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Rome's vestal virgins: public spectacle and society

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ROME'S VESTAL VIRGINS: PUBLIC SPECTACLE AND SOCIETY

By

Joshua Michael Roberts

Accepted in Partial Completion
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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MASTER'S THESIS

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Joshua Michael Roberts

January 19, 2012

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ABSTRACT

The city of Rome developed from a small agricultural village near a small river on the Italian peninsula into the capital of an empire encompassing the entire Mediterranean world and its hinterlands beyond. The Romans themselves attributed the success of their city and society, in part, to their piety. The priesthood of Vesta and the sacred flame that burned within the goddess's temple symbolize Rome and its denizens. The women who served in this priesthood maintained a sacred and undying flame and performed a variety of other significant religious tasks in order to perpetuate Rome's achievements. The rigorous process through which a young Roman girl became a Vestal priestess set her apart from society and conferred a status on her that enabled her to be venerated, modeled and representative of the ideal Roman society. The important religious duties the Vestals performed and the rituals in which they directly or indirectly participated permitted the priesthood to represent and unify various demographic categories. Furthermore, the Vestals and their religious role connected Roman society to its past and functioned to instill a collective identity of what it meant to be a Roman. The significance of this function is demonstrated by the accusation and potential execution of a priestess for failing to live up to these expectations through violating her vow of virginity. This work endeavors to understand the status of the women in this priesthood in Roman society. Their ability to unify the collective and create a common identity in a rigidly categorized and divided society across a millennium of history suggests that the Vestals functioned as a public spectacle.

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INTRODUCTION

By the first century the city-state of Rome had developed from a small agricultural village on the bank of the Tiber into the cultural and political hegemon of the Mediterranean Sea, Britain and substantial portions of the modern Middle East.¹ The central location of the Italian peninsula and Rome was well suited to function as the capital of this ‘Middle Sea’, which effectively became a Roman lake following the advent of expansion outside of Italy during the third century BCE. This once impoverished and fragile community, traditionally founded in 753 BCE, exercised authority over this vast expanse of territory and the multitude of cultures along its shores and hinterland. While historians have pondered the means and nature of Roman success on the historical stage, few have considered a perspective that at least some Romans themselves posited. The first century BCE poet Horace echoes at least the elite’s sentiment for his culture’s achievements, “I shall increase and become ever more praised as long as the priest and silent Vestal solemnly climb

¹ All dates refer to the common era unless otherwise specified.

the Capitoline Hill.”² Although Horace is specifically referring to himself, certainly his audience would have understood the collective allegory of the priests and Vestals climbing this hill. Roman society would thrive so long as its people remained pious. The subject of this work, the priesthood of Vesta and its priestesses, as Horace specifically mentions, was one of the symbols and expressions of this piety.

According to Roman tradition, the priesthood of Vesta was established during the reign of the Etruscan king Numa Pompilius, who is reported to have reigned 715-673 BCE.³ The women devoted to the priesthood, hereafter referred to as Vestals, functioned as a microcosm of Rome. The Vestals and their relationship to Roman society was not static, they performed a variety of tasks throughout the priesthood’s millennium long existence. In addition to witnessing and participating in numerous religious rituals and duties, these women were entrusted with maintaining the sacred flame that burned in the temple of Vesta. So long as Vesta’s sacred flame burned inside the temple located in the Roman forum, the Romans believed that their society and culture would incessantly thrive.⁴ Society generously compensated these women with a variety of unique privileges and rights denied to most women. On the other hand, if a priestess failed to uphold her end of this social and religious contract, she faced the possibility of incrimination, a trial and, if convicted, execution. Like the institution of religion in general, these conspicuous women were inextricably linked to the Roman state and their unique position in Roman society was derived from this

² “...usque ego postera; crescram laude recens, dum Capitolium; scandet cum tacita uirgine pontifex. Horace, *Odes*, ed. T. E. Page (London: MacMillan & Co., 1959), 3.30.7-9. The translations from the original Latin texts are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

³ Livy, *Ab Urba Condita*, ed. B. O. Foster (New York: Putnam Books, 1919), 1.20 ; Ovid, *Tristia*, ed. Arthur Wheeler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 3.1.29-30 ; Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, trans. John Dryden (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2006), *Numa* 9-11.

⁴ Cicero, *De Legibus*, ed. Clinton Walter Keyes (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1928), 2.20 ; Livy 5.52-4.

relationship. In addition to functioning as a priestly history, this work seeks to unravel the status of this position and its significance.

The status and significance of the Vestals, this thesis argues, is best characterized as a Roman spectacle. The term spectacle invokes a variety of connotations and meanings, but it is utilized in a specific context within this work. Although a much more detailed discussion of this concept is expounded upon in a later chapter, it is necessary to briefly mention how this work defines a spectacle. A spectacle is a social relationship between the observed and the observer that performed an important function in Roman society. Spectacles functioned as a collective unifier through creating and reinforcing a commonly experienced emotion across rigid social divides, including class, gender, and legal status among others. They also reinforced this sentiment and help to foster a Roman identity. Furthermore, spectacles associated this identity with Rome's cultural traditions and history in order to provide a sense of continuity from generation to the next even as Roman society and culture changed and developed. These performances are also considered to have been public, even if they did not necessarily have an audience, so long as their purpose fulfilled the expectations delineated above. Through their performance of these prescribed duties, participation in important religious rituals and their exercise of their unique privileges and rights, the Vestals became observed public spectacles. Through their status as spectacles, the Vestals became a visualized other that the Romans readily consumed in order to ensure the success of their society and culture.

Exploring the spectacular nature of the Vestals furthers our understanding of Roman society and culture in several ways. First of all, the Romans associated their social and political achievements with the Vestals. Horace's poem clearly connects these women with

his personal success and through his use of collective imagery, also society's success. In other words, the Vestals and their priesthood are analogous to the Roman understanding of their own cultural identity. Delving into this relationship further contributes to our understanding of Roman society and how they comprehended the world around them. Secondly, this thesis expands the previously narrowly defined category of Roman spectacle beyond the blood sports that historians of Roman spectacle incessantly study and provides a historiographical framework to reconsider other aspects of ancient culture.⁵ A comprehensive history of this priesthood also ameliorates the tendency of historians to simply gloss over the Vestals in their discussions and challenges the historical trope of sexuality and their execution that has dominated Vestal historiography. Scholars interested in Roman religion will gain further insight through observing the Vestals as an underlying, albeit always present, force in Roman religion. Finally, this work contributes to the ongoing discussion about gender in Roman society and the methods through which women performed expectations of or against the norms of sex and gender biased societies.

The remainder of this chapter functions as a navigational compass to this work. The various types of primary sources and the methodology behind this work's use of these sources must be explained before the argument that the Vestals functioned as a public spectacle in Roman society can be expounded. It is first necessary to know what the evidence is, who created it and why in order to more fully understand its relationship to the Vestals. This source criticism must also be situated in the current historiographical context of the Vestals and Roman history as modern historians currently utilize it. Finally, a brief

⁵ Several recent examples of these categorical works are Hazel Dodge, *Spectacle in the Roman World* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011), 9-15 ; Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1-10.

discussion of the origin of the goddess Vesta and her priesthood and how they were crystallized in Roman religion provides an historical context for the Vestals and further emphasizes their importance to Roman society.

The second chapter, entitled “Induction and Appearance: The Vestal as a Visual Other,” considers the induction of a Vestal into the priesthood and her appearance. First we will define the Roman understanding of the spectacle and its significance in Roman culture. This is the fundamental point of departure for this work. The induction of a candidate into the priesthood is paramount to designating the Vestals as Roman spectacles. The rigorous prerequisites expected of a young girl in order to be selected as a candidate for the priesthood, the arduous process through which she was selected and the ceremony through which she was actually inducted into the service of Vesta and Rome during different historical moments reveals a complicated and complex process designed to ensure that each priestess was ideally conceived as a spectacle. Furthermore, the regulated appearance and dress of these priestesses are shown to be a unique and recognizable signatory mark of the important status that the induction process conferred on these women.

The specific religious actions and functions that the Vestals were required to perform on behalf of the Roman people are examined in the third chapter, “Duty and Privilege: The Vestal as a Public Spectacle.” The chapter evaluates and defines the private and public domains as they pertain to Roman society and reconciles their contemporary understanding with modern ideas in order to demonstrate that the Vestals’ status as spectacles was in fact public in nature. The argument that duties, rituals and privileges performed in the privacy of the temple are public as long as they are performed on behalf of the Roman populace is explained. An examination of the various duties and rituals in which the Vestals participated

elucidate this argument and further demonstrates their status as spectacles. Finally, the chapter examines how the Vestals utilized their unique privileges and abilities as spectacles in order to negotiate agency for themselves or others.

The fourth chapter, “Accusation and Execution: *Spectaculum Maximum*,” considers the most discussed aspect of the priesthood, a Vestal’s punishment for failing to uphold her status as a public spectacle guaranteeing Rome’s security. The requirement of virginity designates a Vestal’s body as a form of spectacle and functions as the catalyst of her potential execution if she violated her vow. The entire judicial process of a priestess’s accusation, trial and potential execution bring the purpose of this work full circle. Not only does it demonstrate the significance of the Vestals’ status as public spectacles, but the historical contexts of these incriminations and their subsequent results enable historians to measure the degree of the connection between Roman society and the Vestals’ status as public spectacles.

Throughout this work several themes are defined and utilized to bind these chapters together. First and foremost, each chapter considers the nature of Roman spectacle and demonstrates the extent to which the spectacular and the Vestals in particular are a component of Roman cultural identity. Secondly, this work considers the Roman understanding of the public and private spheres as they pertain to religion and the Vestals. This is decisive to our ability to answer the question of how the Romans might have comprehended a specific ritual or action of the Vestals. Finally, the appropriation of women’s bodies and sexuality in history demonstrate that the Vestals fulfilled this role in Roman society through their status as public spectacles. However, the ways in which the Vestals negotiated and performed this appropriation of their bodies and behavior also provides a glimpse into their ability to influence their own status as public spectacles.

Together, these theories provide a nuanced approach to examining not only the priesthood of Vesta, but also other facets of Roman culture and this work endeavors to provide a step in another direction for Roman historians. Nearly every facet of the priesthood is depicted as a symbol that the Roman populace understood to represent the security of their city, the preservation of their society and the reinforcement of their cultural identity; in short, a spectacle.

Methodology

The priesthood of Vesta, according to Roman tradition, was established in Rome during the eighth century BCE and was not permanently disbanded until the end of the fourth century following emperor Theodosius I's campaign to Christianize the empire.⁶ There are a plethora of ancient works referencing the Vestals and documenting their activities throughout the thousand years of the priesthood's existence. However, the evidence is fragmentary at best, especially for periods outside of the most productive era of classical literature, the first centuries BCE and CE. Almost all of our sources are not contemporary with the events that they describe and, prior to the first century BCE, describe practices and incidents that occurred centuries before their publication. Furthermore, all of our sources were written exclusively by men. Not only are the Vestals themselves absent from their own narrative, but so are women in general. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that men were mostly prohibited from entering the Vestal temple and apartments, the *aedes Vestae*, and understood little about what occurred inside. In a word, scholars examining Roman history confront a

⁶ The emperor Elagabalus temporarily disbanded the priesthood of Vesta and every other Roman religious practice from 218-222, replacing Roman religion with a type of monotheism focused around a Syrian sun god. *Historia Augusta*, trans. Anthony Birley (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), *Elagabalus* 7; Theodosius I, *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, trans. Theresa Davidson and Mary Pharr (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 16.1.2.

variety of source difficulties due to the nature of the evidence described above. All of these difficulties are exacerbated because the authors of our sources themselves could only speculate about the details of the priesthood, especially regarding the interior of the temple, and did not clearly understand the origin of the priesthood, which is discussed below. Historians, however, must attempt to stitch individual threads of evidence from a variety of spools in order to weave as complete a tapestry of the priesthood as possible. This cumulative evidential complication has resulted in significant methodological problems for historians. Before we examine the extant sources for the priesthood it is necessary to account for and resolve the question of adopting a synchronic or diachronic approach to the evidence.

There are two methods of approaching the extant evidence, each with their own benefits and problems. The simplest and most common method tends to freeze the priesthood in time and assumes that most of its features existed throughout the duration of the priesthood relatively unchanged. Tim Cornell and Mary Beard best exemplify this synchronic method and both suggest that the meager evidence spanning across the long duration of the priesthood's existence makes any other type of examination impossible.⁷ The tapestry is never complete and it is impossible for us to be aware of every aspect of the priesthood during one chronological moment. Therefore, scholars employing this synchronic approach tend to discuss the priesthood as it existed during the first century BCE and associate its activities and status to other eras *ad hoc*. While this approach enables historians to discuss the priesthood in depth and to extrapolate on the significance of specific features of the priesthood from the meager evidence, it also presents the priesthood as static.

⁷ Tim Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars, c. 1000-264 BC* (London: Routledge, 1995), 27-8 ; Mary Beard, "The Sexual Status of the Vestal Virgins," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 70 (1980) : 12.

Certainly, the Vestals evolved and changed along with every other facet of Roman civilization and completely ignoring these developments and their social implications where they are available can be misleading.

Scholars have also adopted a diachronic approach to the evidence in an effort to create as complete of a chronological narrative of the priesthood as possible. Grant and Altheim are representative of this method through their description of each particular incident and development of the Vestal priesthood in a linear and chronological fashion as they appear in our sources.⁸ This method has the advantage of granting historians the license to consider changes and developments in the priesthood as they are available. This permits historians to contextually situate the Vestals in their specific historical moment, or at least as much as is possible. For example, Sarolta Takacs includes a discussion about the significance of Augustus attaching the *aedes Vestae* to his personal home in 12 BCE and how this architectural abridgement mirrors the developing relationship between the priesthood and the emperor as his personage became evermore synonymous with Rome.⁹ However, it can be arduous to extrapolate specific trends or themes from such a narrative due to our inability to be privy to even a majority of the priesthood's activities and practices in any given moment. Instead of creating a broad tapestry of the priesthood, a linear chain with relatively large gaps between its links develops.

This thesis amalgamates the synchronic and diachronic approaches to the evidence in order to combine the benefits of each method while mitigating their weaknesses. This work

⁸ See Fredrick Grant, *Ancient Roman Religion* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 26 ; Franz Altheim, *A History of Roman Religion*, trans. Harold Mattingly (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1937), 141-3.

⁹ Sarolta Takacs, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 67.

adopts the synchronic method wherever evidence for change and developments in the priesthood is absent. Considering that the Romans were exceedingly traditional regarding their religious superstitions, this approach is plausible. However, when disagreements do occur in our sources, or our sources explicitly mention that a facet of the priesthood has changed, then it is incumbent upon the author to account for this change or disagreement and evaluate its ramifications on the relationship between the Vestals and society. In this instance, the diachronic method becomes very useful. Given the nature of the evidence, scholars will never know everything about the priesthood and our methodology must adapt accordingly. In order to obtain as clear of an understanding of the Vestal priesthood and its significance in Roman society, it is necessary to employ the synchronic and diachronic methods in tandem as the evidence allows. Of course, the tapestry that emerges is not ideal, but rather is the best that we can produce. An examination of the material from which this tapestry is constructed is necessary before the construction itself.

Primary Sources

The fragmentary nature of the extant evidence and its inherent problems for historians has been alluded to above, but it is necessary to consider our sources and how this work utilizes them in more detail. For the sake of analysis, this evidence is divided into several categories.¹⁰ These categories are organized according to the type of evidence, whether history, biography or poetry, and the language in which it is written. Chronology is not as critical of a criterion considering that almost all of these sources were written during the first centuries BCE and CE. Granted that other historians may categorize these sources along

¹⁰ Each of the following categories are considered in more detail below, but are referenced here for convenience: Latin chronicle historians; Latin compilation historians; Greek historians; biographers; poets; documentary evidence; and archaeological evidence.

different lines or avoid categorizing them altogether, for the purpose of examining the Vestals it is most constructive to arrange the sources into delineated categories. The fragmentary nature of the evidence compels historians to digest nearly the entire corpus of Latin literature and a significant amount of Greek literature as well. This method demonstrates how this work values and incorporates each source without requiring an exhaustive and unnecessary consideration of each individual author, which would fill and has filled volumes. Furthermore, such a discussion also permits us to understand exactly what each spool of thread or category of evidence contributes to the Vestal tapestry. Each category is not designed to be exclusive and indeed there is some overlap between several categories. However, this arrangement is the most efficient and practical method for analyzing these sources as their work pertains to the Vestals.

The first category of evidence to be examined is the Latin chronicle historians. Works in this category, such as Livy's *Ab Urba Condita* and Tacitus's *Annales* and *Historiae*, attempt to reconstruct authoritative narratives of Roman history; the former examining the foundation of Rome until the cessation of the Punic Wars in the second century BCE and the latter, examining the events of the principate from the death of Augustus in 14 until the death of Domitian in 96.¹¹ These authors had the advantage of writing in or near Rome and subsequently had direct access to other important works and archives lost to posterity. This proximity and access, coupled with the fact that the works of Livy and Tacitus were both popular and generally accepted amongst their contemporary

¹¹ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Michael Grant (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), from the Introduction by Michael Grant, 7-10 ; For a brief discussion of Livy's literary career and works, see Lillian Feder, *Crowell's Handbook of Classical Literature* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1964), 230-2 ; Livy, *Rome and Italy: Books VI-X of the History of Rome from its Founding*, trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), from the Introduction by R. M. Ogilvie, 11.

audience, suggests a high degree of reliability. The chronological nature of these narratives also situates events in which the Vestals participated or witnessed in their broader historical context, which provides valuable insight into the significance of each incident and furthers our understanding of the relationship between the priesthood and Roman society. Of course, one of the drawbacks of these works is that their authors designed them for a specific audience and purpose. For example, Livy wrote under the patronage of Augustus and the two are said to have been close friends.¹² In other words, Livy's narrative may reflect a desire to depict Roman history as a sequence of events that must inevitably lead to the establishment of the empire and the reign of Augustus, who was not only Livy's benefactor, but was also portrayed as the benefactor of Rome. Another limitation of these works is that they are overly concerned with the political, social and military developments and subsequently neglect the finer subtleties and intricacies of the priesthood that the next category of evidence provides.

The second category of evidence is the Latin compilation historian, whose authors employ an extremely valuable approach to their narratives that has significant ramifications for any work considering the Vestals. Works in this category, such as Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones* and his second century counterpart Aulus Gellius's *Noctes Atticae*, cast aside the chronological approach of their contemporaries above and instead select specific and often seemingly unrelated anecdotes from which they dissect social, historical and cultural phenomena.¹³ These phenomena and the in depth analysis these authors devoted to them

¹² Feder, 230-2.

¹³ The works in this category consist of, Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, ed. John C. Rolfe (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927), from the Introduction by John Rolfe, vi-xi ; Valerius Maximus, *Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilium Libri Novem*, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) ; Seneca,

would have seemed trivial to the chronological historians reconstructing an epic history of Rome. For example, Aulus Gellius considers various details and aspects of the induction ceremony of a Vestal priestess to such an extent that he even engages in contemporary debates about the origins and significance of specific facets of the process.¹⁴ Each of the authors in this category follow suit and delve into the nature of the sacred flame that burned within the temple or extrapolate on the vestments these women were required to wear. This information would not exist without the contribution of these Latin historians. While many of these compilation historians rubbed shoulders with and were benefactors of the same ruling elite of Roman society as their chronological narrative counterparts, these relationships were not as likely to influence their discussions.¹⁵ Many of their topics were relatively apolitical and focused around folklore or common practices and provided these authors with a certain degree of latitude considering that the ruling elite and sponsors of these authors had little to gain or lose in such trivial discussions. These authors also had access to a vast collection of archives in or near Rome. These characteristics make this category of evidence particularly reliable, especially when utilized in conjunction with other evidence that provide a broader historical context for these phenomena.

Several Greek historians, many of whom were contemporaries of the Latin historians above, also inquired into the past of their triumphal neighbors across the Adriatic. This category of evidence is characterized by the fact its authors were born in Greece and wrote

Naturales Quaestiones, trans. Thomas Corcoran (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) ; and Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historiae*, ed. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

¹⁴ Gellius 1.12.

¹⁵ Gellius served as a praetor under the emperor Marcus Aurelius, Gellius, from the Introduction by John Rolfe, vi-xi ; Valerius Maximus was friends with the imperial prince Germanicus and brother of the emperor Claudius, see Feder, 435 ; Seneca was forced to commit suicide after being implicated in the plot to assassinate the emperor Nero in 68, Tacitus, *Annales* 15.60-4 ; for a discussion of Pliny the Younger's long and distinguished career as a public magistrate, see Julian Bennett, *Trajan: Optimus Princeps: A Life and Times* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 113-25.

their histories in Greek.¹⁶ While many Greek historians were fortunate enough to have similar advantages as their Roman counterparts, such as access to important archives and records, they also benefited from their own cultural legacy. Although some were Roman citizens and even civil servants, Cassius Dio was from a senatorial family and served as consul in 205, their outlook was not distinctly Roman.¹⁷ For example, Herodian is lauded for his relatively fair treatment of the unpopular emperor Elagabalus, who is typically slandered and assumed to have been insane by other accounts.¹⁸ However, they can provide an outside perspective, even if they were denizens of the broader Roman culture spread throughout the Mediterranean world via Roman hegemony, because they may not have necessarily understood the significance of the Vestals to Roman society. This drawback is compounded by the fact that elite Romans patronized the endeavors of Greek authors and subsequently this relationship may have impugned their work in a fashion similar to Roman historians. Fortunately, many of these works, such as Dionysius's *The Roman Antiquities*, the extant books of which align nicely with Livy, examine similar periods of Roman history as Latin historians. Therefore, while this category of evidence corroborates Latin authors, its sources are not necessarily as reliable as Latin historians and are not utilized in this work outside of this role unless a Greek author is the only extant source for a particular aspect of the priesthood or one of its priestesses.

Biographies were just as prevalent in the ancient world as they are in modern American society and they are useful sources of evidence, provided that they are approached

¹⁶ The Greek historians consulted in this work are Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Roman Antiquities*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950) ; Herodian, *Roman History*, trans. C. R. Whittaker (Cambridge: University Press, 1969) ; and Cassius Dio, who even served as a Roman consul in 205, Cassius Dio, *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

¹⁷ Cassius Dio, *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*, from the Introduction by Ian Scott-Kilvert, 18-29.

¹⁸ Herodian, *Roman History*, from the Introduction by C. R. Whittaker, xxi.

with caution. Classical biographers, both Greek and Latin, tend to be rather capricious when evaluating and recording the events surrounding their subjects' lives. For example, the two extant biographies that this work relies upon heavily, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Gaius Suetonius's *De Vita Caesarum* are steeped in bias. The former is a Greek author comparing the lives of notable Greeks and Romans in order to instruct his audience about a moral lesson and the latter is a successful attempt to depict the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors as depraved tyrants.¹⁹ Therefore much of the information contained within these two sources may be tainted or even completely fabricated in order to support their authors' respective purpose. However, biographers are another useful category of evidence, especially in an era in which extant sources are relatively scarce by modern standards. However, they should be utilized cautiously and we must be cognizant of the authors' respective motives. Biographies are consulted in this work in order to strengthen other more reliable sources or if they provide the best or sole extant description of an event related to the Vestals. While biographies may not necessarily be accurate reconstructions of Roman history, another important literary category avoids such pretenses altogether.

Latin poets are likewise part of the evidentiary pool and their works are also quite useful. Although poets have a tendency to sometimes fabricate, often embellish and always distort their narration of historical events for the purpose of eloquence and elegy, they provide information about the priesthood of Vesta that would otherwise be lost. This is further compounded by the fact that poets themselves benefited from the support of both elite

¹⁹ Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, from the Introduction by Clayton Miles Lehmann, xxi ; Michael Grant, however, considers Suetonius to write with a "high degree of objectivity." However, given his attention to the most sensuous details of the emperors lives suggests a fair amount of bias. Gaius Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), from the Introduction by Michael Grant, 8.

and imperial patronage. While these problems with elegiac texts are considered, by the first century poets began to replace more traditional sources of information as Arnaldo Momigliano makes clear, “The men who represented the new age were neither scholars like Varro nor philosophers like Cicero: they were poets—Horace, Virgil, Propertius, Ovid, Manlius.”²⁰ This work makes use of many of these same authors. Indeed, the emperors utilized poetry as a form of propaganda, which suggests that it was widely distributed and that if the people did not generally accept it as such, they at least tolerated its dissemination.²¹ Poetry is particularly valuable for studies examining Roman religion considering that Latin poets considered it in more detail and depth than their historian counterparts. The poet Ovid, for example, published the *Fasti*, a long poem describing the Roman religious calendar, without which our understanding of Roman religion would be even murkier.²² Although poetry is mired by the common problem of authorship and patronage inherent to many of our sources, it is also potentially prone to embellishment even more than our other sources. However, its wide distribution and the fact that it is among the best extant sources for the Roman understanding of their own religion and how their religion contributed to their cultural identity, it is an excellent category of evidence.

In addition to the meter and prose of Latin elegiac texts, this work also relies upon a rich collection of documentary evidence as well. This category of evidence consists of daily use texts as opposed to narratives. Private correspondence, legal briefs and short

²⁰ Momigliano specifically mentions that these Latin poets are very useful for discussions of Roman religion. Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 72.

²¹ Virgil, *The Aeneid* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), from the Introduction by David West, viii-x.

²² While only the first portion of the *Fasti*, which examines the first six months of the year, is extant, it is likely that the second portion was completed. Scholars suggest that it was likely not published after Ovid’s death because the final touches to the work were not completed. Ovid’s supporters, who certainly would not have desired to detract from the poet’s legacy by publishing an unpolished work, likely prevented the publication of the other half. This suggests the extent to which poetry was a carefully crafted art as opposed to a historical work. Ovid, *Fasti*, ed. James George Frazer (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1931), xxi.

informational pamphlets provide first hand glimpses into the Vestals' relationship with Roman society.²³ The authors of the letters and legal speeches utilized in this work were not writing in order to satisfy a patron, but their quills were not free of personal interest. Pliny the Younger wrote his letters to his own purpose, with his own interests in mind and Cicero's famous speeches at the Roman bar were designed to accomplish a legal end and are subsequently not devoid of bias.²⁴ Another problem inherent with utilizing documentary evidence is that the information contained therein is only applicable to a very narrow moment in time and are all but divorced from the historical context in which they occur. Society and history are constantly in motion and the circumstances surrounding a particular letter, speech or pamphlet may change or not even apply after several years or even weeks. Therefore, our documentary evidence must be situated into an historical context through the use of other sources and we must be constantly vigilant and aware of their author's lives in order to dissect any personal interests and bias that they may have deployed in these texts. Evidence for the Vestals is not relegated solely to the dusty pages of manuscripts however.

The Vestals physically occupied space in the Roman forum and therefore there are valuable pieces of archaeological evidence available to historians. In addition to the ruins of the *aedes Vestae* and a twentieth century reconstruction of the temple of Vesta itself, the most significant archaeological remains for the priesthood consists of a dozen individual

²³ Some of the documentary evidence that this work consults are Cicero, *The Speeches*, ed. N. H. Watts (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), ff. 308-413 ; Cicero, *ad Atticum*, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) ; Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, ed. William Melmoth (New York: MacMillan Co., 1915) ; Marcus Terentius Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, ed. Roland Kent (Cambridge: University Press, 1938) ; Cicero, *De Re Publica* and *De Legibus*, ed. Clinton Keyes (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928).

²⁴ There is significant evidence that Pliny the Younger's correspondence may have been with the intent of publication, albeit after his death. Both Cicero and Pliny the Younger's correspondence were published and Cicero's legal briefs were typically published after their delivery. Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, from the Introduction by W. M. L. Hutchinson, xv.

statues that were found buried in the *aedes Vestae*.²⁵ Since their discovery in 1882, scholars have utilized these physical remains in a variety of ways. Jordan wrote the first significant description of these archaeological remains and Van Deman attempted to identify which statues accurately represent Vestal priestesses.²⁶ More recently, Wright has successfully utilized these remains to trace the origins and development of the priesthood and the goddess Vesta and Lindner devoted an entire dissertation to his examination of them and inscriptions in order to understand the close connection between the imperial family and the priesthood following the first century.²⁷ While a more thorough evaluation of these statues is considered in the next chapter, it is important to be aware of their significance as the best evidence for the Vestals' appearance and dress. Through comparing and contrasting these second century statues of individual Vestals with the literary evidence, we can attempt to grasp whether or not the appearance of these priestesses remained relatively static throughout the priesthood's history or if it changed. Other physical evidence, such as inscriptions and numismatic evidence, cited in modern works, also furthers our understanding of the relationship between the Vestals and Roman society. Archaeological evidence seldom speaks for itself and subsequently scholars must connect physical remains with textual references in order to incorporate it into any historical work.

The fragmentary nature and variety of evidence referencing the Vestals throughout their thousand years of the priesthood's existence can seem overwhelming. Indeed, this is a

²⁵ The archaeological evidence for the *aedes Vestae*, the Roman Forum and these statues were personally gathered by the author on a trip to Rome in September 2010. See Plates 1 and 2.

²⁶ Esther Boise Van Deman, "The Value of the Vestal Statues as Originals," *American Journal of Archaeology* 12 (1908) : 324-342 ; Henri Jordan, *Der Tempel der Vesta und das Haus der Vestalinnen* (Berlin: Weidmannsche, 1886).

²⁷ Marcus Lindner, "The Vestal Virgins and their Imperial Patrons: Sculptures and Inscriptions from the Atrium Vestae in the Roman Forum (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1995) ; Richard Wright, "Vesta: A Study on the Origin of a Goddess and her Cultus (PhD Dissertation, University of Washington, 1995), 105-110.

facet of ancient history that scholars either loathe or enjoy in the face of such limited evidence. Scholars are compelled to comb through and digest nearly the entire gamut of classical literature, often only discovering an offhand phrase or description of significance relative to their work. While this burden is not necessarily placed on the audience of this work, historians are obligated to somehow organize all of this fragmented information and find a framework in which to make it useful. The categories described above are arranged according to the type of evidence and, on some occasions, according to the language in which each type of sources was written. There are advantages and limitations associated with each type of source and no single category is more reliable than another by itself. Therefore, the strengths and weaknesses of each category must be evaluated and the sources amalgamated accordingly in order to weave as complete of a tapestry of the priesthood of Vesta and the Vestals' status as public spectacles from a variety of spools as the evidence permits.

