoted to a powerful goddess and emotionally connected to their families. He extracted those perceptions for the benefit of her brother.

Valerius Maximus told another account of a Vestal Virgin using her position to support a member of her birth family.¹³⁹ In 143 BCE, Appius Claudius Pulcher was elected as consul. He fought against the Salassi army and lost at first, only to further his strategy and win in the end. Upon his return to Rome, the pontifical college denied his request to hold a triumph into the city. Going against the wishes of the senate, Pulcher hosted a triumph for himself and his soldiers at his own expense. The senate got word of this and sent a tribune to forcibly remove Pulcher from his chariot. The Vestal Claudia stepped onto the chariot and stopped the attack. Claudia was the daughter of Appius Claudius Pulcher.¹⁴⁰ The Vestal *sanctitas*, sacred status, of the priestess saved the

¹³⁸ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 224.

¹³⁹ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 226

¹⁴⁰ Wildfang, *Rome’s Vestal Virgins*, 91-92.

triumph. Given the legal ideal that Vestals be separated from their families, modern scholars might expect Claudia to receive backlash from her actions. Subverting these expectations, the intervention of Claudia earned her praise as a “paragon of female virtue.”¹⁴¹ From such a public and idolized position in society, the repercussions of an error on the part of the priestesses were more dire than for others, such as with *crimeni incesti*. However, when the holy women did something praiseworthy, they were inundated with accolades. Valerius Maximus described her intercession as a display of filial piety better than any son. In this story, Claudia is the model Roman citizen, putting her family first.¹⁴² The virtue of Claudia which saved the triumph and represented the ideal Roman came from her years of service as a Vestal. Her priestly duties fostered the devotion and *pietas* or piety necessary to stop the forceful removal of her father.

This rebellious move on the part of Claudia had a two fold benefit. On the one hand, the Vestal was able to help a close relation from her birth *gens*. Such a move was successful due to the cultural norm which prohibited bad behavior around the Vestal Virgins.¹⁴³ In fact, Cadoux remarks that, “Their presence was a guarantee against violence.”¹⁴⁴ Claudia wielded her knowledge of this for the benefit of her birth family.

¹⁴¹ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 228.

¹⁴² “*Magna sunt haec virilis pietatis opera, sed nescio an his omnibus valentius et animosius Claudia Vestalis virginis factus. quae, cum patrem suum triumphantem e curru celeritate utrisque se interponendo amplissimam potestatem inimictiis accensam depluit. igitur alterum triumphum pater in Capitolium, alterum filia in aedem Vestae duxit, nec discerni potuit utri plus laudis tribueretur; cui victoria an cui pietas comes aderat.*” “Great are the works of male piety, but perhaps the action of Claudia the Vestal Virgin was more powerful and courageous than them all. Seeing her father at his triumph being dragged from his car by the violent hand of a Tribune of the Plebs, she put herself between the two with amazing speed and so drove off a mighty power fired by enmities. So the father led one triumph to the Capitol while the daughter led another to the temple of Vesta, nor could it be determined which of the two should be praised more, he who had the victory by his side or she who had the piety.” Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb Classical Library (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: 2000) 499.

¹⁴³ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 164.

¹⁴⁴ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 166.

On the other hand, by stopping the tribune from forcibly removing Pulcher, the Vestal Claudia announced to the senate and people of Rome that the Vestals were interested in involving themselves in politics.¹⁴⁵ The Vestals were already invested in politics, but until this point they only participated in politics which directly concerned the Vestal order. By literally and physically inserting herself into the triumph so that it could continue, Claudia intentionally opened the door for the Vestals to participate in issues which affected others in Rome as well.

The Vestal Virgins were once a part of the private citizens of Rome. In theory, they were to renounce their past connections and devote themselves completely to serving the goddess Vesta. In practice, they represented a different story. The Vestals very clearly and publicly were able to foster a relationship with their previous *gens*. In doing so, the priestesses drew upon their status in order to create a positive outcome for their family members. Licinia helped a member of her *gens* to reach the position of consul through an action of public favor. Fonteia brought an emotional element into the defense argument of Cicero. He subjected the jury to their own expectations of the emotions and reaction of a Vestal Virgins upon the death of a relative. Claudia brought honor to her father by giving him the access to complete a triumphal march. She also benefited the Vestals as a whole by showing that they were interested in political matters outside of their preexisting, predetermined sphere. The priestesses connected their Vestal lives to their past families. In doing so, they were able to help their families through the power and prestige of being a Vestal.

Financial Power

¹⁴⁵ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 93.

The financial power of the Vestal Virgins was great, in that they were able to acquire wealth both individually and as a whole group. In most cases, people contributed to the growing wealth of the Vestals. They did so primarily through donations. However, instead of adding to the affluence of the priestesses, some people tried to detract from Vestal holdings. In some situations, especially in those involving land and property, people tried to exploit the extensive financial benefits allotted to the Vestals. Residents of the city knew about the luxury of the Vestal lifestyle. The religious leaders of Rome used that to get people to reinvest in the priesthood. Due to the wealth of the holy women, the Roman state in the Imperial era attracted the desire to participate in the lifestyle of the priestesses as a means to raise support for the Empire. The state raised this support and participation by paying the girl whom the *pontifex maximus* selected to become the next Vestal. Overall, the money and valuables of the Vestal Virgins traded hands frequently and provided many scenarios for people to find an outcome which brought profit to themselves.

