

The Power of Virginitv:  
The Political Position and Symbolism of Ancient Rome's Vestal Virgin

By

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HST 499: Senior Seminar  
Spring 2010  
Western Oregon University

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### I

The Vestal virgin has forever been an image of a woman draped in white priestly garments, carrying herself with an air of purity and near divinity. The Vestal's image is one that has captured the imagination of writers, painters, sculptures and scholars for centuries. However this near divine woman is more than what she appears. The Vestal was more than a virgin; she was the daughter, mother and priestess of Rome herself. Behind this "glamorous" image is a strong, influential, pious and powerful woman who has sacrificed her sexuality and familial ties for not just the service of the Goddess Vesta but also to reap the rewards that such devotion sowed. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the many faces behind the Vestal virgin, and how she achieved not only political power and honor but ritually forged the sacred familial protections on a grand scale -the protection of The Empire at large.

Historians beginning with the Greek historian Plutarch down to Livy, Suetonius, Tacitus and Cicero all analyzed the Vestal image for different reasons. Through their firsthand accounts, these classical historians give us the first glimpse of the political, social and often complex nature surrounding the Vestal cult itself. The Greek historian Plutarch perhaps is one of the first historians to record the presence and importance of the Vestal Virgins. Life of Numa describes for perhaps the first time the order of Vestals and when they were founded and instituted. During the reign of King Numa the Vestals were instituted along with the Pontifex Maximus or chief priest. The Vestal was to remain chaste for tenure of 30 years. These decades are separated into student, practitioner and then teacher. Plutarch describes the institutions and privileges

granted the Vestal during her service to the state. These services ranged from not only being able to fully manage their own affairs and finances but to also craft a will. In essence the Vestal was free from guardian or father only beholden to the Pontifex Maximus and her sacred vows and duties. The Vestal as a sacred vessel is also described in the *Life of Numa*. Plutarch gives example through the crossing of a Vestal and a condemned murderer; who is then pardoned for the fortuitous and chance meeting. (Plut. *Num.*10.3)

The Roman historian Titus Livius or Livy writes about the famed Vestal, Rhea Silvia, whose role is pivotal to the founding of Rome. In his *History of Rome Book 1*, Livy writes that the city of Alba Longa was founded by the heir of Aeneas, the famed Trojan prince and war hero. One of Aeneas's successors, King Numitor, was deposed by his brother Amulius who also murdered his nephews. The only survivor was a daughter, Rhea Silvia. This lone female descendant of Aeneas was given to the order of Vestals to become a virgin priestess. Rhea Silvia's induction into the temple of Vesta was in hopes of terminating any potential lineage from Numitors' line. Even though Livy speaks of this duty as "honoring" her with such a position, his account concludes with "depriving her of all hopes of issue". It is in this particular account that we learn of Rhea Silvia's connection to Aeneas, and her induction into the Cult of Vesta. Rhea Silvia's importance to history and mythology later ties her to the mythical founding of Rome through conception and birth of Romulus and Remus; sired through "forced violation" by the god of war Mars. (Livy. *Epon.* 1.3)

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus keeper of Emperor Trajan's archive examined further the importance of the Vestal's role in society by emphasizing her duties as honorable, virtuous and prestigious. According to Suetonius's biography of Emperor Augustus Caesar in his Twelve

Caesars, Augustus Caesar expanded the funds and privileges to the College of Vestals. (Suet. *Aug.*) Suetonius describes Augustus's vow that if he had a grand-daughter of appropriate age he would place her on the list for consideration as a Vestal candidate. It is in this oath, that Suetonius expresses the prestige and importance of the Vestal College<sup>1</sup> through the oath of Augustus. (Suet. *Aug.*) If the Emperor himself was vowing willing support and sacrifice from his own lineage and household for the temple then the common citizenry and senatorial families should have no place for protest. The political aspect of the Vestal Virgin is also further enriched by Suetonius's accounts of their importance regarding the protection of important documents of state, as well as wills including that of Augustus himself. (Suet. *Aug.*)

The Roman historian and statesman Cornelius Tacitus gives a clear account of the complex ritual of Vestal selection. He writes that Fonteius Agrippa and Domitius Pollio both offered their daughters up for Vestal consideration. Though both girls were of noble birth, Pollio's daughter won the selection because Fonteius Agrippa's line stood condemned because of his divorce from his wife. (Tac. *Ann.* 2.86) The strict selection of the Vestal priestess was so precise that any dishonor attached to a family of a prospective virgin would disqualify her.