Historiography

The discussion of the available evidence for the Vestal priesthood and its relationship to Roman culture and identity demonstrates that these women were a popular subject of inquiry for classical historians and this fascination has not ebbed. Following the disbandment of the priesthood in the fourth century, monks, scholars and artists have been interested in all of its features.²⁸ Historians have not played an insignificant role in instilling and perpetuating this obsession throughout the centuries. In order to fully appreciate the

²⁸ See Jean-Léon Gérôme's famous painting *Pollice Verso*, which depicts the Vestals observing the games in the Colosseum as a gladiator is about to dispatch his opponent ; St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 10.16 ; Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, trans. Sister Mary Francis McDonald (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 1.2.

significance of the Vestals in classical Roman society and their importance to Roman history it is necessary to examine the recent historiography of the priesthood that inspired and to which this work endeavors to contribute.

This analysis must inevitably begin with a brief exposition of the relationship between religion and Roman society. This discussion can fill an entire shelf in a university library, but acknowledging the efforts of these scholars need not require volumes for the purpose of this work. Cyril Bailey's *Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome* makes the convincing argument that what eventually evolved into a state or civic Roman religion by the end of the third century BCE developed from traditional Indo-European practices, the private worship of the hearth, fertility and ancestors.²⁹ Gradually the state appropriated familial and tribal religious associations to the city and its populace. Therefore, even the fully developed civic religion that existed by the first century BCE reflects a private and pastoral character reaching back to an antiquity of which even Romans were not entirely cognizant. More recently, scholars have attempted to analyze the development of Roman religion through psycho-analytical and social anthropological theories.³⁰ While this focus on the origins of Roman religion contributes to our understanding of the innate nature of human beings as both individuals and the aggregate to process environmental conditions through the sacred, others have also approached the subject from a functional approach as well. Religious scholars, such as the influential Arnaldo Momigliano, employ a socio-political theory to evaluating

²⁹ The origins and development of Roman religion, especially in relationship to Vesta and her priesthood are considered in the next segment, Cyril Bailey, *Phases in the Religion of Ancient Rome* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1932), ff. 147 ; Also see Henry Boren, *Roman Society: A Social, Economic and Cultural History* (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1992), 18-9.

³⁰ Wright posits a theory of Roman religious development through the psychological and sociological influences that dominate Indo-European pastoral and agricultural culture, such as the psychological importance of fertility for crops and a burning fire in both private dwelling and communities. Wright, 157-193.

religion through its relationship to society.³¹ Momigliano tempts us to ask the question of what does religion do for society? How does it accomplish this function? In short, why does religion matter? These are the questions that the author was unable to resist and subsequently this work is a socio-political examination of the Vestal priesthood and its relationship to Roman society.

Early twentieth century scholars are responsible for creating the modern historiographical foundation from which recent historians examine Roman religion and this work is in their debt. These Vestal pathfinders attempted to reconstruct the Vestal priesthood and the Roman religious experience in general to varying degrees of success. Works such as Franz Altheim's *A History of Roman Religion* and Georg Wissowa's *Religion und Kultus der Römer* established a descriptive narrative of Roman religion through collating the tidbits of information scattered throughout the corpus of classical literature.³² The several pages within these works that Altheim and his contemporaries devote to the Vestals do not, however, extend much beyond a purely descriptive account of who the Vestals were and their contribution to religion. However, these scholars are responsible for postulating theories about the priesthood that still influence modern discussions, including their comparison of the induction ceremony of a priestess with a Roman marriage and the comparison of the execution ritual of a priestess convicted of *crimen incesti* with a Roman funeral, both of which are discussed in more depth as it is appropriate.³³ Although these early

³¹ Momigliano, 26-9.

³² Altheim, 140-3 ; Bailey, 48-54 ; Georg Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (Munich: Beck, 1912) ; Herbert Rose, *Ancient Roman Religion* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949), 53-7.

³³ Itala Santinelli, "La condizione giuridica delle Vestal," *Rivista di Filologia* 32 (1906) : 63-82 ; E. T. M., "Execution of a Vestal and Ritual Marriage," *Classical Quarterly* 9 (1914) : 317-22.

reconstructions of the priesthood are brief and limited, they created the circumstances through which others could develop our understanding of the Vestals.

During the sixties and seventies historians started to elaborate and build upon the endeavors of their predecessors. These scholars sought more than a reconstruction of the priesthood, but delved deeper into the priesthood and its relationship to Roman society through other historical contexts. For example, John Balsdon's influential *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* situates the Vestals in Roman society through their relationship to other categories of Roman women through his argument that they functioned as daughters to the mythologized Etruscan kings and that this status developed into the divine following the expulsion of the kings.³⁴ Judith Hallet, on the other hand, situates the Vestals in the family structure of the Roman elite, or rather outside of it, through her assertion that these women could not have functioned as either *virgines* or as *matrons*, two of the roles of Roman women described by Balsdon.³⁵ Religious scholars, however, focus on the unique association of the priesthood with Rome's security and success and its subsequent significance to Roman society.³⁶ These works situate the Vestals in the cosmology of religion and society, especially as they pertain to women and the family, but their narratives are limited to several pages and take the function of these women in Roman society for granted without explaining how and why. The Vestals are situated in Roman society through their unique status, but little effort is devoted to explaining the unique position of these women.

³⁴ John Balsdon, *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (New York: John Day Co., 1963), 13-20 and 235-43.

³⁵ Judith Hallet, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family* (Princeton: University Press, 1984), 83-7.

³⁶ John Scheid, "The Religious Roles of Roman Women," in *A History of Women in the West, Volume I: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, ed. Pauline Schmitt Pantel (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 377-96 ; H. Hommel, "Vesta und die fruhromische Religion," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Romischen Welt* I.2, ed. Hildegard Temporini (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972) : 397-420.

A single article profoundly changed the historiography of the Vestal priesthood and remains one of the most influential and important discourses several decades later. Mary Beard's "The Sexual Status of the Vestal Virgins," published in 1980, is not only solely devoted to the Vestals, but it was the first effort to explain how and why they were so important to Roman society. The crux of her argument is that the Vestals were the only individuals capable of religiously representing the collective because their unique sexual status existed on the periphery of Roman society, occupying a locus between the status of Roman wives, daughters and men.³⁷ While Beard's work significantly changed the way in which the priesthood is examined by historians, it has also resulted in some unforeseen consequences. Due to the popularity of the work amongst scholars, nearly every subsequent discussion about the Vestals has focused on this aspect of the priesthood.³⁸ In other words, examining the Vestals through their sexuality became defining through its popularity. Beard herself acknowledges this problem in a revision of her article published fifteen years later.³⁹ The significance of Beard's work cannot be overstated and it has inspired an entire milieu of scholarship.

This thesis redirects the emphasis on the Vestals' sexuality and examines its relationship to Roman society. Several more recent scholars have already paved the way. Ariadne Staples devoted an entire section of her work *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins* in her successful effort to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Vestals with other

³⁷ Beard bases this argument on the theory of ambiguity, that it is possible for one particular subject or item to simultaneously reflect and represent several different ideas or groups in society. Mary Beard, "The Sexual Status of the Vestal Virgins," 13.

³⁸ For example, see Takacs, 85-6 ; Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 210 ; Holt Parker, "Why were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State," *American Journal of Philology* 125 (2004) : 563-601.

³⁹ Mary Beard, "Re-reading (Vestal) Virginitiy," in *Women in Antiquity*, eds. Richard Hawley and Barbara Levick (New York: Routledge, 1995), 166-77.

aspects of Roman religion through her theory of a cultural system, “a complex network of meaningfully related cults and rituals,” which is itself related to other familiar Roman systems such as class, family life or politics.⁴⁰ Each cultural system is composed of smaller components and together each system models Roman culture. Robin Wildfang’s groundbreaking *Rome’s Vestal Virgins* is the most recent and most significant work about the priesthood thus far. Wildfang divorces her work from the sexuality trope, only briefly describing it when it is necessary or useful for her more significant argument that the Vestals reflect a purifactory priesthood rather than fertility priesthood. She also convincingly demonstrates that every facet of the priesthood was tied to its significance in Roman society.⁴¹ These two authors, especially the latter, inspired this work.

The Vestals had a long history in antiquity; they also have a long history in historiography as well. Due to the limitations of the extant evidence and historiography discussed above, this thesis draws on many of the same anecdotes and themes as these previous works. However, this thesis provides a fresh perspective from which to examine the Vestal priesthood and interpret its relationship to Roman society. More significantly, this work challenges our understanding of Roman spectacle, a subject that has, like sexuality and the Vestals, become definitive through its own popularity amongst modern scholars and societies. Following in the footsteps of others is a necessary cornerstone of history and this work hopes to encourage scholars to not only examine the Vestals with nuanced perspectives and a fresh methodology, but also other facets of Roman civilization that have already been discussed *ad nauseam*. The Vestals ensured the survival of the Roman state and the

⁴⁰ Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 8 and 157-9.

⁴¹ Robin Wildfang, *Rome’s Vestal Virgins: Vestal Priestesses in the late Republic and early Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4-5 and 109-10.

spectacular nature of their induction and appearance, the rites, duties and privileges which they performed and exercised and sometimes even their punishment for transgressions reflect their status as public spectacles.

Origins of Vesta and the Vestals

The best place to begin a discussion of the Vestals and their role in Roman society as public spectacles is with origin of the priesthood. Roman authorities believe that the priesthood and its goddess were established during the Etruscan monarchy in the late eighth century BCE.⁴² However, others suggest that perhaps the origins of the Roman priesthood lay in Alba Longa, a nearby city in Latium, or even in Greece.⁴³ The fact of the matter is that the Romans of the first century BCE and CE, the principal authors of our extant sources, did not fully comprehend the creation and development of the Vestal priesthood. Just as we are not all cognizant of the origin of the various traditions and practices in our society, such as the practice of exchanging gifts or the tradition of the Christmas tree, the Romans were similarly unaware of the traditions and practices the Vestals performed. The Romans did not completely understand the pre-Roman history of the Vestals because it has a much longer history that even pre-dates history. An examination of the goddess Vesta herself, the Indo-European origin and migration of the Great Mother and hearth cults and the local Italian development of a Vestal priesthood reveals that the origins of the Vestals lay outside of contemporary Roman cosmology.

⁴² Livy 1.20 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 2.65 ; Plutarch, *Numa* 9-14.

⁴³ Livy 1.20 ; Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, ed. Arthur Stanley Pease (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 2.67 ; Georg Wissowa, "Vesta," in *Ausführliches Lexicon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie*, 6 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1924), 243.

The multi-faceted nature of the Roman goddess Vesta herself suggests that she and her priesthood were not invented by the Romans, but rather appropriated from a variety of other archaic religious traditions that existed prior to the historical era. The defining nature of Vesta to the Romans was as a hearth goddess, since the flame that burned within her temple reflected the success or failure of their society. However, scholars suggest that the goddess was not binary and that she had many other functions. For example, there is evidence that the Roman Vesta was associated with the earth, which combined with her purifactory function discussed in a later chapter has led scholars to suggest that she may have been a chthonic goddess of the underworld and possibly even associated with rites involving the pacification of spirits.⁴⁴ Other scholars cite the virginal status of the goddess and her priestesses as well as the phallic imagery associated with both hearth fires and the priesthood in order to argue that the goddess herself reflected both a virginal and a maternal status simultaneously.⁴⁵ Ovid mentions that Rhea Silvia, a mythologized Etruscan Vestal, was raped by a Mars through a phallus that appeared in the hearth for which she was responsible.⁴⁶ Wright, arguably the most recent expert on the subject of the origins of Vesta, also suggests that the unique round shape of the temple itself, as opposed to the more common rectangular design of most Roman temples, cannot be linked to any one particular type of goddess.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the fact that unlike other Roman deities, Vesta did not have an effigy other than the fire within her temple corroborates Wright's claim.⁴⁸ The nature of

⁴⁴ Ovid, *Fasti* 6.267-8 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.66 ; Wildfang, 6 ; K. R. Prowse, "The Vestal Circle," *Greece & Rome Second Series* 14, no. 2 (1967) : 178.

⁴⁵ Livy, 1.3 ; Ovid, *Fasti* 2.382-6 ; Cornell, 60-3 ; Gregory Nagy, "Six Studies Related to the Fireplace," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 78: 71-105.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Wright, 100-5 ; See Plate 2.

⁴⁸ St. Augustine, *City of God* 4.31 ; Tertullian, *Apologeticus pro Christianis*, ed. T. R. Glover (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931), 25.11.

Vesta, whether a hearth goddess, an earth or underworld goddess or her sexual status as a virginal and maternal goddess reveals that she could have potentially represented a variety of different types of goddess. Vesta was not restricted to any particular or simple mystery, such as fire, love or war. Vesta could reflect many natures simultaneously. The answer to the question of why the Roman Vesta had this ability lies in her anthropological origin.

The multi-faceted Roman Vesta may have had a connection to early Indo-European religious practices and indeed she may have been a religious idea that had migrated from the Indus valley to Rome. George Dumézil makes this claim through his comparison of the Vestal priesthood the early Vedic religion of India.⁴⁹ In addition to describing the similarity of the significance to the hearth, which was a permanent source of fire for the community and thus important on a practical level, he convincingly argues that the Latin title of the goddess is a derivative of the Vedic verb ‘to burn’.⁵⁰ Wright argues that Vesta is an adaptation, in part, of the Vedic Great Mother cult, which has so many variants in different societies ranging from India to the Mediterranean.⁵¹ One of the most convincing methods through which Wright traces this migration is archeology. Starting in India, Wright examines several spiral shaped temples with hearths as their central feature, which he refers to as *omphalos*, a Greek term appropriated for the type of structure found in numerous societies and cultures.⁵² He devotes an entire chapter of his dissertation to tracing the migration and development of these *omphalos* structures from India, Iran, Malta, Delos in

⁴⁹ George Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 322-3 ; Altheim, 140-1.

⁵⁰ Wright extends Dumézil’s linguistic discussion by sketching out Greek as an intermediary, although not the only lingual intermediary, between the Latin *Vesta* and the Vedic *ta*. See Dumézil, 322-3 ; Wright, 28-9.

⁵¹ Wright, 36.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 75-6.

Greece, Pompeii in Italy and finally the round temple of Vesta in Rome.⁵³ The linguistic and architectural migration of these structures certainly suggests that Vesta and her priesthood may have developed some aspects of its different natures from the consistent borrowing, adapting and transforming of a religious practice that originated in early Indo-European cultures.

Other scholars do not accredit the establishment of Vesta and her priesthood to the Romans and accept the premise that the religious practice may have developed somewhere else, however, they argue that the origins of the priesthood are closer to Rome. Georg Wissowa convincingly argues that the Vestal priesthood existed in other pre-Roman Italian cities, especially in Latium and Etruria and that Rome, a community founded on migrants from these other cities, incorporated Vesta into its own religious cosmology.⁵⁴ Livy specifically mentions that the Vestal priesthood was adopted from Alba Longa, a Latin city.⁵⁵ More recently, scholars and archeologists have found the remains of similar round temples in various Etruscan and Latin cities resembling the Roman temple of Vesta.⁵⁶ The similarity of these temples to the Roman Vesta certainly implies a connection between the Roman priesthood and the surrounding Italian pre-Roman cultures. However, we must be careful not to rule out any external origins of the priesthood or its practices that these Italian communities may share with other areas of the world. Wright successfully amalgamates these two arguments through his premise that the development and transformation of Vesta in the Italian cities were certainly unique in their own locale, but that they are also related to

⁵³ Wright, 100-56.

⁵⁴ Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 15-19.

⁵⁵ Livy, *Ab Urba Condita* 1.20.

⁵⁶ Wright, 85-90.

the migration of the Indo-European observances of hearth religions and the Great Mother cult from the Indus Valley.⁵⁷

Essentially each culture that came into contact with this Indo-European religious idea, whether Vedic, Iranian, Greek, or Italian, adopted its practice, transformed and internalized it to reflect their own society or culture and then subsequently exported it. While this process was not at all homogenous and it certainly cannot have been expected to always flow smoothly from East to West, it permeated many cultures along this route in one form or another. The form that these Indo-European ideas took in Rome has become the quintessential Vesta and subsequently the Roman model of these ideas has become the focus through the success of Roman society and culture. In short, the culmination of the priesthood described in this thesis and the Vestals status as public spectacles is derived from an idea chronologically and geographically remote from Rome and numerous other cultures separated by time and space have influenced it.

⁵⁷Wright, 204.

INDUCTION AND APPEARANCE: THE VESTAL AS A VISUAL OTHER

The six women serving as priestesses in the Vestal priesthood were charged with a considerable responsibility, to function as mediators between Rome and the gods, who were believed to govern the world around them and who determined their fate. The Romans themselves defined this relationship with the Latin term *pax deorum*, peace of the gods. Although the Vestals were only a single facet of this religious arch dedicated to maintaining this relationship, they certainly were its capstone. The Vestals were guardians and protectors of Roman society through their religious role in maintaining the *pax deorum*. The means through which they ensured this relationship is discussed in the next chapter, but the ability of each priestess to participate in its preservation was considered prior to her service. The required qualifications for candidature, the selection and induction process and her carefully regulated appearance once accepted into the fold of the priesthood transformed a young elite Roman girl into one of the most recognizable spectacles of Roman society.

This chapter accomplishes several aims in order to explain this transformation and its significance. First of all, it is imperative to elaborate on our working definition of spectacle

as it is applicable to Roman culture. An examination of the term and the historiographical perspectives of a spectacle, as they pertain to classical Roman society, is the foundation of this entire work. Secondly, identifying and analyzing the various qualifications that a young girl had to meet in order to be considered a suitable candidate for the priesthood reveals that the Romans took the Vestals' status as spectacles quite seriously. Indeed, the significance of a spectacle as a form of status is a relevant discussion assumed in this chapter. The induction ceremony itself and the subsequent legal implications confirmed that each priestess met the rigorous qualifications. Finally, the strictly regimented appearance of a Vestal further demonstrates that her clothing, hair, ornaments and behavior signified her new status to the populace. In short, a Vestal candidate was not only initiated into the priesthood of Vesta, but was also designated as a spectacle charged with the task of ensuring the success of Roman society through the maintenance of the *pax deorum*.

Spectacle

Modern western society retains a strong fascination with Roman spectacles. Volumes detailing the blood sports of the Coliseum and the chariot races of the circus fill libraries throughout the world. While these spectacles are significant legacies of Roman civilization, they have become definitive through their modern popularity.⁵⁸ These events are understood to be Roman spectacles, but there has been little effort towards explaining the term and its implications for Roman society or towards broadening the category of spectacle beyond the poet Juvenal's "bread and circuses."⁵⁹ Despite this shortcoming, the plethora of works

⁵⁸ Bettina Bergmann, "Introduction: The Art of Ancient Spectacle," in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondolen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 9.

⁵⁹ The phrase is a metaphor describing how Roman politics changed during the late Republic. Staging gladiatorial combats, chariot races and providing grain doles to the masses translated into political influence

describing these particular spectacles opens the door to scholars interested in further defining and comprehending the nature of the spectacle and its relationship to classical Roman society. Spectacles are entities, not necessarily events, and they reflect a social relationship between the observer and the observed. They function as social unifiers and simultaneously instill and preserve the ideal cultural identity inherent to a society.

Scholars have been eager to identify spectacles in Roman society and their discourse is the foundation upon which this thesis endeavors to contribute. First of all, spectacles were public affairs and consisted of some type of audience. A variety of scholars focus on the Roman blood sports and on the nature of their audience in particular, which has had a tremendous influence on our understanding of Roman spectacles.⁶⁰ The audience must be situated and organized in some fashion, through stadium seating for example, in order to qualify as an audience and subsequently the spectacular became an event. Bergman argues that the associations of spectacles with events is due to historians' tendencies to "match periods with certain kinds of events," such as the classical Greeks with the Olympiads or first century CE Romans with the blood sports.⁶¹ Beard successfully dispels this connection for the Romans through her argument that spectacles also had to be relatively rare events or else the opulence and grandeur would nullify the magnificent nature of an event, whether the Roman games or the more infrequent military triumphal procession.⁶² Several others broaden the category of spectacles to include more frequent and less observed entities into the Roman spectrum, including funerals, banquets, religious rituals and theater

and replaced the traditional values of civil service, military command and social status. Juvenal, *Satires*, ed. Susanna Morton Braund (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 10.77-81.

⁶⁰ Roland Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization: The Roman Games* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1972), 24 ; Hazel Dodge, 40-3

⁶¹ Bergman, 9.

⁶² Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 60.

performances.⁶³ While the public nature and rarity of a spectacle are critical to identifying and understanding a Roman spectacle, the emphasis is placed on events. The realm of the spectacular goes beyond events however.

Events can certainly be spectacles, but a spectacle does not necessarily have to be a carefully orchestrated event. Guy Debord's groundbreaking work *Society of the Spectacle* does not only examine the concept of the spectacular divorced from any particular society or moment, thus mitigating the problematic association Bergman describes, but also argues that they are social relationships between the observed and the observer.⁶⁴ The observed do not have to necessarily be situated at the center of a consciously orchestrated occurrence and neither must the observers be positioned or organized in any particular fashion in order to carry out their prescribed task of observation. In other words, a spectacle does not have to be an event. Parker inserts performance theory into Debord's premise of the spectacle as a social relationship through his argument that the theater provided a "perfect venue for self-display and self-fashioning...for all the drama of Roman society to be played out," and subsequently provides a basis from which to expand on scholars' association of spectacles with events. A spectacle does not have to necessarily be defined as an event, but can also be an infrequent or unique performance or negotiation of a social relationship in front of an audience, or as we shall see momentarily, on behalf of an audience.

⁶³ Holt Parker, "The Observed of All Observers: Spectacle, Applause and Cultural Poetics in the Roman Theater Audience", in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kindolen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 163-8 ; John Bodel, "Death on Display: Looking at Roman Funerals", in *The Art of Ancient Spectacle*, ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kindolen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 259 ; Donald Kyle, 34-53 and 128-171.

⁶⁴ For an analysis of Debord's work, see Johnathan Crary, "Eclipse of the Spectacle," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (Boston: D. R. Goodine, 1984), 282-94 ; Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985), 79-85 ; Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12.

The etymology of the Latin word for spectacle suggests that it can be more than an infrequent public event in Roman society. The term *spectaculum* has many meanings and is similar to the Greek words *thea* and *thema*, which Bergman suggests implies three different connotations: the physiological sense of seeing, a sight or something that is seen and also a location or “place for seeing.”⁶⁵ The second meaning is particularly useful because the vantage of the observers compared to the observed entails relationships of power, a type of social negotiation through the expected or unexpected performance of social and cultural norms. This is exactly the type of relationship that Debord and Parker suggest spectacles reflect. This is further extended by the fact that not all observers have the same view of the observed. The Latin term *spectaculum*, which means “exposed to public view” or “certain events seen by a public,” appropriates the latter two meanings of *thea* and *thema*.⁶⁶ More significantly, the first definition does not specifically imply that a spectacle has to be an event, although the second component does suggest that events were a prominent type of spectacle in Roman society. This contemporary understanding bridges nicely with the modern theory Debord postulates. The term spectacle is revealed to be much more than an event; it is an entity, a type of social negotiation inherent in classical Roman society. This is the first and most basic component of our working definition of spectacle, but this literal definition is qualified by other less obvious, albeit crucial connections.

The historical function of these entities and events in Roman culture further enriches our understanding of spectacles and their relationship to Roman society. Momigliano makes

⁶⁵ Bergman specifically refers to Herodian’s use of the word in order to demonstrate these connections, “...in his reign we saw spectacles consisting of all types of displays in all the theaters at once.” See, Herodian 3.8 ; Bergmann, 11.

⁶⁶ Bergmann, 11 ; Bergmann’s view is also adopted by John H. D’Arms, “Performing Culture: Roman Spectacles and the Banquets of the Powerful,” in the *Art of Ancient Spectacle*, ed. Bettina Bergmann and Christine Kondolen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 301.

this exposition necessary through his claim that, “To know the vocabulary of the institutions is not equivalent to knowing the institutions.”⁶⁷ Whether in the form of games, banquets, religious festivals or entities, Roman spectacles linked the observers and the observed to their own past. The Romans were very nostalgic and preoccupied with associating the practices and attitudes of their contemporary era to those of Rome’s history.⁶⁸ However, this often resulted in only a kernel of the original significance of particular spectacles being observed in later periods of Roman history. For example, gladiatorial bouts were initially an important feature of Roman funerary rituals, but as this particular religious significance waned, they continued to be performed and dedicated to various individuals and gods for generations.⁶⁹ Momigliano succinctly describes the importance of this feature of spectacles to Roman society, “Traditional practices implied collective responsibility for the prosperity of the country. They were the tissue of daily life, the occasions for social reconciliation or conflict.”⁷⁰ Whether or not the Vestals and their relationship to Roman society remained static or particular features of the priesthood lost their original significance, they were spectacular entities and functioned as a reminder of Rome’s past. Spectacles are a means of cultural continuity.

Spectacles also project this cultural identity onto varying segments of society and a brief digression of the social divisions inherent in Roman society enables this argument to be proved. Social status was an important feature of Roman culture and more than anything else defined an individual, although many of the categories examined below are not exclusive and do sometimes overlap. In some ways Roman society was organized vertically in ways that

⁶⁷ Momigliano, 311.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁹ Auguet, 19 ; Bodel, 264.

⁷⁰ Momigliano, 88.

are recognizable in many societies throughout history, including our own. Wealth and economic class were certainly important, but in Roman society wealth was a secondary status in comparison to civil status.⁷¹ Participation in the highest government positions and family status were the defining characteristics of the Roman elite. The division of gender was inherent in Roman society as women were mostly considered secondary citizens, although following the Punic Wars during the third century BCE and perhaps particularly during the principate, women did exercise a limited degree of social responsibility out of necessity.⁷² Legal status was also very important and for much of Roman history individuals fell into one of three categories: the citizen, who possessed the greatest amount of social rights; the freedman, a freed slave who had limited rights; and the slave, who was regarded as little more than the private property of their owners.⁷³ These universal social divisions and others that are not specifically mentioned here permeated Roman society.

In addition to these more universal social categories, the Romans also had other distinctly horizontal divisions unique to their own society. The most prevalent difference was between the *patricians* and *plebeians*. Both were citizens, both were members of the property owning elite and both influenced Roman society and history.⁷⁴ The *patricians* consisted of certain families, possibly originating out of noble advisors to the Etruscan

⁷¹ Boren, 73.

⁷² Following the disaster at Cannae in 216 BCE, women temporarily assumed control and authority of their household and familial property in the absence of their fathers and husbands. In 18 BCE Augustus granted special privileges to women with three or more children in an attempt to correct a population problem. Hallet, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society*, 87 ; Wildfang, 101.

⁷³ The category of citizenship broadened over time to include free men in the entire empire due to an edict of the emperor Caracalla in 212. Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940 ; Boren, 15-18 ; Howard Hayes Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome from 133 BCE to AD 68* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 7-10 and 12-21.

⁷⁴ Boren, 15-18.

monarchs, which had a monopoly on political office and important priesthoods.⁷⁵ The *plebeians*, on the other hand, were families without these rights, although they would come to possess a certain degree of political and religious agency through the “Struggle of the Orders,” a series of social conflicts between these two groups that occurred from 475 BCE until 287 BCE.⁷⁶ During and following the first century BCE, one could argue that the various political struggles reflected developing social division considering that much of the elite aligned themselves to one side or the other during each struggle. The political struggle between Lucius Cornelius Sulla and Gaius Marius resulted in two marches on Rome and several battles in which Romans opposed each other.⁷⁷ This set a dangerous precedent that the *optimates* and *populares* made example of during the late first century BCE, which resulted in two more civil wars and eventually the creation of the principate and the practical dissolution of the oligarchy. These were not political parties in the modern understanding, but were so integral to Roman society that they mirrored social divisions in their own right. Roman society was rigidly divided and the nature of this division changed over time and the lines upon which they divisions occurred are not necessarily clear due to the complexity and intricacies of categories potentially overlapping each other. In short, the second function of a Roman spectacle was not an inconsiderable task.

Having briefly examined how intricate the divisions of Roman society actually were, it is now possible to describe the second function of Roman spectacles, unifying society. Many of the larger and more considered spectacles also functioned to unify the Roman community. Keeping with the example of the popular gladiatorial combats, the biographer

⁷⁵ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 148-9 ; Carcopino, 52-6.

⁷⁶ Philip Matyszak, *Chronicle of the Roman Republic: The Rulers of Ancient Rome from Romulus to Augustus* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 46-75.

⁷⁷ Boren, 99-103 ; Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 77-83.

Suetonius meticulously describes the demographic composition of a typical audience one might find seated in an amphitheater during the first century. Senators, ambassadors from allied and neighboring territories, freedmen, soldiers, married men, boys, women and the poor are each specifically mentioned according to their prescribed seating arrangements.⁷⁸ The demographic variety of the audience that Suetonius mentions indicates the ability of spectacles to bring different communities of Roman society together for a common activity and a similar purpose. Debord could have had Suetonius's description in mind as he emphasized the ability of spectacles to facilitate a collective, "The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification."⁷⁹ The rarity of a momentous event, most Roman spectacles were only held intermittently, created a commonly experienced emotion amongst the different segments of Roman society.⁸⁰ However, as is demonstrated below, more frequent and mundane activities can similarly create these collective emotions, although they typically only did so when they were threatened or absent. Either way, they functioned to unify Roman society.

Spectacles were an important component of Roman life and developing a workable definition to describe these events and their relationship to society only furthers our understanding of Roman society. Previous historical discussion of the Roman games and other momentous events inspires our contributions to the historiography of spectacular. First of all, the domain of Roman spectacles extends beyond the games and the category has limitless possibilities. Spectacles hold more significance other than their own grandeur and they reflect and represent social relationships inherent to the society and culture in which

⁷⁸ Suetonius, *Augustus* 44.

⁷⁹ Debord goes so far as to describe spectacles as a "common language that bridges this division." Debord, 22.

⁸⁰ Beard, 60.

they were held. For the purpose of this thesis, spectacles were uncommon events or specific institutions that functioned to create a common cultural identity and unify Roman society in order to create a collective and social experience. The remainder of this thesis demonstrates that every facet of the Vestal priesthood fulfilled these criteria.