The financial position of the Vestal Virgins varied throughout the years. By the time of Livy, the priestesses were receiving money in some form. Livy wrote that they received a *stipendium* which came at the expense of the public.¹⁴⁶ The *stipendium*, as written according to Livy, was a sum of money given to each Vestal at the start of her religious career. Only a few years later, Tacitus described the Vestal income in an annual aspect, similar to the annual income men in the military received.¹⁴⁷ Scholars are uncertain over the details of how exactly the Vestals acquired money from the state, but it is certain that they did indeed have a growing financial support.

¹⁴⁶ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 70.

¹⁴⁷ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 71.

The priestesses were able to manage their income themselves and spend it as they pleased.¹⁴⁸ The Vestals were not subject to the ministrations and management of a *tutela*. A *tutela* was the guardianship, usually by the *paterfamilias*, over a woman, including her financials. The Vestals were released from the monetary oversight of the *paterfamilias* upon their initiation into the sacred order. As such, the priestesses had the ability to buy, sell, and rent land and properties at their own discretion.¹⁴⁹ This power equipped them with the ability to will this property to others outside of their *gens*.¹⁵⁰ These transactions gave individual Vestals financial security. Donating to the Vestal Virgins was the most common way to access their power, but it involved an equal exchange. The Vestals were able to provide a service to a customer of sorts. Public intrigue spiked when people tried to take advantage of the financial stability and security from which the Vestals benefitted.

Another way in which the Vestals accrued financial stability was through sales. By the 1st century CE, Hygenius remarked that the priestesses leased out store fronts in the markets near the *aedes vestae*.¹⁵¹ These shops paid rent, thus giving the Vestals an additional form of income. It was also in a central location which would be beneficial to those wanting to sell their goods in those stores. According to a translation from Joshua M. Roberts, Hygenius wrote “From antiquity, they learn this, so that they also make use of the ancient names, such as the leased property of the Vestals, the temple altars, temples, tombs and similar [things].”¹⁵² This affluence only added to the privileges of the Vestals. The priestesses understood how to lease their properties for maximum financial gains.

¹⁴⁸ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 72.

¹⁴⁹ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 62.

¹⁵⁰ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 138.

¹⁵¹ Joshua M. Roberts, “Rome’s vestal virgins: public spectacle and society,” (Masters thesis, Western Washington University, 2012), 94.

¹⁵² Roberts, “Rome’s vestal virgins: public spectacle and society,” 95.

Both the order as a whole and individual Vestals had a large amount of financial privilege. This wealth came to the Vestals in the forms of material trades and donations. The clients of the priestesses tended to be Roman citizens. The clients asked for the benedictions and help of the holy women and, in return, they would donate something of value to the religious order, or even to the specific Vestal who helped them, in exchange for the sacred services. A good portion of the Vestal wealth came from the bequests of wealthy patrons and family members.¹⁵³

Family members did find other means through which to take advantage of the Vestal resources. The Vestal Licinia was selling property which Crassus wanted. He claimed to have been courting Licinia, spending more than appropriate time with her, in order to acquire a cheaper deal on her land. The experience of the Vestal Licinia and M. Licinius Crassus is but one example of the common occurrence of a Vestal meeting someone in private in order to negotiate a deal for the sale of an estate owned by a Vestal. In that case, Licinia was accused of *incestum* as a form of blackmail for the property. According to DiLuzio, at least in the Imperial period, situations such as the one described above were not uncommon.

Tiberius did not take advantage of money already in the hands of Vestals. Instead, he wielded the potential for money and the greed which goes along with it. According to Tacitus, in the 1st century CE, Emperor Tiberius was attempting to reinvigorate the Roman public in their trust and positive feelings towards the Roman state.¹⁵⁴ One of the ways in which he did so was by incentivizing families to invest themselves into the support of the Vestals by providing an award for the young girl the *pontifex maximus*

¹⁵³ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 136.

¹⁵⁴ Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, ed. Alfred John Church, William Jackson Brodribb, and Sara Bryant (New York: Random House, Inc., 1942).

would choose. In a previous year there was even a second place prize for the family of the second place girl. The child who would eventually be called the Vestal Cornelia won the position to be a Vestal Virgin and received two million sesterces. Two million sesterces was twice the value of the property qualifications needed in order to join the senatorial order.¹⁵⁵ Awarding such a grand prize strengthened the connection between the Empire and the elite families of Rome. Suddenly, contributing a daughter to the Roman state was beneficial to the public and could bring good financial tidings. The emperor used the desire for money as a tool to benefit the interest in the safe-keeping and religious ongoings of the empire.

The Vestal Virgins held a surprising amount of financial power, even when it was not yet in their hands, such as with the case described above with Emperor Tiberius. Similar material and monetary donations encouraged the Vestals to support a person or cause they may not have supported before. Property was a common good of which people would try to take advantage from the Vestals, all because the priestesses possessed the ability to buy and sell estates without the guidance of a *tutela*. The financial gains of the Vestals put them in a position apt for deals in order to bring a positive outcome to multiple parties contemporaneously.

Political Power

The high standing of the Vestal Virgins within the political sphere of Rome was evident in many aspects of their lives. The sway the Vestals had over politics was common knowledge throughout the city. The citizens of Rome were able to use that political sway to their advantage and connect their needs to those of the Vestals. The priestesses were educated members of a religious order who were integral to the

¹⁵⁵ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 142.

purification and longevity of both the city and society. The Vestals received their education as a part of their training which was centered around serving the goddess and Rome. Politicians exploited their exhibited need for purity in order to create an outcome which benefited their own personal or group desires. The Vestals themselves found ways to incorporate their own desires into the outcomes of their political actions. Members of the public and the Vestals themselves molded the political power held by the Vestal Virgins for an outcome that benefited the case-specific manipulator.