The Roman historian, lawyer, and orator Cicero records numerous accounts in which the mere presence of a Vestal could often change the pulse and intentions of a crowd through the fear of harming her person. In such a case, Cicero invokes the image of Claudia Quinta, a pious and virtuous Roman priestess, who embraced her father during a triumph to prevent a hostile

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<sup>1</sup> The Vestal College was one part of the College of Pontiffs or Collegium Pontificum. The Collegium Pontificum was a body of high ranking Roman priests who were primarily from Roman elite families. The Collegium Pontificum housed not only the Vestals who served only 30 years whereas other members served for life; but the Pontifex Maximus himself whom governed over the Collegium. The Collegium Pontificum was one of four priestly colleges. Aside from the Vestal Virgins, the Rex Sacorum a senatorial priestly college and the heads of primary religious cults called Flamines also resided within the Pontificum.

tribune to pull him off his chariot (Cic.*Cael.*14). In Cicero's speech "For Lucius Murena" Cicero calls upon the familial ties to a Vestal to give a more pious and direct imprint of his speech (Cic.*Mur.* 35). This familial relationship to a Vestal gives a more pious and "noble" approach to the character of Lucius Murena. Cicero perhaps uses the image of the Vestal as a sacred entity in his orations to further express that those formerly connected to her such as her family are raised to a higher standard, or are more sacred.

Classical Roman sources primarily focus on Roman society from a larger perspective. The role of the Vestal is often given a brief overview or a quick reference in classical sources, even though during the age of the Vestal presence, each account is somewhat different enough to build upon one another to create the world of the Vestal. The personification of piety, purity, self sacrifice and familial duty (on a state level) all can be seen through the combined classical sources.

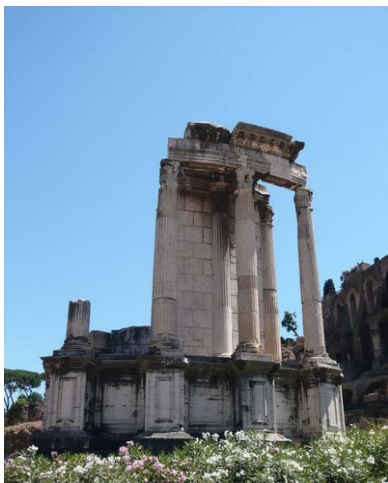
## II

There are perhaps dozens of secondary sources from both classical and theological scholars' worldwide who have devoted scholarship to the understanding of Roman religion. Franz Altheim a German historian writes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and gives us a near definitive representation of what we may consider now as the prime image of the Vestal. The Vestal was first and foremost an image of all that was both feminine and virtuous. She was a girl taken from her family at the cusp of womanhood and kept at the ideal moment and preserved symbolically through perpetual virginity for the next 30 years.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Franz, Altheim. A History of Roman Religion, (Methuen & Co. LTD. London 1937), 88.

Altheim did discuss some religious rites and practices; however it is not until Georges Dumèzil that perhaps the first description of the purposes behind these rituals is finally unveiled. The Vestal is finally given a more defining image as more than just a virgin priestess who protected the sacred hearth of Rome, but the answer to “why” is discussed. The sacred fires of Vesta were more than just a flame at the center of the Temple Vestae on Palatine Hill but a symbol of Rome as a whole.