Qualifications of Selection

The process of selecting and inducting a young girl into the Vestal priesthood, hereafter referred to as *captio*, and subsequently transforming her into a Roman spectacle was by no means a simple feat. The entire procedure was exclusive and organized in such a way so as to ensure that each individual priestess was physically, religiously and socially perfect. While these requirements guaranteed that the maintenance of the *pax deorum* and Rome's fate were entrusted only to the purest individuals, they also reflect the need for each priestess to be able to represent a variety of communities within Roman society, one of the functions of a spectacle. The Vestals had to be exhaustively defined in order to create a common experience across the various rigid social divides in Roman society. These strict requirements enabled the Vestals' audience to comprehend the priesthood and its role in Roman society through various paradigms according to their own individual social status or cosmology, which would otherwise inhibit the preservation of a common cultural identity. Each qualification that a young girl had to meet in order to be considered for the priesthood signifies this connection.

The girls considered for the priesthood were subject to at least seven stringent criteria in order to be selected as a candidate. Aulus Gellius is the only extant source that describes

the *captio* process and his long list of prerequisites establishes all of the extant qualifications a young girl had to fulfill:

...divine will does not permit a girl less than six or more than ten years old to be accepted; likewise a girl without a [living] father and mother; or a girl with frail speech, diminished hearing or a distinguishing body defect; or a girl who has herself been emancipated, nor her father before her, even if her father is alive and under her grandfather's authority; or a girl whose parents are slaves or engaged in dirty professions. But, it is written, that a girl whose sister has been selected for the priesthood merits exemption; likewise a girl whose father is a flamen, augur, one of the fifteen men with the holy task [custodians of the Sybilline oracles], one of the seven men who oversee solemn public banquets, or a Salina priest. It is customary that the fiancée of a priest and the daughter of a sacred tribune are exempt. In addition, Ateius Capito writes that the daughter of a man who does not own a residence in Italy and the daughter of a man who has three children are exempt.⁸¹

We do not know the specific moments in Roman history in which each of these requirements became active, but it is likely that many reflect the requirements of candidature for most of the priesthood's history if only because our sources were equally distant from the events they describe as well. Therefore, we must adopt a synchronic approach towards most of Gellius's list. Two exceptions, however, are the exemption of the daughters of a tribune, an office that did not exist until 471 BCE following the social war of 494 BCE, and the requirement that a candidate's father had to own a residence in Italy, which is not applicable until Rome

⁸¹ "Qui de virgine capienda scripserunt, quorum diligentissime scripsit Labeo Antistius, minorem quam annos sex, maiorem quam annos decem natam negaverunt capi fas esse; item quae non sit patrima et matrima; item quae lingua debili sensuve aurium deminuta aliave qua corporis labe insignita sit; item quae ipsa aut cuius pater emancipates sit, etiamsi vivo patre in avi potestate sit; item cuius parentes alter ambove servitutem servierunt aut in negotiis sordidus versantur. Sed et eam, cuius soror ad id sacerdotium lecta est, excusationem mereri aiunt; item cuius pater flamen aut augur aut quindecimvirum sacris faciundis aut septemvirum epulonum aut Salius est. Sponsae quoque pontificis et tubicinis sacrorum filiae vacatione a sacerdotio isto tribui solet. Praeterea Capito Ateius scriptum reliquit neque eius legendam filiam, qui domicilium in Italia non haberet, et excusandam eius, qui liberos tres haberet." Gellius 1.12.

expanded its hegemony beyond the Italian peninsula during the Punic Wars.⁸² While these two exceptions demonstrate that the priesthood did change and evolve over time in order to meet social and political developments, little else is known about the other conditions. Gellius certainly did not incorporate these criteria into his list haphazardly and a closer look at the physical, religious and social requirements reveals much about the spectacular nature of the priesthood.

The first category of criteria is the physical requirements. Gellius mentions that a Vestal candidate had to be a girl between the ages of six and ten. Beard expounds the plausible argument that girls were selected at this age in order to guarantee that they were virgins without requiring an inspection that would not only have been invasive, but would also have subsequently voided the girl's candidature.⁸³ The age limit presumably guaranteed that the candidate was a virgin because she would not have likely entered puberty. There is, however, a more practical explanation for establishing this age limit. Life was much more fragile in the ancient world and classical medicine was often rudimentary by modern standards. Saller's demographic study of Roman grave sites convincingly posits that at least fifty percent of young girls died or developed a physical deformity by the age of six.⁸⁴ The narrow age gap between six and ten certified that each candidate was a virgin and significantly lessened the chances of a priestess developing a physical defect or expiring shortly after her induction. A Vestal's physical condition was important to her ability to function as a Roman spectacle in other ways as well.

⁸² For a discussion of the creation of the plebeian tribunes, see Boren, 26-7 ; Livy 2.33.

⁸³ Beard, "The Sexual Status of the Vestal Virgins," 19.

⁸⁴ Richard Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), Table 2.1, 24.

Gellius's statement that Vestal candidates were required to be free from any sort of physical impairment does not reflect a social tendency to discriminate against such individuals, although this does not imply that these pressures did not exist, but they instead reflect a practical religious motive. Roman religion revolved heavily around specific physical actions, prescribed processes and verbal incantations or prayers.⁸⁵ Any mistake during a ritual and the entire observance had to be repeated from the beginning in order to maintain the *pax deorum*. The Vestals were expected to perform a variety of prescribed tasks and rituals, which necessitated the ability to audibly recite prayers as well as carefully conduct a variety of physical actions. Although some scholars have assumed that such stringent physical requirements were placed upon all priests, Morgan's influential article "Priests and Physical Fitness," argues that only the Vestals were subject to such an extensive and rigorous degree of physical perfection.⁸⁶ This expectation was so important that even sick priestesses were suspended from their duties and removed from the *aedes Vestae* until they recovered and could efficiently perform their tasks without simultaneously corrupting them.⁸⁷ The solution to the question of why the Vestals alone faced such imposing constraints lies in their spectacular nature. Through the successful performance of these actions and incantations, the Vestals ensured that Rome would continue to prosper. The

⁸⁵ For a detailed conversation about the importance of action and prayer in Roman religion, see Frances Hickson, *Roman Prayer Language: Livy and the Aeneid of Virgil* (Stuttgart: B. G. Tuebner, 1991) ; Beard, "Priesthood in the Roman Republic," in *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World*, eds. Mary Beard and John North (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 28-9 and 39.

⁸⁶ Morgan lists the examples of Marcus Sergius Silus, who conducted sacrifices after having been maimed during the Punic War; Publius Scipio, the son of Africanus, who served as an augur despite his poor health; and the future emperor Claudius, whose own mother ridiculed his physical condition. The article overturns Georg Wissowa's claim that all Roman priests had to be physically perfect and free from any blemishes. Wissowa makes this gross overgeneralization, in part, based on Gellius's description of the requirements for the Vestal priesthood. See M. Morgan, "Priests and Physical Fitness," *The Classical Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1974) : 140-1 ; Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Romer*, 491 ; Gellius 1.12.

⁸⁷ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 7.19.

physical requirements guaranteed that these girls were able to fulfill the expectations placed upon them as spectacles.

Several religious requirements had to be met in order to ensure that each Vestal candidate could function as a spectacle. Included in his long list of qualifications, Gellius specifically mentions that the candidate was not permitted to have any associations with other important religious institutions, such as the custodians of the Sybilline oracles, the priests of Mars, or a variety of other religious offices.⁸⁸ These were also requirements unique to the Vestals. For example, there is no surviving evidence suggesting that the sister or daughter of a priest of Mars was not eligible to function in any other religious capacity. While deficient evidence does not make a convincing argument, it can lead scholars to answer related questions. One of the explanations for this absence of evidence could be that the Vestal priesthood was so important to Roman society it had to operate on its own terms and could not have any association with any other priesthood. The Vestals' prerogative had to be Vesta. As will be discussed in the next chapter, they were important components of numerous other religious observances, but always on Vesta's terms. Furthermore, Wildfang argues that the physical requirement of a candidate's virginity also implied that she was in good standing with her familial cult.⁸⁹ A candidate was expected to have been in good standing with her familial cult in order to properly remove her from her familial cult and induct her into the priesthood during the *captio* ceremony, the details of which are discussed below. The strict religious requirements ensured that each candidate was in excellent standing with her familial cult and prevented connections to other religious institutions,

⁸⁸ Gellius 1.12.

⁸⁹ Each Roman family observed its own familial cult with its own practices. The purpose of these cults was to connect each family member to their ancestors. Wildfang, 42.

which might have potentially detracted from their focus on Vesta and preserving Roman society and identity.

In addition to the religious requirements, a Vestal candidate was also subject to a strict rubric of social criteria as well. Although some scholars assert that the only specified social requirement was that the girl and her family had to be Roman citizens, the social parameters were in fact much more complex and limited.⁹⁰ First of all, both the mother and father of a candidate had to be alive at the moment of her induction into the priesthood. While this qualification could have simply been an extension of the age limit and its connotations, it also could have been designed to increase the likelihood that a Vestal would have the longevity to fulfill her thirty year obligation to the priesthood. Saller suggests that it would have been rare for both parents to have been alive once their children reached adulthood.⁹¹ If this was the case, then it would have been reasonable to assume that the priestess would also live a relatively longer life and mitigate the possibility of her death during her thirty years service to the priesthood. It is also likely that this qualification ensured that each candidate was in the most optimal familial position in Roman society. Staples suggests that this involved being in the ‘ideally conceived’ family, which was governed by the dynamic of *potestas*.⁹² Tacitus corroborates this claim by mentioning that during a heated exchange between two rival families in the reign of Nero, both desired that their daughter occupy a vacancy in the priesthood, the emperor Nero awarded the office to one of the daughters “due to the fact that her mother was still married to the same husband,

⁹⁰ Takacs, 81.

⁹¹ Saller, 22-5.

⁹² Staples, 140.

while Agrippa's divorce diminished [his] house..."⁹³ Gellius further demonstrates the importance of social standing to a Vestal candidate by mentioning that a candidate or her father could not have been emancipated from another's *potestas*.⁹⁴ The concept of *potestas* is subsequently critical to understanding the significance of these social requirements for a Vestal candidate.

Patria potestas was the governing relationship within a Roman family and an indispensable social institution. The *pater*, or head of a household, which included the immediate family, extended family and slaves, held absolute authority over his household and family.⁹⁵ This authority included, but was not limited to, the ability to punish family members for transgressions and disobedience, arrange marriages, provide the economic and political direction of the family and even the power to expose an infant if he did not acknowledge the child to be his progeny.⁹⁶ Most significant to this work, the *pater* also held the power to emancipate family members, which removed the individual from his *potestas* or legal control.⁹⁷ He retained these powers throughout the entire course of his life and they only transferred to another upon his death. Considering the importance of this relationship to Roman society, it is not surprising that a Vestal candidate was required to exist in the ideal conception of *potestas*. This ensured that the priesthood could represent Roman society to

⁹³ Note that Gellius does not specifically mention anything about a candidate's parents divorcing and remarrying. "...praelata est Pollionis filia, non ob aliud quam quod mater eius in eodem coniugio manebat; nam Agrippa discidio domum imminuerat..." Tacitus, *Annales* 2.86.

⁹⁴ Gellius 1.12.

⁹⁵ Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 5.

⁹⁶ There is an entire corpus of works examining this important institution in all of its aspects. For a much more complete discussion of *patria potestas* see Barry Nicholas, *An Introduction to Roman Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 65-68 and 76-79 ; Alan Watson, *Rome of the XII Tables: Persons and Property* (Princeton: University Press, 1975), 40-51 ; W. K. Lacey, "Patria Potestas," in *The Family in Ancient Rome: New Perspectives*, ed. Beryl Rawson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 121-144 ; John K. Evans, *War, Women and Children in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 177-195.

⁹⁷ Nicholas, 79.

the gods and it is this representation which, in part, designated the Vestals as an ideally conceived spectacle.

Other social qualifications guaranteed that a candidate was selected from the most prestigious Roman families. Gellius mentions that in order to be considered for the priesthood, a candidate's parents could not have ever been slaves, worked in an undignified occupation and her father had to possess a residence in Italy.⁹⁸ Roman state religion was, like politics, a prerogative of the elite. The daughters of slaves or freedmen could not be appointed to the priesthood because it would have upset the rigid social boundaries that governed Roman society, especially between the vertical relationship of slaves and citizens. Practicality, however, often trumped ideal circumstances and Dio mentions that during the principate a law enabled the daughters of freedmen to serve in the priesthood due to the reluctance of elite families to offer up their daughters, who were valuable political and social tools via marriages, for the priesthood.⁹⁹ The women in this new demographic of candidates were presumably subject to the other requirements however. These social criteria guaranteed that only the upper class had access to the priesthood. The members of the upper class were the personification of the ideal Roman identity and culture that the Vestals were partly responsible for propagating and maintaining and only their daughters could represent the collective ideal. It would have been unfathomable that a girl from a lower demographic could have represented the elite ideal considering how important the social divisions of Roman society and status were. In other words, these social requisites enabled the Vestals to represent the collective, albeit a collective ideal.

⁹⁸ Gellius 1.12.

⁹⁹ Cassius Dio 55.22 ; Carcopino, 80-4 ; Boren, 79-81.

Finally, the condition that a candidate's father had to own a residence in Italy was a geographical and social requirement. The goddess Vesta was considered to be, in part, an earth deity. Ovid explicitly makes this distinction, "The Earth and Vesta are one and the same deity."¹⁰⁰ Vesta was physically connected to the very soil upon which her priestesses served her. In early Roman history, prior to Rome's hegemony of the Italian peninsula, other cities had their own Vestal priesthoods devoted to their own locale.¹⁰¹ Therefore, a priestess of the Roman Vesta logically had to come from Rome and, by the second century BCE, its cultural locale in Italy. Certainly individuals outside of Italy participated in Roman spectacles, many gladiators and other victims of the amphitheater were prisoners of war or criminals from the provinces, but they were only props to an event.¹⁰² The audience's observance of their demise reflected the triumph of Roman culture over their own and subsequently contributed to the unification of Roman society. The Vestals, however, were spectacular entities in their own right and not merely props. Therefore, each priestess had to have a geographical and, through implication, a cultural connection to the city in whose service she would serve. All these criteria had a common purpose however.

The rigorous qualifications for selecting a Vestal candidate reflect their spectacular nature. Each candidate had to be a virgin and physically perfect to ensure that she could perform her sacred tasks to perfection in order to maintain the *pax deorum* so that Roman society would continue to thrive. She had to be in good standing with her familial cult and not have associations with other priesthoods in order to guarantee that she could completely

¹⁰⁰ "Vesta eadem est et terra..." Ovid, *Fasti* 6.267-8.

¹⁰¹ Wright traces the Roman priesthood of Vesta to other Italian cities and even to its Indo-European origins. The priesthood existed in other cities prior to the foundation of Rome, who imported it. For his extensive work on the subject, see Wright, 22-35.

¹⁰² Dodge, 29-30 ; Kyle, 79-80 and 91-5.

devote herself to Vesta and society. Only the absolute best of society would have met the strictures of the physical, religious and social ideal to which the Vestals were held. These women were charged with the security of Rome and had more responsibility than any other woman in Roman society. They were constantly scrutinized and their performance of their spectacular nature was under the unyielding gaze of an apprehensive Rome and one error held the potential to bring about the obliteration of their society and culture. The girls selected as candidates for the priesthood already functioned as examples to be emulated, but their induction transformed them from an exemplary ideal into a spectacular entity.

Methods of Selection

The process through which a Vestal was selected from amongst the pool of suitable candidates is just as significant as the qualification for their candidature. Several methods were utilized throughout different eras of Roman history and an examination of each reveals that they also contributed to the spectacular nature of the priesthood. Plutarch suggests that originally each priestess was personally selected by the Etruscan king Numa Pompilius, who is credited with establishing the priesthood and many other features of Roman religion during the sixth century BCE:

In the beginning, then, they say that Gegania and Verenia were consecrated to this office by Numa, who subsequently added to them Canuleia and Tarpeia; that at a later time two others were added by Servius, making the number which has continued to the present time.¹⁰³

Plutarch implies that the early kings personally selected the Vestals. This method is also briefly mentioned by Aulus Gellius.¹⁰⁴ Beard seized upon the rare occasion of two sources

¹⁰³ Plutarch, *Numa* 10.

¹⁰⁴ Gellius mentions that the first Vestal was appointed by Numa as well. Gellius, 1.12.

agreeing on a facet of the priesthood in her argument that the earliest Vestals were the kings' daughters or were at least symbolic personifications of them.¹⁰⁵ The authors, however, only briefly mention that the Romans traditionally believed that the Etruscan kings personally selected the priestesses. While this can never be known with any certainty, the Romans themselves understood very little about this early era of their history, we have a starting place. Since the nearly mythological history of Rome during this era reflected traditions accepted by the Romans contemporary to our sources, this tradition was a fundamental component of Roman identity and as such the connection between the Vestals and the Etruscan kings established a precedent for the selection of a candidate that endured in the other methods described below. The various processes through which the Vestals were inducted into the priesthood reflect the function of a spectacle as a propagating force for an ideal cultural identity.

Two methods for selecting a Vestal are reported to have determined the process from the sixth century BCE to the first century and each demonstrate the spectacular nature of the priesthood. The first method consisted of a lottery that became a legal institution on account of the Papian law, which was published in 250 BCE. Gellius describes this method, noting that "twenty virgins were chosen from the people by the pontifex maximus and that the virgin who is most qualified is elected and the pontifex maximus takes her and she becomes Vesta's."¹⁰⁶ This system was similar to the selection of other important priests, including the *rex sacrorum* and the various *flamens*, who were at least chosen from a list of suitable

¹⁰⁵ Beard, "The Sexual Status of the Vestal Virgins," 14-5.

¹⁰⁶ "Sed Papiam legem invenimus, qua cavetur, ut pontificis maximi arbitratu virgines e populo viginti legantur sortitioque in contione ex eo numero fiat et, cuius virginis ducta erit, ut eam pontifex maximus capiat eaque Vestae fiat." Gellius, 1.12.

candidates.¹⁰⁷ Through the lottery system, however, the goddess herself participated in the selection of her priestess. The Romans utilized chance in this fashion in many ways.¹⁰⁸ The *pontifex maximus* assembled the list based on the rigorous criteria designed to ensure that each candidate represented the ideal cultural Roman identity that the priesthood was charged with protecting. The approval of Vesta, through the lottery, represented not only divine favor of the candidate selected, but also the authority of Rome personified. In this case, Vesta herself personified Rome instead of a king.

The lottery system, while still on the books, was not used by the first century BCE as the development of the empire complicated Roman society with the accumulation of wealth and prestige. The prestige that came with having a daughter or family member in the priesthood was great and it is not surprising that elite families lined up for the honor during such a prosperous period. Gellius mentions that Roman citizens could offer their daughters to the *pontifex maximus* on an individual basis, as opposed to the list of twenty collected by the priest himself, provided that her consideration did not violate any of the requirements discussed previously.¹⁰⁹ In fact, Cassius Dio mentions that Augustus, the founder of the principate in 27 BCE, declared that he would have been willing to offer women in his family to the priesthood if any of them would have been able to meet the age criteria.¹¹⁰ If a candidate was offered and deemed suitable, the *pontifex maximus* would present her to the senate and the entire assembly decided whether or not she would be inducted via an

¹⁰⁷ Beard & North, 22 ; Wildfang, 47 ; Beard, "Priesthood in the Roman Republic," 22-5.

¹⁰⁸ For example a parricide was sewn up in a sack with several animals and tossed into the Tiber and hermaphrodites were sent adrift at sea. Other religious lotteries and augury were also practiced before appointing a priest or crossing a river. The Romans believed that the appropriate deities judged the matter themselves. Wildfang, 58.

¹⁰⁹ Gellius 1.12.

¹¹⁰ Cassius Dio 55.22.

election.¹¹¹ Senate approval, in this case, is analogous to goddess approval and the precedent established by the Etruscan kings. The Senate reflected an authority with the power to determine whether or not a girl was capable of living up to the cultural ideal inherent in the priesthood. However, tumultuous developments in Roman society following the reign of Augustus in the first century would come to have an impact on the selection of a candidate.

The social chaos and civil wars of the first century BCE resulted in a decaying republic transforming into a monarchy and the depletion of the aristocracy in its wake, which necessitated a drastic social change. Julius Caesar's nephew and adopted son, Gaius Octavius, emerged out of this chaos to become the first Roman emperor or *princeps* in 27 BCE and subsequently took the name Augustus. The principate was a restructuring of Roman society and government that concentrated power into the hands of Augustus and his successors while avoiding the creation of a monarchy, the fear of which instigated the famous assassination of Augustus's uncle, through the manipulation and control of the senate. Many features of Roman society changed. Boren argues that the instruments of power for any government are the army, finance and chief offices, all of which were gradually concentrated into the person of the *princeps*.¹¹² The army took an oath of loyalty to the emperors and the legions were amongst the most devout observers of the imperial cult.¹¹³ The army acquired vast amounts of wealth through their conquests, which fell into the hands of the emperor and was administered by a large cadre of loyal senators and

¹¹¹ Gellius 1.12.

¹¹² Boren, 172.

¹¹³ The *Feriale Duranum*, a third century Roman military religious calendar unearthed in Syria, records the rituals that the army observed, almost all of which were related to the emperor or his family. *Feriale Duranum*, eds. Robert O. Fink et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940) ; Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Punic Wars* (London: Cassel & Co., 2000), 108-9.

privately owned slaves, reflecting a personal bureaucratic civil service.¹¹⁴ Emperors used this money to build massive monuments and to put on the Roman spectacles of the amphitheater and circus in an effort to curry popular favor and promote their own legacy. These changes also penetrated the religious sphere as well and played an important role in the selection of the Vestals following the first century.

Although no extant source explicitly states that the emperors personally selected Vestals during the principate, there is a variety of circumstantial evidence to support such a claim. First of all the emperors became *de facto pontifex maximus*, a position that had a vested interest in the priesthood and an office that is discussed in more detail below.¹¹⁵ The *pontifex maximus* traditionally lived in a structure symbolic of the Etruscan kings' home and was attached to the *aedes Vestae*, the *regia*.¹¹⁶ Upon assuming the robes of the *pontifex maximus*, Augustus was reluctant to leave his private home on the Palatine Hill, the remains of which can still be seen from the circus maximus, in order to live in the *regia* and he subsequently built a bridge from his palace to the *aedes Vestae*.¹¹⁷ Later emperors also granted some of the rights permitted to Vestals to women in their household, further suggesting the developing relationship between the imperial household and the Vestals.¹¹⁸ The *princeps*, for better or worse, gradually became the personification of the ideal Roman cultural identity and these developments granted them the authority to personally select the Vestals of their own accord. Nero, who reigned from 54 to 68, personally selected a priestess

¹¹⁴ Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, 148-151.

¹¹⁵ Mary Beard, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), 189.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Plutarch, *Numa* 10.

¹¹⁷ Mary Beard and John North, *Pagan Priests* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 189.

¹¹⁸ The emperors Tiberius, Caligula and Nero cemented this relationship through their extension of the Vestals' privileges to female members of their family. Beard *et. al.*, *Religions of Rome: Volume 1* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 189; Tacitus, *Annales* 4.16; Cassius Dio, 60.5.

and other emperors exercised a considerable amount of influence over the Vestals.¹¹⁹ An emperor's selection of a priestess at his own whim reflects his status as the authoritative personification of cultural identity following the first century along similar lines as the Etruscan kings, Vesta herself and the Senate during previous eras of Roman history. While the method through which each Vestal was selected to serve in the priesthood changed over time, the significance of the authority selecting them did not wane and this significance was also present in their actual induction as well.

Captio Ceremony

While the qualifications for a young girl to be considered eligible for the priesthood and the nature of her selection, depending on the historical moment, both confirm her aptitude to function as a spectacle, the *captio* ceremony itself actually transformed a chosen candidate into a Vestal. A lot of ink has been spilled in an attempt to contextualize and understand this ceremony as similar to a Roman *cum manu* wedding due to the transition of a girl's legal status from her natal household to another.¹²⁰ This discourse has subsequently resulted in the acceptance of the argument that the Vestals' relationship to Roman society reflected their connection to the mythologized Etruscan kings and, following the establishment of the republic in 509 BCE, the *pontifex maximus*.¹²¹ The *captio* ceremony

¹¹⁹ The emperor Domitian tried four Vestals during his reign. Elagabalus and Theodosius I both disbanded the priesthood, the latter permanently in 390 BCE. These developments are discussed in more detail below. See p. 112-3.

¹²⁰ There were several different types of Roman weddings. The principle form, *cum manu*, consisted of the complete transfer of a bride and her property, usually in the form of a dowry, from her father's *potestas* to her husband's. This form of marriage declined during the late republic and imperial eras. The second most common type of wedding, *sui iuris*, in which the bride maintained some limited legal control over herself, including the right to manage her property through a guardian other than her husband. Wildfang credits Italian historian Santinelli with having initiated this incessant discourse, Wildfang, 37 ; Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 29.

¹²¹ The most prominent examples of this position can be found in Katariina Mustakallio, "The 'Crimen Incesti' of the Vestal Virgins and the Prodigious Pestilence," in *Crudelitas: The Politics of Cruelty in the Ancient and*

certainly did resemble a *cum manu* wedding in the sense that the girl was removed from her family's authority, but this comparison has limited how scholars have examined this ceremony and the Vestals' relationship to Roman society. A fresh examination of the *capitio* ceremony and its ramifications on the relationship between a priestess, her natal family and the *pontifex maximus* contributes to our understanding of the Vestals as a unifying spectacle.

In order to understand a Vestal's legal status and its implications on her spectacular nature, it is paramount to depict an image of the ceremony that conferred this status upon her. Gellius mentions that the *pontifex maximus*, who presided over the ritual, physically removed the inductee from her parents and led her "away from the parent under whose control she is, as if she had been taken in war."¹²² The militant expression may connect the ceremony to the early settlers' abduction of the Sabine women in order to acquire wives in order to propagate the small community under Romulus's, the traditional founder of Rome, direction.¹²³ Kroppenberg associates this connection with one of the functions of a spectacle, to create a shared cultural identity through history, in her statement that, "The inauguration of each Vestal, in fact, symbolically reenacted the founding of the Roman republic."¹²⁴ Similar to a *cum manu* marriage, the action of removing the girl from her family signified that the priestess was legally disassociated from her natal family. However, unlike the *cum manu* ceremony, the Vestal was not subsequently placed under the legal authority of another, but instead retained her rights *sui iuris* of her own accord. In case the physical act did not make

Medieval World, eds. Toivo Vilijamaa, Asko Timonen and Christian Kritzel (Krems: Medium Aevum Quotidianum, 1992), 74 ; Hallet, 84-6 ; Wildfang, 37-41.

¹²² "Capi autem virgo propterea dici videtur, quia pontificis maximi manu presa ab eo parente, in cuius potestate est, veluti bello capta abducitur." Gellius 1.12.

¹²³ Rome's traditional founder, Romulus, lured the neighboring Sabine tribe to his new city in order to celebrate a festival. At the peak of the festival the Romans ravished the Sabine's daughters and compelled their fathers to accept their betrothal to members of the fledgling community. Livy 1.9-13 ; Plutarch, *Romulus* 11-5.

¹²⁴ Inge Kroppenberg, "Law, Religion and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins," *Law and Literature* 22, no. 3 (2010) : 424.

this transference of legal status clear enough, the *pontifex maximus* simultaneously declared, “I take you thus, Amata, as a sacred Vestal, who will perform the sacred rites, which it is just [*optima lege*] for a sacred Vestal to do on behalf of the Roman people.”¹²⁵ The expression *optima lege* was also incorporated into the induction of other Roman magistracies and although we cannot be certain of its specific meaning, this connection implies that the inducted priestess also represented the community in a similar fashion as her more secular counterparts.¹²⁶ The physical removal and this imperative prayer made it clear that the girl was no longer under the legal control, or *potestas*, of her father, that she ceased to be a member of her familial cult and from that moment on was *sui iuris*, legally independent, and a member of the Vestal priesthood.

There were several motives behind the removal of a priestess from the *potestas* or her family in the *captio* ceremony and each reflects the importance of the Vestals as a spectacle. First of all, her removal from her family and her family’s religious cult enabled each priestess to exercise more religious responsibility to Vesta on behalf of the Roman people.¹²⁷ This is certainly likely considering that Vesta was very demanding of her priestesses, which is demonstrated in the next chapter. More recently, other scholars have extended this argument beyond one of practicality to incorporate the idea that legal emancipation situated the Vestals on the periphery of Roman society so that they could represent the collective as a spectacular

¹²⁵ Scholars have debated the significance of the title “Amata.” Georg Wissowa claims that the word is simply a title meaning ‘beloved’ and is derived from the Latin verb *amare*, to love. Gellius, however, simply states that it was the name of the first Vestal, who served as a reminder to each priestess of her obligations and the tradition of the priesthood. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 510 n. 4 ; “Sacerdotem Vestalem, quae sacra faciat, quae ius siet sacerdotem Vestalem facere pro populo Romano Quiritibus, uti quae optima lege fuit, ita te, Amata, capio.” Gellius 1.12.

¹²⁶ Kroppenberg, 422-3.

¹²⁷ For scholars proposing this view, see Scheid, 50-2 ; Treggiari, 29.

entity.¹²⁸ They were not on the periphery in the sense that they were marginalized, but rather in the sense that they had to be excluded from every potential category and division of society in order to be placed at the pinnacle of society in order to represent the cultural and social ideal. This was the purpose of the *captio* ceremony and of the subsequent legal implications for the Vestals, which aligns nicely with the function of a spectacle as a social unifying entity.

The role of the *pontifex maximus* in the *captio* ceremony may lead one to conclude that perhaps the inducted Vestal was transferred into his *potestas* since he physically removed the priestess from her father's, but the relationship between the Vestals and the *pontifex maximus* is better characterized as a religious regulatory authority. To be fair, the *pontifex maximus* did have the power to punish a transgressing Vestal, just as the *paterfamilias* was permitted to punish any erring member of his household. Plutarch specifically mentions that the *pontifex maximus* sometimes invoked this authority and "...scourged the offender [a Vestal], sometimes with her clothes off, in a dark place, with a curtain between them."¹²⁹ Although the potential access the *pontifex maximus* seems to have had to the Vestal's body may suggest that he held a significant degree of authority over a priestess whose virginity and purity were paramount, this is mitigated through the barrier of linen and darkness placed between the two. On the other hand, the function of the *pontifex maximus* in Roman religion further corroborates the claim that he held only a religious regulatory power over the priesthood. Beard's examination of Roman priesthoods explicitly argues that the *pontifex maximus* had two functions in Roman state religion, "control over the

¹²⁸ Holt Parker, "Why were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State," *American Journal of Philology* 125 (2004) : 572 ; Staples, 142 ; Wildfang, 39 ; Kroppenberg, 427.

