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Vestal Virgins of Rome: Images Of Power

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The Power of Representation: The Vestal Virgins of Rome
Melissa Huang

Abstract: The earliest archaeological and literary evidence suggest that the Vestal Virgins began as priestesses primarily responsible for religious fertility and purification rituals. Yet from humble beginnings, the Vestals were able to create a foothold in political life through the turbulence of the transition from Republic to Principate. In part due to the violent and perilous transition, the Vestal Virgins of Rome began to represent a sense of what it meant to be Roman. The manifestation of the symbolization of Rome gave the Vestals great power. As the social and political power that Vestals gained grew, so too do their expressions of their power. Throughout this transition, the instances of the Vestals' most infamous punishment, burial alive, decreases and ends with Domitian's final execution of three Vestals in 83 CE. The changes to the Vestals' social and political roles and relationships are reflected in changes to their perceived power. In order to describe these changes, the first third of this paper concentrates on the religious and social roles of the Vestals established before the Late Republic. This is necessary because most of the evidence is focused around the turn of the millennium, and concrete evidence for earlier Vestals is rare. However, a discussion of the traditions that were accepted as ancient is still necessary to establish the social expectations for the Vestals up until the Late Republic. The Vestals' initial attempts at altering these social expectations lead to the subsequent section. The second portion details how the transitions from Republic to Principate resulted in a change in social and political roles for Vestals. The Vestal Virgins were originally placed in a liminal status set between the state and individual families. The ambiguity in their status eventually allowed for unprecedented gains in legal and political rights for this subset of Roman women in the Late Republic. Throughout the Principate, Augustus tied the Vestals to the imperial home for political gain. Not long after this period, the Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties both continued to build on Augustus' foundation. The third and final part demonstrates that the powers that the Vestals gained, and were perceived to have gained, were dependent upon the social consciousness of contemporary Rome. By placing these power dynamics in the context of a Roman consciousness, I prove that Vestals gained power by virtue of their unique social and political positions. By comparing and contrasting the cases of 114/113 BCE and 73 BCE, I show that the Roman consciousness did change its perception of the power of the Vestals.

The Vestal Virgins of Rome are well-examined in modern scholarship. The fascination appears to result equally from the unique nature of a female priesthood in a highly patriarchal society as well as from the traditional capital punishment imposed on Vestals convicted of the crime of *incestum*, live internment. However, most scholarship on the Vestals tends to treat the order as a whole, although their political activity did not unify until the time of Caesar.¹ This treatment often occurs as a result of an uncritical conviction in the accuracy of the literary sources. Yet most of these sources are concentrated around the Imperial and later years while they discuss events from the legendary monarchy five hundred years or more before their time. Too often, scholars cobble all evidence for the Vestals together from all available time periods to create a fictionally static narrative of a centuries-old religious order.² Conversely, I demonstrate that the Vestals gradually changed their roles and relationships with the Roman state and people, resulting in an increase in power and expressions of power through the political transition of Republic to Principate.

In order to treat this dynamic, responsive collective of individuals, whose duties, restrictions, and social functions evolved and regressed with Roman society, this paper is divided into thirds. First, I combine the writings that establish earlier traditions of the Vestals that describe their appearance, legal and social statuses, and religious duties in order to set up the customs that were understood to have been instituted earlier than the Republic. In other words, these features of the Vestals were certainly established by the time of our writers, but the suspicion necessarily involved with describing the history of the mythical king Numa makes a thorough history prior to this impossible. Yet detailing the social norms up until the Late

¹ Page 15 of this document.

² For example: Thompson, *The Role of the Vestal Virgins in Roman Civic Religion*; Kroppenberg, "Law, Religion, and the Constitution of the Vestal Virgins;" Jennings, "Tending Hestia's Flame: Circumabulating the Sacred Feminine;" Arieti, "Rape and Livy's View of Roman History."

