

**The Vestal Virgins:  
A Paradoxical Phenomenon of Greco-Roman Society**

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All Roads Lead to Rome

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Through the examination of the extraordinary religious phenomenon of the Vestal Virgins, this research paper will concentrate on the interplay between Greco-Roman religion, gender/sexuality, and ancient Roman Law. Societal restrictions based on gender were prominent in Rome, especially given the nature of the Twelve Tables. The Vestal Virgins, a Roman priestesshood, were the only exception to the rules of *tutela perpetua mulierum* or "perpetual guardianship of women." Their high regard throughout the city highlights significant aspects of their existence, ultimately bringing to light that there is a stark contrast between the typical female experience and the privileged grounds that the Vestal Virgins walked on. It could be said that this essentially separated them from their womanhood and changed their priestly livelihoods. Nevertheless, their status and role in society solely depended on the interest and sense of security of men, which was clearly the superior gender. This is demonstrated by the control that the *Pontifex Maximus* held over the Vestal Virgins, especially when suspicions of broken chastity vows ran amok or executions were carried out. The ultimate focus is as follows: Did the supposed prestige and esteem of the Vestal Virgins elevate them to unreachable heights for women at the time? Or did their limited sexuality and freedom ultimately make their lives simply a service to men?

## I. ANCIENT ROMAN CULTURE AND SOCIETY

The political affairs and cultural development of early Roman society are both inextricably intertwined with religion; divinities and religious practices molded Roman institutions and granted the Republic, and eventually the Empire, exceptional power. Today, the availability of such a comprehensive documentation of "names, powers, and shrines of deities, the religious calendar, the organization and duties of priestly colleges, and the nature of religious ceremonies" elucidates the processes of expansion and adaptation that were central to Rome's sustainability.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Forsythe, Gary. *A Critical History of Early Rome: from Prehistory to the First Punic War*. (University of California Press, 2005), pp. 112.

of Rome's polytheism specifically serves to gain a deeper understanding of the Roman worldview and style of life. An important aspect to consider is how the imperialistic and patriarchal nature of the Roman world came to shape the perceptions of sex and gender. Particularly, how did it impact women's political and religious narratives?

Women were excluded from the public sphere and confined to a social construction that prohibited their access to political leadership, authority, and overall social privileges. The woman, subordinate and secondary to man, was at the helm of domestic obligations and expected to nurture the family, "bear legitimate children," and care for the home. As a means of survival, women of the lower class were allowed to hold jobs in agriculture, crafts, midwifery, and wet nursing.<sup>2</sup> In the vast pool of Roman women forced into submission, numerous inscriptions and ancient texts reveal the power and stature of a select few. These "select few" were typically women that were members of the "upper strata of society" and relatives of prominent imperial figures like Mark Antony, Brutus, or Septimius Severus.<sup>3</sup> This noble rank granted them the privilege of receiving a formal education and certain freedoms that slave women's "poverty and servitude" could never afford them. Despite the disparities in each woman's particular experience and narrative, they were never to be perceived as "equal to a man in terms of [their] worth to the state."<sup>4</sup>

Under the early Roman Republic, in 450 BCE, Romans established their own code of law entitled the "Law of the Twelve Tables," which disclosed the rights and responsibilities of their citizens. Not only was the subordination of women a societal norm to abide by, but it was explicitly imbedded in the law. Sovereignty over their entire lives resided in the hands of a male authority figure; so much so that a female child's father held "legal right of *ius vitae et necis*", or life and

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<sup>2</sup> Cartwright, Mark. "The Role of Women in the Roman World." Ancient History Encyclopedia, 22 Feb. 2014, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/659/the-role-of-women-in-the-roman-world/>

<sup>3</sup> Sawyer, Deborah F. *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries*. (Routledge, 2003), pp. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, pp. 31.

death, over her.<sup>5</sup> This same legislation also forced women to reside under their father's *patria potestas* or "paternal control", their husband's *manus* if they were married, or a male tutor's supervision if they were unwedded.<sup>6</sup> This enforced system of tutelage operated under the inherent assumption that women were "incapable of managing their own affairs", which again points to their perceived inferiority.<sup>7</sup> Despite these prejudiced and misogynistic generalizations, there was a solitary example of women's emancipation in Ancient Rome: The Vestal Virgins. However, upon examining their standard of life, their supposed freedom was not necessarily given "freely."