¹²⁹ Plutarch, *Numa* 9.

religious behavior of individuals and an advisory function in relation to the senate.”¹³⁰

Plutarch’s description of this office supports this claim:

The office of *pontifex maximus*, or chief priest, was to declare and interpret the divine law, or rather, to preside over sacred rites; he not only prescribed rules for public ceremony, but relegated the sacrifices of private persons, not suffering them to vary from established custom and giving information to everyone of what was requisite for purposes of worship or supplication. He was also guardian of the Vestal virgins...¹³¹

In other words, the *pontifex maximus* could regulate the behavior of individual priests, but he did not wield absolute control over their person and property.

The example of Postumia, a Vestal acquitted of a sexual transgression in 420 BCE, directly demonstrates the type of guardianship that the *pontifex maximus* held over the Vestals. Livy mentions that following her acquittal, the *pontifex maximus*, “in the name of the college commanded her to abstain from jests and to dress rather with regard to sanctity.”¹³² In other words, he regulated the dress and behavior of the Vestals on the behalf of the college of pontiffs, not necessarily at his own discretion. Although Livy is writing centuries after this event, it reflects his contemporary understanding of the relationship between the *pontifex maximus* and the Vestals. He had the authority to regulate their behavior not as their *paterfamilias*, but as the chief priest and their religious superior in a fashion similar to his authority over other priesthods.

Although a Vestal was not subject to the *potestas* of the *pontifex maximus* or religious her natal *paterfamilias* following the completion of the *captio* ceremony, there is a plethora

¹³⁰ Mary Beard and John North, *Pagan Priests* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 27 ; Beard, “Priesthoods in the Roman Republic,” 19 and 27.

¹³¹ Plutarch, *Numa* 9.

¹³² The emphasis is my own. “Eam ampliata, deinde absolutam *pro collegii* sententia pontifex maximus abstinere iocis colique sancte potius quam scite iussit.” Livy 4.44.

of evidence suggesting that these familial connections endured. In 142 BCE the consul Appius Claudius Pulcher celebrated a triumph for his victory over the Salassi without senatorial approval due to the high casualties his army suffered. A plebeian tribune, whose person was sacrosanct and immune from violence, attempted to prevent Claudius's triumph, but either his daughter or sister Claudia, a Vestal at the time, "put herself between the two with amazing speed and drove off a mighty power fired by enmities" and the procession continued along a different route.¹³³ These familial connections endured the passing time as well. A century later, Claudia's descendant Gaius Clodius Vestalis invoked her image on a coin in 41 BCE and Suetonius mentions the incident at the beginning of his life of the emperor Tiberius, who reigned from 14-37.¹³⁴ Other Vestals, such Licinia in the first century BCE, who was engaged in real estate deals with her cousin and future triumvir Crassus, conducted business arrangements with their family members.¹³⁵ Licinia also gave up her privileged seat at the games in favor of her cousin Licinius Murena, who was running for political office in 61 BCE, in a performative display of approval.¹³⁶ In addition to demonstrating that the Vestals did not always completely sever connections to their family, despite the legal implications of *captio*, this evidence also suggests their performative agency. The Vestals could literally stop civic celebrations or potentially influence Roman

¹³³ Law protected a tribune from any type of physical violence. Therefore Pulcher would not have been able to resist being pulled down from his chariot had his daughter, under a similar legal protection, not intervened. "Quae, cum patrem suum triumphantem e curru violent tribune manu detrahi animadvertisset, mira celeritate utrisque se interponendo amplissimam potestatem inimicitiis accensam depulit." See, Boren, 26-7 ; Kroppenber, 423 ; Valerius Maximus 5.6

¹³⁴ Fantham argues that the image of Claudia on the coin may have been derived from a statue of her. The coin is also the only representation of a woman on a coin during the republic. See Figure 7.7 in Elaine Fantham, et. al., *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (Oxford: University Press, 1994), 234 ; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 2.4.

¹³⁵ Plutarch, *Crassus* 1.

¹³⁶ Cicero, *Pro Murena*, ed. C. MacDonald (London: Duckworth Publishing, 1982), 73.

politics, feats not to be expected of women living in such a patriarchal society.¹³⁷ The fact that they could suggests how important their spectacular nature was to Roman society. Other aspects of their life, however, reminded the Romans just how important this function was to society.

Appearance

The scene of the Vestals going about their daily tasks and business in the heart of the Roman forum, the nerve center of the city and empire, would have certainly been an impressive performance to the crowd and their distinct hair style and vestments set them apart from the politicians, citizens and foreign visitors assembled there. Second century statues of women were excavated in the center of the *aedes Vestae*, which are presumed to represent Vestals, have left us an archaeological record of their distinct appearance.¹³⁸ These statues constitute the most reliable physical evidence, but several of them are damaged. This work will rely specifically on the two examples that are adorned with several vestments signifying their service in the priesthood. The archaeological record, however, is corroborated by literary evidence that provides explanations for many aspects of their peculiar coiffure and vestments. The nature of the hair style, clothing and the miraculous feats which the Vestals performed with them were a permanent display of their transformation into a spectacular entity.

Each priestess, upon her induction, was required to arrange their hair in a particular style referred to as the *sex crines*. The *sex crines* is characterized by the arrangement of the hair into six vertical locks draped across the priestess's shoulders and neck, while several

¹³⁷ Aleida Assmann, *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaften: Grundbegriffe, Themen, Fragestellungen*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Schmidt, 2008), 109 ; Kroppenber, 423.

¹³⁸ For a complete discussion of these remains, see Esther Boise van Deman, 324-42 ; Molly Lindner, "The Vestal Virgins and Their Imperial Patrons: Sculptures and Inscriptions from the Atrium Vestae in the Roman Forum," PhD dissertation, University of Michigan (1995).

braided locks were placed horizontally across the head.¹³⁹ The Latin author Festus mentions that Roman brides, he does not specify a particular type of wedding ceremony, “wear the six locks, because this was the most ancient style, which indeed the Vestal Virgins also used.”¹⁴⁰

The *sex crines* is one of the features of a Roman wedding that seem to share a relationship with the Vestals, although Festus does not privilege the hairstyle to one or the other and he simply comments that both were known to have worn it. While the bride did not wear the *sex crines* after her wedding day, the Vestals continued to arrange their hair accordingly for the duration of their service. Wildfang argues that the *sex crines* may represent a trait common to both categories of women, chastity.¹⁴¹ *Sex crines* represents more than just a symbol of chastity, but may also reflect that specific category of elite women, the virgin.¹⁴² Pliny the Elder mentions that the Vestals routinely cut their hair and placed it on an ancient tree, which was believed to have existed during the Etruscan monarchy, as a symbol of their status as virginal and pure.¹⁴³ The *sex crines* enabled the Vestals to represent the category of virginal women in Roman society and their hair also contributed to Roman identity through its connection to their own traditional history via the ritual Pliny describes. The function of the Vestal wardrobe was similar to that of their coiffure.

¹³⁹ See Plates 3 and 4. Some scholars have suggested that there are minor differences in both the arrangement of the locks of hair and the method by which they were bound. This description, however, fits the statuary evidence and is subsequently the one that this work accepts as most plausible. Although the article principally refers to Roman brides, who likewise wore the *sex crines*, it also includes references to the Vestals. Laetitia La Follette, “The Costume of the Roman Bride,” in *The World of Roman Costume*, ed. Judith Lynn Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 56-7.

¹⁴⁰ “Senis crinibus nubentes ornantur, quod [h]is ornatus vetustissimus fuit. Quidam quod eo Vestales virgines ornentur, quarum castitatem viris suis *sponoe***a ceteris...” Sextus Pompeius Festus, *De Verborum Significatu Quae Supersunt cum Pauli Epitome*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Lipsiae: B. G. Teubneri, 1913), p. 454.

¹⁴¹ Wildfang uses the term *castitas*, which can be translated as purity and not necessarily physiological virginity. Wildfang, 12.

¹⁴² Haastrup, 59 ; Scheid, 381 ; Staples, 129.

¹⁴³ Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 16.235.

The priestesses were also required to wear a garment related to another category of elite Roman women and it also enabled the Vestals to represent a specific segment of Roman society. All of the statues found within the *aedes Vestae* depict these women wearing a loose garment draped over their shoulders and that hanged down to just above their feet.¹⁴⁴ Scholars generally agree that this garment was in fact the *stola*, the standard dress of elite matrons.¹⁴⁵ Pliny the Younger, who witnessed the live interment of a convicted priestess, specifically mentions that, “In fact, when she was lowered into the subterranean [chamber], her gown [*stola*] caught something while descending...”¹⁴⁶ The Vestals may have worn the *stola* in order to be identified or stand out in a crowd, but the *sex crines* would have been both more suitable and efficient if this was in fact its sole purpose.¹⁴⁷ Elite Roman matrons all wore the *stola* and so the garment would have been relatively common and subsequently not distinctive enough to identify a Vestal. Furthermore, by the first century each Vestal was accompanied by a *lictor* and the *fascēs*, a herald bearing a bundle of sticks that represented authority and announced her presence to crowds.¹⁴⁸ The *stola* must have had another purpose and significance for the Vestals.

Clothing was closely associated with status in Roman society. For example, prostitutes were forbidden to wear the *stola* and were required to wear a common man’s tunic.¹⁴⁹ Triumphal generals and emperors were awarded the right to wear a distinctive red

¹⁴⁴ See Plates, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

¹⁴⁵ For a description of the everyday dress of Roman women, see Balsdon 252-9 ; La Follette, 54-5.

¹⁴⁶ “Quin etiam cum in illud subterraneum demitteretur, haesissetque descendenti stola...” Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 4.11.

¹⁴⁷ Staples, 146.

¹⁴⁸ Livy mentions that the Romulus instituted this office and practice because the Etruscan kings were accompanied by *lictors*. Livy 1.8.

¹⁴⁹ Anne Duncan, *Performance and Identity in the Classical World* (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 128-31 ; Catherin Edwards, “Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome,” in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith Butler and Marilyn Skinner (Princeton: University Press, 1997), 82 and 84 ; Balsdon, 224.

cape for the rest of their lives and even the toga was designed to distinguish a male citizen from all other inhabitants or visitors.¹⁵⁰ These are just several examples of the relationship between clothing and status. Elite matrons wore the *stola* because it reflected their status as the wives of Roman citizens. The Vestals were not wives however. They wore the *stola* not as an identifying marker, but in order to represent this demographic of Roman society. This is particularly potent considering that women other than the Vestals typically did not participate in many religious rituals, with a few exceptions discussed later. The *stola* provided a means through which the Vestals could at least represent this category of women, if not implicate their participation, in important rituals. The fact that the Vestals also incorporated more common accessories that were not exclusive to or prohibited to any category of women, such as the *vittae*, a ribbon that held the hair together, suggests that the vestments and *sex crines* of the Vestals enabled all women, whether virgin, matron or commoner, to participate in important religious rituals.¹⁵¹ In other words, their clothing itself was a type of social unifying instrument. While the *sex crines*, *stola* and *vittae* reflect a gendered function of social unification, another component of their wardrobe specifically had a religious function.

The Vestals were also known to have worn a special veil. Festus mentions that the Vestals typically wore a *suffibulum*, a white veil, while performing various tasks and presiding at different rituals.¹⁵² Examples of the *suffibulum* can clearly be seen on the statues in the *aedes Vestae* behind the coiffure.¹⁵³ Our sources do not describe the purpose of this

¹⁵⁰ Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, 272-7.

¹⁵¹ Juvenal 4.9 and 6.50 ; Ovid, *Fasti* 3.30 and 6.457 ; Balsdon, 224.

¹⁵² Festus, p. 74 ; Varro describes the etymology of the *suffibulum*, which, he suggests, "is named as if *subfigabulum* from *suffigere*, 'to fasten down.' " " 'Is cum eat, suffibulum ut habeat,' scriptum: id dicitur ut ab suffigendo subfigabulum." Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, 6.21.

¹⁵³ See Plates 3 and 4.

veil or the reason why it was only typically worn during religious ceremonies. Rouselle argues that this veil was a “badge of honor, of sexual reserve and hence mastery of the self,” but this reflects a modern understanding of a veil and we cannot necessarily transpose their significance in our own society the Roman.¹⁵⁴ However, other scholars have suggested that they wore the *suffibulum* because other prestigious priests, such as the fifteen *flamens*, wore a similar veil during rites.¹⁵⁵ The Etruscan king Numa Pompilius is credited with having instituted the first *flamens* at the same time he established the priesthood of Vesta and subsequently the *suffibulum* may in fact reflect the relationship of the Vestals to Roman tradition and identity through the *flammenia*.¹⁵⁶ The Vestals participated in many of the most important religious rituals, but in many cases some priesthods were not always present and in other cases they were specifically prohibited from attending.¹⁵⁷ The *suffibulum*, in a fashion similar to their other vestments discussed above, enabled the Vestals to represent other religious institutions in religious ceremonies in which they did not participate. The clothing and appearance of the Vestals performed a unifying function through their ability to ensure that some categories of Roman society, gender and other religious institutions, were at least represented in every ritual in which they participated. Furthermore, their vestments also reflected a relationship to the Romans' understanding of what it meant to be Roman via their

¹⁵⁴ The veil that Christian nuns and devout Muslim women wear are a “badge of honor” and signify the “mastery of the self” that Rouselle posits. Aline Rouselle, “Body Politics in Ancient Rome,” in *A History of Women in the West, Volume I: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, ed. Pauline Schmitt Pantel (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 315 ; Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance* (New York: Berg, 1999), 93.

¹⁵⁵ There were three *flamen maiores*, who functioned as the chief priests of the cults devoted to Jupiter, Mars and Quirinalis, and there were twelve *flamen minors* devoted to other deities. During the principate, a *flamen* also represented the imperial cult devoted to the emperor as well. These priests wore a bright and distinguishing yellow veil form which the title of their office is derived, the *flammenia*. Livy, 1.20 ; Cicero, Brutus 57.

¹⁵⁶ Festus, p. 74 L ; Livy 1.20 ; Beard, “Priesthood in the Roman Republic,” 19-41.

¹⁵⁷ For example, men, including priests, were not permitted to participate in the *Vestalia* on June 15 or the *Bona Dea* in December. These rituals are discussed in more detail on 84-5.

traditional explanations for the establishment of their city and culture. While their clothing identified and enabled the Vestals to function as spectacles, the Vestals also performed miraculous spectacles through their vestments as well.

There are two extant accounts of individual Vestals performing miracles through their clothing and they both illustrate the connection between a priestess's clothing and her spectacular nature. Several historians record an incident that occurred in 206 BCE, in which a novice priestess had negligently allowed the sacred flame to be extinguished during her shift. After she was accused of a transgression and threatened with execution, the Chief Vestal Aemilia miraculously rekindled the flame by applying a piece of her *stola* to the cold coals in tandem with a supplication to Vesta.¹⁵⁸ Dionysius of Halicarnassus provides the most detailed account of the incident and mentions that “from the ashes, which had long been cold and retained no spark, a great flame flared up through the linen, so that the city no longer required either expiation or a new fire.”¹⁵⁹ His description of the condition of the fire prior to Aemilia's placing her clothing on it suggests that it could not have been restarted by adding fuel to it. Only Vesta, the priestess and her clothing were able to demonstrate that the novice priestess was only guilty of negligence and not a carnal crime. The incident suggests that a Vestal's clothing became a channel through which a priestess could invoke the goddess and perform her spectacular nature, or in this case, to perform and demonstrate that it had not been violated. This argument is even better demonstrated by another incident.

Only several years after Aemilia's miraculous intercession, another priestess performed an even more impressive feat through means of her clothing. Following the Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE, in which the Carthaginian general Hannibal defeated several Roman

¹⁵⁸ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.68 ; Valerius Maximus 1.1 ; Livy 28.11 ; and Propertius 4.11.53-4.

¹⁵⁹ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.68.

legions and threatened Rome itself, an oracle demanded that the Romans adopt the Great Mother cult in order to avert the eminent destruction of their city.¹⁶⁰ In 204 BCE the ship bearing the idol of the Great Mother cult, a black stone, from Phrygia either ran aground or became fastened to the mud in the shallow Tiber. Purportedly, teams of mules and men were unable to loosen the ship from its hold. The Vestal Claudia, who had recently been accused of a transgression, prayed to Vesta and wrapped the sash of her *stola* around the prow of the ship and managed to drag the vessel up the river with relative ease.¹⁶¹ Certainly this is a fantastic literary invention, but it is one that demonstrates the interconnectedness of the Vestals and their clothing to Roman identity and culture. The fact that the ship ferrying the idol to Rome became stuck in the mud indicates the goddess's reluctance to be relocated to Rome. More importantly, the fact that Claudia, through her *stola* and Vesta, was able to compel the Great Mother to accept her new home in Rome echoes Rome's emergence as a Mediterranean power during the war against Hannibal and Carthage. By 204 BCE the Carthaginian threat to Rome had significantly lessened and Rome had started to acquire its empire.¹⁶² This anecdote is an example of the Romans associating the Vestals with their cultural identity, in this case, the development of their empire.

The priestesses serving Vesta were by no means ordinary women. The strict qualifications for their consideration to serve in the priesthood were strenuous and demanded physical, religious and social perfection. Many could not live up to this ideal and were not eligible to even become candidates for the priesthood. The selection process, whatever form

¹⁶⁰ Livy reports that Fabius Pictor was sent to the Oracle at Delphi in Greece, which suggested that the Romans import the idol. Livy 22.57.

¹⁶¹ Herodian 1.11 ; The poet Ovid does not mention the sash and suggests she moved the ship by the mooring line to which it was attached. Ovid, *Fasti* 4.291-344 ; Suetonius recalls the incident during his description of the famous ancestors of the emperor Tiberius. Suetonius, *Tiberius* 2; and St. Augustine cites the incident as an example of admirable pagan women. St. Augustine, *City of God* 10.16.

¹⁶² For a brief account of the Punic Wars, see Boren, 56-60 and Goldsworthy, *The Punic Wars*, 35 ff.

it took during different historical moments, reflected their spectacular nature through their association with the personification of the Roman ideal, whether Etruscan king, Senate, Vesta or *princeps*. The legal ramifications of a priestess's induction into the priesthood through the *captio* ceremony removed her from the *potestas* of her father and granted her legal independence, although she was under the religious control of the *pontifex maximus*, and disassociated her from any single category of Roman society so that she could represent the collective. Finally, a Vestal's vestments and coiffure did not only identify a woman as a Vestal, but enabled each priestess to represent specific categories of Roman society who may otherwise not have participated in some of the more exclusive religious rituals. Their clothing also connected them to their history and helped to instill a collective cultural identity that even developed along with the geo-political changes that Rome experienced as it developed into an empire. Through their ability to represent the divided segments of society and create an ideal cultural identity for the collective through a connection to Rome's history, the entire induction process suggests that the Vestals were spectacular entities.

DUTY AND PRIVILEGE: THE VESTALS AS PUBLIC SPECTACLE

Once a Vestal donned the prescribed vestments of the priesthood, she was expected to learn and perform a variety of religious tasks for the benefit of Rome. Vestals devoted the first ten years of their service to learning the proper performance of these tasks and rituals, spent the next ten years actually performing them and finally during the last ten years of their thirty year service they instructed the novice priestesses in their execution.¹⁶³ These responsibilities included both daily tasks, such as maintaining the sacred flame or cleaning the *aedes Vestae*, and participation in important rituals. Each priestess received a variety of unique privileges in compensation for the religious responsibility that these expectations placed upon them. The various duties, rites and the subsequent privileges that the Vestals performed and exercised further demonstrate their spectacular nature. Furthermore, these duties and privileges characterize the public status of the priesthood.

This chapter explores the connection between the expected religious functions that the priestesses rendered on behalf of the Roman people and the public significance of these services. In order to accomplish this goal, we must discuss the Roman understanding of public and private, especially as they pertain to Roman religion. The argument that religious duties performed in private were in fact public so long as they were conducted for the benefit

¹⁶³ Plutarch, *Numa* 10.

of the collective must be established. An examination of the most important, albeit sometimes mundane, tasks that the Vestals performed within the *aedes Vestae* corroborate and illuminate the extent to which private actions or events were considered to be public. In addition, the numerous public rituals in which the Vestals directly or indirectly participated further illustrates this connection. Finally, the extant accounts of Vestals exercising their unique privileges in the first century BCE and the nature of these rights suggest that the priesthood began to invoke them in order to create public performances in an attempt to further their own agency in Roman society. An amalgamation of the private and public responsibilities and privileges of the Vestals reveals that each aspect of their religious obligation, whether it was performed in front an audience or not, reflects the public status of their spectacular nature.

Private and Public

Just as the Roman understanding of the visual was not exactly similar to modern society, Roman conceptualizations of public and private also do not align with our own. Some scholars have unequivocally applied our modern understanding to the ancient world without any attempt to account for this difference.¹⁶⁴ John Scheid attempts to ameliorate this problem through his creation of a hybrid category, the “semi-public,” which is essentially a blending of the private and public and consequently reflects an attempt to force a modern understanding onto the ancient world without actually having to account for the inherent distinctions.¹⁶⁵ This thesis pursues a simple, yet elegant, approach to this problem. We can apply our own terms and understanding of private and public, whether something involved an

¹⁶⁴ Bailey, 159 ; Rose, 30 ; Marilyn Skinner, “*Nossis Thelyglossos: The Private Text and the Public Book*,” in *Women’s History and Ancient History*, ed. Sarah Pomeroy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 17-18.

¹⁶⁵ Scheid, 377.

audience or not, to the Romans, but only if we also understand that Roman society utilized these terms differently. Their focus was more on the outcome of an event as opposed to the observation of an event or process occurring. A discussion of the public and private spheres as they pertain to classical Roman society, especially in relationship to Roman religion, permits this work to consider events and processes performed in private without an audience to be public as long as their objective had a public orientation and benefit.

The public sphere is the most accessible to modern understandings. The domain of public was characterized by an open or not an exclusive audience.¹⁶⁶ Some of the most enduring and popular features of Roman society exhibit a public nature. The triumphal parades of victorious generals returning from their conquests, the infamous games and even the open space of the forum itself, situated at the center of the classical city, bustled with throngs of observers.¹⁶⁷ Many of the religious rites described later also demonstrate that the Roman understanding of the public sphere was characterized by an unrestricted audience. However, it is important to consider that not every observer in the audience observed a public event in the same way and their social status had large implications on their understanding of the public sphere. Baumann has taken this idea so far as to question the citizenship status of women since, according to his argument, women were mostly absent from the public.¹⁶⁸ While the Romans certainly considered an audience to be the foundation of their conception of the public domain, there is more to it however.

¹⁶⁶ Heath defines a public in modern society as a group of individuals, or audience, and he argues that a general public is defined as the collection of these groups. See Robert Heath, "Public Sphere (öffentlichkeit)," in *Encyclopedia of Public Relations*, ed. Robert Heath (Washington D.C.: Sage Publications, 2004), 707.

¹⁶⁷ Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, 9-14 ; Auguet, 24.

¹⁶⁸ Baumann's argument is a gross generalization. Women often appeared in public and this work provides evidence for this appraisal. However, this claim does demonstrate the extent to which modern scholars have comprehended the classical understanding of public. Richard Baumann, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 2.

In order to fully appreciate the classical understanding of public, it is necessary to briefly examine the private sphere. Certainly the Romans had institutions that seem to reflect the modern understanding of something private, as having a limited or exclusive audience. The familial cult and the dynamic of *potestas*, previously discussed, are perhaps the best examples.¹⁶⁹ The sovereign power of the *paterfamilias* over his family was almost absolute and family cults were so exclusive that even the Romans themselves had little understanding of familial cults outside of their own individual family. In other words, the most reduced unit of the private sphere in Roman society was the family unit. However, during the principate, the imperial family became synonymous with the Roman public and indeed even became the symbol of Roman identity.¹⁷⁰ This demonstrates that there was overlap between the two categories. The Roman conceptions of public and private were both related to the openness or exclusivity of an audience. However, the significance of these categories and how this work appropriates modern terms to describe them lies elsewhere.

The private and public spheres in Roman society share some similarities with our own, but they were utilized in different ways. In his examination of the function of elite Roman houses, Wallace-Hadrill argues that while modern society divorces the private and public, Roman society connected them.¹⁷¹ The distinguishing feature between the completely public and the completely private is not the presence or participation of an audience, but rather on whose behalf the action or event was performed. Another important mythologized Roman tradition provides an example of this relationship. The last Etruscan king, Tarquinius Superbus, allegedly raped Lucretia, the wife of a prominent noble man.

¹⁶⁹ Lacey, 123-5 ; For an earlier consideration of this topic, see p. 41-3.

¹⁷⁰ Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero*, 219-24.

¹⁷¹ Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: University Press, 1994), 12.

After informing her husband of the violation, she killed herself and the subsequent action of her husband Brutus resulted in the expulsion of the monarchy and the establishment of the republic in 509 BCE.¹⁷² Not only did the rape symbolize the violation of Brutus's status as a *paterfamilias* and his authority over his family, but it also suggests that women could function as a channel and barrier between the private and public. As will be discussed momentarily, the duties that the Vestals performed inside the *aedes Vestae* and away from an audience reflect this permeable or impermeable position of women between the public and private. Other evidence closer to our subject also demonstrates the potential public nature of the private sphere as well.

Religion functioned as another mediator between the private and public. Contemporary authors had much to say about this connection. Dionysius posits that the Romans recognized two types of religious rituals, "the one public and common to all citizens and the other private and confined to particular families."¹⁷³ Cicero, however, bridges these two spheres by stating that the private and public religious observances both held the state together.¹⁷⁴ The intermittent persecutions of the Christians prior to the emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313, which proclaimed religious toleration throughout the empire, demonstrate this connection. The Christians were not targeted for ill treatment due to their reluctance to accept Roman religion *ad hoc*, but rather because the Romans considered their reluctance to participate in the imperial cult corresponded to an act of

¹⁷² Livy 1.57-60 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4.64-70 ; Sandra Joshel, "The Body Female and the Body Politic: Livy's Lucretia and Verginia," in *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources*, ed. Laura K. McClure (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 164-81.

¹⁷³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 2.65.

¹⁷⁴ Cicero, *De Legibus* 2.12.

political treason.¹⁷⁵ This was also compounded by the exclusive nature of Christianity and the Roman suspicion that they were cannibals, a practice that revolted the Romans, due to the Eucharist, a practice they did not entirely understand. The Christians were occasionally victims of persecution, in part, because their private religious practice conflicted with both Roman understandings of privacy and public religious observances that were a matter of civic responsibility.

The spectrum of the private and public spheres in Roman society was very different from our own. The distinguishing feature was not the presence or participation of an unrestricted audience, but rather on whose behalf the action or event was performed. The emperor's personal slaves and friends governed the empire behind the walls of the imperial palace on behalf of the Roman people and for their benefit. Christians suffered persecution because their religious practice neglected the benefit of the Roman people. Consequently, this work treats events that occurred beyond the glimpse and even knowledge of the Roman people as a public occurrence so long as it was designed to support the public. This perspective aids our attempt to define the Vestals as public spectacles in all aspects of their lives, even the actions they performed in the privacy of the temple and their apartments.

Duties in the *Aedes Vestae*

The Vestals were charged with a significant amount of religious responsibility and the required duties they performed within the *aedes Vestae* testify to the amount of effort these women had to exert in order to function as public spectacles. The most important obligation

¹⁷⁵ The imperial cult gradually developed into a political and social religious institution during the principate. Observance of the cult designated that an individual or group of individuals were loyal to the regime in Rome and did not necessarily correlate into the belief that the emperor was actually a god. Boatwright goes so far as to describe the imperial cult as a "unifying thread" of Roman society. Mary Boatwright et al., *The Romans: From Village to Empire* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 350.

was the maintenance of the sacred fire, the living flame of Vesta and a Roman symbol of cultural continuity. However, other tasks such as the manufacturing of religious food stuffs, the storage and preservation of significant artifacts and the maintenance of the *aedes Vestae* itself were likewise important obligations. Each of the duties examined in this section were public in the sense that they were performed on behalf of the Roman people, even if most Romans, who were prohibited from entering the structure, were hardly aware of their existence. The various duties examined in this segment further demonstrate that the Vestals were important Roman spectacles through their ability to negotiate a common Roman identity and unify their rigidly divided society. Furthermore, the duties performed just out of view of the eyes of the populace within the *aedes Vestae* confirm the public nature of their status as spectacles.

The sacred flame that burned within the temple is perhaps the most well known and most discussed duty that the Vestals were required to perform. The fire was not only the effigy of the goddess Vesta herself, who did not have a statue like most other Roman deities, but also represented the Roman community as well.¹⁷⁶ As long as the sacred flame continued to burn within the *aedes Vestae*, the Roman people and civilization would thrive. Plutarch warns that the extinguishment of the flame portended that the city would “be either inhabited

¹⁷⁶ Fantham refers to a coin of Cassius Longinus, which depicts an image of Vesta, to suggest the possibility that statuary models may have existed. However, it is not possible for us to be certain and it is unlikely given the amount of contrary evidence. Takacs concisely describes this argument, “If we agree that fire in a fireplace was the cornerstone of the cult of Vesta, that the goddess was linked to fire, and that the main purpose of the goddess’ attendants was to keep this fire alive, then the absence of a cult statue could be explained: the goddess was originally not represented anthropomorphically.” See Takacs, 85 ; Elaine Fantham , 235 ; Ovid explicitly mentions that, “An undying fire is concealed in that temple, but it contains no effigy of Vesta nor of the fire.” “Ignis inextinctus templo celatur in illo, effigiem nullam Vesta nec ignis habet.” Ovid, *Fasti* 6.297-300.

by strangers or newcomers, or left a wild pasture for cattle to graze on.”¹⁷⁷ Plutarch’s statement reflects the real belief that the city itself would be destroyed and left in ruin, but it is also a metaphor for Roman culture. Even throughout its one thousand years existence and the development of the empire, the actual city of Rome itself was fundamental to Roman identity. Numerous other sources make it clear that maintaining this flame was the most important task of the Vestals.¹⁷⁸ Plutarch even mentions that some of his sources incorrectly believed that the sacred hearth was the sole occupation of the Vestals, which further demonstrates the considerable importance of this task.¹⁷⁹ The connection between the security of Rome, the goddess Vesta and the sacred fire that the Vestals perpetuated behind the closed doors of the temple corresponds to a public spectacle. The flame itself protected the most important feature of Roman cultural identity, the city itself and the culture of its inhabitants. The Vestals maintained this sacred flame, which in the Roman psyche was analogous to the flame first kindled, in a place that most Romans were not permitted to enter in order to maintain the *pax deorum* and thus guarantee Rome’s survival and prosperity.¹⁸⁰ There is not a better example of a Roman public spectacle and the effort that had to go into this particular duty demonstrates its primacy.