Republic is essential because evidence for the Vestals' religious functions, hair and dress, and social actions characterize all descriptions of Vestals prior to 143 BCE and show the expected social and religious roles of the Vestals. From the Late Republic onward, the descriptions begin to focus on the changing political and social functions of the Vestal Virgins and become more specific, with reference to particular Vestals and substantial events. In comparison with accounts of the mythical Vestal who began it all, Rhea Silvia, these accounts are much more useful as examples of historical proceedings and contemporary beliefs.

The second section covers how the evolution of the Roman state affected its relationship to the Vestals and to the Roman people by suppressing or encouraging Vestals' political agency. The Vestals' expressions of power are first limited, but soon become more and more accepted. The main periods of analysis in this portion are the Late Republic and the Principate, ending with Domitian in 96 CE. Finally, the last third compares the events of 114/113 BCE and 73 BCE to create a new theoretical approach to analyze the social location of the Vestals and the sociological motivations for violence. As the Vestals accrued more power, they also became the ultimate symbol of it. While Augustus displayed his power by uniting the Vestals with the imperial family, Domitian flaunted his power by executing them. The Vestals' responses to these performances are a reflection of their ever-changing social and political power.

I. Established Early Duties

The Vestal Virgins began simply as religious figures dedicated to fertility and purification rites. However, because of the original form of the order, the Vestals eventually won significant political and legal powers. This section shows that the Vestals' initial purposes necessitated a connection from the public cult to the private, family cult. This gave the Vestals an

ambiguity that they later exploited to expand their political and legal rights, which will be discussed in the next section.

One way in which the Vestals were able to connect the public and private cults was in the creation of *mola salsa*. Among the Vestal Virgins' earliest duties was the preparation of the *mola salsa*, a ground meal sprinkled on the head of sacrificial victims before they were killed.³ This gesture gives the Latin verb *immolo*, which originally described the "act of sprinkling the *mola salsa* on the head of a sacrificial victim."⁴ Yet the deep connection to the act of sacrifice led to its metonymical use, which became so common that *immolo* later gained the simplified definition, "to sacrifice."⁵ The connection between Vestals and *mola salsa* to everyday private sacrifice culminated in the final link circling back to the public hearth in the Forum Romanum. This ritual task was exclusive to the Vestals, but because the *mola salsa* was used in every sacrifice, also meant that the Vestals were included symbolically in every Roman sacrifice. A. Staples theorizes that the function of *mola salsa* was to ensure that every sacrifice, however private, could benefit the collective by including a symbol of the ritually excluded, thus making every private religious function a state function.⁶ However, it should be noted that no evidence exists of self-described precise and logical motives for religious activities. R. Wildfang points out that the process of making the substance used the sacred and eternal fire in the *aedes Vestae*, which no other rites or ritual appears to use. This fact demonstrates that the creation of the *mola salsa* was intimately tied to Vesta, who was embodied by the fire, making it an extremely sacred religious function

³ Dion. Hal., *Ant. Rom.*, 24.2; Festus, p. 124 L; Tibullus, 1.5.14; Verg. *Eclogues*, 8.82; Cic. *Div.* 2.16.37; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, 18.7. Earliest reference in Plautus, *Amphitryon*, 2.2.109.

⁴ Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, entry for *immolo*. Early uses found in Plautus, *Poenulus*, 2.5; Caes., *Gallie War*, 4.16.2, 4.17.

⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 12.949, Cicero, *de Natura Deorum* 3.36.88, Livy, 1.45.7, Suet. *Div. Iul.* 18, 59.

⁶ Staples, *Good Goddess*, 154. The ritually excluded are typically a subset of people who are left out of a certain cultural landscape; in this case, the Vestals are not a part of any one family cult, which gives them the ability to be apart from private cults. Yet because every sacrifice uses the *mola salsa*, the Vestals were intimately tied to every family.

that powerfully tied together the public and the private.⁷ While the *mola salsa* connection between public and private seems tenuous here, the architecture of the homes solidifies the tie. The private hearth was inseparable from the public hearth. At every meal, the Roman family gathered around the hearth and ate together, creating an act of worship to Vesta and including a sacrifice to Vesta and the Penates,⁸ thus joining the hearth of a private home to the public one at the center of Rome. The significance of this connection is proven by Augustus' connection of the Vestals' public hearth to his own.⁹