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The flame itself was a symbol of the unity of Rome as one large collective household, with their “mothers” tending to it, keeping it safe and ever burning. These fires also represented a connection to the divine. Fire was the key element designed to send offerings from the mortal realms to the gods. Each temple had its own respectable hearth however the central hearth in the Temple of Vesta is a symbol of Rome’s strength and cemented roots in the Earth as a stable and unwavering force.<sup>5</sup> This symbolism was so strong that if the flame were to ever burn out, the priestess could face severe punishment for placing the Roman state into jeopardy. The purpose behind the significance of the eternal flame is the perception by Romans that the element of fire

3 aedes Vestae : [http://www.fotopedia.com/en/Temple\\_of\\_Vesta](http://www.fotopedia.com/en/Temple_of_Vesta)

4 2 denari coin crafted during the reign of Emperor Nero, depicting the aedes Vestae on the reverse side: <http://www.romancoins.info/VIC-Buildings.html>

5 Georges, Dumèzil. Archaic Roman Religion, (University of Chicago Press, 1937), 558, 315.

was the most pure. Plutarch emphasizes that according to Numa a Vestal was perfect for the task of tending this fire, “It was either because he (King Numa) thought the nature of fire pure and uncorrupted, and therefore entrusted it to chaste and undefiled persons, or because he thought of it as unfruitful and barren, and therefore associated it with virginity”.(Plut. *Num.*9.5) The fire within the aedes Vestae was associated with the Emperors' household fire, and further connected all of Rome through the usage of this central fire from the temple to re-kindle the hearths in their own homes.

Dumèzil writes of the punishment of scourging for Vestals who have failed in their task of maintaining the holy fire.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore with this role the complexity of the rites surrounding the young vestals symbolic “abduction” into a “marriage” with the state and her often contradictory clothing style is also brought into question. The Vestals' dress according to Dumèzil was that of a proper Roman matron giving an appearance of a married woman in her dress, however maintaining her innocence and purity of a maiden linked to her family and the state. This maidenly appearance is shown through the manner of hairstyle and adornments.

Ariadne Staples, author of *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion*, provides a more cohesive understanding of the relationship between the Vestals and their sacred duties protecting the eternal flame. Staples creates a more clear understanding behind the “symbolism” associated with the Vestals and fire. The fire is described as representing both forceful masculine procreative energies and that of the purified and cleansed women (the Vestal). This duality was both of sexual aggression/power and of sexual avoidance.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Dumèzil, 315.

7 Staples, Ariadne, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion*, (Routledge, 1998), 149.

Staples argues that it is this duality that represented the strong masculine might of Rome's male population while the warmth and life giving virtue of Rome's female population.

Robin Wildfang author of "*Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire*" argues that the role of the Vestal was not necessarily that of "a" matron of Rome but more importantly "the" matron of Rome. This coincides with previous accounts stating that the similarities between a traditional matron role and that of a religious symbolic entity. To add to the growing image of the Vestal, Wildfang describes in great detail the significances of traditional rites and rituals along with the specific dates they would have been conducted. These dates and rituals which would have been conducted on a smaller scale within a traditional Roman household were conducted at the Temple Vestae in a similar fashion. Such rituals being conducted at a religious center, symbolizing the hearth of Rome adds to the perception and concept of Vestas' priestesses as both a matronly and maidenly in virtue, a duality that should be considered in further discussion.

Through the works of Sarlota A. Takàcs the illustration of the Vestal virgin takes on a different perspective by comparing the Vestals with other priestesses. Takàcs describes whereas other priestesses of other deities were not granted special dispensations and privileges; the Vestals often had more rights than freemen. Whereas other authors and scholars focused on the rites and rituals of the Vestals, Takàcs is interested in unearthing the intricate social workings and privileges of the virgins. For example, the Vestals were the only females allowed within the college of Pontiffs.<sup>8</sup> In a strictly male dominated world, these women managed to garner great power and privilege along with status they would never have been allowed to possess outside of the Temple Vestae. Vestals dined openly with the Roman elite, and attended gladiatorial combat in prime seating.

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8 Sarolta A. Takàcs, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, (USA: University of Texas Press, 2008), 83.