One such aspect of political priority in the lives of the Vestal Virgins was their physical location in the forum, in the middle of all the political activity. These priestesses were the only women to hold such a fixed physical position in the Roman Forum. They were also the only women who were able to address the senate.¹⁵⁶ Even the way in which the priestesses walked through the city was an indicator of their importance to the senate. The holy women had a special type of bodyguard called a *lictor*. The Vestals were accompanied by a specific type called *lictore curiatii* which were affiliated with the pontifical college.¹⁵⁷ Ariadne Staples, a scholar on women in ancient religions, writes,

A *lictor* was a symbol of power, secular in the case of magistrates, sacred in the case of the *flamen Dialis* and the Vestal Virgins. From the perspective of common perception a Vestal on the streets, accompanied by a *lictor*, would have been a unique figure, instantly recognizable as a Vestal. Positions of power in Rome were occupied exclusively by men. The Vestals were the only women who were accompanied by a symbol of power... It kept her aloof from the common experience of any other category in Rome.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Matthew Dillon and Lynda Garland, *The Ancient Romans: History and Society from the Early Republic to the Death of Augustus* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 349.

¹⁵⁷ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 141.

¹⁵⁸ Ariadne Staples, *The Good Goddess to the Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (London and New York: 1998), 145.

These *lictors* granted the Vestals not only a distinction into the realm of influential people, but also physical protection. Vestals were allowed to employ a *lictor* starting in 42 BCE; Dio reported this is because a Vestal was insulted and therefore put in danger on her way home from a dinner party.¹⁵⁹ The *lictors curiatii* placed the Vestals on a similar visual level of influence and importance as the rest of the pontifical college.

In a typical Roman household, women held influence over their children and husbands. This extended into the households of senators as well.¹⁶⁰ As described in the earlier section, the Vestal Virgins did not relinquish their connection to their previous *gens*. Their feminine influence extended to their fathers and brothers, the same way an elite matron could attempt to sway her husband or child. The impact of the Vestals upon their families was even more pronounced because of their status. This is all to say that the Vestal Virgins could guide and affect the political realm in Rome because of the religious offices they held and their familial connections to senators. One of the reasons for which people would implore the Vestals for aid was to gain respect by association.¹⁶¹ The Vestals held such a high status in the political realm that people wanted to use that to their advantage.

A commercial guild took advantage of the high status of the college of priestesses in the early 3rd century CE. The commercial guild was one responsible specifically for the repairs to major access roads to and from Rome. They took advantage of the political status of the Vestals with the establishment of a statue base and inscription found in the *atrium vestae*. Their goal in this was to ease the bureaucracy involved in road construction. The inscription was dedicated to Emperor Caracalla. “The road repairs

¹⁵⁹ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 141.

¹⁶⁰ De la Bédoyère, “Virtue, Honour, and Chastity,” 25.

¹⁶¹ Saquete, *Las vírgenes vestales*, 105.

mentioned in the inscriptions echoed the idea of maintenance of order and decency within the college of Vestals in the Severan period, which Caracalla supported most aggressively.”¹⁶² According to Lindner, in Roman thought, it was considered wise to foster a public connection between the emperor and the Vestal Virgins by means of inscriptions and dedications.

This inscription does a two fold job. On the one hand, it reinforces the support of the emperor for the major road works. That support ensures an easy construction without political or bureaucratic roadblocks. On the other hand, by placing the inscription in the *atrium vestae*, the guild was imploring the blessing of Vesta. They placed the inscription in a location where the Vestals would see. The Vestals would then have the agency to pray to Vesta and provide support for the workers, or not. The guild finessed the system in such a way that they essentially asked Vesta and the emperor for blessings on their work.

These guild workers were fully cognizant of what results their actions would achieve. They played into the connection between the emperor and the Vestals. This came at a time when the relationship between the political and religious was strong. By calling upon both offices, those who built the roads ensured the favor of the religious and the state powers. The emperor approved of and funded a project, public works ran smoother. When given the favor of a goddess, life became less challenging because her protection was a part of divine favor. Making the inscription was a calculated move. On the off chance that the emperor did not want to support the commercial guild, the Vestals, having been honored in the placement of the inscription within the *atrium vestae*, could suggest to the emperor and pontifical college that they support the workers.

¹⁶² Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 77.

According to Takács, “Roman women could sway political opinion, but outside their assigned sphere, in the realm of the public, they could easily become targets themselves.”¹⁶³ Such an event happened to the Vestal Mor Minucia during the Struggle of the Orders. The Struggle of the Orders, or Conflict of the Orders, was a lengthy political battle between the different classes in Rome to see where each sect fit and held power.¹⁶⁴ Minucia was alive in the 4th century BCE. She was a plebeian in origin. Plebeians were very rarely accepted into the order of the Vestals. Typically, the *pontifex maximus* wanted a new member from a patrician family to further establish her purity. Minucia was the only plebeian Vestal throughout her tenure. By the time that Minucia had already passed her first ten years of learning, the plebeians of Rome were trying to gain more influence over the pontifical college and the patricians, especially within the political sphere. In retaliation and as a way to deter the plebeians from gaining political ground, Mor Minucia was accused of *incestum*.¹⁶⁵ The accusation was on the basis of improper dress. Her act of *incestum* was not even one that had another partner. It was simply theoretically out of custom and propriety for a Vestal. The pontifical college used her as an example that the plebeians were not fit to hold such power. In 337 BCE, Mor Minucia was convicted of the *crimen incesti* and buried alive.

To fully understand the power manipulations at play, one must peel back the layers of each action. The plebeians were using the sanctity and class standing of Minucia as a Vestal Virgin in order to show that they could integrate themselves into the upper ranges of society and add positive contributions. Minucia almost certainly would have

¹⁶³ Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 19.