The Vestals were also responsible for the safekeeping of the entire state in the guarding of certain sacred objects, the exact nature of which is unknown to us as well as to our extant ancient sources. Such care of sacred materials and their storage in the *penus Vestae*¹⁰ may also have acted as a heightened reflection of personal home duties. Chief among the suggestions for the identity of the sacred objects by ancient authors includes the *Palladium*, the guarantor of Roman power, *pignus imperii Romani*,¹¹ brought from Troy by Aeneas.¹² It is possible that only the Vestals were allowed to see or touch the Palladium.¹³ However, Dionysius of Halicarnassus reports that both the Vestals and the Pontifex Maximus both had access to it,¹⁴ whereas Ovid relates that only men were forbidden from seeing it,¹⁵ which would explain the story that Pliny the Elder passes along that a Pontifex was blinded while saving the "sacred things" from a fire.¹⁶

⁷ Rome's Vestal Virgins, 10.

⁸ Ov., *Fast.*, 6.305, Verg., *Georgics*, 4.384, Serv., *ad Aen.*, 1.734.

⁹ As *pontifex maximus*, he chooses to make his home on the Palatine public property and to build a shrine to Vesta in his home, rather than to move into the official house adjacent to the Vestals in the Forum. Cassius Dio 54.27.3.

¹⁰ Storehouse of Vesta.

¹¹ Livy, 26.27.14, 5.52.7; Cic., *Phil.*, 11.10.24.

¹² Ovid, *Tr.*, 3.1.29.

¹³ Plut., *Num.*, 9.8, Ov., *Fasti*, 6.417.

¹⁴ *Ant. Rom.*, 2.66.

¹⁵ Ovid, *Fasti*, 6.4.17.

¹⁶ Pliny, *Hist. Nat.*, 7.43.139.

Whatever the nature of the objects, it is agreed that they were highly sacred and had implications for the safety of the state as a whole.

Due to the impartiality of the Vestals inherent to the condition of being separated from individual families, they were entrusted with the knowledge and care of these objects. As a side note, however, it is incredible that no one knew precisely what they were considering the many times the temple was threatened throughout history, necessitating the removal of the sacred objects, sometimes even by slaves— such events occurred in 390 BCE;¹⁷ 241 BCE;¹⁸ 210 BCE;¹⁹ 48 BCE;²⁰ and 14 BCE.²¹ The house was burned again in 64 CE and in 191 CE, with no comment on the preservation of the sacred objects.²²

At the heart of the Roman Forum dwelt highly sacred, unknown and possibly unknowable things that kept Rome safe. It was because of the Vestals' separation from individual families that permitted them to be entrusted with the well-being of the entire state; they were at the center of Roman religious activity, and were responsible for making private sacrifice possible. With no allegiance to any single family, the Vestals could be unquestionably impartial and thus, ostensibly, care equally for all families within the state. Spatially, Vestals had special power only in Rome, emphasizing that the powers of the Vestals were associated with the geographical location of Rome. Moving Rome, as was argued after the sack of the Gauls in 390 BCE, was impossible because the religious power of the *Palladium* and *ancile* could operate only on the site of Rome itself.²³ Like the sacred objects, the Vestals only had potency in Rome. Pliny the Younger reports that Vestals could root to the ground runaway slaves, but only if they

¹⁷ Livy, 5.40.7-10, 42.1-2, Plut. *Camil.*, 21.1, 22.6; CIL 6.1272=ILS 51.

¹⁸ Livy, *Per.*, 19, Dion. Hal. 2.66.4, Val. Max. 1.4.5, Pliny, *HN* 7.141.

¹⁹ Livy 26.27.4.

²⁰ Cassius Dio, 42.31.3.

²¹ Cassius Dio, 54.24.2.

²² Accounts of 64: Tacitus, *Ann.*, 15.41; *Hist.* 1.43.191; Cassius Dio 72 [73].24; listed by regionary catalogues in Regio VIII.