Like previous historians Takàcs describe the necessity to maintaining the fires; however he also describes the punishments that would befall a priestess if she were to break her vow. The grim details of the “live burial” of a priestess were vividly described along with the symbolism of this live burial. Takàcs adds to previous historians in this aspect by further developing a thesis surrounding the significance of water, oil, a bed, food, a lamp and other limited amenities that were placed in the earthen tomb. Takàcs argues that these items were granted in either sacrifice to the ancestors or perhaps to give a lasting chance for the condemned. It is believed that the condemned Vestal even though granted such amenities such as food and water, was primarily buried in such a fashion as to further connect the link between the goddess Vesta and her deific connection as an earth goddess. It is in this text that a preliminary understanding and concept emerges behind the darker side of Vestal life.

### III

To understand the religious, political, and symbolic relation and concepts surrounding the Vestal it is essential to understand the position and role of the goddess Vesta herself. Vesta and her Greek counterpart Hestia have no technical mythology. She is referred to as the third daughter of Kronos and Rhea, sister to Jupiter, Pluto, Neptune, Juno, and Ceres. Vesta is one of three goddesses who vowed perpetual virginity; the others are Minerva/Athena (Greek) and Diana /Artemis (Greek). Vesta's religious association is of the protectress of the home and hearth.<sup>9</sup> In the Roman world her temple was the center of the city, and therefore the hearth of a nation. It is interestingly that out of this role she is seen as a matronly figure. A proper Roman Matron is one that has provided children into the familial unit; however Vesta as a goddess is revered to as a virgin.

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9 Michael, Grant, Who's Who Classical Mythology, (Oxford University Press, 1993), 176, 342.

Perhaps the term “virgin” is one that can be seen as more than just a physical trait of these young women and priestesses but also a symbolic one as well. Holt N. Parker in his book, *“Virginité Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body”*, 2007 considers the term “virgin” as nothing more than perhaps a metaphor. Virgins are women who have not been “penetrated” by man, and if the Vestal was envisioned as the heart of Rome, then for her to be virgin is to metaphorically state that the walls of Rome have not been penetrated by outside forces.<sup>10</sup> Aside from metaphors, there were several reasons why the Vestal physically had to be a virgin. Parker and others have along with others concluded that the Vestal was a virgin in order to be a pure vessel for divine power. Vesta herself was a virgin goddess, and together with her divinely ordained vessel could symbolically connect. This purity was essential to maintain during the 30 year tenure of a Vestals service to continue this connection between mortal and divine. More importantly and less divine in nature is the power of reproduction. Parker explains that for a Vestal to be a symbol of power in the Roman Empire it was necessary for her to remain as neutral as possible; allowing only her familial loyalties to remain with the Roman state as a whole. To maintain this she was unable to conceive and bear children during that 30 year tenure, and remain a virgin to prove that her oath to the Roman state was solid. This sacrifice of non-sexual contact also ensured that no family tie would bind the priestess into political gain through her offspring.<sup>11</sup>

The duties of the Vestal aside from maintaining her purity were extremely tasking. There were initially 4 Vestals however by the age of Augustus there were 6 Vestals at a given time whom all lived in a compound connected to the aedes Vestae, and monitored the fires within. It is in the aedes Vestae that many Vestals conducted the rituals and rites associated with

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10 Parker N. Holt, *Virginité Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 69.

11 Ibid. p.83

purification and matronly duties in regard to home and hearth. One such duty is the creation and milling of mola salsa. Flour is essential ingredient for the staple of Roman life: bread. In this symbolic creation of mola salsa, the Vestal is preparing the flour for usage in the home. In this case the flour is stored for future use in purification rituals where it would be scattered in such rites on the temple floors. The second craft conducted by the Vestals is muries. Muries was a purification tool primarily made of salt resembles closely in creation to brine, which a Roman household used to preserving food.