The amount of time and effort that the Vestals must have devoted to maintaining the sacred flame must have been both considerable and excruciating and this certainly was the single most time consuming component of their daily life. The fact that the priesthood was constituted with only two priestesses, but four more were soon added, suggests that these

¹⁷⁷ Dionysius similarly mentions that the extinguishing of the fire portended the destruction of the city. Plutarch, *Camillus* 20 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 2.67.

¹⁷⁸ Livy 5.2 and 28.11 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.66 ; Ovid, *Fasti* 3.135-56 ; Ovid, *Tristia* 3.1.29-30 ; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 16.208 ; Plutarch, *Numa* 10 ; Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.22 ; and Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, 1.2.

¹⁷⁹ Plutarch, *Numa* 10.

¹⁸⁰ Mary Beard, “Priesthood in the Roman Republic,” 25 ; Fantham, 235 ; Staples, 150 ; and Wildfang, 8-9.

women had their work cut out for them.¹⁸¹ Little is known about how the temple, located in the middle of an ever expanding ancient metropolis, procured the necessary wood to maintain the flame or the extent to which the Vestals themselves participated in this task. The method of starting the fire, whether it was extinguished out of negligence or during the annual new year celebration, was labor intensive. According to our sources, the method for igniting the fire varies between collecting it from lightning strikes, the use of flint stones or rubbing sticks together.¹⁸² Plutarch alludes to the potential Greek origin of the priesthood through his suggestion that the Vestals employed a similar method of procuring the sacred flame as the priests of Vesta's Greek counterpart Hestia, which consisted of using a variety of mirrors in order to collect and concentrate the "pure and unpolluted rays of the sun" to ignite a fuel source.¹⁸³ Festus, himself a Roman and more reliable source, describes another method in more detail, "It was their habit to drill a piece of wood for a long time and a virgin would then carry the fire in a bronze sieve."¹⁸⁴ Festus implies that the flame was actually ignited outside of the temple itself, which may have presented those who were not permitted to enter the temple proper to be confident that the priestesses were properly performing this most important duty. Perhaps the fire was ignited outside in order to ensure that only a burning flame would be brought into the temple as it may have required several attempts to start a new flame, especially according to the method Festus describes. The annual rekindling of the flame and the Vestals ferrying it in a sieve into the temple, presumably in front of whatever crowd happened to be in the forum at the time, and their daily maintenance of this

¹⁸¹ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.67.

¹⁸² For these general methods, see Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 16.208 ; Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* 2.22 ; Plutarch, *Numa* 10.

¹⁸³ Plutarch, *Numa* 10.

¹⁸⁴ Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 32-8 ; Prowse, 180 ; "...quibus mos erat tabulam materiae tam diu terebrare, quosque exceptum ignem cribro aeneo virgo in aedem ferret." Festus, *De Verborum Significatu*, p. 94.

flame on behalf of all the Roman people throughout the year would have been a spectacle in its own right. The fact that these women were entrusted with and executed this task is suggestive of their own spectacular nature as well. The importance of the fire to Rome and the priesthood is further demarcated by its use in the execution of another task.

The Vestals were also charged with manufacturing two important food substances, *mola salsa* and *muries*. *Mola salsa* was a type of hard salt cake that the Vestals made several times a year by baking flour ground from freshly harvested wheat stalks, which they collected themselves, with salt.¹⁸⁵ The other substance, *muries*, was manufactured from salt and water, and was used to preserve the tail from the October Horse ritual for later use in another religious ceremony.¹⁸⁶ Scholars agree that these substances represented foodstuffs consumed during Rome's earliest history and were gradually replaced by other foodstuffs, although their use in religious functions persisted.¹⁸⁷ While this certainly seems to have been the case, these substances also aided the religious representation of different communities in

¹⁸⁵ Servius describes the process thoroughly, "From 7 May to 14 May, the three senior Vestals, on alternate days, place freshly harvested wheat in baskets and the Vestals roast, crush and store the grain. From this grain, three times a year, the Vestals make *mola* during the Lupercalia, the Vestalia and on 13 September, through adding boiled salt and hard salt." "Virgines Vestales tres maximae ex nonis Maiis ad pridie idus Maias alternis diebus spicas adreas in corbibus messuarii ponunt easque spicas ipsae virgines torrent, pinsunt, molunt atque ita molitum condunt. Ex eo farre virgines ter in anno molam faciunt, Lupercalibus, Vestalibus, idibus septembribus, adiecto sale cocto et sale duro." Maurus Servius Honoratus, in *Vergilis Eclogae*, ed. Waldo Sweet (Chicago: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1983), 8.82.

¹⁸⁶ Festus describes the manufacture of this substance, "*Muries* is, as Veranius teaches, that which is made from impure salt, grinded in a pestle and mixed together in a pot. When it has been sealed with gypsum, it is baked in a furnace. Having been cut by an iron saw, it is mixed into a large pot, which is in the store room in the Vestal apartments and they make use of this in later sacrifices...the Vestals add flowing water other than that which comes from the pipes." "Muries est, quemadmodum Veranius docet, ea quae fit ex sali sordido, in pila pisato, et in ollam fictilem coniecto, ibique operto gypsatoque et in furno percocto; cui virgines Vestales serra ferrea secto, et in seriam coniecto, quae est intus in aede Vestae in penu exterior, aquam iugem, vel quamlibet, praeterquam quae per fistulas venit, addunt, atque ea demum in sacrificiis utuntur." Festus, p. 152.

¹⁸⁶ Staples, 154 ; Scheid, 400 ; Rose, 54 ; Wildfang, 10 ; Takacs, 46-7.

¹⁸⁷ Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 260 ; Wildfang, 17.

Roman society, who did not always participate in each ritual.¹⁸⁸ For example, *mola salsa* was incorporated into both the *Vestalia* and *Bona Dea*, in which direct participation was limited to elite women.¹⁸⁹ Both substances were also utilized in a variety of rituals in which specific communities, such as plebeians, the urban poor, women and even the Vestals themselves, are not known to have participated. These substances were manufactured by individuals who were specifically selected and inducted into the priesthood partially on account of their ability to represent the collective. *Mola salsa* and *muries* were essentially a conduit through which the socially divided populace could observe many of the important rituals as one unitary body. In short, these substances reflected the status of their manufacturers and functioned as a religious social unifier. They also connected Rome to its traditional foodstuffs and subsequently preserved their earliest identity.

In addition to being entrusted with the care of the sacred flame and the manufacture of sacred foodstuffs, the Vestals and the *aedes Vestae* also functioned as a storehouse protecting significant items. Considering that most Romans were not permitted to enter this public storehouse, it is not surprising that we know very little about what it contained. The most important object believed to be under the Vestals' protection was the *palladium*, an image of the goddess Athena that the Romans believed Aeneas had brought with him from Troy following the destruction of this famous city.¹⁹⁰ The *palladium* prompts the question of why this particular object was in the Vestals' custody instead of being stored or even

¹⁸⁸ Staples, 154 ; Scheid, 400 ; Rose, 54 ; Wildfang, 10 ; Takacs, 46-7.

¹⁸⁹ Cicero, *ad Atticum* 1.13 ; Ovid, *Fasti* 6.283-318 ; Versnel, 32 ; For a complete description of these festivals, see p. 83-4 and 87-8.

¹⁹⁰ The *palladium* was believed to protect any city it inhabited. It protected Troy during the Trojan War and had to be stolen in order for the Greeks to successfully destroy the city. During the fourth century, Constantine I relocated the *palladium* to Constantinople, thus symbolizing the transference of primacy from Rome to Anatolia. Averil Cameron, *The Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 170 ; Takacs, 48 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.66 ; Herodian 1.14 ; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 7.141 ; Plutarch, *Camillus* 20 ; Valerius Maximus 1.4-5 ; Vergil, 2.293-7 and 3.11-2.

exhibited elsewhere in Rome. The answer lies in their connection to Roman identity. The Vestals were perfect candidates to handle and protect this object that symbolized the Romans as not only the dominant culture of the Mediterranean, but also as the heirs to the previously dominate and certainly no less important Greek culture. Whether or not this was a legitimate object, the correlation between Homer's Troy and Virgil's Rome symbolizes first century Roman perceptions of themselves as the cultural heirs to the Greeks through the mythological Aeneas and subsequently this object is ingrained in Roman identity during the principate. Of course, *mola salsa*, *muries* and the sacred flame and their connotations, each discussed above, were also stored here as well.¹⁹¹ Each was connected to Roman identity and some were utilized in ceremonies unifying the collective. Even if the argument that the Vestals functioned as the storehouse of the community because they protected the stores of the early Etruscan kings is accepted, they were certainly suitable to perform this function because these items and their custodians both represented the Roman ideal and collective.

Others temporarily assumed responsibility for these sacred objects and their example demonstrates the Vestals' spectacular nature through the public significance of these objects. In 390 BCE Rome was sacked by a raiding party from Gaul. While fleeing the city with his family in a wagon, Lucius Albinus came across the Vestals, who were likewise abandoning the city with the sacred objects. He ordered his family and possessions out of the wagon so that the Vestals would not have to walk with such an important burden.¹⁹² Over a century later, in 251 BCE, the temple of Vesta was completely destroyed in a large fire. An ex

¹⁹¹ Festus also mentions that the Vestals also had to empty barrels in their custody, although Festus admits that their significance is unclear. The fact that no other extant source corroborates Festus's description of these barrels further inhibits our ability to understand their significance, if any. Scholars have argued, however, that perhaps these barrels stored *mola salsa* or *muries*. We cannot be certain however. See, p. 61 n. 143 and *Festus*, p. 152.

¹⁹² Livy 5.39-40.

consul and triumphant general, Lucius Caecilius Metellus, entered the *aedes Vestae* in order to protect the sacred objects after uttering a prayer to Vesta, “Forgive me sacred things! I, a man, will enter where it is prohibited for men to enter. If it is a crime, may the penalty for this undertaking fall on my head so that Rome is free!”¹⁹³ Metellus was lauded for having preserved the sacred objects inside the temple, but the goddess still saw fit to blind him for his transgression. Metellus forfeited his eyesight, Albinus the potential safety and certainly the comfort of his family, and both were praised by their contemporaries and descendants because they placed the preservation of the collective Roman identity above their own. These particular objects were chosen to be saved, despite potentially disastrous repercussions, while other important religious objects were left to burn or fall into the hands of the Gauls, because they were integral to Roman identity. They were objects to be set apart from all others because of their spectacular nature, as well as that of their custodians

During the first century BCE, however, the Vestals also protected items of a more political than religious nature and their possession of important documents granted them a degree of political significance, if not agency. Roman politics were quite turbulent during the first century BCE. There were several moments of social unrest, at least one popular slave revolt led by the famous gladiator Spartacus, two failed coups hatched by the infamous Lucius Sergius Catilina and two civil wars that ultimately tore apart the republic and resulted in the creation of the principate in 31 BCE.¹⁹⁴ Julius Caesar entrusted his will to the Vestals,

¹⁹³ Valerius Maximus describes Metellus as the current *pontifex maximus*. However, if Metellus was in fact the *pontifex maximus*, then he would have not been so concerned to enter the temple since the *pontifex maximus* was permitted to enter it. “Haurit aquas tollensque manus, ‘ignoscite,’ dixit ‘sacra! Vir intrabo non aduenda viro. Si scelus est, in me commissi poena redundet: sit capitis damno Roma solute mei!” Ovid, *Fasti* 6.450-55 ; Valerius Maximus 1.4-5 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.66 ; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 7.141.

¹⁹⁴ For a brief description of these events and their impact on Roman history outside of the Vestal sphere, see Boren 110-15 ; R. G. Lewis, “Catilina and the Vestal,” *The Classical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2001) : 141-9.

who released it to Mark Anthony's father-in-law upon his assassination in 44 BCE.¹⁹⁵ This document, which declared Caesar's nephew and adopted son Octavian as his heir, resulted in the Second Triumvirate, a political alliance between Anthony, Octavian and Sextus Pompey. The document guaranteeing this brief political alliance, drafted at Misenum in 39 BCE, was also handed over to the Vestals.¹⁹⁶ Anthony and Augustus both also entrusted their wills to the Vestals.¹⁹⁷ The former initiated the civil war between Anthony and Augustus that would culminate in the establishment of the principate following the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE and the latter declared Augustus's adopted son Tiberius to be the second Roman *princeps* and established the transference of power during the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

The Vestals retained these documents, each of which profoundly influenced Roman history and politics, and they exhibit the Vestals function as spectacles. First of all, they further suggest that their custodianship of the storehouse eventually developed beyond a religious function to include secular functions as well. Secondly, some scholars argue that the Vestals were chosen to hold these important documents because their person was considered to be sacrosanct and inviolate.¹⁹⁸ Certainly a variety of other temples, military barracks or vaults within the city could have kept these documents just as safe. However, the authors of these documents understood their potential ramifications on Roman society and the fact that they elected the Vestals to protect them demonstrate their confidence in the priesthood's ability to represent the collective. Perhaps they even selected the priesthood for this task in an attempt to ensure stability, hoping that the Vestals ability to negotiate and

¹⁹⁵ Suetonius, *Iulius* 83.

¹⁹⁶ Appianus of Alexandria, *Historia Romana*, transl. Horace White (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912), 5.73 ; Cassius Dio 48.37.

¹⁹⁷ Suetonius, *Tiberius* 76 and *Iulius* 83 ; Dio Cassius 48.37 ; Appian 5.73.

¹⁹⁸ Staples, 144-5 ; Wildfang, 100.

preserve Roman identity would make transitions of power upon the death of a ruler or the decay of the Triumvirates smoother in order to offer Rome a modicum of protection from its own politics.

Water was important to many of the tasks the Vestals had to perform and subsequently it has a secondary role in describing the Vestal's spectacular nature. Considering that the Vestals lived in the *aedes Vestae*, in which they manufactured and stored symbolic food substances and a variety of other objects and documents, it is not surprising that they were also required to maintain and clean it.¹⁹⁹ The nearest water supply to the *aedes Vestae* was the pool of Juturna, which was located near the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the forum. Some scholars have suggested that this is the likely source from which the Vestals obtained their water, but they base this conclusion on its proximity as opposed to the evidence.²⁰⁰ Prior to the construction of the *cloaca maxima*, a large drain placed under the area of the forum, the Roman forum consisted of swamp land and consequently the water may have originally been brackish. Literary evidence indicates that the *aedes Vestae* eventually had access to water via an aqueduct.²⁰¹ However, even after its construction, the Vestals collected their water elsewhere.

Despite these more readily accessible sources, the Vestals were required to obtain the necessary water for their religious duties from a spring near the *porta capena*. This particular spring, commonly known as *Egeria*, had connections to two early Vestals and may subsequently explain why the priestesses had to go so far out of their way to obtain water

¹⁹⁹ Ovid, *Fasti* 3.11-14 ; Plutarch, *Numa* 13 ; Festus, p. 152.

²⁰⁰ Takacs, 29 ; Staples, 150 ; and Wildfang, 11.

²⁰¹ Although our sources do not specifically mention when the *aedes Vestae* gained access to water from an aqueduct, Appius Claudius Caecus completed Rome's first aqueduct, the *Aqua Appia*, in 312 BCE. Festus, p. 152 ; Livy 9.26 ; Pliny the Elder 36.121.

despite closer sources. Rhea Silvia was believed to have been abducted by Mars while napping next to the spring, which resulted in the birth of the mythologized founder of Rome, Romulus and Remus.²⁰² Another Vestal, Tarpeia, was captured and compelled to betray the Romans during the Gaul's successful sack of Rome in 390 BCE.²⁰³ In other words, this particular spring was already established as the water source for the priesthood and it was also connected to Roman identity through the mythologized Rhea Silvia and Romulus. However, Takacs argues that the sight of the Vestals strolling through the streets carrying a sieve of water would have made a considerable impression on the observers and functioned as a spectacle in its own right.²⁰⁴ While this certainly may have been the case, it demonstrates the Vestals status as public spectacles through the connection of this spring with Rome's cultural identity and history. The Vestals gathered water from a spring associated with the priesthood and Rome's founder and this water was used in a variety of duties, including the manufacture of substances that enabled the representation of the social collective in a variety of exclusive religious rituals. The interconnectedness of these duties suggests the depth to which the Vestals' spectacular nature was part of the priesthood's identity, a process observable in other aspects of the Vestals' religious obligations.

Rites

While the Vestals performed a variety of functions within the *aedes Vestae* on behalf of the Roman people, they were also expected to participate in a variety of religious rituals.

²⁰² Ovid, *Fasti* 3.11-50

²⁰³ Sextus Aurelius Propertius, *Elegies*, ed. H. E. Butler (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), 4.4.1-95.

²⁰⁴ The bronze vessel was constructed with a round base so that it could not be rested on the ground. Furthermore, once the water arrived in the *aedes Vestae* it was poured into a basin designed to ensure that the water remained in constant motion. Richlin, "Carrying Water in a Sieve," 340-57; St. Augustine, *City of God* 10.16; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.69; Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturales* 28.12; Tertullian, *Apologies* 22; Valerius Maximus 8.1.

On some occasions they were only required to be present or to witness a particular ceremony. However, the Vestals also actively participated in and even took center stage in others. Each of the rituals included in this discussion are public in the sense that they were carried out in front of an audience for Rome's benefit. The Vestals were observed nearly every month participating in these rituals, which started with the Roman new year's festival on 1 March and ended with the *Parentalia* in February. They made more religious appearances than any other priest or official, excluding the *pontifex maximus*. Despite the emphasis of this thesis describing the public nature of the duties the Vestals performed without an audience thus far, it is important to pause and also consider their participation in ceremonies that did have an audience. Examining these rituals furthers our understanding of the Vestals as a spectacular nature through the events and ceremonies that many Romans would have had witnessed themselves. More importantly, in many of these rituals the Vestals were the focus of the audience's gaze. The rituals in which the Vestals participated or witnessed further demonstrate their ability to represent the collective and encourage a Roman identity through their performance.

The first ritual of the Roman religious calendar that the Vestals participated in was the new year's celebration of 1 March. On this day the most important religious temples were cleaned and then decorated with laurel leaves.²⁰⁵ Ovid succinctly describes the Vestals' role in the celebration, "In order that Vesta may likewise shine with a new leaf, the old laurel is removed from the Trojan hearth [and replaced]. In addition, it is said that a new fire is

²⁰⁵ Some of the other important temples redecorated in this ritual were those devoted to Jupiter, Minerva, Mars and Quirinius. For an excellent discussion of the new year's festival, see William Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic* (New York: MacMillan & Co., 1908), 35-43 ; Michael York, *The Roman Festival Calendar of Numa Pompilius* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 95-98.

kindled.”²⁰⁶ This was not only a celebration inaugurating a new calendar year, but was likewise a celebration of Rome’s history and identity. The laurel, which adorned the temples, was sacred to Mars, who was believed to have abducted the Vestal Rhea Silvia and culminated in the founding of Rome by her offspring. The day on which this ceremony took place, 1 March, also coincides with the day in which the *ancille*, a stone sacred to Mars, dropped from the heavens near the Etruscan king Numa’s home.²⁰⁷ In other words, this ceremony had a strong connection to the Romans’ understanding of their history, the kernel of their identity. More importantly, the rekindling of the sacred flame reflects this connection considering that Numa was believed to have inaugurated the priesthood. Replacing the laurel and igniting a new fire in the forum and carrying it inside the temple in a sieve during the new year’s ceremony was a performance of the Vestal’s guarantee to the people that they were remaining vigilant in their charge.

The rites of the *Fordicidia*, the *Parilia* and the October Horse are related to each other, despite the lapse of two months between the first two and the latter. The *Fordicidia*, celebrated on 15 April, consisted of the *pontifex maximus* sacrificing a pregnant heifer to Tellus, an earth deity. Each of the thirty neighborhoods of Rome mirrored this sacrifice with a heifer of their own.²⁰⁸ The entrails were examined and burned according to standard practice, but in contrast to any other sacrifice, the unborn calves were torn from the wombs and delivered to the senior Vestal. The Vestals then reduced the calves to ash and stored them for use in the *Parilia*, which occurred several days later. Wildfang sees the Vestals’

²⁰⁶ “Vesta quoque ut folio niteat velata recenti, cedi tab Iliacis laurea cana focis. Adde quod arcana fieri novus ignis in aede dicitur, et vires flamma relecta capit.” Ovid, *Fasti*, 3.141-44.

²⁰⁷ York, 96.

²⁰⁸ Unfortunately, Ovid does not provide a reason for the division of Rome into these thirty neighborhoods and therefore it is impossible to comment on their subsequent significance. For a contemporary account of this ritual see Ovid, *Fasti* 4.629-40 ; Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 6.15 ; For a modern discussion of the ritual see, York 106-109 ; Fowler, 71-2 ; Beard *et. al.*, *Religions of Rome*, 45.

role in the *Fordicidia* as little more than another example of the priestesses performing one of their sacred duties, the manufacture and storage of purifactory substances.²⁰⁹ While this certainly may have been the case, the fact that the sacrificial victims from each neighborhood were collected in the *aedes Vestae* is very suggestive of the Vestals' ability to represent the collective of Rome. The sacrifice of the *pontifex maximus* on behalf of Rome was certainly necessary, but the *pontifex maximus*, not having gone through the rigorous induction process that the Vestals had, only served the collective. The Vestals were able to represent the collective, which, in addition to their role as the manufacturers and custodians of sacred items, is exactly why the victims from these different neighborhoods were placed in their charge. The use of these ashes a few days later further illuminates this connection.

The *Parilia* was a fertility ritual celebrated on the anniversary of the traditional date of the founding of Rome on 21 April. Subsequently, the Romans believed it to have been one of the earliest observed rituals.²¹⁰ Our principle source for the festival, Ovid, not only witnessed the rite, but jubilantly participated in it:

Certainly, I have often carried the ashes of the calf and bean stalks in my hands, the burnt offerings. Certainly, I have leaped over the flames placed in a triple row and have cast water from the wet laurel... Go people, seek the fumigant from the virgin altar; Vesta will give it, you shall become pure through the service of Vesta.²¹¹

The ashes of the calves obtained during the *Fordicidia* were combined with the preserved blood and tail of the October Horse, discussed below, and bean stalks. The entire composite

²⁰⁹ Wildfang, 24-5.

²¹⁰ Fowler, 79.

²¹¹ "Certe ego de vitulo cinerem stipulasque fabales saepe tuli plena, februa tosta, manu. Certe ego transilui positas ter in ordine flammis, udaeque roratas laurea misit aquas. Mota dea est, operique favet... I, pete virginea, populosa, suffimen ab ara. Vesta dabit, Vestae munere purus eris." Ovid, *Fasti* 4.721-34 ; Fowler, 79-85 ; York 109-11.

was thrown into a line of fire in the forum, over which the male participants jumped three times. Again we see the use of laurel, flora sacred to Mars, and its significance. The poet does not specifically mention that the Vestals participated in this rite, but they certainly provided the means considering that they manufactured, stored and distributed the fumigant.²¹² Since Ovid mentions that the participants purposefully sought out and carried the fumigant in their hands, it is likely that Vestal participation did not extend much beyond their prerogative of storing the substance. Staples asserts that each participant in the *Parilia* conducted his own ritual by leaping over the flame and that the use of this substance unified these individual rituals, at least as Ovid experienced it, into a communal one.²¹³ If Staples argument is accepted, then the Vestals are the means of this unification, a function to which they were more than qualified as we have observed thus far. Through their distribution of the fumigant, its implications in the ceremony and the *Parilia*'s early history and connection to Mars, the Vestals function as unifying spectacles.

The Vestals had an even more important role in the *Argei* ritual, observed on 15 May, as the ceremony's central participants. The ritual itself consisted of a long procession of the most important priests and politicians, including the Vestals, from a designated location in the city to the *pons sublicus*, the first stone bridge built across the Tiber. The festival culminated in the Vestals casting numerous rush effigies into the waters flowing under the bridge.²¹⁴ Scholars have suggested that these effigies represented either a human sacrifice

²¹² Elaine Fantham, *Fasti: Book IV* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 230.

²¹³ Staples, 155.

²¹⁴ Dionysius of Halicarnassus provides the most complete description of the ritual, although he does not specifically mention that the Vestals themselves cast the effigies into the water. Although Ovid's account is not the most complete, it is more creditable since his poem is focused explicitly on Roman religion and is likely to have witnessed the ceremony himself. Ovid writes, "Now it is the custom of the Vestals to throw oaken likenesses of ancient men [into the Tiber] from the bridge." "Tum quoque priscorum Virgo simulacra vivorum mittere roboreo scirpea ponte solet." ; Festus also implicates the Vestals as well, "They used to call the

from Latium's pre-Roman history, a practice that became deplorable to the Romans, or the spirits that inhabited Rome during the *Lemuria*.²¹⁵ This notion of casting away unwanted things through the Tiber may also account for the disposal of the unpopular emperor Elagabalus's body following his demise, which was reputedly thrown into the Tiber through the *cloaca maxima* that drained into the river near the *pons sublicus*.²¹⁶ The Vestals tossing these effigies demonstrates their ability to unify Roman social divides. Dionysius unequivocally states that thirty effigies were cast from the bridge.²¹⁷ There is no explanation for this number except for the thirty neighborhoods of Rome that Ovid mentions during the *Fordicidia*. Certainly a member from each of the thirty communities could have tossed their respective effigy into the water themselves, but only the Vestals could transform such a local ritual into a universally Roman ceremony. The link between the effigies and the Roman community and the antiquity of the bridge from which they were thrown demonstrates the *Argei* as another piece of evidence for the Vestals as public spectacles.

In June the Vestals conducted the *Vestalia*, a ritual devoted entirely to their own goddess. Between 7 June and 15 June the *aedes Vestae* was opened up to the elite women of Roman society in order to be cleaned and the waste dumped into the Tiber. The priestesses also made *mola salsa*, which was utilized in almost every single religious ritual. However, the *Vestalia* consisted of more than the observance of these duties. Following the manufacture of *mola salsa* on 9 June, the Vestals led a procession of donkeys carrying the

effigies of reeds, which were thrown into the Tiber by Vestals each year, Argeos." "Argeos vocabant scirpeas effigies, quae per virgines Vestales annis singulis iaciebantur in Tiberim." Festus, p. 14.

²¹⁵ D. Harmon, "The Public Festivals of Rome," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang Der Romischen Welt*, 2.16.2 (Berlin: Walder de Gruyter & Co., 1972), 1454-59 ; Rose, 79-80 ; Fowler, 116 ; York, 123 ; Takacs, 47.

²¹⁶ Cassius Dio 80.20 ; Herodian 5.5 ; *Historia Augusta*, Elagabalus 5-7.

²¹⁷ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.38.

sacred cakes and they placed flowers on their millstones.²¹⁸ This day was also a special day for Roman bakers and this ceremony subsequently may have represented the religious fusion of the baker's holiday with the Vestals' manufacture of *mola salsa*.²¹⁹ The donkey, whose energy ceaselessly propelled the millstones, was subsequently rewarded with a day off and participation in an important procession. Through this aspect of the *Vestalia* the Vestals dignified the bakers, a profession considered to be below Roman standards since the ideal Roman family was expected to bake its own bread. The importance of this ritual to Rome is further demonstrated by its inclusion, it is one of only a couple rituals in the calendar that is not associated with the imperial cult, in the *Feriale Duranum*, a third century military religious calendar.²²⁰ The *Vestalia*, subsequently, was one of the most important Roman religious rituals and garnered the collective appreciation for an often underrated profession. Although Ovid's extant description of the Roman religious calendar ends in June, evidence exists for the Vestals' participation in rituals observed later in the year.

The second portion of Ovid's *Fasti* detailing the religious ceremonies from June until February is not extant and therefore we must rely on less detailed evidence in our literary sources. However, the priesthood has been linked to two rituals performed in August. The *Consualia* consisted of various sacrifices performed on two different days in an altar buried under the *circus maximus*, which was exhumed just for this purpose and then reburied. The Vestals participated on the sacrifice held on 21 August. The ritual also involved races of both horses and, uniquely, donkeys.²²¹ Although we can only speculate why this ceremony

²¹⁸ Ovid, *Fasti*, 6.309-318 ; For a detailed modern discussion of the *Vestalia* see Fowler, 145-154 ; York, 130-32.

²¹⁹ Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 18.107 ; Takacs, 38.

²²⁰ The *Vestalia* was in fact the only exception to this case. See *The Feriale Duranum*, Col II. 15.

²²¹ Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* 5.7 ; Herbert Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 163.

involved two sacrifices, more than a month apart and was carried out by a different body of religious officials, the Vestals' participation can be explained. First of all, we have already seen that Vesta was, in part, associated with the earth and since the altar was buried underground it may have had some relationship to the goddess.²²² Secondly and more significantly, the *Consualia* occurred on the anniversary of the mythological rape of the Sabine women on 21 August and connects the audience to their cultural history.²²³ The ritual and the Vestal's participation may be related through the Roman's belief that the abduction of the Sabine women provided the early community with wives in order to propagate. Without this abduction there would not have been a Rome or a Vestal priesthood. The participation of the women charged with protecting the sacred flame, whose unyielding light guaranteed Rome's prosperity, may reflect Rome's early development through acquiring a female population with which to reproduce and ensure their community's survival. While we know little else about this ritual, the Vestals participation in the sacrifice and the fact that it occurred on the anniversary of an important moment in Roman tradition is enough to confirm the Vestals' spectacular nature.

The second festival, the *Opsconsivia*, occurred several days later on 25 August. Even less is understood about the rituals that occurred along with this festival than the *Consualia*. Varro alludes to the participation of the Vestals however, "The day *Opsconsivia* assumes its name from the goddess Ops Consiva, whose shrine is in the *regia*, in order that no one other

²²² For a previous and later conversation of this association between Vesta and the earth, see p. 45 and 126 ; Also see Ovid, *Fasti* 6.267-8 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.66 ; Festus p. 230 L ; Plutarch, *Numa* 11 ; St. Augustine, *City of God* 7.16.