²³ Livy 5.52.

were still within the city.²⁴ This deep connection between the Vestals and the boundaries of Rome shows that the very existence of the Vestals is dependent on the state—without Rome, the Vestals are insignificant. Similarly, the health of the state is tied to the Vestals’ guardianship of sacred items.

In addition to such significant religious and social roles that necessitated a special category for Vestals, they were also visibly marked. One highly noticeable indication of the Vestals’ special status was their hairstyle, the *sex crines*. This style, also worn by brides, is mildly contested as to if the Vestals copied the style of brides or the brides Vestals. However, R. Wildfang provides a well-structured argument that the hairstyle simply marked out women who had been removed from the familial cult of her birth.²⁵ Wildfang points out that the bride kept this hairstyle through the entire duration of the intervening period between her removal from her family cult and replacement into a new family cult.²⁶ Thus, the hairstyle that the Vestals wore symbolized the status of the Vestals as women who had been removed from a family cult and persisted in not being replaced into the regular social order, because they could not marry. The purpose of this ambiguity was to mark off a woman who was of a typically short-lived status, a virgin between girlhood and motherhood.

Although some scholars attempt to say that Vestals wore the matronly *stola*, the Vestals’ manner of dress is altogether too widely disputed to discuss with any certainty.²⁷ Livy does mention that the Vestal Postumia was accused of impropriety because of her love of dress in 420 BCE, suggesting that some expectations were in place regarding the standards of their clothing.²⁸

²⁴ *N.H.* 28.13, also Cassius Dio 48.194

²⁵ *Rome’s Vestal Virgins*, 13.

²⁶ *Rome’s Vestal Virgins*, 13.

²⁷ Uses of the *stola* argument in: Schroeder, *The Vestals and the Fasces*, 12; Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 16; LaFollette, “The Costume of the Roman Bride,” 55.

²⁸ 4.44.11.

In a different case, the Vestal Minucia came under suspicion of unchastity because of her ornate clothing, and was judged guilty in 337 BCE.²⁹ While there is no reason to question that Vestals were executed in these years, Livy's sources may not have been accurate. Even if nothing determinate can be said about their dress, at least the Vestals' hairstyle remained a mark of their separation from ordinary social roles if Wildfang is correct.³⁰

The Vestals' legal statuses were also indicative of their separation from individual families. The rite of *captio*, "taking," removed a Vestal candidate from her father's power, without the ceremony of emancipation or the loss of civil rights, and granted her the right to make a will.³¹ The ability to write her own will was significant because it indicated that the Vestal was not legally considered a member of any Roman family; her property could not automatically devolve onto her next of kin because she did not have any kin.³² If a Vestal did not make a will before her death, her property went back to the public treasury.³³ The Vestals were able to give testimony, unlike other Roman women.³⁴ They acted as notaries, maintained archives, and stored the wills of emperors,³⁵ could not be put under oath by a praetor.³⁶ These legal rights, in particular the storage of wills of emperors, expanded as the political scene developed. Eventually, the Vestals could help create political connections.³⁷ These functions were highly significant to regular operations in the new imperial period, but the Vestals could only perform them because their neutrality was unquestionable. From the beginning of the order,

²⁹ Livy, 8.15.7.

³⁰ Many statues (which typically end up being the primary evidence for Vestal regalia) may be imports from other cities throughout the Roman territories, with only the head being the representation of the Vestal in question.

³¹ 4.44.11.

³² Aul. Gell., *N.A.*, 12.73.

³³ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 65.

³⁴ Gell., *N.A.*, 12.73.

³⁵ Gell. *N.A.*, 7.1.

³⁶ Appian. *Bell. Civ.* 5.72f, Cassius Dio 36.32.1 48.12, 48.37, 46.2, Suet. *Div. Iul.* 83.1, Plut. *Antonius* 58.47, Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.8, Suet. *Div. Aug.* 99.