¹⁶⁴ “The Struggle of the Orders: Plebeians Unite to Lift their Shackles,” Sites at Penn State. Last modified 2022. <https://sites.psu.edu/struggleoftheorders/>.

¹⁶⁵ An enslaved person accused Mor Minucia of *incestum*. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 83.

known about her position and public persona being used as such. The patricians used Minucia to keep the plebeians out of political power. As a Vestal Virgin, she was within her assigned sphere with the power to sway political opinion, but as a plebeian, the patricians viewed her as having stepped outside of her sphere and sought to use her to put a stop to others doing the same. Minucia became a target of these manipulations by the mere virtue of her birth. The origin of her birth would theoretically have been ignored but in practice was not, just as how past *gens* would theoretically not have received any benefits, but did in practice.

The power of Minucia was significant because she was a Vestal Virgin and a plebeian. Both the plebeians and patricians were using the Vestal for their own designs. “Minucia’s *incestum*, real or invented, provided the patricians with a golden opportunity to make their point and warn the plebeians of the dangers attendant on overstepping their traditional place, and it is most probably for this reason as much as any actual misdeed that she was found guilty and buried alive.”¹⁶⁶ Accusing a Vestal of *crimen incesti* was a fast way to remove her from the power playing field. The Vestal Virgins were easy targets because they had limited authority with which to defend themselves, even though they were the only women allowed to testify in court. While at the same time, the priestesses were difficult targets because of the power they could wield, political or otherwise.

By the 1st century CE, the Vestal Virgins were publicizing the ways they found to reclaim their own power within the political sphere. For example, in the 3rd century CE, the Vestal Julia Aquilia Severa married the emperor and received the title of *Augusta*.¹⁶⁷ There were many instances of the Vestals individually trying to sway the political forces

¹⁶⁶ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 84.

¹⁶⁷ Outi Sihvonen, “The Vestal Virgins and Power: Tradition and Change in Third Century Rome” (PhD diss., Tampere University, 2020), 127.

at play and most resulted in failure.¹⁶⁸ After the turn of the millenium, the Vestals identified ways to successfully influence the political sphere of Rome. In order to do so they would move as a unit and manipulate the preexisting religious rules, such as the conservative attire, and frameworks in which they lived. That is to say, the Vestals went through loopholes in the rules and regulations of their own order.¹⁶⁹

One example of such was that the Vestals began arguing for more sexual leniency, although this did not gain any traction until a few centuries later.¹⁷⁰ Part of the actions of Julia Aquilia Severa were for such sexual leniency: marriage while still a Vestal. However, any changes she may have made reverted back to their more conservative norm after her death.¹⁷¹ Instead of fighting directly for sexual leniency, the Vestals approached the proverbial barriers in smaller steps by, for example, arguing for a less strict dress code. As seen with Minucia above, a fashion faux pas could be fatal. In this way, the Vestals took their own power in their hands and used it for their benefits and not to the direct advantage of others.

Another instance in which the Vestals wielded their power for their own benefit was in order to reinforce their diminishing support from the pontifical college. The Chief Vestal exchanged dedicated statues with the married couple Agorius Vetius Praetextatus and Fabia Paulia. This means that in the 4th century CE, Praetextatus, Fabia, and Coelia Concordia commissioned statues and wrote the inscription displaying the purpose of these statues was to honor the other person. The three parties dedicated their statues right before the disbanding of the cult of Vesta.¹⁷² Such as the case, it was a symbiotic

¹⁶⁸ DiLuzio, *A Place at the Altar*, 191.

¹⁶⁹ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 95.

¹⁷⁰ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 91.

¹⁷¹ Sihvonen, "The Vestal Virgins and Power: Tradition and Change in Third Century Rome" 237.

¹⁷² Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 78.

relationship and transaction due to the power and acknowledgement each party received. Praetextatus was a praetor and a high priest under Emperor Valentinian II. Coelia Concordia was the *virgo vestalis maxima* and a friend of the pair.¹⁷³ At this time, the Vestals were in search of support from the senate. Christianity was on the rise and the Vestals were mere years away from their dispersion. Archaeologists found that the statue dedicated to Coelia Concordia was established first. The Chief Vestal did not dedicate one to her friend until after his death. This move was heavily criticized by Symmachus because it was the first time a Vestal had ever set up a statue dedicated to a man.¹⁷⁴

The Vestals in the late empire were able to grab political status, reminiscent of their positions in the past. Coelia Concordia calculated the correct person with whom to exchange statues. Because of the exchange, the Vestals reinforced their association with the other primary religious orders of Rome. Praetextatus was a priest of Vesta as well as a praetor. The association between the Vestal Virgins and a priest of Vesta was not a surprise, but by associating themselves with a praetor, a man holding a political office, the Vestals were able to steal back some power which had disappeared with their declining popularity from the people of Rome in the 4th century. In return, Praetextatus was able to reinforce his authority as a priest of Vesta through the acknowledgment and inscription by the Vestal Virgins, the group of people most dedicated to Vesta. The Vestal Virgins took hold of their own power both from within, by using it to strengthen the perceived relationship between Praetextatus and Vesta, and from without, by encouraging Praetextatus to strengthen the influential relationship between the Vestals and the pontifical college for the duration of their existence.

¹⁷³ Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 79.

¹⁷⁴ Rodolfo Lanciani, *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries* (Boston and New York: Houghton & Mifflin, 1898), 169.