## II. THE GODDESS VESTA

The icon and deity of the cult of the Vestal Virgins was the Roman goddess Vesta, and in order to further understand the implications of this religious body, it's imperative to analyze their idol. Vesta was considered to be the goddess of the hearth (the fireplace), which alludes to the warmth and unity of one's own home.<sup>8</sup> Families convened around the hearth to enjoy meals and spend time with one another.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Vesta's mere presence and essence was a representation of permanence, immutability, and centrality. Moreover, religious practices and rituals of veneration dedicated to her were meant to instill a sense of collectivity and protection, especially upon the establishment of a new home or ceremonial invocations.<sup>10</sup> However, Vesta's significance extended beyond the privacy of a house. Her exaltation had political connotations as well because she was also a symbol of the public hearth: The Roman Forum in the heart of the Eternal City of Rome. Ultimately, she

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<sup>5</sup> Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, pp. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Forsythe, *Critical History of Early Rome*, pp. 188.

<sup>7</sup> Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, pp. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Goux, Jean-Joseph. "Vesta, or the Place of Being." *Representations*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1983, pp. 91–92.

<sup>9</sup> Takács, Sarolta A. *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons: Women in Roman Religion*. (University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. 93.

<sup>10</sup> Goux, "Vesta, or the Place of Being," pp. 92.

was the guardian of the democratic state and the binding or uniting factor for the city.<sup>11</sup> In continuance with her primacy and powers of stability, Vesta's temple or sanctuary was round, which was not a common structure for temples.<sup>12</sup> Built in imitation of a primitive hut, the temple was not officially inaugurated because it was an *aedes sacra*, or "a sacred building;" fundamentally, the temple and the Roman goddess that resided within were considered to be part of the earth beneath their feet.<sup>13</sup> The shrine's circularity, as a representation of the divine, conveniently housed the sacred, perpetual fire of Rome. Throughout its existence, the temple was

actually destroyed by the fire several times, the most severe being the fire of Nero in 64 CE. Today, the ruins of the temple of Vesta were reconstructed in 1930 (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> The diligent Vestal Virgins dedicated their lives to maintaining this fire, which will be further discussed later. Vestal Virgins



**Figure 1:** Temple of Vesta, Forum Romanum. Ulrich, Roger. 2009. [https://www.flickr.com/photos/roger\\_ulrich/4119939516/in/photostream/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/roger_ulrich/4119939516/in/photostream/)

had consequential responsibilities, and membership to this cult was rather exclusive because it demanded extensive commitment and devotion to the goddess and the state.

<sup>11</sup> Parker, Holt N. "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State." *Virginité Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, edited by Judith Fletcher and Bonnie MacLachlan, University of Toronto Press, 2007, pp. 69.

<sup>12</sup> Goux, "Vesta, or the Place of Being," pp. 92.

<sup>13</sup> "Temple of Vesta." *Encyclopaedia Romana*, University of Chicago, [penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia\\_romana/romanforum/vesta.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/romanforum/vesta.html).

<sup>14</sup> "Temple of Vesta."

### III. THE VESTAL VIRGINS: PRIESTESSES OF ROME

The cult of the Vestal Virgins was formed under the reign of King Numa Pompilius (717-673 BCE) and retained societal importance up until its dissolution by Emperor Theodosius I in 394 CE.<sup>15</sup> The priestesshood consisted of six Vestals, originally inducted into the group at the prepubescent ages of six to ten years old. They would then commit to serving for thirty years, and upon completion of their duty and responsibility to the state, they would be given the opportunity to leave the priesthood.<sup>16</sup> The *Vestales* consecrated their existence to the devotion of Vesta, and their primary obligation was to tend the sacred fire in the Temple of Vesta. They would perform religious rites throughout the day such as safeguarding sacred objects, preparing food for rituals, and presiding over public events.<sup>17</sup>

The most distinctive characteristic of a Vestal Virgin was indistinguishably her virginal chastity. She had to be "physically and socially unblemished" in order to be part of the order and preserve her position, which ultimately served a symbolic function. Her permanently unpenetrated body countered the possible vulnerability to unwarranted intrusions and attacks, mirroring the impenetrable walls of Rome.<sup>18</sup> However, it was not simply an emblematic depiction of Rome's impermeability. It was the actual guarantee and means of continuing success. The Eternal City depended on the Vestals' perfectly unscathed and undefiled frame to preserve the relationship between the gods and the Roman state, or the *pax deorum—pax hominum*<sup>19</sup>, and the divine good will of the gods. Essentially, adhering to their chastity vows were a matter of life and death.