³⁷ Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.34, Gell. 10.15.31

³⁸ CIL VI 2131 thanks a Vestal for getting an equestrian status and appointment to a second rank (skipping the first).

the Vestals had special legal differences that permitted them to be a group like no other Romans could. A. Staples even suggests that the Vestals' legal differences were so great that they may not have been viewed as citizens, strictly speaking.³⁸ Her argument hinges on the *lex Valeria*, passed in 509 BCE, which granted recourse to the *ius provocationis ad populum*, the right of provocation before the people for capital charges, while the Vestals did not have this right.³⁹ Staples alleges that Vestals transcended the category of *civis*. But her argument is weak, predominantly because there is no evidence that the Vestals were not thought of as complete citizens. Additionally, the pontifical board was responsible for judging cases of Vestal *incestum*, but also *incestum* involving ordinary citizens, because this particular kind of pollution involved the family's cult.⁴⁰ Both crimes affected the domestic religious status of the families involved and put the *pax deorum* at risk, and therefore under the pontifices' jurisdiction.⁴¹ The Vestals were in a special category in relation to religion, but it is more judicious to say that they were judged by their occupation in the priesthood rather than as non-citizens.

The Vestal Virgins' social ambiguity also extended to their familial relationships. Their personal relationships were varied, but were often conflicted due to the ambiguity of their statuses. Although it was a highly acclaimed priesthood, *venerabiles et sanctae*, as Livy puts it,⁴² such that the ranks were restricted to patrician families until 5 CE,⁴³ there is evidence that many Roman families did not wish to part with their children. When a Vestal died in Augustus' time,

³⁸ Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins*, 151.

³⁹ Mommsen believed that women did not have the right to *provocatio* (1899: 143, 475), but there is no direct evidence for this, either.

⁴⁰ Koch, *Religio: Studien zu Kult und Glauben der Römer*, 70.

⁴¹ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 57.

⁴² *Ab Urbe Condita*, 1.20.3: "Venerable and sacred."

⁴³ Cassius Dio 55.22.5 notes that a law was passed allowing Vestals to be selected by lot from the daughters of freedmen: *ἐπειδὴ τε οὐ ῥαδίως οἱ πάνυ εὐγενεῖς τὰς θυγατέρας ἐς τὴν τῆς Ἑστίας ἱερατεῖαν ἐπεδίδοσαν, ἐνομοθετήθη καὶ ἐξ ἀπελευθέρων γεγεννημένας ἱεραῖσθαι.*

Suetonius reports that “*ambirentque multi ne filias in sortem darent.*”⁴⁴ Augustus supposedly assured them that if he had a granddaughter of appropriate age, he would offer her.⁴⁵ This event or some others may have precipitated the change in 5 CE, opening the candidacy to include the daughters of freedmen. Even as confirmed Vestals, however, the relationship between a Vestal and her original family was often in question. In five inscriptions dedicated to the Vestal Flavia Publicia, only two records indicate filiation,⁴⁶ expressing the tension inherent to the sacred order. She could still be called a daughter. Such a designation could express a family’s pride in a Vestal daughter; but did the absence of such a designation symbolize the distance between them, or protecting her from harm by one’s political enemies? The motivation for the varied choices of filiation and non-filiation is completely unknown.

A Vestal’s relationship with her family was highly fluid, but her separation from her family was legally complete as noted above, meaning that in the event of her death and without a will specifying otherwise, her property defaulted to the state. In many official ways, a Vestal Virgin simply could not be affiliated with any one family cult. Although some scholars theorize that the Vestals were representative of the sisters or daughters of the ancient royal family,⁴⁷ the Pontifex Maximus could not be considered the *pater familias* of the Vestals. The first reason is because of her original *captio*, “taking”—the point of removing a Vestal from a socially perfect family⁴⁸ was to cut her cleanly from an individual family cult and leave her unattached. The Pontifex Maximus also did not have the *ius vitae necisque*, or the power over life and death, because the entire pontifical college held responsibility for judging cases of *incestum*.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 31.4: “Many used their influence to keep their daughters from being chosen in the lot.”

⁴⁵ Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 31.4 *si cuiusquam neptium suarum competeret aetas, oblaturum se fuisse eam*

⁴⁶ CIL VI. 32414-32419; 32414 and 32415 record filiation.