Many Imperial statues of Vestal Virgins resembled their contemporary empresses.¹⁷⁵ The sculptors copied the styles of the statues of the empress and emulated distinguishable characteristics in the statues of the Vestals. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the express purpose for these similarities outside of gaining favor with the senate and the ruling family. “It is unlikely that we will ever know the name of this Chief Vestal Virgin, because the names of all but two second century Vestals are missing in the historical record.”¹⁷⁶ The repetitive styles of the statues creates difficulties for identifying specific people after two thousand years of wear. Therefore, archaeologists must rely on other identifiers on the statues, such as soft shoes to indicate a Vestal.

The relationship between the people of Rome, from every social standing and class, and the power of the Vestal Virgins within the political sphere is one of give and take. The commercial road working guild gave authority to the Vestals by connecting them and the contemporary emperor, while also gaining political favor from the Vestals and the emperor. By being placed in the political favor of the Vestals, the guild had a voice speaking out for the workers when they were not able to do so themselves. *Mor Minucia* was a perfect example of a Vestal and her influence being used by multiple groups all at once. Her role as a Vestal was overshadowed by her birth as a plebeian. In the Late Empire, the Vestals transitioned from having to work as a group in order to gain sway and desires, to making individual decisions and power grabs like *Coelia Concordia*. The Chief Vestal worked to keep her order in the political sphere by exchanging statues with a senator. The political influence of the Vestal Virgins was accessible and able to be molded to one’s own desires than other forms of their power.

¹⁷⁵ “Empress” here means the wife of the emperor.

¹⁷⁶ Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 148.

Crimen Incesti

The previous three sections have been on the power of the Vestal Virgins, be it the power of family connections, financial gains, or political sway. Going forward, the *crimen incesti* will be highlighted for the way in which each of these Vestal powers were exploited against their benefit. *Crimen incesti* was an important and grand event any time it occurred. In some cases, the allegedly *incestae* Vestals came out alive, but many did not. Even when the priestess was saved by the goddess Vesta herself, the event in question benefited someone other than the Vestal Virgins. The crime of unchastity opened up the opportunity for people to manipulate the various powers of the Vestals for their own sakes. It often worked so well because there were few ways to avoid live internment when a Vestal had already been convicted in the eyes of the public. With that as the case, the accuser of the *incesta* Vestal influenced the outcomes.

As already discussed, the Vestal Virgins could be charged with *crimen incesti*, convicted, and sentenced to death. By performing their rituals in a state of *incestum*, the Vestals brought pollution into their performances for purity. The Romans placed a great deal of importance on the Vestals to remain chaste because they were representations of the city itself. “The untouched body of the Vestal Virgin is metonymy for the untouched city of Rome. Her unique legal status frees her from all family ties so that she can incarnate the collective.”¹⁷⁷ While in theory the unique legal status of the Vestals cut them off from all familial ties, as seen in this paper, in practice that was not true. Anyone, from the gods to family to enslaved people could accuse a Vestal. Vestals were accused of *incestum* for many reasons throughout time, not simply for unchastity. The reasons behind the accusations shifted in each case but there were some commonalities. Scholars

¹⁷⁷ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” 563.

have debated how to define the death of the Vestal, but the bottom line is that “all was not well with the state’s relationship with its gods. The only way that relationship could be repaired was by the ritual of live internment.”¹⁷⁸ In order for Rome to operate smoothly in agriculture and with the protection of Vesta, fostering purity within the Vestal Virgins was essential. This section will be taking a look at specific cases of accusations towards the Vestals and those who benefitted from these encounters.

Investigating the cases of *incesta* Vestal activity relies on investigating the accusers of the Vestals in question. The majority of accusations were brought to light by enslaved people, family members, or the gods themselves. More often than not, when an enslaved individual accused a Vestal of *incestum* it was through eyewitness accounts. In one account told by Dio, Vestals Aemilia, Marcia, and Licinia were all tried together in 114-113 BCE.¹⁷⁹ Originally, Marcia and Licinia were acquitted despite the displeasure of the public. Eventually, a second investigation occurred and a slave of Vetutius Barrus acted as the informant which solidified the guilt of the three Vestals and convicted them with *incesti*. In this scenario, Aemilia had multiple lovers, one of whom was Vetutius. In the hopes of being manumitted, Manlius, another person enslaved by Vetutius, betrayed the Vestal because he allegedly caught the offenders in the act.¹⁸⁰ The pontifical college approved of this type of irrefutable proof. The word of enslaved people was taken very seriously in these matters.

Here, Manlius took advantage of the vulnerable position of the Vestal. Given that the consequences of her actions were so high, the reward for reporting her offense was equally as high. This situation was a perfect example of a life for a life. Manlius traded in

¹⁷⁸ Schultz, “On the burial of unchaste Vestal Virgins,” 129.

¹⁷⁹ Dillon and Garland, *The Ancient Romans*, 352.

¹⁸⁰ Wildfang, *Rome’s Vestal Virgins*, 94.

his life of servitude and slavery for freedom because he exhibited exemplary actions for the city, while Aemilia was trading in her life of servitude for death because she exhibited unacceptable actions for the city. Manlius tore down the high standing of a Vestal Virgin and used it for his own gain.

In Mor Minucia's case cited earlier with regards to political power,¹⁸¹ sexual activity was not involved. Chastity for the Vestals was not restricted to promiscuity. In these situations, the Vestals in question showed too much wit and inappropriate dress as with Minucia in 337 BCE. Livy describes an instance where the Vestal Minucia was accused of misconduct.¹⁸² Minucia was very possibly the first historical example of a Vestal being buried alive for *incestum*.¹⁸³ She was suspected of misconduct because she dressed in a manner more elaborate than was the norm. Such an exhibition was not appropriate for a vessel of Vesta. A slave accused her in front of the pontiffs. This accusation led to the interrogation through torture of others Minucia had enslaved. The rulers of Rome took the eyewitness accounts of enslaved people against the Vestal Virgins very seriously. This situation demonstrates how a Vestal could be accused for things other than sexual activity. The Vestals represented the moral standards of Rome.