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<sup>15</sup> Mark, Joshua J. "Vestal Virgin." Ancient History Encyclopedia, 2 Aug. 2009, [www.ancient.eu/Vestal\\_Virgin/](http://www.ancient.eu/Vestal_Virgin/).

<sup>16</sup> "Part IV: The Vestals and Rome." *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion*, by Ariadne Staples, Routledge, 1998, pp. 129.

<sup>17</sup> Mark, "Vestal Virgin."

<sup>18</sup> Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?", pp. 69

<sup>19</sup> Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, pp. 87.

Given the complex cultural and political system of Ancient Rome, other social markers regarding her legal status and ostensible advantage over other women must also be examined. Considering these aspects of their lives help forge a more comprehensive conception of the Vestals' true womanhood. Some requirements and modifications included the following: having living parents, being liberated from her father's *patria potestas*, receiving a yearly stipend "to compensate for their loss of patrimony," surrendering control of their property to the public treasury, and no longer belonging to her agnatic family.<sup>20</sup> On the surface, the priesthood accorded its members freedom, unrivaled privileges, and advantages that were forbidden for women in the Greco-Roman world. Nevertheless, the mere reason for their existence, the forced sexual limitations, and the horrid mistreatment and punishment they endured suggests that the presumed stature of the Vestal Virgins was a paradoxical phenomenon of this era.

#### IV. PRIVILEGE OR PUNISHMENT?

The Vestal Virgins exploded "the conventions of gender expectations"<sup>21</sup> and defied the concept of typical categorization in Ancient Rome. They were an all-female cult not bound by domestic "wifely" duties or male ownership, which to a certain extent freed them from societal norms. However, they never ceased to be women first. The cult was "a male-defined idealized womanhood" that fundamentally subverted their standing in society due to their nature and empowered them based on "male social values."<sup>22</sup> In a misogynistic and patriarchal world, there would have never been an attempt to unshackle women's chains and cultivate a sense of solidarity and equality, which has been a struggle for what appears like an eternity. The Vestal Virgins, given their symbolic wholeness and function for the sake of Rome's safety, were established and allowed

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<sup>20</sup> Takács, *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>21</sup> Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, pp. 119.

<sup>22</sup> Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, pp. 127.

to exist for the interests of men.<sup>23</sup> This sexual energy they possessed could bring about "military power and supremacy,"<sup>24</sup> so taken from their homes and imprisoned during the most fertile years of their lives, men would continue to thrive. Essentially, only to secure their own survival would they place women in a position of inauthentic emancipation and authority. Thus, to this extent, men tacitly continued to have dominion and power over these women, which was a preconceived advantage they held over the rest of the Roman female population. There were nonetheless more overt ways in which a man's ascendancy inhibited the Vestal Virgin's freedom to live. Despite relinquishing their own father's *patria potestas*, the Vestals upon entering the priestesshood would be under the formal discipline and regulation of the *Pontifex Maximus*.<sup>25</sup> They especially faced petrifying retribution from the Highest Pontiff if a Vestal "[ventured] beyond permitted behavior and [engaged] in sexual relations."<sup>26</sup> If any member of the cult were to ever break their vows of chastity, they had to face live internment, or being buried alive.<sup>27</sup> To spray perfume on the casket or cover up their injustices, the College of Pontiffs would bury an unchaste Vestal within the *pomerium*, or the sacred city boundaries.<sup>28</sup> Once again, they become an exception for another Roman law, but it does not reflect their perception and treatment in society. So, were the Vestal Virgins elevated to these unreachable heights? Women may have believed that to be the case, but upon closer analysis of their actual standards of living, it becomes clear that the Vestals were still secondary in nature; they were used as pawns in the games of man and denied the actual authority that they deserved.

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<sup>23</sup> Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, pp. 127.

<sup>24</sup> Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, pp. 128.

<sup>25</sup> Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?", pp. 73

<sup>26</sup> Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, pp. 128.

<sup>27</sup> Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins?", pp. 80

<sup>28</sup> "Part IV: The Vestals and Rome," pp. 133



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