²²³ The rape of the Sabines is a Roman foundation myth. In order to acquire wives for the newly established city of Rome, Romulus organized a festival with their neighbors. During the festival the Romans ravished the daughters of their Sabine neighbors and compelled them to marry into the Roman community. See, Livy 1.3-4 ; Plutarch, *Romulus* 14.

than the Vestal virgins and the sacred priest may enter it.”²²⁴ Why the Vestals and the *rex sacrorum* were the only individuals permitted to enter the temple and what they did inside is unknown. However, scholars have identified Ops Consiva as a storehouse goddess and her connection to the *regia*, the king’s traditional home and later the permanent home of the *pontifex maximus*, is very suggestive.²²⁵ The goddess is related to one of the duties the Vestals were required to perform, the storage of sacred objects within the *aedes Vestae* and it is likely that this connection instigated Vestal participation in her rites. Furthermore, like the temple devoted to Ops Consiva, the *aedes Vestae* was also traditionally attached to the *regia*, which further suggests a connection between the Vestals and this goddess. We cannot infer any other information about this rite, but it is sufficient to be aware that the Vestals were connected to other gods and goddesses and they subsequently invoked their spectacular nature, in one form or another, whether our sources explicitly mention it or not, for a divine collective as well.

The October Horse, celebrated on 15 October, complemented the *Fordicidia* and *Parilia*. The ritual consisted of a chariot race in honor of Mars in the field dedicated to him, the *campus Martis*. The horse on the right hand side of the victorious span was sacrificed and beheaded. While a traditional struggle for the head, which had been sprinkled with crushed *mola salsa*, ensued amongst the witnesses, the Vestals amputated the tail, collected its blood and took both to the *aedes Vestae*.²²⁶ The blood and tail would later be mixed with the ashes of the calves sacrificed during the *Fordicidia* and the composite substance was the

²²⁴ “Opsconsiva dies ab dea Ops Consiva, cuius in Regia sacrarium quod adeo artum, ut eo praeter virgines Vestales et sacerdotum publicum introeat nemo.” Varro, *De Lingua Latina* 6.21 ; Also see Scullard, *Festival and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic*, 181.

²²⁵ Scullard, *Festival and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic*, 181.

²²⁶ Ovid simply mentions that the blood and tail of the ritual were incorporated into the *Fordicidia* and *Parilia*, Ovid, *Fasti* 4.733 ; Festus, p. 190 ; C. Bennett Pascal, “October Horse,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 85 (1981) : 261-3 ; York, 178-9 ; Fantham, *Fasti: Book IV*, 230.

fumigant cast into the fire during the *Parilia*. Wildfang convincingly suggests that this was a purification ritual based on Ovid's statement that the fumigant was that utilized in the *Parilia*.²²⁷ However, the Vestals' participation in the ritual also reflects their spectacular nature through their ability to represent the collective. Considering that the ritual consisted of a chariot race, it is reasonable to assume that individuals from many different walks of life would have been in attendance since there is no record of a particular demographic ever being excluded from such an event. Although the details of the struggle over the sacrificed horse's head, who participated, whether or not it was an exclusive struggle or if the entire audience participated, are not known, the struggle is a symbolic representation of the potential chaos of such a rigidly divided society. In the midst of this chaos, the Vestals collected the blood and tail that would be utilized during the *Parilia*, in which many of these competing participants would leap over the fire together. The fact that *mola salsa* was sprinkled over the head suggests that even the struggle over it was done on behalf of the collective since *mola salsa* was one of the means through which the Vestals facilitated social unity and represented the collective in religious ceremonies.

The Vestals also participated in the *Bona Dea* festival on 4 December and there is a staggering amount of evidence for this ritual due to its association with the notorious figure Clodius Pulcher. In 62 BCE, Clodius dressed up as a woman and entered the *regia*, where the ceremony was held, supposedly in order to pursue a fascination with Julius Caesar's wife, who was leading this ritual that only elite women were permitted to attend.²²⁸ Men were

²²⁷ Wildfang, 25.

²²⁸ This event prompted Caesar to divorce his wife Pompeia, arguing that "he [Caesar] should wish even his wife to be free from suspicion." Plutarch, *Caesar* 9-10 ; Cassius Dio 37.45 ; Cicero, *Ad Atticum* 1.13 ; Suetonius, *Iulius* 6.2 ; For a rich corpus of recent discussion of this event, see David Epstein, "Cicero's Testimony at the Bona Dea Trial," *Classical Philology* 81, no. 3 (1986) : 229-35 ; H. Versnel, "The Festival for

strictly prohibited from witnessing the ritual and even the *pontifex maximus*, in whose home it was observed, was required to vacate the household for its duration. The wife of the *pontifex maximus*, the Vestals and a large number of elite women listened to music, drank wine and carried out a joyous celebration in front of an effigy of the goddess, removed from her temple just for the occasion.²²⁹ Typically, rites in which women exclusively participated in the ancient world turned social and gender norms on their head and this certainly was the case in this ritual. The ceremony culminated with the sacrifice of a pig to the goddess, the only known occasion in which a woman was permitted to wield the religious authority of an animal sacrifice. Cicero, whose wife Terentia hosted the celebration in 62 BCE, testifies to the Vestals' ability to represent the collective in this ceremony: "What is done by the Vestals, is done on behalf of the Roman people."²³⁰ Wildfang asserts that this sacrificial capacity may have only been permitted during this circumstance considering that men were not allowed to be present.²³¹ Either way, the Vestals would have been the ideal candidates to perform this sacrifice since they had the capacity to represent the collective. More importantly, Cicero explicitly states that this act, through the Vestal's ability to sacrifice the pig, ensured the success of Rome. This is also why Clodius's intrusion in the ceremony was so scandalous; he threatened the *pax deorum* that the Vestals protected on behalf of Rome.

Bona Dea and the Thesmophoria," *Greece & Rome* 39, no. 1 (1992) : 31-55 ; Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 216-9 .

²²⁹ For a more acute conversation of the Vestals' involvement in this festival, see Scheid, 391 ; Staples, 155 ; Takacs 100 and 109-11 ; and Wildfang, 31-2 ; Appian 5.7 ; Cicero, *Ad Atticum* 1.13 ; Plutarch, *Caesar* 9-10 and *Cicero* 28.

²³⁰ Plutarch suggests that the matron of the household, Cicero's wife in this case, performed the sacrifice herself. Cicero's claim, however, is commonly accepted considering that he was a contemporary witness with such a close association with the festival. "...fit per virgines Vestales, fit pro populo Romano, fit in ea domo quae est imperio." Cicero, *De Haruspicum Responsis*, ed. T. E. Page (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 17.37 ; Plutarch, *Cicero* 19.

²³¹ Wildfang, 32.

The Vestals participated in a variety of different rituals during the Roman calendar year and the degree of their participation varied between each, but together they reflect the Vestals' spectacular nature as social unifiers and facilitators of a Roman identity. Some of these festivals, such as the *Ops Consiva* and their role in the *Fordicidia* and *Parilia*, were performed in the privacy of a specific altar or space from which most Romans were excluded. Other celebrations such as the *Vestalia* and *Bona Dea* were specifically prohibited to men, but included elite Roman women. Finally, ceremonies such as the *Argei* and the new year's festival were conducted in public spaces and were subsequently completely open to an unlimited audience. The Vestals were central participants in some of these rituals, witnesses in others or background instigators of rites such as the *Parilia*, in which they did not witness or directly participate. *Mola salsa* was a common feature of many of these ceremonies. All of the rituals contributed to an expression of Roman identity through their connection to Rome's early history and, in part, determined what it meant to be Roman. These rituals also were performed on behalf of the Roman people, whether or not they were exclusive to a specific demographic of Roman society or were unlimited. The Vestals were the thread that held this Roman tapestry together and the extent to which they participated in all of these rituals demonstrate the interconnectedness between their spectacular nature and Roman society.

Privileges

The Vestals were expected to live a strictly regimented life of devotion to the priesthood and the Roman state compensated them with unique rights and privileges. Dionysius explicitly correlates these privileges to this sacrifice, "Many high honors have been granted them [the Vestals] by the commonwealth, as a result of which they feel no

desire either for marriage or for children.”²³² Whether or not these privileges actually curbed their desire for this type of lifestyle, they certainly encompassed economic, legal, religious and social benefits typically denied to most women. The narrative of the Vestals’ rights and honors is one of change and agency. Many of these privileges are demonstrated to have been instituted during different eras, especially during the principate.²³³ The Vestals occasionally made use of these privileges in elaborate performances designed to pursue their own individual agenda and they are subsequently the best evidence for the Vestals’ performance of the advantages of their unique position in Roman society as spectacles.

The select few who were inducted into the priesthood had much to gain financially for their service. While it is likely that the amount of wealth accumulated by the priesthood and individual Vestals increased over time, the evidence only permits an examination of their wealth during the first century BCE and after. This may account for the reason why scholars have all but entirely neglected the fiscal aspects of the priesthood in Vestal scholarship.²³⁴ The extant evidence indicates several sources of potential income. The Vestals, whether collectively or individually, received a stipend from the state, which the Romans believed originated with the establishment of the priesthood during the regal period.²³⁵ By the first century, this stipend was rather large, as much as two million sesterces, and was bestowed upon each individual priestess.²³⁶ The Vestals made use of this capital to purchase clothing,

²³² Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.67.

²³³ Suetonius mentions that the emperor Augustus increased the honors bestowed on the Vestals in 8 BCE. Suetonius, *Augustus* 31.

²³⁴ The only comprehensive treatment of this subject can be found in Wildfang’s brief account. She also expresses her disappointment that this facet of the priesthood has been ignored. Wildfang, 70-3.

²³⁵ Livy credits Numa with the creation of this stipend, but Wildfang suggests that this evidence only demonstrates that the Vestals received a state stipend only by the first century. Livy, 1.20 ; Wildfang, 70-1.

²³⁶ Tiberius even awarded one million sesterces as compensation to a candidate he did not even select for service in the priesthood. Nero awarded as much as two million sesterces to the Vestal Cornelia Cossa upon her induction. Tacitus, *Annales* 2.86 and 15.22.

necessities for the *aedes Vestae* and their religious duties and they even acquired their own personal slaves and private estates.²³⁷ Hygenius even mentions that the priesthood also owned and leased out valuable shop front properties near the *aedes Vestae*, “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].²³⁸ All of this evidence, when taken together, suggests that by the first century BCE the Vestals as individuals and the priesthood as a whole had a great degree of wealth and fiscal independence. This independence was necessary considering that these women did not have access to any familial economy following their induction into the priesthood. More significantly, this wealth provided the Vestals with the means to negotiate agency for themselves or on the behalf others.

In addition to the privilege of independently accumulating private property and fortunes, they also had the capability to administer and manage their wealth as well. Women emancipated from *patria potestas* were typically required to manage their assets through the use of a male tutor.²³⁹ An abundance of literary evidence, however, suggests that the Vestals acquired exemption from this condition and were permitted to distribute their wealth and property as they saw fit. For example, the Vestal Licinia was involved in real estate deals.²⁴⁰ In fact, a Vestal could bequeath her private property to any citizen of her choice through a

²³⁷ Plutarch mentions that the Vestal Licinia owned private estates during the first century BCE. Plutarch, *Crassus* 1 ; Livy 8.15 ; and Tacitus, *Annales* 4.16.

²³⁸ “Ex antiquitatem recipunt hoc [est], ut et nominibus vetustis utantur, ut vectigalis ager virginum Vestae, et aris templis sepulchris et his similibus.” Hyginus Gromaticus, *The Works of Hyginus Gromaticus*, eds. Maurice Lenoir and Carl Thulin [CD-ROM #5.3] (Los Altos: Packard Humanities Institute, 1991), C.82.

²³⁹ Staples, 143 ; Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 24 ; Beard, “Re-reading (Vestal) Virginity,” 168.

²⁴⁰ Plutarch, *Crassus* 1.

will that she was also entitled to prepare herself.²⁴¹ There would have been no other method through which a deceased Vestal could have distributed her property considering that she did not have any default intestate legal connections to any individual or family. If a Vestal died intestate, all of her wealth was appropriated by the state for religious purposes and perhaps even for directly funding other Vestals' stipends.²⁴² The Vestals, through their status as public spectacles, were expected to represent the collective and their ability to manage their own property and to even prepare a will ensured that they were legally isolated from any community or individual in Rome. The fact that the state assumed control of an intestate priestess's wealth further elucidates this connection. The Vestals were permitted to acquire and distribute their own wealth because they had to be able to represent the collective as public spectacles, but this also necessitated their legal and social independence from the institution of *potestas* and any fiscally determinate relationship to any other party.

The Vestals were also invested with *sacrosanctitas*, a religious status that made them legally immune from any type of violence. The privileges of *sacrosanctitas* was another means of ensuring that each priestess remained sexually inviolate, was not unnecessarily harassed in public and was able to go about her prescribed routine with relative ease and free from any hindrance. Bauman argues that the Vestal's *sacrosanctitas* was equivalent to that of the plebeian tribune, an office granted this immunity shortly after the establishment of the republic in 494 BCE in order to protect the plebeian official from any potential violence

²⁴¹ See Cicero, *De Re Publica* 3.10 ; Plutarch, *Numa* 10 ; Gellius 1.12 ; For a modern discussion of this privilege as it pertains to Roman women in general and the Vestals in particular, see Lacey, 127 ; Gardner, 190-200.

²⁴² Gellius cites Labeo, author of the *Commentaries on the Twelve Tables*, on this matter, "In the commentary of Labeonis, which is composed from the twelve tables, it is written that a Vestal is not heir of any intestate [person], anyone her heir. Should she die without having created a will, all her property, they say, is rendered to the state." "Praeterea in commentariis Labeonis, quae ad duodecim tabula composuit, ita scriptum est: 'Virgo Vestalis neque heres est cuiquam intestatae quisquam, sed bona eius in publicum redigi aiunt. Id quo iure fiat, quaeritur.'" Gellius 1.12.

during periods of social conflict with the patricians.²⁴³ Plutarch describes the severity of this status and attributes its creation to Numa, “Anyone who presses upon their chair on which they are carried, is put to death.”²⁴⁴ Plutarch does not specifically describe this protection as *sacrosanctitas*, but it was similar to the privilege granted to the plebeian tribunes. It is likely, however, that Plutarch may simply have been repeating the traditional explanation for the creation of this privilege contemporary to Roman beliefs at the time. Whether or not the application of *sacrosanctitas* to the Vestals developed before or was modeled after that applicable to the plebeian tribunes, the nature of the privilege was essentially one and the same and provided the Vestals with an inviolable authority.

Sacrosanctitas was not just a passive privilege, but an active authority the Vestals seemed to have made use of relatively often and in a very powerful way. We have already discussed the intervention of the Vestal Claudia between a triumphing general and a plebeian tribune, who attempted to utilize his own *sacrosanctitas* in order to prevent the procession.²⁴⁵ Claudia’s success not only demonstrates that the Vestals’ *sacrosanctitas* trumped that of the plebeian tribunes, but it may also have changed the nature of the Roman triumph. Following Claudia’s intervention, the Vestals became part of the triumphal procession, perhaps in order to prevent any similar interruptions in the future.²⁴⁶ Claudia is also the first definite example of a priestess performing this authority to her own end. The priesthood also collectively exercised this privilege. Julius Caesar sought refuge with the Vestals in 80 BCE after the dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix signed a death warrant against the young Caesar

²⁴³ Bauman, 47.

²⁴⁴ Plutarch is incorrect in asserting that Numa instituted this right. The privilege of *sacrosanctitas* is not likely to have been extended to the Vestals until at least after the office of the plebeian tribune was created in the fifth century BCE. Plutarch, *Numa* 10-11.

²⁴⁵ See p. 55-6.

²⁴⁶ Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, 223-4.

because he would not divorce his wife.²⁴⁷ Without the Vestals possessing this *sacrosanctitas*, this may have prematurely ended what would turn out to be a very significant career. If a criminal being led to his execution happened to come across a Vestal by coincidence, his sentence was commuted.²⁴⁸ During the turbulent civil wars of the first century BCE, the *aedes Vestae* occasionally functioned as a place of asylum for important citizens who ended up on the wrong side of the conflict.²⁴⁹ Indeed, the Vestals authority to protect and store important wills and documents during this era may even reflect their *sacrosanctitas*. In 48 Valeria Messalina, the third wife of the emperor Claudius, fled to the Vestals after her husband learned of her plot to assassinate him and in 69 the priesthood also spared Vitellius from one of the emperor Vespasian's triumphant generals.²⁵⁰ The abounding evidence suggests that following the early first century BCE, the Vestals actively utilized this right in order to benefit or protect chosen individuals as they saw fit. The Vestals were elevated to the protective status of the plebeian tribunes in order to protect their status as public spectacles. This protection granted them freedom of movement and the ability to perform their religious functions without harassment. However, this privilege also had the unforeseen consequence of enabling the Vestals to play significant political and social roles during periods of turmoil and chaos, a role and duty unrelated to their religious function. *Sacrosanctitas* provided individual Vestals and the priesthood as a whole the ability to wield a surprising and unintended degree of social and political agency.

²⁴⁷ Julius Caesar was the nephew Gaius Marius, a famous military General and staunch opponent of Sulla during Rome's first civil war in 88 BCE, and he was subsequently included on Sulla's proscription list. Plutarch, *Caesar* 1 ; Suetonius, *Iulius* 1.

²⁴⁸ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.67.

²⁴⁹ Appian 1.54 ; Following the aftermath of the *Bona Dea* scandal in 63 BCE, Cicero's wife Terentia was harassed to the point that she sought out the Vestals for protections during Cicero's exile from Rome. Terentia's sister Fabia was a priestess at the time. *Cicero, ad Atticum* 14.2 ; For a complete discussion of this event, see Epstein, 235.

²⁵⁰ Tacitus, *Annales* 31.32 ; Tacitus, *Historia*, ed. Clifford H. Moore (Cambridge: University Press, 1937), 3.81 and *Annales* 3.69 and 9.32 ; Dio Cassius 65.18 ; Suetonius, *Vitellius* 16.

During the first century the Vestals were granted the right to be accompanied by a *lictor* while in public. A *lictor* was essentially a secretary and herald who carried the *fasces*, a bundle of axes and rods that symbolized the authority of the official whom the *lictor* served, and announced the arrival of an official to the crowd. Cassius Dio mentions that the emperor Augustus granted this privilege to the Vestals after one priestess was insulted on her way home from a banquet.²⁵¹ A magistrate walking through the crowd with a *lictor* bearing the *fasces* before him would have been an impressive sight to the Romans in its own right, but it certainly was even more significant when a woman was seen with this honor. The privilege may have even been an identifiable trait of her *sacrosanctitas*, almost as a warning to the people that this woman was untouchable. Staples suggests that the *lictor* “kept her aloof from the common experience of any and every other category in Rome.”²⁵² The *lictor*, *fasces*, *stola*, *sex crines* and other identifiable markers of the priesthood in combination certainly would have made a Vestal recognizable to nearly anyone in a crowd. This privilege focused everyone’s gaze upon the Vestal and would have immediately conjured to her audience’s mind the unique status and religious implications of her office.

Special seats at the games were reserved for the Vestals and further provided the Vestals with the opportunity to negotiate agency for themselves or for others. Women did attend the games, but they were typically required to sit in the top tier of the stands with the lowest dregs of the audience.²⁵³ The Vestals, on the other hand, sat in a reserved box near the most important magistrates. This may have had a religious function. Many of the games

²⁵¹ Plutarch incorrectly asserts that this privilege originated with Numa’s founding of the priesthood. However, if this was a customary practice during the first century, then there would have been little reason for Augustus to confer this privilege on the Vestals again, Plutarch, *Numa* 10 ; Dio Cassius, 47.19.4 ; Beard incorporates this privilege into her argument that the Vestals had a male aspect in their sexuality, Beard, “The Sexual Status of the Vestal Virgins,” 17.

²⁵² Staples, 145.

²⁵³ Suetonius, *Augustus* 44 ; Auguet, 35-7.

originally complimented religious festivals for funeral rites.²⁵⁴ Therefore, the Vestals presence initially may have reflected their religious duty. However, during the principate, religious function turned into a privilege when the emperor Nero permitted the Vestals to attend other contests that had no known associations with the sacred that were previously denied to them, such as boxing and athletic competitions.²⁵⁵ Even if Suetonius only mentions this act in an effort to demonstrate how depraved the emperor was for allowing the priestesses to participate in such unsavory events, the Vestals made use of it. The poet Ovid mentions that women attended the games in order “to see and be seen.”²⁵⁶ However, only the Vestals, with their privileged seating, could endorse political candidates through giving up their seats to them in a successful attempt to demonstrate her approval to the audience, which would have been considerable in an era without access to television or a printing press. The Vestal Licinia gave up her assigned seat to a relative, Licinius Murena, a candidate for the consulship in 73 BCE.²⁵⁷ Thus this seating arrangement did not only make the Vestals visible, but also enabled them to make others of their own choosing visible as well.

The Vestals were undoubtedly public spectacles. Many of the duties and festivals that they performed or in which they participated were designed to maintain the *pax deorum* and guaranteed Rome’s success. Some of these religious rituals such as the *Argei* and *Parilia* were open to the public. Other festivals and tasks, such as the maintenance of the sacred flame, the *Vestalia* and *Bona Dea* were only open to an exclusive public or not observed at

²⁵⁴ The *Consualia* and the October Horse festivals consisted of a chariot race and scholars have also suggested that games were also connected to the *Parilia* and *Vestalia*. The Vestals participated in each of these rites. Wildfang, 33 ; J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 55.

²⁵⁵ Suetonius, *Nero* 12.

²⁵⁶ “...spectatum veniunt, veniunt spectentur ipsae.” Ovid, *Ars Amatoriae*, ed. J. H. Mozley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 1.99 ; Parker, “The Observed of All Observers,” 163-6.

²⁵⁷ Cicero, *pro Murena*, in *The Speeches*, ed. N. H. Watts (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931), 73.

all. However, the Vestals performed these duties for the benefit of the people and this motive subsequently qualifies them as public. The Vestals' participation in many of these duties and rights guaranteed that each demographic of Rome was represented in an act of cultural unification that associated each generation with Rome's traditional history. Therefore, they further demonstrate the spectacular nature of the priesthood. The Vestals were granted a variety of privileges during different moments of the priesthood's existence, sometimes out of necessity or as the whim of emperors dictated. The priesthood seized these opportunities or at least haphazardly exercised their privileges in order to negotiate a degree of political agency for themselves or others and they subsequently influenced Roman history beyond the religious sphere. The religious duties and rituals in which the Vestals participated unified Roman society and contributed to the formation and preservation of a Roman identity and the subsequent privileges with which they were rewarded demonstrate their capability to invoke their spectacular nature to influence Roman history.

ACCUSATION AND EXECUTION: *SPECTACULUM MAXIMUM*

The *captio* ceremony designated a Vestal as a spectacle and their daily life confirms that the Vestals functioned as spectacles, but the task of understanding the degree to which the priesthood's spectacular nature was directly associated with Rome's success or failure remains to be shown. The consequence for a Vestal who violated this relationship between the priesthood and society provides the best evidence for measuring the degree of this relationship. This is the most discussed aspect of the priesthood in both contemporary and modern accounts and subsequently there is a plethora of evidence from which to accomplish this aim. Priestesses accused and convicted of transgressing their status and role in Roman society through the charge of violating their virginity were buried alive in an elaborate ritual. The Vestals' bodies and sexual status functioned as the catalyst and agent of these transgressions. An analysis of the circumstances surrounding incidents of Vestal transgression reveals that the accusation, trial and live burial ceremony demonstrates that the Vestal's body and spectacular nature were entwined with Roman society and identity to such an extent that it is hardly possible to distinguish between the two.

This chapter accomplishes this aim in several ways. Considering that the Vestals' sexual status and bodies functioned as the accusatory agent of their transgressions, it is of considerable importance that this status is defined in order to completely comprehend their relationship to Roman society. While our sources principally cite a Vestal's sexual transgression as the source of her accusation, a closer look at the evidence reveals that their sexual status reflected other conspicuous threats to Roman society, such as military disasters, disease and social unrest. The judicial process of convicting a Vestal of *crimen incesti*, the antithesis of her ideal sexual status, was designed to mark and remove the priestess's religious authority in order to make her an acceptable expiatory spectacle. Finally, the elaborate execution ritual simultaneously balanced the *pax deorum* and enabled the entombed priestess to regain her status and function as a spectacle, which she symbolically and perpetually performed in her tomb on behalf of Rome.

Sexual Status

The sexual status of the Vestals is one of the most considered aspects of the priesthood and dominates both contemporary and modern discussions.²⁵⁸ However, this is not surprising since their sexual status is directly connected to the other most discussed feature of the priesthood, their execution for violating their virginity. As we have already seen, virginity and emancipation both enabled the Vestals to represent the collective through their ability to be alienated from any particular family or demographic.²⁵⁹ Subsequently

²⁵⁸ For contemporary discussions of the Vestals sexual status, see Livy 1.20 ; Gellius 1.12 and 7.7 ; Dionysius of Halicarnasuss 2.66 ; Ovid, *Fasti* 6.283-318 ; Cicero, *De Legibus* 2.12 ; Plutarch, *Numa* 9-10 ; For the most prominent modern discussions, see Parker, "Why were the Vestals Virgins," 563-601 ; Beard, "The Sexual Status of the Vestals Virginity," 12-27 ; Pomeroy, 210 ; Amy Richlin, "Pliny's Brassiere," in *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sourced*, ed. Laura McClure (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 228-234 ; Scheid, 381 ; Staples, 129-135 and 137 ; Wildfang, 51-61.

²⁵⁹ See p. 41-4.

many features of the priesthood, from their appearance to their daily tasks, were based on this important criterion. This work defines the Roman conception of virginity as simultaneously a physiological condition and a sociological condition. Furthermore, the Romans culturally made use of this polysemic understanding of virginity in order to appropriate women's bodies for the benefit of society, a practice ingrained in Roman identity and the Vestal priesthood. A Vestal's sexual status as a virgin enabled her to completely devote her life completely to the priesthood, enabled her to represent the Roman collective and was fundamental to Roman cultural identity. An examination of the Roman understanding of virginity and how Roman society appropriated the Vestals' sexual status and body for the benefit of their state and culture reveals just how interrelated the priesthood and Roman society actually were.

The first component of the Roman understanding of virginity reflects a physiological condition. Just as modern society defines virginity as the condition of an individual abstaining from sexual intercourse, the Romans also incorporated this definition into their own comprehension of the term *virgo*.²⁶⁰ The physiological component is significant to the Vestals for several reasons. First of all, a virgin was not married and the emancipation of a virgin, which the *captio* ceremony essentially accomplished for each Vestal, ensured that each priestess was not legally associated with any particular family. In short, her physiological status enabled her to represent the collective, an important function of a spectacle. Scholars have also posited that a Vestal's virginal sexual status enabled her to perform her daily religious tasks without polluting them and prevented the distractions

²⁶⁰ Kirsten Hastrup, "The Semantics of Biology: Virginity," in *Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society*, ed. Shirley Ardener (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), 49 ; Beard, "The Sexual Status of the Vestal Virgins," 14 ; Parker, "Why were the Vestals Virgins," 568 ; Wildfang, 53.

inherent in an active sex life.²⁶¹ Cicero mentions that virgins were more able to care for the sacred flame and other religious duties that the priesthood was required to perform.²⁶² Beard argues that the Vestals were virgins because many of these tasks that they were required to perform reflect tasks that daughters performed in Roman households, even going so far as to suggest that the Romans associated the Vestals with the early Etruscan king's daughters.²⁶³ Whether through the prevention of religious contamination or out of practicality, the Vestals' physiological virginity demonstrates how Roman society appropriated the body of each priestess, through the regulation of her sexuality, and deployed it for the benefit of Rome. This is only half of the solution however.

The Romans also considered virginity to reflect a certain standard of behavior and demeanor as well. Hastrup argues that this socially constructed definition was derived from the physiological and that the former is the most important in determining societies' understanding of the concept.²⁶⁴ Several sources infer this meaning through the use of the word *castitas*, which roughly translates to purity, in their description of the Vestals and their appropriate behavior.²⁶⁵ Cicero specifically associates the sociological virginity with the physiological, "Since Vesta...protects the city's hearth, *virgins* shall more easily watch over the fire and women may witness that the nature of women is capable of *purity* [*castitatem*]."²⁶⁶ Cicero's cryptic statement implies that the Vestals had to live up to rigorous behavioral standards in addition to their observance of physiological virginity. Indeed,

²⁶¹ Mustakallio, 62 ; Rose, 442-3 ; Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 264.

²⁶² Cicero, *de Legibus* 2.29.

²⁶³ Beard, "Sexual Status of the Vestal Virgins," 14.

²⁶⁴ Hastrup, 52.

²⁶⁵ For example, see Valerius Maximus 8.1 ; Festus, p. 454 ; Ovid, *Fasti* 3.417 ; Propertius 3.4.11.

²⁶⁶ The emphasis is my own. "Quomque Vesta quasi focum urbis...complexa sit, ei colendae *virgines* praesint, ut advigiletur facilius ad custodiam ignis, et sentient mulieres in naturam feminarum omnem *castitatem* pati. Cicero, *De Legibus* 2.29.

castitas was a type of performance of a *virgo*. It is, however, important to note that virginity was not requisite for a woman to display *castitas* considering that *matrons* were expected to behave accordingly as well. We do not know much about what this standard of behavior or performance entailed and most of the evidence is purely circumstantial, but we know enough to argue that *castitas* was an important component of the Roman understanding of virginity.

The manner in which Roman society appropriated women's bodies and virginity in particular demonstrate the close association between the Vestals, their sexual status and Roman society. Although her work is focused on early modern Europe, Mary Douglas provides a framework for understanding the relationship between sexuality and societies:

The group is likened to the human body; the orifices are to be carefully guarded to prevent unlawful intrusions... The most fundamental assumptions about the cosmos and man's place in nature are colored by the socially appropriate image of the human body... The idea of cherished bodily form vulnerable to attack from without tends to be transferred from one context to another. It can serve as a theory of misfortune by pinning blame and hidden enemies of society; it can serve as a guide to action, requiring enemies to be unmasked and disabled.²⁶⁷

Two examples provide an ancient Roman context for this relationship. In 509 BCE the last Etruscan king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, raped Lucretia, the wife of a prominent noble, who committed suicide after publicly testifying to the crime due to the shame of having been violated.²⁶⁸ Due to the distance of our sources from the event, this incident is likely fictional, but it explained the overthrow of the monarchy and the establishment of the republic in 509 BCE. The Romans appropriated the violated body of Lucretia in order to explain the existence of their state. *Castitas* was just as important in Julius Caesar's decision to divorce

²⁶⁷ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966), viii-ix.