Accusations could also come from familial connections. In the case mentioned earlier in this paper,¹⁸⁴ Plutarch wrote that the Vestal Licinia was tried and acquitted for *crimen incesti*.¹⁸⁵ The trial took place in 73 BCE. The Vestal Licinia faced trial with

¹⁸¹ Found on page 54-55.

¹⁸² Dillon and Garland, *The Ancient Romans*, 350.

¹⁸³ Dillon and Garland elaborate on the situation, emphasizing that there was an ongoing war with the Latins. Minucia was the first plebeian Vestal. Dillon and Garland note that some politicians may have believed her inherent impurity coming from her lower birth status led to the military losses of Rome. Dillon and Garland, *The Ancient Romans*, 350.

¹⁸⁴ Found on pages 61-62.

¹⁸⁵ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1916), 315.

Marcus Licinius Crassus. Scholarly debate has accepted the two as cousins, given the “Licini-us/-a” name.¹⁸⁶ The avarice of Crassus provided proof of innocence for the two parties. In this case, Licinia had been selling property which Crassus coveted. In the end, both parties were acquitted. Crassus was such a prolifically greedy person that the pontifical college accepted his defense. At the same time, Crassus “did not let Licinia go until he had acquired her property.”¹⁸⁷ Crassus blackmailed the Vestal Licinia, relying on his position in society and greed to assure him a victory. Crassus exploited a familial connection in order to take financial power from a Vestal Virgin.

Members of the *gens* of a Vestal were able to use the chastity status and potential death of the related priestess as bargaining means for an advantageous end. In the example above, Crassus was not the only person who walked away from this event with a better position in life. M. Pupius Piso regained social status and a positive reputation. He defended Licinia in the trial. His career had been in a rut until this very public scandal.¹⁸⁸ By winning the case, Piso secured his position in society. The trial of the Vestal Licinia and Marcus Licinius Crassus proves that when one accused a Vestal of being *incesta* there were outcomes which did not benefit the city of Rome alone, but also specific powerful individuals involved. Piso used the importance of the case of Vestal impurity within society to further his own political career, as he was cited in more winning court cases after this event.¹⁸⁹

As described earlier, when the eternal living flame of Vesta went out, it portended the unchastity of a Vestal and required a solution to the problematic situation. The Roman

¹⁸⁶ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 166.

¹⁸⁷ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, 315.

¹⁸⁸ Dillon and Garland, *The Ancient Romans*, 360.

¹⁸⁹ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 167.

public, upon discovering the extinguished flame, took that as a sign that the gods were angry with the Vestals for polluting the purity of Rome.¹⁹⁰ In this sense, the gods accused the Vestals of *crimen incesti* because the deities themselves revealed the crime by putting out the fire, but in reality, “it is generally assumed nowadays that accusations of, and convictions for, Vestal *incestum* occurred only at moments when Rome was in especially great danger or turmoil.”¹⁹¹ In each account of misconduct described in *The Ancient Romans: History and Society from the Early Republic to the Death of Augustus*, the authors Dillon and Garland associate the accusations with recent ill auguries, leading to the search for an unchaste Vestal.¹⁹²

This is a tactic which is applied by politicians in power, such as the *triumviri* or the pontifical college, in order to appease and settle the concerns of the masses. According to Wildfang,

A close examination of these cases in fact reveals that such accusations seem to have been made only when the punishment of a Vestal could serve as an object lesson to some segment of the Roman population with whom the Vestal in question had close connections or whom she could be seen as symbolizing in some way. In other words, Vestals of this period seem to have been accused of *incestum* only when a faction to which they or their family belonged or which they could be seen as representing was involved in the turmoil in question.¹⁹³

The quote above argues that accusations and cases against people like Mor Minucia, a plebeian, occurred when the punishment of the Vestal could serve to punish the connected faction or identity of the Vestal. In this case, the condemnation of Mor Minucia proved that plebeians could not handle the responsibility and piety needed to hold power in Rome. Minucia represented Rome and, in these cases, anything that was wrong with

¹⁹⁰ Staples, *The Good Goddess to the Vestal Virgins*, 136.

¹⁹¹ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 79.

¹⁹² Dillon and Garland, *The Ancient Romans*, 346-358.

¹⁹³ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 80.

Rome. The factions associated with the Vestal did not have to be class based, they could also be family members or even an entire gender. In 472, BCE there was a plague which terrorized the city, with a specific focus on the women in Rome. As a solution, the Vestal Orbinia was accused, convicted, and sentenced to death.¹⁹⁴ To people of a culture which believed in offerings to gods for better favor and luck, this was a viable solution with a positive outcome.

The death of the Vestal Orbinia was the light at the end of the tunnel. In order to be a solution, it was imperative that the Vestal was convicted and not acquitted. Even though her testimony was submitted to court, there was no guarantee anyone would listen to it, especially because the Vestal could not speak it herself. It was read by an orator. Wildfang believes that a Vestal in times of Roman chaos had little chance of providing an apt defense.¹⁹⁵ The only feasible outcome was a guilty charge. It was up to the pontiffs to further incriminate the Vestal in the eyes of the public. Not only did the Vestal Virgin in question have to appear guilty, accomplished by whatever proof the prosecuting orator brought forth during the trial, but the orator also needed to further separate the Vestal from her community.¹⁹⁶ The trial worked to show that the Vestal willingly sinned against her people, all of Rome, and the goddess Vesta, thus becoming a traitor. In doing so, the state manipulated the public perception of the Vestal, creating its own problem and solution in order to distract from and “resolve” a more large-scale problem regarding the view of the senate in the eyes of the people. The state manipulated the public and political power of a Vestal.