Further household like religious rituals were conducted throughout the year. Many of these rituals surrounded the usage of purification tools to clean out the old debris of the temple. The most prosperous ritual of the year was conducted on the first day of the New Year in which the Vestals renewed the life of the temple by rekindling a new fire in the aedes Vestae.<sup>12</sup> This purification ritual is easily seen as a rebirth and renewal rite to signify the dwindling and banishment of the old and the promise and emergence of the new. It is perhaps not only purification rights that the Vestals had focused on but more importantly the sacred protections of Rome's food supplies and religious goods. These sacred religious objects ranged from the mola salsa and muries, to the wills and political treaties of Emperors and politicians alike.

The first image associated with the Vestal priestesshood is the mythological mother of Romulus and Remus; Rhea Silvia.

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<sup>12</sup> Robin Lorsch, Wildfang, Rome's Vestal Virgins: A study of Rome's Vestal priestesses in the late Republic and early Empire, (Routledge, 2006), 10,16,17,23.



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As Livy describes, Rhea Silvia is given over to the Vestals for induction after the expulsion of her father King Numitor and death of her brothers. (Livy. *Epon.*) It is at this point we can start to see some future symbolism between the cult of Vesta and Rome itself. According to the most popularly believed mythology; Rhea Silvia was gathering water in a sacred grove of Mars when she was seduced by the god of war. When she had given birth to twin boys Romulus and Remus, Rhea Silvia's uncle was furious and had her imprisoned. The twins however were rescued by a she-wolf who had lost her own cubs and suckled the twins to good health. The mythological founding of Rome concludes with Romulus, Rome's namesake founds the city and has his mother freed from imprisonment. The connection between Rome as a founded city and the role of the vestal is evident. Rhea Silvia a Vestal priestess; the personification of virtue, piety, and protector of home and hearth and bloodline descendent from the hero Aeneas is the "mother" of Rome through her son Romulus the founder. This connection to the mother seen in Rhea Silvia and the strength of Rome through masculine might and war can be seen further in duality of the nurturing, earthen femininity in Rhea Silvia and the fire and unharnessed

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13 Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) oil painting of "Mars and Rhea Silvia" <http://www.peterpaulrubens.org/Mars-And-Rhea-Silvia.html>

masculine energies of the god Mars. These two primal entities of earth and fire combined into one spirit of Romulus. This concept and primal initiation entwines Rome and the fires of Vesta.

The triple concept of maid mother and priestess is seen not only in Rome but throughout European mythology as well. The concept of the maid, mother and crone has graced Western Civilization and theology for millennia. It is not difficult to see the initial parallel between Western civilizations interpretation of the maid, mother, crone concept with the 30 year tenure of the Vestal priestesses. Each of these roles is played out in both the temple and political arenas in Ancient Rome. Initially the first decade as described by Plutarch *Life of Numa* is that of the student.

During the first 10 years of the Vestals 30 year service she was still very new to the order, freshly removed from her familial unit and inducted as a child into a life devoted to the state as protectors of home and hearth. However the ritual conducted to remove the soon to be priestess is akin to an abduction marriage ceremony conducted by the Pontifex himself called *captio*. The initiate girl is dressed in the manor of a matron, however with her hair adorned and styled in the fashion of a bride. The young priestess is typically chosen between the ages of 6-10 and is taught as a young maiden in the rituals and rights of the temple.

#### IV

Looking at a more focused role of the young maid we can already see a parallel between the young priestess; obviously a young girl and a more matured woman in her 30's who is educating her in the rites of the home much like a matron would teach her young daughters or grand-daughters prior to establishing homes of their own. This example personifies the point that Altheim describes as the moment and point of womanhood.<sup>14</sup> This priestess is being educated to

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14 Altheim, 88.

conduct matronly rites and rituals, however dressing in the manner of both a proper Roman Matron and hair styling of a young bride.



This is the exact point in the young girls life where if she was not inducted into the Vestal College she would be learning similar familial and household rites for her own home at this age, initiating her place on the path of becoming a matron. By the time the girl had experienced the first decade of Vestal service she would be between the ages of 16-20 years, the appropriate age of marriage and initial childbearing.