²⁶⁸ Livy, 1.57-59 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4.66-70.

his second wife Pompeia during the aftermath of the *Bona Dea* scandal in 61 BCE.²⁶⁹

Although other similar incidents were recorded, Lucretia and Pompeia both demonstrate the extent to which women's virtue and their bodies, whether physiologically or sociologically through the idea of *castitas*, had enormous social potential. Joshel utilizes the example of Lucretia to argue that women's bodies became barometers of the Roman state.²⁷⁰ Roman society similarly appropriated the Vestals' bodies and virginity every day of the priesthood's existence and transformed the priesthood into more than a religious institution, but rather, a microcosm of Rome.²⁷¹ The remainder of this chapter is devoted to explaining exactly how the Vestals, their sexuality and their bodies functioned as this microcosm.

Accusations

There are twenty one extant incidents of individual Vestals accused of committing *crimen incesti* during the priesthood's existence. Our sources utilize a literary formula in their account of each incident, associating each accusation with a priestess violating her virginity. Dionysius of Halicarnassus provides a brief, albeit characteristic, example of this formula, "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."²⁷² While this formulaic description is strong evidence for the connection between a priestess's body, sexuality and Roman society, a

²⁶⁹ As we have already seen, Caesar is reputed to have explained his decision despite Clodius's acquittal as "my wife ought not to be so much as suspected." For a more detailed discussion of this event, see Plutarch, *Caesar* 10 ; Cassius Dio 37.45 ; Suetonius, *Julius* 6.2 ; Cicero, *ad Atticum* 1.13 ; Epstein, 231.

²⁷⁰ Amy Richlin comes to a similar conclusion in her examination of Roman medicinal practices. She mentions that "the female body itself is intrinsically powerful—both harmful and helpful." Richlin, "Pliny's Brassiere," 229 ; Joshel, 164.

²⁷¹ Parker, "Why were the Vestals Virgins?," 564.

²⁷² Dionysius of Halicarnassus 8.89 ; Other accusations follow suit. For other examples, see Dionysius of Halicarnassus 3.67 ; Livy 2.42, 4.44 and 8.15.

second look at these incidents and the historical context in which they occurred reveals that this formula is a rather gross generalization. The Romans often utilized the Vestals' bodies and sexual status as a symptom of larger and much more significant problems affecting their state and society. Accusations of *crimen incesti* seem to have occurred during moments of military disaster or social unrest that threatened to destroy Rome or tear the fabric of society apart from within. Other accusations occurred along with various plagues and diseases that targeted pregnant women or animals, which threatened Rome's reproductive capacity. During the later eras of the priesthood, accusations also reflected Vestal religious negligence and disorder, which may have been a conscious effort of the priesthood to acquire more agency and control of their bodies and sexuality in an attempt to dissolve the requirement of virginity. An analysis of the historical context in which accusations of *crimen incesti* occurred does not only demonstrate the relationship between the Vestals and society through their status as spectacles, but also measures the degree to which their body, sexuality and spectacular nature was associated with Roman society.

Military disaster was one of the most threatening catastrophes to Roman society during the fragile period of the early and middle republic and the Romans believed that an interruption in the *pax deorum* often accounted for these threats. Parker succinctly demonstrates the Roman understanding of such crises, "We are in trouble; therefore, the rites designed to protect us are not being performed properly; therefore, those entrusted with those rites have betrayed us; therefore, the way to restore safety is to sacrifice those who have betrayed us."²⁷³ The Vestals occasionally performed this role. The Vestal Postumia was accused of *crimen incesti* in 420 BCE "due to the suspicion of her most attractive appearance

²⁷³ Parker, "Why were the Vestals Virgins?," 579-80.

and her habits were freer than was customary for a virgin.”²⁷⁴ At first glance, the connection between Postumia’s accusation and her sexuality seems apparent. However, a year before her accusation, Postumia’s brother Marcus Postumius suffered a military defeat against one of Rome’s greatest Italian enemies, the city of Veii.²⁷⁵ The timing, less than a year, between the military defeat at Veii and Postumia’s accusation seem more than coincidental given their relationship to each other. Even if this incident was simply a coincidence, other evidence supports the argument that the Vestals’ sexuality and spectacular nature correlated to moments of military disaster.

The series of wars between Rome and Carthage during the third century BCE, referred to as the Punic Wars, was perhaps Rome’s single greatest military conflict. The Punic Wars were an important component of Roman identity considering that Rome’s eventual victory over Carthage resulted in Rome’s economic and political hegemony in the Mediterranean.²⁷⁶ Prior to their victory, however, the Carthaginian general Hannibal annihilated several Roman armies in Italy during the Battle of the Trebia (218 BCE), the Battle of Lake Trasimene in (217 BCE), and the Battle of Cannae in (216 BCE). The annihilation of a third Roman army in three years at the Battle of Cannae opened the door to Italy for Hannibal and the Romans actually would spend the next ten years besieged in their own territory. Livy’s reaction to the battle several hundred years later provides insight into Roman sentiment regarding the aftermath of Cannae:

Never without an enemy within the gates, had there been such terror and confusion in the city. To write of it is beyond my

²⁷⁴ “Eodem anno Postumia virgo Vestalis de incestu causam dixit crimine innoxia, ab suspicion propter cultum amoeniorem ingeniumque liberius quam virginem decet parum abhorrens.” Livy 4.44.

²⁷⁵ Livy 4.40 ; Robert Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy: Books 1-5* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 602.

²⁷⁶ Boren, 56-60 ; Scullard, *From the Gracchii to Nero*, 2-5.

strength, so I shall not attempt to describe what any words of mine would only make less than the truth....No other nation in the world could have suffered so tremendous a series of disaster, and not been overwhelmed. It was unparalleled in history...²⁷⁷

Military disaster of the proportion Livy describes could only have resulted from a disturbance in the *pax deorum*. Subsequently, the Vestals Opimia and Floronia were both simultaneously accused and convicted of *crimen incesti*.²⁷⁸ If one Vestal's transgression threatened Rome, then certainly two would have signified imminent and certain doom. Several years later in 207 BCE, while Hannibal was still menacing Italy, the Vestal Aemilia was likewise accused of *incestum*. Aemilia, however, was not convicted of the crime. Scholars argue that her acquittal may reflect the fact that Rome was not as threatened despite Hannibal's lingering presence in Italy.²⁷⁹ The imminent military disaster the Romans faced after Cannae and the conviction of Opimia and Flornia demonstrates the connection between the Vestals, their bodies and sexuality and the preservation of Roman society through the very fact that these two priestesses were accused and convicted of *crimen incesti* following the defeat. Aemilia provides a rare chance to measure the extent of this connection considering that she was accused during the same military conflict, but was ultimately not convicted since by 207 BCE the situation had drastically improved and stabilized. Military disaster threatened the very existence of Rome and impious Vestals, as public spectacles maintaining the *pax deorum*, functioned both as an explanation for the catastrophe and provided a means to restore the *pax deorum*. Despite momentary setbacks, Rome did not face military disasters that threatened its very existence following their successful completion

²⁷⁷ "Numquam salva urbe tantum pauoris tumultusque intra moenia Romana fuit. Itaque succumbam oneri neque adgrediar narrare quae edissertando minora uero faciam. Nulla profecto alia gens tanta mole cladis non obruta esset." Livy 22.53.

²⁷⁸ Livy mentions that one Vestal committed suicide and that the other was executed. Livy 4.44.

²⁷⁹ Bauman, 14 ; Wildfang 82 ; Livy 28.11 ; Valerius Maximus 1.1.

of the Punic Wars. Following the Punic Wars there are no extant accounts of Vestals being accused of the *crimen incesti* during periods of military crisis. However, other types of crises threatened the city and accusations of *crimen incesti* against the Vestals did not cease.

Plague and disease threatened ancient communities and the Vestals suffered from more than just their potential effects and symptoms. The Vestal Orbinia was accused of *crimen incesti* in 472 BCE during the same year that a horrible plague spread throughout the city. This particular plague seems to have primarily affected a certain demographic of Roman society:

And not long afterwards the disease known as the pestilence attacked the women, particularly such as were with child, and more of them died than ever before; for as they miscarried and brought forth dead children, they died together with their infants.²⁸⁰

Pregnant women clearly suffered the most during this outbreak. Mustakallio claims that Orbinia was a scapegoat for this particular plague, but falls short of explaining *why* Orbinia may have functioned in this role.²⁸¹ Another incident furthers our understanding of the motive behind Orbinia's accusation. Several centuries later, the Vestals Sextilia (274 BCE) and Caparronia (266 BCE), were likewise accused of *crimen incesti* during the spread of another contagion affecting primarily pregnant women and children.²⁸² This correlation between several incidents of *crimen incesti* and disease affecting women are not a coincidence. We have already seen that the Vestals transcended the rigid social divides of Roman society through their inability to be clearly associated with one specific demographic,

²⁸⁰ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 9.40.

²⁸¹ Mustakallio, 62.

²⁸² Scholars have posited that this was likely a similar affliction considering that these immolations occurred within a decade of each other. For Sextilia, see Paulus Orosius, *The Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 4.2 and 4.5 ; For Caparronia, see Orosius 4.5. Livy and Dionysius's accounts are not extant for this period. Wildfang, 84-5.

in this case women. Therefore the motive for accusing these priestesses lies outside of their sexual status as women. However, if these plagues threatened the reproductive capability of the Roman family, then it is conceivable that the disease was a threat to Roman society.²⁸³ Without a continual rejuvenation of soldiers, mothers and labor it would have been difficult to prevent the decay of Roman society. Therefore, these Vestals were accused of the *crimen incesti* during these moments because they reflected a legitimate threat to Roman security.

Interior crisis also threatened Roman society and various periods of social crisis resulted in the accusation of several priestesses. The first social crisis that Rome faced was the struggle between the plebeians and patricians, which started around 470 BCE with the first meeting of an unofficial plebeian assembly in order to elect its own magistrates and ended by the beginning of the Punic Wars in 264 BCE.²⁸⁴ The plebeians consisted of a lower social category best understood as a group without political agency, as opposed to a socio-economic class.²⁸⁵ The patricians were the elite category with political agency. Both could be wealthy or poor and even related to each other. The conflict between these two groups was characterized by the plebeians' attempt to negotiate agency in Roman politics for themselves alongside the patricians. During the duration of this struggle, the plebeians gradually acquired the right to elect their own protected magistrates, the tribune, who was invested with the power of *sacrosanctitas* and the authority to veto any action.²⁸⁶ By the end of this conflict, the Licinian-Sextian law granted plebeians almost complete equal political

²⁸³ Valerie Hope and Eiream Marshall, *Death and Disease in the Ancient City* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

²⁸⁴ For a discussion of this 'conflict of the orders', see Boren 23-37.

²⁸⁵ For a more complete analysis and definition of plebeians, see Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 52 ; Philip Matyszak, *Chronicle of the Roman Republic: The Rulers of Ancient Rome from Romulus to Augustus* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 54-5 ; Boren, 25-30.

²⁸⁶ Boren, 26-7 ; Scullard, *From the Gracii to Nero*, 26-9.

authority, including the right to serve as consuls in 367 BCE.²⁸⁷ At various times this struggle for equality threatened to tear Roman society apart and posed a risk to Rome's success.

Several Vestals were caught in the middle of this struggle and the accusations of *crimen incesti* leveled against them further demonstrate the extent to which the Vestals, their sexuality and body and spectacular nature corresponded to the ebb and flow of Rome's success as a city-state on the rise. Near the beginning of this struggle, in 483 BCE, the Vestal Oppia was accused of *crimen incesti* during an intense debate between plebeians and patricians on land reform that resulted in the execution of an ex-consul.²⁸⁸ This social conflict did not abate and in 337 BCE the Vestal Minucia was likewise accused during the same year that the plebeians finally obtained a substantial political office, that of consul and censor in 337 BCE.²⁸⁹ Scholars have argued that both Oppia and Minucia were in fact plebeian Vestals, although there is not sufficient evidence to support this claim, and that these examples of immolation reflect the social struggle.²⁹⁰ However, like the pregnant women affected by the plague above, the Vestals legally represented Rome, not a particular social group. The struggle certainly threatened to tear the fabric of Roman society apart, at least as the elite Romans comprehended it, and it was not coincidence that these two accusations occurred during flashpoints in this struggle. This is a trend recognizable in a period of Roman history for which our sources are more contemporary as well.

²⁸⁷ Boren, 28-9.

²⁸⁸ Livy mentions that following the completion of the war with the Hernici, the consul Spurius Cassius desired to donate half of the conquered territory to the Latins and the other half to the plebeians of Rome. This land included some which patricians had possessed before the land. Following his consulship, Cassius was tried, executed and his house destroyed, which upset the plebeians and initiated social unrest. Livy 2.42 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 8.89 ; Ogilvie, 349.

²⁸⁹ Livy 8.15 ; Ovid, *Fasti* 2.382 ; Orosius 3.9.

²⁹⁰ Bauman, 211 ; Ogilvie 349 ; Cornell, 47 n. 39.

Following the stabilization of the struggle between the plebeians and patricians and the Punic Wars, the first century BCE consisted of its own social crises and a very brief consideration of these developments is a necessary digression for our narrative since the Vestals were implicated in these conflicts as well. The social debate during this century was between two factions, the *populares* and the *optimates*. Both consisted of patricians and plebeians and both were organized along political lines.²⁹¹ The *populares* consisted of political leaders endeavoring to use the support of the masses to further their political goals, while the *optimates* attempted to rein conservative and elite support for their personal goals. Neither necessarily supported one group of people, whether common or elite, over the other, they were just political instruments for personal gain. The *optimates* achieved political dominance during the dictatorship of Lucius Cornelius Sulla (81-79 BCE) during which time the senate was reduced in number and authority and the legislative powers of the people was effectively curbed.²⁹² The authority of the *populares* reached its peak during the dictatorship of Julius Caesar, who utilized popular support in order to concentrate an enormous amount of power into the hands of the First Triumvirate (59-53 BCE), essentially a political coalition of Caesar, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus and Marcus Licinius Crassus.²⁹³ This coalition eventually broke down and resulted in the first civil war between Caesar and Pompey (49-45 BCE), which resulted in Caesar's victory and the consolidation of power into his own hands as dictator.²⁹⁴ Following Caesar's famous assassination in 44 BCE, his nephew and heir, Octavian, formed a Second Triumvirate (43-33 BCE) with Marcus Antonius and Marcus

²⁹¹ Boren, 96-8..

²⁹² George Baker, *Sulla the Fortunate: Roman General and Dictator* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), 254-80 ; Scullard, *From the Gracchii to Nero*, 80-3 ; Plutarch, *Sulla* 27-35.

²⁹³ Scullard, *From the Gracchii to Nero*, 112-23 ; Plutarch, *Caesar* 13-14, *Pompey* 47 and *Crassus* 14 ; Suetonius, *Iulius* 19.2 ; Cassius Dio 37.54-8.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.* ; Iulius Caesar, *De Bello Civili*, ed. A. G. Peskett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914) ; Matyszak, 207 ; Scullard, *From the Gracchii to Nero*, 134-40 ; Boren, 124-7.

Aemilius Lepidus.²⁹⁵ This political coalition also resulted in a second civil war between Octavian and Mark Anthony that eventually led to the establishment of the principate in 31 BCE.²⁹⁶ In addition, Rome also faced slave revolts and another conspiracy for power during this century. The conflict between these rival factions resulted in two failed conspiracies to overthrow the republic and two civil wars that eventually resulted in its dissolution and the establishment of the principate.

The Vestals were implicated throughout the various social conflicts of the first century BCE. We have already observed that the priesthood held some of the important documents that determined the development of this conflict, such as the wills of Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony and Augustus and the documents guaranteeing the Second Triumvirate.²⁹⁷ The priesthood also protected Julius Caesar from the dictator Sulla as well. However, several priestesses were also accused of *crimen incesti* during this turbulent era. The Vestal Fabia was accused of having a sexual relationship with the notorious conspirator Catiline in 73 BCE.²⁹⁸ Catiline played a notorious role during the dictatorship of Sulla, decapitating his brother-in-law's head and carrying it throughout the city, and he also led a conspiracy to overthrow the republic in 62 BCE, which failed and resulted in his demise due, in part, to the most famous speech of Marcus Tullius Cicero's career.²⁹⁹ Fabia was Cicero's sister-in-law and her accusation subsequently reflects the dichotomy between Cicero's denunciation of Catiline's plot, which essentially made Cicero a savior of the republic, and the plot itself. In other words, Fabia's acquittal and Catiline's demise represents the triumph

²⁹⁵ Matyszak, 228-9; Boren, 131-6; Scullard, *From the Gracchii to Nero*, 154-71; Suetonius, *Augustus* 15-25.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁷ See p. 74-6.

²⁹⁸ Fabia was acquitted due to an excellent legal defense by Cato Minor. Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 19; Sallust, *In Catilinam* 15.1; For a modern discussion of this event, see Lewis, "Catilina and the Vestal," 141-9.

²⁹⁹ Anthony Everitt, *Cicero* (New York: Random House, 2003), 87-113; Matyszak, 214; Sallust 50-60; Cicero, *In Catilinam*, in *The Speeches*, trans. N. H. Watts (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931); Lewis, 141-9.

of the republic over chaos and is a great example of how a Vestal's body and sexuality functioned as a barometer of the state.

Fabia's contemporary, Licinia, was also accused and acquitted of *crimen incesti* around the same time.³⁰⁰ Licinia was accused of having a suspicious relationship with the future triumvir Lucius Lincinius Crassus, the priestess's cousin, although it turned out that the two were simply engaged in a real estate deal at the time. It is tempting to see the connection between these Vestals and their natal family members in these accusations and scholars have not resisted the temptation of directly associating the two accusations to the later events of their relatives' careers.³⁰¹ This factional quarrel did inevitably result in the dismemberment of Roman society as the republic gave way to the principate established by Julius Caesar's heir, Augustus in 31 BCE. Considering that each Vestal's relative was a leader on opposing sides of this quarrel suggests that these priestesses were accused of *crimen incesti* based on the threat that each faction posed to Rome's inevitable restructuring and was not on account of their previous familial relationships. After the military disasters, reproductive threats and social crises abated during the stability of the early principate, Vestals were still being accused of *crimen incesti* however.

Throughout the principate Vestals were accused of *crimen incesti* on a more collective level and this may reflect the priesthood's attempt to negotiate agency for themselves and acquire some measure of control over the sexuality. Although several emperors are alleged to have raped Vestals, Nero was accused of raping Rubria in 54 and Elagabalus married the chief Vestal Aquilia Severa in 218, these accounts seem to reflect our

³⁰⁰ Licinia was ultimately exonerated due to the testimony of Crassus, who described their meeting as a business affair. Plutarch, *Crassus* 1.

³⁰¹ This is one of Wildfang's weaker arguments in her important work. Wildfang, 96-7.

sources' attempt to defame unpopular emperors rather than reconstruct historical events.³⁰²

The Vestals and their sexuality were so important to Roman identity that such a transgression by an emperor could only demonstrate how wicked a figure he was to Roman society.

During the reign of Domitian (81-96) multiple priestesses were accused of *crimen incesti*.

The Vestals Varronilla and the Oculatae sisters were accused and convicted of transgressions made during the reigns of Domitian's predecessors, Vespasian (69-79) and Titus (79-81).

Suetonius mentions that Vespasian and Titus explicitly ignored these Vestals' sexual activity,

"the *incestum* of the Vestal Virgins, overlooked also by his father and brother, [Domitian] punished variously and severely."³⁰³ Domitian also retried the chief Vestal Cornelia, who

had originally been acquitted, and convicted her of *crimen incesti*.³⁰⁴ These accusations

reflected an attempt by the Vestals to throw off the requirement of chastity. Bauman argues

that the Vestals attempted to claim control of their own sexuality as early as 114 BCE, when

three Vestals were accused of *crimen incesti* for actively participating in incest with their

brothers and group sex.³⁰⁵ Marcia, Aemilia and Licinia were ultimately acquitted, but

considering that this event seems to have occurred independently of any significant

catastrophe, Bauman's explanation becomes tantalizing for gender scholars seeking examples

of women negotiating their own sexuality and agency in society. Pomeroy, on the other

hand, argues that these accusations reflect Domitian's religious reforms designed to

ameliorate the moral and religious decay of the Roman people that had developed since the

³⁰² Suetonius, *Nero* 28 ; *Historia Augusta, Elagabalus* 6-7.

³⁰³ "...incesta Vestalium virginum, a patre quoque suo et fratre neglecta, varie ac severe coercuit, priora capitali supplicio, posteriora more veteri." Suetonius, *Domitian* 8.3.

³⁰⁴ Pliny the Younger admitted that Cornelia may have been innocent due to her declaration, "Caesar believes me to be unchaste, he who has conquered and triumphed through [my] sacred acts." "Me Caesar incestam putat, qua sacra faciente vicit triumphavit!" Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 4.11 ; Suetonius, 8.5.

³⁰⁵ Cassius Dio 87.1 ; Bauman, 57 ; Wildfang, 94 and 104-5.

death of Augustus in 14.³⁰⁶ However, it is possible to bridge both these explanations. The Vestal's neglecting their vow of chastity in an effort to assert their own sexual agency certainly would have reflected decay in religious moral behavior to a Roman emperor, especially one determined to restore it.

The Vestals were accused of *crimen incesti* for a variety of reasons that go beyond what our sources explicitly mention. While our sources attributed these accusations towards improper behavior or appearance, sexual activity or the simple extinguishing of the flame, these rare incidents reflect more significant threats to Rome. Military disasters posed a very real threat to Rome during the early and middle republic. Plagues affecting Rome's reproductive capability to support its armies and labor force would have been a very serious concern. Various social crises developed right along with the strength of Rome and threatened to tear it apart from the inside even while its armies were successful in the field. During the first century BCE, this finally happened and the oligarchic republic was replaced with the monarchic principate. The Vestals' bodies and sexuality provided a means through which this process could be realized. The historical contexts surrounding the accusations of *crimen incesti* suggests that the Vestals and their status as public spectacles were synonymous with the Roman's understanding of the success and failures of their society.

Judicial Process

The judicial process of convicting a Vestal accused of *crimen incesti* has been relatively neglected despite the significant amount of available evidence for the proceedings and its ramifications on our understanding of the priesthood and its connection to Roman

³⁰⁶ Pomeroy, 212.

society. The Vestals were the only Roman religious officials subject to such a rigorous trial at the slightest sign of wrong doing. Michel Foucault provides a framework in which to comprehend the significance of this unique process in his famous work *Discipline and Punish*, “The tortured body is first inscribed in a legal ceremonial that must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime.”³⁰⁷ In some respects, Foucault’s description resembles a spectacle in its own right. The tortured body is deployed in an effort to create a collective emotion, which the trial itself confirms. In the case of the Vestals, the sexualized body of an accused priestess must be confirmed and its threat to society corroborated in order to not only produce the truth of the crime, but to designate her as an expiatory object that could be deployed in order to balance the *pax deorum*. In other words, the judicial process of a Vestal accused of *crimen incesti* enabled Roman society to appropriate her body and sexuality in a negative spectacle, one designed to atone for a crime. An examination of the various judges of an accusation of *crimen incesti*, the evidence utilized in this process and a priestess’s ability to defend herself reveals that the judiciary process was an elaborate religious and secular attempt to invoke her status as a spectacle in order to ameliorate the crisis that prompted her accusation.³⁰⁸

The official conducting a trial of *crimen incesti* changed over time, but each category of judges were institutions of contemporary authority and subsequently demonstrate the extent to which a Vestal’s sexual transgression threatened Roman society. During the regal period, our sources suggest that the Etruscan kings personally governed the process.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus credits the king Tarquinius Priscus with establishing the process

³⁰⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 35.

³⁰⁸ For a conversation of the trial as both a religious and secular proceeding, see Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, 207-8 ; Staples, 133-4 ; Parker, “Why were the Vestals Virgins?,” 584-5.

and the execution ritual at his own discretion, “[Tarquinius Priscus] seems to have first invented the punishment which the Pontifices inflict on those Vestals who do not preserve their chastity, motivated either by his own views, or as some believe, following a dream.”³⁰⁹

The Etruscan kings were synonymous with Roman identity, or at least our sources accepted that they were. Therefore, the Etruscan kings logically had to be the institution of authority to hear a case of *crimen incesti*. A Vestal’s transgression threatened not only Rome, but their authority to rule. During the regal period, the Etruscan kings were the symbols of Rome and Roman society and their authority to judge accused priestesses at their own discretion suggests the extent to which the Vestals symbolized Roman society. This connection was strong enough to persist after the Etruscan kings faded into history in 509 BCE.

From the expulsion of the Etruscan kings until the establishment of the principate in the first century BCE, the republic found a way to ensure that the connection between the Vestals and Roman society was preserved in the judicial process. A religious board, the college of pontiffs, was created to oversee religious affairs and consisted of all the lesser pontiffs, which numbered between three and sixteen throughout Rome’s history, all twelve *flamines*, the chief priests of Rome’s most important priesthoods, the *rex sacrorum*, the heir to the Etruscan kings’ religious authority and perhaps even the Vestals themselves were incorporated into this panel by the first century BCE.³¹⁰ A panel of such distinction would have had a tremendous power to mark a Vestal in the eyes of the Roman public, especially

³⁰⁹ Dionysius of Halicarnassus 3.67.

³¹⁰ A variety of sources discuss the composition of the college and due to the constant flux of Roman religion, it is difficult to precisely pin down the exact composition at any particular moment. Therefore, scholars have generally followed this formula in the absence of a significant study examining this institution. Rose suggests that the Vestals assume this religious discretionary authority after the chaos of the *Bona Dea* scandal in 63 BCE, in which they decided the necessary actions to expiate the transgression. See, Beard, “Priesthood in the Roman Republic,” 36-8 ;Ken Dowden, *Religion and the Romans* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992), 18 ; Lacey, 124-7 ; Lewis, 142 ; Rose, 83.

within the context of the *pax deorum*. This comprehensive board reflected every religious institution and seems to have functioned as an advisory board to the most important political institution, the senate, “The pontiffs represented a repository of religious knowledge on which the senate could call; they were consulted on matters that fell within senatorial control but were consulted when specialist religious advice was required.”³¹¹ The college of pontiffs judged accused Vestals on behalf of the senate and the two institutions together ensured that the trial proceeded and that its decision was implemented on behalf of Roman society. While this large and cumbersome panel fulfilled this function during the republic, acts of *crimen incesti* were judged by means of another institution following the first century.

Following the establishment of the principate under Augustus during the first century BCE, the Roman emperor became synonymous with Roman society and the association of the priesthood with the imperial family extended to the judiciary process of an accused Vestal as well. The relationship between the Vestals and the imperial family became quite close as emperors began granting the unique privileges of the Vestals to female members of their own household and extending the religious responsibilities of the priesthood to the imperial cult.³¹² Augustus did not only connect his personal palace to the *aedes Vestae*, a blatant demonstration of the symbolism between the emperor and the priesthood, but also required the Vestals to participate in religious ceremonies at the *ara pacis*, an altar of peace he commissioned after the end of the second civil war.³¹³ The emperors constantly utilized the Vestal symbol in an effort to create a similar relationship between themselves and Rome

³¹¹ Beard, “Priesthood in the Roman Republic,” 38.

³¹² The emperors Tiberius (14-37), Caligula (37-41) and Claudius (41-54) each granted such privileges to various female members of their family. Tacitus, *Annales* 4.16 ; Wildfang 102-3.

³¹³ Beard et. al., *Religions of Rome*, 191.

that the Vestals enjoyed, their priesthood and spectacular nature functioning as a barometer of social health.

One of the many methods in which they accomplished this task was their ability to judge accused Vestals. Our best evidence for the authority of the emperors to judge accused Vestals is the role of Domitian during the first century trials of Varronilla, the Oculatae sisters and the chief Vestal Cornelia. Several circumstances of these trials demonstrate the officiating authority of the emperor during the principate. First of all, Domitian seemed to have retroactively prosecuted these priestesses, who served during the reigns of Titus and Vespasian.³¹⁴ The emperor likewise permitted Varronilla and the Oculatae sisters to select their own method of execution instead compelling them to endure of the ritual practice described below.³¹⁵ Domitian's ability to break with prescribed tradition highlights the extraordinary authority of the emperor during these proceedings. The emperors clearly had the authority to judge Vestals at their own discretion, although it is likely that at least the *pontifex maximus*, if not the entire college of pontiffs, continued to play at least a representative role in the process.³¹⁶ Whether the Etruscan kings, the college of pontiffs, or the emperors evaluated a Vestal's guilt during different moments of Roman history, it is clear that this authority was delegated to the most important figures and institutions of Roman society.

The evidence against accused priestesses was compiled from a limited number of individuals and the methods for obtaining this evidence routinely involved the use of torture.

³¹⁴ Suetonius, *Domitian* 8.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*; Wildfang, 104-5.

³¹⁶ A letter of Pliny the Younger mentions that the *pontifex maximus* participated in the trial and execution of the chief Vestal Cornelia. Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 4.11.

Foucault argues that torture itself is a ritual, “it must mark the victim or...brand the victim with infamy.”³¹⁷ Subsequently torture and interrogation are an important component of transforming a positive spectacle into a negative spectacle through the branding of the victim, which makes them identifiable to the public and invokes a collective experience. This was also a practice observable in Roman public executions in which the condemned would undergo a variety of different tortures before actually being killed.³¹⁸ This certainly seems to have been the case with the judicial proceedings against the Vestals. An accused priestess’s slaves were tortured in order to procure evidence against their owner, even if a particular individual denounced the transgression of his or her owner.³¹⁹ The importance of slave testimony during a trial of *crimen incesti* is best demonstrated by Livy, who mentions that immediately following an accusation, the *pontifex maximus* “ordered [her] to abstain from the sacred [rites] and to keep her slaves in her authority.”³²⁰ Emancipated slaves or slaves who had been sold to another owner were exempt from such examinations.³²¹ The torture of these slaves and the evidence they provided was not necessarily designed to brand or mark the slave as infamous, but rather to mark their owners, the accused Vestal.

The tortuous interrogation of a Vestal, however, was designed to specifically mark her body as evidence of the crime and signaled her transformation from a positive spectacle into an expiatory spectacle, albeit with the same function of unifying society and instilling a collective identity. It is a negative and expiatory spectacle in the sense that the symbolism of

³¹⁷ Foucault, 33-4.