¹⁹⁴ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 85.

¹⁹⁵ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 56.

¹⁹⁶ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” 585.

While death by live internment was the only solution to the corruption of a Vestal, it was not the only option for the priestess convicted of *crimen incesti*. Two Vestal Virgins, both in the Republican Era, were recorded as having committed suicide and therefore were not murdered in the same ritualistic sense as the others. One was Caparronia who was accused in 266 BCE. Sources deviate regarding her death. One account, St. Jerome in his *Temporum Liber*, says that she hanged herself.¹⁹⁷ The other account says that she was hanged, according to Paulus Orosius.¹⁹⁸ These men were 4th and 5th century Christians, respectively. Orosius wrote about the Vestal to indicate the series of years in Roman history which tragedy afflicted. St. Jerome translated into Latin the *Chronicon* of Eusebius. There is very little information surrounding why the Vestal potentially chose to commit suicide instead of facing death at the hands of the goddess inside the tomb. Avoiding the tomb was not an appropriate response for a Vestal Virgin. This did not appease the powers at play because they could not wield the Vestal as a scapegoat or *pharmakos*. The Vestal Virgin suicides forced the pontifical college to find other methods.

Suicides in lieu of live internment did not assuage the people of Rome. Another instance, a few years later in 216 BCE involved two Vestals who were tried together. Livy wrote on this account mentioning that Floronia and Opimia were convicted of unchastity. “One had received the traditional penalty of being buried alive near the

¹⁹⁷ “A Vestal Virgin at Rome was condemned for fornication, and killed herself by hanging.” “St. Jerome (Hieronymus): Chronological Tables,” Attalus, last modified February 29, 2016. [St. Jerome: Chronological Tables \(1\) \(attalus.org\)](https://www.attalus.org/chronological-tables-1).

¹⁹⁸ “*Eodem tempore Caparronia uirgo Vestalis incesti rea suspendio perit: corruptor eius consciique serui supplicio adfecti sunt.*” “At that time Caparronia, a Vestal Virgin, upon being convicted of unchastity, was hanged. Her seducer and the slaves, who were her accomplices, were also put to death.” “Orosius Book 4: Chapters 1-13: 288-219 BCE,” Attalus, last modified December, 2020, [Orosius, Book 4 \(A\) \(attalus.org\)](https://www.attalus.org/orosius-book-4-a). This translation was adapted from the translation by I.W. Raymond, 1936.

Colline Gate and the other had committed suicide.”¹⁹⁹ It is not entirely clear which Vestal was buried alive and which killed herself. During that same year, the impending attack of Hannibal was on the minds of the political figures of Rome. Livy said that the two Vestals who participated in *incestum* made the politically powerful people nervous. The fact that one of the Vestals did not submit to the ritual killing made the people of Rome anxious as well. In a search for a viable solution to appease both the gods and the people, the political leaders found a “Gallic man and woman and a Greek man and woman”²⁰⁰ to sacrifice instead. Such a reasoning and situation would define this situation as both a sacrifice and a ritual killing, much to the chagrin of Schultz who argued that the death rites of a Vestal were not sacrifices. Livy here seems to indicate the need for an appropriate method of death for a Vestal. A suicide upset the necessary balance between the gods and the people of Rome.

Despite the need for the death of a Vestal, there were certain examples in which the accused Vestal did not die. In these situations, the goddess Vesta saved the priestess. Even in these cases, the saving of a Vestal was a means to an end for the Roman political leaders. There are multiple cases of a Vestal Virgin being saved by divine intervention. Around 230 BCE, the Vestal Tuccia was accused of *crimen incesti*.²⁰¹ According to Valerius Maximus, Tuccia called out to the goddess and said that she would draw water from the Tiber with a sieve and bring it to the *aedes vestae* in order to prove her innocence and her continued favor of Vesta.²⁰² Tuccia was successful in her efforts and no

¹⁹⁹ Livy, *History of Rome: Books 21-22*, trans. J.C. Yardley, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2019), 365.

²⁰⁰ Livy, *History of Rome: Books 21-22*, 365.

²⁰¹ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 85.

²⁰² “‘Vesta’ inquit, ‘si sacris tuis castas semper admovi manus, effice ut hoc hauriam e Tiberi aquam et in aedem tuam perferam.’” “‘Vesta,’ she said, ‘if I have always brought pure hands to your sacred service, make it so that with this I draw water from the Tiber and bring it to your temple.’” Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, 192-193.

longer needed a trial. In the source context, Valerius Maximus added this story amidst other examples of gods saving people who were unjustly accused. The gods, as powerful characters in the ancient world, brought justice to the special cases in which they were invested.

Divine interventions on behalf of a Vestal demonstrated that the goddess was still present and attentive to her priestesses and that her priestesses, in turn, were present and attentive to the city and people of Rome. Tuccia's trek to prove her innocence was such a powerful moment that Pliny the Elder celebrated her in his *Natural Histories* and Petrarch did the same in his *Triumph of Chastity*. The visual representation of Tuccia carrying her sieve became famous by the Middle Ages and she was associated with the virtue of chastity. Depictions of the Vestal Tuccia carrying her sieve and proving her *castitas* remain in famous museums throughout the world today.²⁰³ Having a goddess save an allegedly impure Vestal reiterated for the Roman people the constant connection to the goddess, thus reinforcing the connection between the city of Rome and the Vestals who work in their favor.