It is not until the second decade of service do we see the most influential and possibly the most common representation of Vestal service in Rome. During the Virgins second decade of service she is required to conduct the appropriate services associated with her station as priestess. It is widely known that the primary function of the Vestal was to perpetually keep the eternal fire aflame in the aedes Vestae. The sacred fire represented many different aspects of Roman society and beliefs. Firstly as previously discovered, the eternal flame represents the hearth of Rome. Each household within Rome had a hearth, the symbol of warmth, protection and nourishment in the home. Each hearth was kindled initially by the great hearth in the aedes Vestae. Therefore

15 Raffaele Monti (1818-1881) sculpture of “Veiled Vestal” :  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/8487676@N07/3401923411/>

16 Unknown sculptor of matronly Vestal: <http://www.the-romans.co.uk/state.htm>

17 Unknown sculptor of Vestal tending a flame: <http://www.the-romans.co.uk/state.htm>

each household was connected by a large more centralized fire; creating a unification of multiple households into one large entity, Rome itself.

The ritual and belief behind the eternal hearth dates back to earlier societies who expressed the necessity to have a warm fire in their homes. The symbolism behind this flame in particular was that the empire as a whole was seen as one large home. The flame inside was the fire that brought warmth to the hearth of Rome, *“The significance of the flame on their hearth must therefore, in at least one of its aspects lie in its link with the foundation, generation and continuation of the race”, “The goddess Vesta herself encapsulated all the elements; she was the flame itself, she was the virgin, she was Vesta the Mother”*.<sup>18</sup>

Another concept behind the eternal flame is the conclusion of Ariadne Staples who perceived the flame as a masculine energy. Virginal and matronly women who represent fertility and nurturing feminine elements tending to a creative and destructive energy of fire is not too hard to grasp. The energies of the flame in the dual relationship of creator and destroyer / fertility and sterility being controlled, tended and mothered in a reverent ritual appears to be intentional. Especially when harnessed and tended to by women in their prime age for conception, this symbolism could be understood as a focus for such energies to coexist in one location.

The role of virginity played also a dual part in the Vestal temples. It could be considered personifying and relating to the divine by also choosing chastity when devoting to a chaste deity, or perhaps the role of virginity played a more metaphysical aspect as well. The Vestals virginity when examined more thoroughly is a symbol of both divine and mundane. Divinely speaking, a Vestal was a pure vessel designed to harness the presence of a deific power. Evidence is given at the levels of this deific presence. Firstly the Vestals presence is seen as sacred. This can be

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18 Mary, Beard & John, North, Religions of Rome, (Cambridge University, 1998), 53.



explained by the sheer power her presence demands. As examined before if a condemned man were to come across a Vestal in passing to his execution or sentence if the encounter was seen as purely coincidence and fortuitous; her presence would exonerate him. (Plut. *Num.* 10.3) This same divine personification can be seen in rituals surrounding the punishment of a Vestal for committing the crime of fornication.

The Vestal having a direct connection to a Goddess was therefore considered a sacred and holy vessel. She therefore could not be harmed by man or else this would be committing offence to the goddess herself and potentially invoke the goddess's wrath or disfavor. The Vestal so divine in her existence would be buried alive in an earthen tomb with water, oil, a lamp, a bed, and some food. Therefore when the Vestal is placed in this tomb she was not harmed at all by man, for it is still men who gave her food and shelter. It was now up to the Vestals connection to the divine to be freed from her prison by communicating her innocence to Vesta herself. It is evident that no such case of a miracle or of divine intervention has been recorded, but this example is necessary to furthering the understanding between the mortal vessel and the divine.

The punishment of burying alive was instituted to Vestals who were believed to have committed the offence of incest/ fornication. The crime of incest in regards to a Vestal had no true connections to sexual intercourse with a family member but an offence to the family unit of Rome. A Vestal was "married" and served the state in all their familial practices and rites, and therefore all the citizens of Rome were her family; to have any sexual relations with any Roman was seen as committing the crime of incest. These examples led credence to the importance of the Vestals virginity being intact and unquestioned. Her body needed to be a pure, virtuous and untainted vessel to be able to fully understand and connect with her deity.