³¹⁸ Kyle, 7-10 and 34-5 ; Dodge, 50.

³¹⁹ For examples of Vestals being denounced by various slaves, see Livy 7.15 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.69 and 9.40.

³²⁰ “Eo anno Minucia Vestalis suspecta primo propter mundio rem iusto cultum, insimulata deinde apud pontifices ab indice servo, cum decreto erorum iussa esset abstinere faliamque in potestate habere...” Livy 7.15.

³²¹ Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), 165-70.

the event and its function are an antithesis to the ideal. Dionysius mentions that in 216 BCE, the pontiffs condemned the Vestal Opimia after “having by tortures and other proofs found that the information was true.”³²² While all of our extant accounts of Vestals committing *crimen incesti* do not specifically mention that the Vestals were tortured during the course of the investigation, there is evidence that they were treated similarly for lesser transgressions. Plutarch describes the punishment of Vestals for minor offenses, “If these Vestals commit any minor fault, they are punishable by the high priest only, who scourged the offender, sometimes with her clothes off, in a dark place, with a curtain drawn between.”³²³ At least one Vestal was reprimanded in this fashion after permitting the sacred flame to be extinguished due to negligence.³²⁴ The Vestals seem to never have been subject to any type of medical determination in order to determine their guilt for a similar reason. If such an invasive examination would have been performed or if the curtain was not placed between the *pontifex maximus* and the priestess, then the violation and exposure of the priestess’s body would have implicated her through its intrusive nature.³²⁵ A priestess’s body was appropriated and deployed through this physical punishment and it reflects her transgression. In other words, this torture was society’s attempt to regain control of her body and sexuality in order to realign it with Rome’s needs.

The judicial process culminated in a trial and our sources provide two methods through which a Vestal might demonstrate her innocence and earn an acquittal. First of all, numerous cases suggest that the Vestals themselves participated in their own legal defense

³²² Dionysius of Halicarnassus 8.89 ; Livy 22.55.

³²³ Plutarch, *Numa* 10

³²⁴ Valerius Maximus 1.1.6 ; Propertius 4.11.53-4 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.68.

³²⁵ Parker, “Why were the Vestals Virgins,” 587.

and even in the defense of others.³²⁶ Gellius specifically mentions this right, “that Taracia was a Vestal Virgin, whom this same law raised above the people. She received many honors from this law, including the right of giving evidence, and she alone of all women received this [right].”³²⁷ In fact, the Vestals had to be able to participate in their own religious legal proceedings. Their legal status, as essentially emancipated women, required that they manage their own affairs, whether property disputes or an accusation of *crimen incesti*, because they were not subject to anyone’s *potestas* or tutelage like all other elite women in Roman society. Their legal testimony was also conducted in a very public setting, which Tacitus makes clear through his statement that “it was customary for the Vestals to be heard in the forum when testifying.”³²⁸ The setting of the trial is just as significant as the Vestal’s participation. Cicero succinctly demonstrates the significance of this location, “I should have the *curia*, the gazing forum, the immortal sky [gods] in my view and the Roman people and senate would remember the kindness of King Deiotarus, it would be impossible for my speech to falter.”³²⁹ Cicero infers that the venue and audience were just as important as the defendant and the composition of the judges evaluating the case. Cicero’s sister-in-law, the Vestal Fabia, benefitted from such a public defense in 73 BCE considering that she

³²⁶ For some of the examples, see Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 20 ; Gellius 7.7 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 9.40 ; Plutarch, *Crassus* 1 ; Orosius 6.3 ; Tacitus, *Annales* 2.34 ; For the best modern discussion of individual Vestals participating in their legal defense, see Lewis’s work about the Vestals Fabia and Licinia in 63 BCE, Lewis, 141-9 ; Pomeroy, 213 ; Epstein, 232.

³²⁷ “Et Taraciam quidem virginem Vestae fuisse lex Horatia testis est, quae super ea ad populum lata. Qua lege ei plurimi honores fiunt, inter quos ius quoque testimonii dicendi tribuitur testabilisque uns omnium feminarum ut sit datur.” Gellius 7.7.

³²⁸ “...missus est praetor qui domi interrogaret, cum virgines Vestales in foro et iudicio audiri, quotiens testimonium dicerent, vetus mos fuerit.” Tacitus, *Annales* 2.34 ; Other sources indicate that the Vestals were permitted to participate in their own defense or other court cases heard in the forum. Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.69 ; Gellius 7.7.

³²⁹ “Spectarem curiam, intuerer forum, caelum immortalium et populi Romani et senates beneficia in regem Deiotarum recorderer, nullo modo mihi deesse posset oratio.” Cicero, *Pro Rege Deiotaro*, in *Cicero the Speeches*, ed. N. H. Watts (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1931), 2.

was defended in such a public setting by one of Rome's leading lawyers at the time.³³⁰ The common observers interested in the case also participated in the legal proceedings of accused Vestals and contributes to the degree to which the trial reflects the connection between the Vestals and society.

If an accused priestess was unable to secure a legal acquittal for herself, she had the option of pursuing a performative one and several Vestals are believed to have succeeded. Scholars describing accounts of Vestals performing miracles in order to obtain an acquittal tend to understand each incident through the divine intercession of Vesta, who sought to protect an innocent and faithful priestess.³³¹ The notion of divine intervention makes the accused Vestal almost a passive party in her own acquittal, which contradicts her potentially very active legal defense. For example, immediately following her conviction in 230 BCE, the Vestal Tuccia was acquitted in such a fashion:

And she, with knowledge of her innocence, sought to look for hope of safety in a bold thought. Having grabbed a sieve, she said, "Vesta, if I have always conducted your sacred rites with chaste hands, bring about that I shall draw up and carry water from the Tiber to your temple with this [sieve]." The things of the natural world yielded to the bold and rash vow of the priestess.³³²

³³⁰ Our sources are divided on whether Marcus Piso, Quintius Lutatius Catulus or Marcus Portius Cato defended Fabia. All three, however, were acclaimed Roman statesmen and prestigious lawyers. See Asconius, *Toga Candida* 70, 28-31 ; Orosius 6.3.1 ; Plutarch, *Cato Minor* 19.3 ; Gaius Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, ed. John Carew Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), 15.1.

³³¹ Wildfang, 85-6 ; Richlin, "Carrying Water in a Sieve," 357.

³³² "Quae conscientia certa sinceritatis suae spem salutis ancipiti argumento ausa petere est: arrepto enim cribro 'Vesta' inquit, 'si sacris tuis castas semper admoui manus, effice ut hoc hauriam e Tiberi aquam et in aedem tuam perferam.' Audaciter et temere iactis uotis sacerdotis rerum ipsa natura cessit." Valerius Maximus 8.1 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.69 ; Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historiae* 28.12 ; Augustine, *City of God* 10.16 ; For a modern discussion of this incident, see Amy Richlin, "Carrying Water in a Sieve: Class and the Body in Roman Women's Religion," in *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today*, ed. Karen L. King (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 357 ; Hans-Friedrich Mueller, *Roman Religion in Valerius Maximus* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 50-2.

The sieve was supposedly the same one with which the Vestals obtained water from the spring near the Caelian hill. Two decades later, in 204 BCE, the Vestal Claudia similarly demonstrated her innocence through her effort to release a ship ferrying the Great Mother, which was being imported to Rome, from the bottom of the Tiber:

She took off her sash and threw it on the prow of the ship with a prayer that, if she were still an innocent virgin, the ship would respond to her. When the ship with the sash tied to it followed her without hindrance, the Romans were full of awe at this manifestation of the goddess and the holiness of the maiden.³³³

The significant point is that these miracles were performed in front of a public audience. Certainly, the streets of Rome and the forum through which Tuccia carried her sieve and the banks of the Tiber from which Claudia miraculously dragged a grounded ship would have been full of observers—common ordinary citizens going about their daily lives. Whether by Vesta’s intervention or not, the accused priestess chose the task and environment of their actions. More importantly, they seemed to have selected a very public venue. Even in the case of Aemilia, who rekindled the sacred flame with a piece of her garment after a priestess was accused of *crimen incesti*, the *pontifex maximus* witnessed the action and was able to report it to the public.³³⁴ These incidents demonstrate that the Vestals had the active ability to perform their innocence and subsequently their sexual and moral status.

Vesta herself did not always play a role in priestesses performing their innocence and this further suggests the extent to which Vestals were able to actively perform their sexual and moral status. During the reign of Domitian, the chief Vestal Cornelia was acquitted and subsequently retried along with three other priestesses. Cornelia was condemned during her

³³³ Herodian 1.11 ; Ovid, *Fasti* 4.291-344 ; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 2 ; Augustine, *City of God* 10.16 ; For a modern discussion of this incident, see Fantham, 223 ; Takacs, 18.

³³⁴ For a previous discussion of this priestess, see 61-2.

second trial. However, the priestess managed to convince Pliny the Younger, a witness to her live burial, of her innocence:

The Pontifices were immediately sent to see to her death and burial. She raising her hands now to Vesta, now to the other gods, said many things, but this especially: ‘Caesar thinks that I am impure, I who has performed so many rites, by which he has conquered and triumphed!’ ... She repeated this until she was led away to punishment. Whether she was innocent or not, I do not know, but she certainly acted innocent. For even when she was sent down into the underground room and her *stola* caught as she descended, she turned and collected herself, and when the executioner would have given her a hand, she refused.³³⁵

Cornelia did pray to Vesta, but unlike the incidents described above, the priestess convinced Pliny the Younger of her innocence through her own words and actions. Her statement that she was innocent because the emperor, by now a symbol of Roman society, had nothing but success during her tenure does not only suggest the relationship between the priesthood, the emperor and Roman society, but is also indicative of her conscious attempt to earn an acquittal. Even more significantly, her refusal of the executioner’s hand was more than an act of stubbornness, but a performance of her innocence. Cornelia’s words and actions were not enough to convince Domitian at the last moment, but they convinced Pliny and likely author witnesses as well and suggest that the Vestals played an active performative role in their legal defense.

The procedure of acquiring evidence, evaluating that evidence and formulating a defense against an accusation of *crimen incesti* further reveals the close connection between

³³⁵ “Missi statim pontifices qui defodiendam necandamque curarent. Illa nunc ad Vestam, nunc ad ceteros deos manus tendens, multa sed hoc frequentissime clamitabat: ‘Me Caesar incestam putat, qua sacra faciente vicit triumphavit!’...Dixit donec ad supplicium, nescio an innocens, certe tamquam innocens ducta est. Quin etiam cum in illud subterraneum demitteretur, haesissetque descendenti stola, vertit se ac recollegit, cumque ei manum carnifex daret, aversata est...” Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 4.11.

the Vestals and Roman society. The entire process was designed to simultaneously mark an accused priestess as unfit to function as a public spectacle and to designate her as a spectacle that needed to be expiated in order to augment the consequences of her transgression. The individuals who judged an accused priestess throughout Roman history, whether the Etruscan kings, the college of pontiffs on behalf of the senate, or the emperor himself, each were the focus of Roman society in their respective moments. The torture of her slaves and the interrogation of the priestess herself not only provided evidence against an accused priestess, but also marked the priestess and transferred her status as a public spectacle to an expiatory spectacle. In other words, it provided society with a means to restore the *pax deorum* and end any affliction Rome may have been enduring at that moment. The legal and miraculous defenses that the Vestals conducted in order to defend themselves further implicated society into this formula through the common observers going about their daily business in the bustling centers of the city. If a priestess was unable to gain an acquittal and regain her status as a public spectacle, the Romans developed another avenue through which this aim could be accomplished.

Execution

The execution of a Vestal convicted of *crimen incesti* was unlike any other occasion in Roman history. The elaborate ritual was so unique and rare that it only occurred on less than two dozen occasions in the almost one thousand years of the priesthood's existence. The condemned Vestal was placed on a bier and carried down the *via Sacria* in a melancholy procession that many citizens, including the Vestal's family, attended. Once the procession arrived near the Colline gate, the priestess was ceremoniously conducted inside an already prepared tomb and the entrance was sealed behind her. This ritual qualifies as a spectacle in

its own right considering the collective audience and its significance to Roman identity, but it also is the pinnacle of the Vestals' status as spectacles and further demonstrates how close the priesthood, its spectacular nature and Roman society were. The convicted priestess, whose positive spectacular status was transformed into a negative and expiatory one through the judicial process, was interred in the city and she regained her former status upon her live burial. The location of the tomb, the ritual itself and the items placed inside the chamber along with the condemned priestess demonstrate that the entire ritual fueled and was fueled by the intimate relationship between the Vestals, their spectacular nature and Roman society.

The live interment of a condemned priestess within the city walls suggests that even in death the Vestal regained her positive status and function as a spectacle. Plutarch provides the most exhaustive and complete description of this entire ritual and he particularly describes the nature of the tomb itself: "...but she who has broken her vow is buried alive near the gate called Collina, where a little mound of earth stands, inside the city, reaching some little distance, called in Latin *agger*; under it a narrow room is constructed, to which a descent is made by stairs..."³³⁶ The nature of this tomb is unique not only because a living person was sealed inside, but also because its location was exceptional. The Twelve Tables, the foundation of the Roman legal code established in 450 BCE, explicitly prohibited the interment of a corpse within the *pomerium*, the city's religious boundary believed to have been established by Romulus himself.³³⁷ In fact, most deceased elite Romans were either cremated or buried in various necropoleis extending from the city on either side of the roads

³³⁶ Other sources support Plutarch's description of the tomb and the ritual, but their descriptions are fragmentary and are not as coherent as Plutarch. Plutarch, *Numa* 10 ; Ovid, *Fasti* 6.435-460 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.67.

³³⁷ Bodel, 262 ; Toynbee, 40-3.

leading to Rome, while the poor were often buried *en masse* in large pits.³³⁸ There is evidence, in the form of a tomb outside of Trivoli, that Vestals who successfully completed their service to the priesthood were also buried in tombs outside the *pomerium*.³³⁹ Only condemned Vestals proved to be the exception to this rule.

There are several equally plausible motives explaining the interment of a condemned priestess within the *pomerium* and they demonstrate the strong affiliation of the Vestals with Roman society. Several sources explain that condemned priestesses were buried within the *pomerium* because Vesta was an earth goddess, and, more specifically, a Roman earth goddess.³⁴⁰ The sacred ground that the priestess was charged to protect and had contaminated through her transgression was Vesta's Rome and entombing her within its *pomerium* was one method of ameliorating this contamination. This pattern fits with the Roman understanding of religion in general. For example, wine offerings intended for the gods of the underworld were often emptied onto the ground in the belief that the earth would absorb the liquid and deliver it to the appropriate recipient, while other offerings were burnt in the belief that the smoke carried the sacrifice to the appropriate recipients in the heavens.³⁴¹ This also explains why the family of a candidate for the priesthood had to own a residence in Italy.³⁴² Vesta was an earth goddess, an inherently Roman earth goddess and therefore the sacrifice and compelled atonement of one of her priestess had to be made in the

³³⁸ Kyle, 159-71.

³³⁹ G. H. Hallam, "A Note on the Monument and Tomb of a Vestal Virgin at Tivoli," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 20 (1930) : 14-5.

³⁴⁰ Pliny the Elder furthers this connection between Vesta and the *pomerium* through his statement that the Vestals had the authority or religious power to prevent fugitives or runaway slaves from fleeing the city. "We trust that today Vestals can restrain fugitive slaves in place with a prayer as long as they have not cleared the city." "Vestales nostras hodie credimus nondum egressa urbe mancipia fugitive retinere in loco precatone..." Ovid, *Fasti* 6.435-60 ; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.66 ; St. Augustine, *City of God* 7.16 ; Festus, p. 230 ; Plutarch, *Numa* 11 ; Prowse, 178.

³⁴¹ Wildfang, 58-9.

³⁴² See p. 45.

earth within the *pomerium* that she offended. A Vestal's live interment represents the ultimate social appropriation of her body.

Convicted Vestals were ceremoniously buried in the city in a perpetual effort to deploy their status as public spectacles guaranteeing Rome's security. Joshel, through her conceptualization of women and their chastity as appropriated spaces, provides us with a framework for understanding the exiated Vestal's burial in the city as their body represented, "the space of the home, a boundary and a buffer zone."³⁴³ Once sealed in her tomb near the Colline gate, the threat that the priestess posed to society was removed and she regained her chastity and therefore her status as a public spectacle. Parker describes this relationship as *devotio*, in which "the presence of the body helped to guard the city."³⁴⁴ While the priesthood ensured Rome's success through the performance of their daily rituals and the preservation of their chastity, unchaste Vestals, upon their interment within the *pomerium*, regained this religious function and held it in perpetuity.

Condemned Vestals may also have been exempt from the practice of burying the dead outside of the *pomerium* because the Romans did not believe that they actually died at all. Scholars have seized on some the similarities between the interment of a condemned Vestal and a Roman funeral in order to make the claim that the priestess the ritual reflects her death.³⁴⁵ For example, the Vestals seem to have been dressed in funeral clothing, the procession to the tomb almost mirrors a Roman funeral and Pliny the Younger's mentioning of a *carnifex*, or executioner, supports such a comparison.³⁴⁶ Others have even associated the

³⁴³ Joshel, 174.

³⁴⁴ Parker, "Why were the Vestals Virgins," 587.

³⁴⁵ E. T. M., 318 ; Bailey, 48 ; Staples, 131-3.

³⁴⁶ Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 4.11.

incident with an ordeal, that if the priestess was in fact innocent then divine intervention would preserve her life.³⁴⁷ However, while aspects of the ritual seem to incorporate funerary images, just as the *captio* ceremony partially reflected a Roman *cum manu* wedding, there are some deviations that suggest a more polysemic connection. Plutarch's detailed description of the procession and interment specifically mentions some unique deviations from a Roman funeral:

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... When they come to the place of execution, the officers loose the cords, and then the high priest, 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 priests;* 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 from being distinguished from the rest of the mound.*³⁴⁸

Plutarch mentions that the litter in which the priestess was carried to her tomb is covered and that the priestess herself is restrained and muffled in order to prevent the audience from seeing or hearing her. The priests and the audience turn their back to the priestess as she enters the chamber in order to witnessing her potential physiological death. Finally, the entrance to her tomb is filled in and made indistinguishable from the rest of the earth around it. Staples argues that these peculiar features of the ritual imply a “fiction of not killing” the priestess and rather that the Vestal seemingly executes herself.³⁴⁹ However, these features

³⁴⁷ Staples makes this argument and compares the interment of a Vestal with the Roman practice of sewing up parricides into a sack with a variety of animals and being tossed into the Tiber or of sending hermaphrodites out to sea on a raft. Staples, 151 ; Beard, et. al. *Religions of Rome*, 81.

³⁴⁸ The emphasis is my own. Plutarch, *Numa* 10.

³⁴⁹ Staples, 87-8.

also stand in opposition to a Roman funeral, in which the deceased are an exposition, the audience watches the cremation or entombment and a marker of some sort is placed in order to distinguish it from the rest of the earth around it.³⁵⁰ In other words, aspects of this ceremony suggest that the condemned priestess was not killed at all, at least symbolically.

A convicted priestess was not simply executed and buried alive in a plain shallow grave, but she voluntarily entered an elaborate vaulted room and the items sealed inside with the Vestal enabled her to perform her religious functions after she had regained her status through her expiation. Plutarch provides the most detailed description of the items placed inside the tomb, “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...”³⁵¹ The generally accepted theory about these objects is that they prevented the Romans from being culpable for executing one of Vesta’s priestesses, which also supports Staples “fiction of not killing” argument.³⁵² If the priestess was actually innocent, this line of thought runs, then the Romans believed that Vesta herself would somehow intervene in a fashion similar to Tuccia or Claudia in order to spare her priestess. If the purpose of these items, however, was to simply preserve the Vestal’s life in order to free society from the potential divine guilt of executing her, then why was such an unusual variety of items included? Water and food would have been sufficient for survival.

The various items enclosed with the Vestal inside of the chamber reflects the various duties and rituals in which she participated as a priestess and enabled her to perpetually perform her sacred duties on behalf of the Roman collective. Wildfang comes closest to this

³⁵⁰ Bodel, 259 ; Toynbee, 43-5.

³⁵¹ Plutarch, *Numa* 10.

³⁵² Mustakallio, 65.

argument in her assertion that the items reflected the purifactory nature of the priesthood, but this significance can be made more explicit.³⁵³ Elaborating on this idea, we can connect each item to the daily tasks and rituals that a Vestal was required to perform as delineated in chapter three. The lamp, for example, likely represented the sacred flame the Vestals were required to maintain and the incorporation of the oil provided the priestess with the means to keep it burning. The bread may have reflected *mola salsa*, which the Vestals manufactured and which enabled them to represent the collective in many Roman rituals. We also have already seen how water was integral for the priesthood and its activities through the cleansing of the temple, the manufacture of *muries* and the mythological significance of the spring from which it was obtained. Each of these substances enabled the entombed priestess to regain her spectacular nature through providing her the means to represent the Roman collective and participate in instilling and preserving Roman cultural identity with their associated rituals and duties. One item in particular, however, has a much more elusive association.

Plutarch specifically mentions that milk was included in the list of items sealed with a condemned Vestal and its presence must be accounted for considering that there is no extant evidence that the Vestals utilized milk in any way. Even if the argument that these items prevented culpability from executing a priestess through their ability to keep her alive is accepted, milk remains an unusual substance considering that only infants and farmers commonly consumed milk in ancient Rome.³⁵⁴ Therefore, there would have been no logical reason to include it as a dietary staple for the priestess. Wildfang, however, attempts to

³⁵³ Wildfang, 60.

³⁵⁴ For a discussion of Roman dietary habits, see Andrew Dalby, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 217-8 ; Catherine Osborne, "Ancient Vegetarianism," in *Daily Food in Antiquity*, ed. John Wilkins et. al. (Exeter: University Press, 1995), 216-7.

understand the significance of the milk through broaching the question, what if the milk included in the chamber was donkey's milk?³⁵⁵ Donkeys were associated with the priesthood in several ways. First of all, the braying of a donkey alerted the goddess Vesta to the presence of Mars, who intended on ravishing her while bathing in the very spring from which the priesthood was expected to collect its water.³⁵⁶ Donkeys were also prominently featured during the *Vestalia*, in which they were paraded through the streets of Rome decorated and dressed with *mola salsa*.³⁵⁷ Furthermore, the *Consualia* consisted of an unusual chariot race with teams of donkeys instead of horses in the circus. If donkeys milk was the type included in the chamber with the other substances, then even the presence of the milk can be associated the Vestals functions as spectacles and suggests how important these functions were even after the live burial of a condemned priestess. The items included in the underground chamber in which she was buried were directly associated with the priestess's responsibilities and enabled her, after he expiation, to regains her function as a public spectacle.

The Vestals were important to Roman society and the expiation process that some had to endure demonstrates the intimate relationship between the Vestals, their status as public spectacles and Roman society. The Vestals were required to not only devote their entire existence to the priesthood through their continued observance of virginity; they were expected to dress and act in a matter according to their station and observe strict *castitas*. During periods of military disaster, rampant disease, social crises or religious reforms the

³⁵⁵ Today we commonly associate milk with cow's milk, the type our modern society consumes. However, people in the ancient world made use of a variety of different milk and therefore we must not exclude this possibility. Wildfang, 60.

³⁵⁶ Ovid, *Fasti* 3.11-50.

³⁵⁷ See pages p. 69-70.

Romans sometimes appropriated the Vestals in an attempt to correct whatever particular affliction that effected society. The success of Rome was literally bound up with the priesthood. The judiciary process both marked and confirmed this relationship through a conviction or exoneration. If a Vestal was convicted, she was ceremoniously placed in a tomb within the *pomerium* with the necessary staples to ensure that she perpetually performed her religious duties and subsequently she regained her status as a spectacle. The entire process that an accused priestess was subjected to reflects the Vestals' status as *spectacula maxima* and elucidates the connection of this status and Roman society.

CONCLUSION

The Vestal Virgins, the institution of their priesthood and the cult of Vesta were integral to Roman society. These six priestesses studiously maintained the sacred flame of Vesta that the Romans believed sat in vigil over their society and future. The priesthood and its members were intimately bound up with the success of the society that it represented. Parker alludes to this connection through his statement that the Vestals “functioned as Sign, Stranger and Sacrifice.”³⁵⁸ The ebb and flow of this work has inadvertently supported this point. The induction ceremony and the resulting legal status of the Vestals marked each priestess as a Stranger. Her appearance and the various duties and rites she performed elevated her status as a Stranger to the level of a Sign or symbol. Finally, the potential expiation of a Vestal and the deployment of her body demonstrate her status as a suitable Sacrifice during moments of military, political and social crisis. While these are all plausible claims, this work, however, has sought to extend this conclusion. The Vestal Virgins were public spectacles employed by Roman society to account for its continual success and its occasional failures.

³⁵⁸ Parker, “Why were the Vestals Virgins?,” 588.

This work employs several methods to frame this argument. The combined use of the synchronic and diachronic approach to the extant evidence regarding the priesthood enabled this work to make significant points about the cult and the status of its priestesses as public spectacles while allowing for any relevant changes the priesthood experienced during its millennium existence. The intricacies of the Roman spectacle has been defined and utilized in this work as a social relationship between the observer and the observed designed to promote a common emotional response across various social divisions and associate this response to a nostalgic past. As we have seen, the Vestals performed this function in a variety of different ways. An analysis of the Roman understanding of the public and private spheres permits this work to consider the actions and performances carried out in the privacy of the *aedes Vestae* or in front of an exclusive audience to be considered public as long as they were carried out for the benefit of Rome. This enabled the Vestals' status as spectacles to assume a completely public quality even though not every segment of society witnessed many of their activities simultaneously. Finally, the Roman understanding of virginity, being determined by both the physiological and socially constructed *castitas*, permits this work to make connections between the Vestals, their bodies and Roman society. These tools have transformed a priestly history into a more substantial historical discussion.

The induction process of the *captio* ceremony and the clothing that each priestess wore designated the Vestals as spectacles. The rigorous requirements that a candidate for the priesthood was scrutinized against reflect physical, social and religious perfection. The methods for selecting a Vestal, whether through the Papian law or an individual's choice, confirmed each candidate as satisfactory and the final decision was left up to Vesta herself through the means of a lottery or election via senate confirmation. The elaborate *captio*

ceremony removed her from the *potestas* of her natal family in a fashion similar to a Roman wedding, but, instead of being transferred to another's *potestas*, the Vestal was permitted to assume complete control over her own life and affairs. Each priestess was removed from the governing social institution so that she could represent the collective. In Parker's terms, she was made a Stranger so that she could represent every Roman regardless of rigid social divisions. The vestments of her office, including the *stola*, *sex crines*, *vittae* and the *suffibulum* distinctly marked her status and made it open for all to see. Her status as a spectacle was designated as a public status.

The various duties, rites and privileges that the Vestals were required and permitted to perform further suggest that these priestesses were public spectacles. The priesthood performed a variety of religious duties within the *aedes Vestae*. Maintaining the sacred flame, manufacturing sacral food staples, cleaning the temple and safeguarding the most important items and documents consumed the priestesses' lives. Several of the religious rites that the Vestals observed, such as the *Vestalia*, *Bona Dea* and the *Ops Consiva*, were also either performed away from the eyes of the people whom they served or were only observed by an exclusive demographic of society. Although performed in private, these rites were in fact public through their function of benefiting Rome. Other rites, including the *Argei*, *Parilia* and October Horse were public rituals that many Romans, including some of the authors of our extant sources, participated in or witnessed. Through *mola salsa* the Vestals indirectly participated in almost every religious ritual. Many of the unique privileges granted to Vestals, including the ability to own property, their *sacrosanctitas*, and the right to be accompanied by a *lictor* further indicate the public nature of their status. The priestess individually and the priesthood collectively occasionally invoked these privileges on the

behalf of others and themselves and have subsequently had an effect on Roman history. The Vestals were not just Signs, as Parker mentions, but also public spectacles. As public spectacles, the Vestals were directly engaged in a relationship with Roman society.

Sometimes the relationship between the Vestals, their religious charge and Roman society was only noticed when something went wrong or when it was missing. Vestals accused of performing sacred rites in a state of impurity, whether through sexual activity or simply not living up to the idea of *castitas*, resulted in a loss of reputation and occasionally in her death. The Vestals functioned as Sacrifices during moments of military, reproductive, social and religious crisis. This was especially true if invoking the priestess as a sacrifice could function to ameliorate the crisis. The entire judicial procedure of convicting a priestess accused of *crimen incesti* was designed to remove her status as a positive public spectacle and replace it with an expiatory status. Finally, the punishment of a convicted priestess and her interment within the *pomerium* did not only correct whatever religious transgression that had caused the gods to caution Roman society, but also employed her body as a continual spectacle. Even within her earthly tomb the Vestal perpetually fulfilled her obligation to Roman society.

The Vestals and the cult of Vesta have long been a focus of inquiry and discussion. Both contemporary authors and more modern scholars have attempted to recreate and find solutions to various questions about this unique feminine priesthood and its primacy in a largely masculine world. While most of these discussions were tangent to others, scholars have finally begun to study the priesthood for its own sake. This work is designed to be another step in that direction. More importantly, this work has called upon scholars to continually question and redefine ideas about Roman society and ancient world culture that

have previously been considered moot. The idea of the ancient spectacle indeed encompasses more than just the chariot races and gladiatorial games of the Roman amphitheater. We cannot take for granted our understanding of the private and public world and transfer it to other societies and cultures. Even more importantly, the Roman understanding of virginity and women's bodies provide important lessons for understanding how our society invokes women as signs, strangers and sacrifices. An examination of the *captio* ritual, their appearance, the rites, duties and privileges they performed, and their accusation and potential execution suggests that the Vestals were public spectacles in every sense of the term or terms and that their status was important and directly linked to Roman society. Indeed, the Vestals functioned as Sign, Stranger, Sacrifice, and Spectacle in Roman society.

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PLATES

Each of these photographs was taken by the author in the Roman Forum in September 2010.



Plate 1. A view of the *aedes Vestae* from the Palatine Hill.



Plate 2. A view of the modern reconstruction of the Temple of Vesta from the Palatine Hill.



Plate 3. A view of a Vestal statue within the *aedes Vestae*.



Plate 4. A view of another Vestal statue within the *aedes Vestae*.



Plate 5. Views of partially destroyed Vestal statues in the *aedes Vestae*.



Plate 6. A profile of a Vestal statue in the *aedes Vestae*.