These miraculous divine interventions came in other forms while still relaying the same message. At an unknown date, although Wildfang believes it to be sometime around 70 BCE shortly after the trials between Licinia and Crassus, the Vestal Aemilia, different from the one tried above, was accused of *incestum*.²⁰⁴ The hearth was extinguished and

²⁰³ Some examples of this artwork are: *The Vestal Virgin Tuccia with a Sieve*, painted by Andrea Mantegna, c.1495-1506; *The Vestal Virgin Tuccia Proving her Innocence*, engraved by Jacob Matham, 1608, after Bartholomeus Spranger, c.1546 - 1611; and *Veiled Woman (The Vestal Virgin Tuccia)*, sculpted by Antonio Corradini, 1743. "The Vestal Virgin Tuccia with a Sieve," Two Exemplary Women of Antiquity, The National Gallery, last modified 2022, [Andrea Mantegna | The Vestal Virgin Tuccia with a Sieve | NG1125.1 | National Gallery, London](#). "The Vestal Virgin Tuccia Proving her Innocence," The Philadelphia Museum of Art, last modified 2022, [The Vestal Virgin Tuccia Proving her Innocence \(philamuseum.org\)](#). "Veiled Woman (The Vestal Virgin Tuccia)," Masterpieces, Barberini Gallerie Corsini Nazionale, [Veiled Woman \(The Vestal Virgin Tuccia\) | Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini](#).

²⁰⁴ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 86.

blame fell to Aemilia, indicating her *crimen incesti*. Aemilia proved her innocence by throwing a piece of her garment onto the eternal hearth and reigniting the flame from the dead ashes. This miracle came directly from the goddess. Aemilia called upon her deity, the embodiment of whom resided in the sacred hearthfire. Had Aemilia not received the blessing of Vesta then the hearth would not have relighted. The *incesta* Vestal draped her attire at her goddess and laid herself bare before the revered deity. Vesta in turn saw all of Aemilia and saved her from live internment. This connection between goddess and priestess, deity and human, was evident to the audience in these moments. The relationship of the Vestal and her goddess represented the continued relationship between Rome and its deities.

The potential for Vesta to save a Vestal was even built into the criminal death ritual the Vestals were a part of. By leaving the bread, milk, water, and oil in the tomb for the convicted Vestal, in theory the Vestal did not die of starvation.²⁰⁵ But the true purpose was to displace the blame from the people of Rome for killing a priestess of a goddess. It also created the opportunity for Vesta to decide if she wanted her priestess to live or die, because the ingredients for life were provided in the tomb. By doing so, it literally put the fate of the Vestal in the hands of the goddess; humans had no more control over matters and would accept what came. The outcome for the Vestal was life or death, but at that point for Rome, the ritual had already taken place and the goddess Vesta had the agency to keep or kill her priestess. Rome and its representatives complied with the traditions which brought the city prosperity and luck. The *pontifex maximus* made the show of praying over the descending Vestal and fixed Rome's problems. The very life of the Vestal was used for the benefit of the city.

²⁰⁵ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 59.

The Vestal Virgins were obviously very sacred to the city of Rome. Moreover, in death the Vestals and all that they represented were important to the rituals of Rome. Enslaved people could accuse a Vestal and have their accusation accepted as proof because they represented eyewitness accounts. These people then negotiated the information in exchange for manumission. The charges against the Vestals were motivated. Different people were able to benefit from the situation and in different ways. Members of the *gens* of the Vestal received something from the trials and death, whether it be a positive outcome or an admonition. The beneficial outcomes were seen in cases like Crassus and the Vestal Licinia. Cases of admonition were those like that of Mor Minucia whose status as both a plebeian and a Vestal was used to say that the plebeians were not fit to have power in Rome.

Even a powerful priestess was not free from the reach of the penalties of Rome. The gods could indicate that a Vestal was *incesta*. Sentencing the Vestal to her death was necessary for the prosperity of the city. For Rome to remain pure, the Vestal had to die by ritualistic means. Suicides did not provide the proper cleansing of the impurities brought upon by the *incesta* Vestal. All that being said, it was the prerogative of the goddess Vesta to choose to save any Vesta who had been wrongfully accused, should the deity choose to do so. The circumstances surrounding the accusation, trial, death, and salvation of a Vestal associated with *crimen incesti* were all manipulated in order to benefit other people, whether it was slaves, family members, orators, or even the city of Rome itself.

Conclusion

The Vestal Virgins were women who lived under the constant public eye of ancient Rome. Included in their visibility came high status. Through their status, the

priestesses were given many special privileges which other elite women did not have. For example, the Vestals were able to testify in courts, sit in reserved seats at gladiatorial games, and they were the only women to employ *lictores curiatii*. The Vestals held power with their high status. The priestesses used their positions to benefit their familial connections. Even though the Vestals supposedly renounced any connection they had to their past, nepotism still rang true. The devout women had many avenues through which to receive money, and just as many avenues through which others tried to acquire it. Within the political sphere, the Vestals were able to influence the senators of Rome. Workers, such as those in the commercial guild, availed themselves of that ability by indirectly imploring the priestesses to do something for them through a dedicated inscription in the *atrium vestae*.

Through their familial connections, financial power, and political power, the Vestals had at least some opportunities for agency in how their power was manipulated. In cases of *crimen incesti*, agency was most often ripped away from the tainted priestesses. All the same, people took advantage of the situation and found ways to create a better future for themselves, despite the death of a Vestal. The Vestal Virgins were powerful women whose power was manipulated to benefit the needs of others, but the priestesses also found ways to use it for themselves.

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