On a more mundane level the Vestal's virginity was a more political tool than a religious one. Due to the unique circumstance of the Vestals' political power, prestige and influence over the Roman citizenry it would be extremely devious to play on the power of these women through their familial ties. Both politically and religiously speaking, the danger of having the beating heart of Rome's religious institution at the beck and call of a sired child or used as a pawn by a politically hungry father, brother or husband. These familial ties at the induction to the order are immediately severed.<sup>19</sup>

The Vestal at this point on till the end of her 30 year tenure is property of the state and under the "household" of the Pontifex Maximus. The Pontifex in his position as head priest of the College of Pontiffs is for all intense and purposes the Vestals husband, and father figure. It is only the Pontifex who has the power to not only select but to also condemn a Vestal to punishment. Through this "marriage" to the state as a whole, the Vestal was therefore beholden to no one and everyone at the same time. Her duties were to be matron and priestess to the nation in all rites and rituals befitting her station as "household" matron. Perhaps out of this distinct set of circumstances of separation from a familial bloodline that the Vestal was allotted more rights and privileges; many only granted to freemen and male citizens.

A Vestal in essence was the controller of her own destiny. Through this unique position she was granted the ability to manage their own affairs without a guardian and craft a will of their own.(Plut. *Num.* 10.3) Even though after her 30 year tenure as a priestess, marriage to a former Vestal was still seen as prestigious, even though quite often she was no longer able to bear children. Some former Vestals however denied this right and requested to maintain their chastity and in the service of the temple. This could be in fear of the unknown lifestyles associated with women, or the loss of protection and rights and status associated with her former

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<sup>19</sup> Wildfang, 52,53.

position. Vestal priestesses as a whole were the primary symbols of the Roman Empire. The Vestal in her duties were intricately tied to Rome's strengths; not men. In a patriarchal Empire, having a woman or any priestess exists as an icon and symbol of that Empire's strength is both controversial and unspeakably powerful in the eyes of women. With this image and attention it is still amazing that so many women did not volunteer through their families to candidacy.

Each rite personified the role of a Roman matron tending the duties of her home, and thus sanctifying through purification the continuation of her home. However beyond the confines of their traditionally seen religious role, Vestals throughout the Roman Empire held power and sway in religious and political circles alike. We see in the mythological founding of Rome the creation of an institution politically and religiously tied to the heart of the Empire itself. As Rhea Silvia gave birth to the founder of Rome, she in essence as a Vestal paved way for the existence of cult of Vesta as an intricate part in the expansion and existence of Rome. Vesta was in essence the mother of Rome. Her priestesses played the role of matron by enacting the religious rituals associated with home and hearth on a larger scale focused primarily in the aedes Vestae. Yet her priestesses even though playing the part of a matron in religious rites and dress, appeared through hairstyle and perpetual chastity that of a young maiden.

In numerous accounts as stated above the Vestal Virgin through the dress, chores and rituals acted very similar to that of a Roman matron, associating themselves almost in the image of earlier wives of the king, in this case the Pontifex. Of course at the same time, acting in accord with other rituals associated with that of a daughter imitate the blushing and youthful maiden bride, these women are seen as daughters. This could be in part by the duality of the goddess Vesta herself. She is a fertility "Mother" deity, and revered in mythology for her virginity and chastity that of a youthful maiden.

These connections to the divine in later years show a distinct desire to maintain position amongst the young priestesses as tutor part tutor and part mystic. This triple image of maid, mother and crone all intricately bond the temple of Vesta together through virginity, fertility, and spirituality. These elements combined created an institution that still fascinates historians today. Women who sacrificed so little but gained so much. Through a simple sacrifice of perpetual chastity; the Vestal was able to empower not only herself politically and financially, but also empower the Roman Empire as a whole. It is important to see the connections of a virgin matron and the mother of a nation, and through this connection see and understand what made the Vestal virgins so influential and powerful.

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