⁴⁷ On putative origins in domestic structures: Beard 1995, 167

⁴⁸ As Aulus Gellius tells us in the *Attic Nights*, 1.12: her parents cannot have been slaves or held lowly occupations, or be dead, or have been emancipated from her father.

⁴⁹ Livy *Periochae* 63.

Religiously, legally, and socially, the Vestal order was closely associated with the Roman state, but had to be excluded from the ordinary social structure in order to complete their social and religious functions. The health of the Vestals and the strength of the state were co-dependent. Yet this connection, however many unique legal rights it granted the Vestals, was also the basis for the Vestals' most infamous function as human sacrifice. If the health of the state was compromised, the Vestals were immediately under suspicion of wrongdoing, due to their association with the sacred objects in the Forum and with the maintenance of the flame of Vesta. Both of these ties were fragile, as impropriety or improper ritual behavior could result in endangering Rome. If a prodigy occurred, or a state crisis, the Vestals could become the ritual sacrifice necessary to restore the health of the state or the state's relationship to the gods.

Another note on sources is necessary here. Dionysius of Halicarnassus was writing from about 60 BCE up until perhaps the turn of the millennium, but he and Plutarch happen to be the only extant authors who describe in full the procedure of burying a Vestal. Although they agree on certain points, Plutarch lived and wrote later than Dionysius, and may have used Dionysius as a source. Both writers, as Greeks, may have misunderstood points about the ritual; Dionysius' description includes his personal opinions on the matter, which may have colored his perception and reports of the process. For instance, Plutarch struggles to understand the provisions given to the Vestals by reasoning that the executioners were acting “ὥπερ ἀφοσιουμένων τὸ μὴ λιμῶν διαφθεῖρην σῶμα ταῖς μεγίσταις καθιερωμένον ἀγιστείαις.”⁵⁰ However, he plainly does not know the reason for the inclusion of the water, bread, milk, and oil in the ritual. As discussed later, these items may have held certain religious significance that was lost on Plutarch. A misunderstanding could have led to exclusion or incorrect inclusion of details on the ritual. Thus,

⁵⁰ “as if they were trying to purify themselves of the guilt of starving to death a person consecrated to the greatest services [of the gods.]” Plutarch, *Numa*, 10.5.

even greater caution than usual is necessary for examining the particulars of this punishment especially.

Up until the Late Republic, Vestal Virgins held primarily religious functions. However, they could be counted on as scapegoats to expiate political crises that were perceived as stemming from religious imbalances. The Vestals were largely out of the political eye of histories from early times, and the only extant records mentioning them occur when mistakes are made. For instance, when certain crises occurred, as in 216 BCE in the midst of the Second Punic war, the Vestals Opimia and Floronia were convicted of unchastity; one killed herself and the other was buried alive in the customary way.⁵¹ The Vestals' guilt was uncontested, as H. Parker points out, and often did not require the presence of a man; she could safely be convicted and buried alive without further pursuit of a male counterpart.⁵² The crime of *incestum* is a specific crime that exists in a special category, because it cannot be expiated.⁵³ Parker also theorizes that a Vestal was a *pharmakos*, a ritual substitute.⁵⁴ As a *pharmakos*, a Vestal symbolized "the impregnable boundaries of Rome."⁵⁵ She embodied Rome; any threat to Rome could be indicative of her misdeeds. Supporting Parker's argument is the fact that a convicted Vestal was paraded through the city.⁵⁶ R. Girard suggests that such a parade, for a *pharmakos*, was to "absorb all the noxious influences that may be abroad."⁵⁷ These passive roles of the Vestals would change dramatically— at this point, however, the guilt of a Vestal went unquestioned and undisputed.

⁵¹ Livy 22.57.2-6.

⁵² "Why Were the Vestals Virgins," 581.

⁵³ Cornell, "Some Observations of the Crimen Incesti," 36.

⁵⁴ See Derrida, *Violence and the Sacred*, for the function of scapegoats in antiquity.

⁵⁵ Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins," 587.

⁵⁶ For instances of proceeding through the city: Plutarch, *Numa* 10; Dion. Hal. 2.67.4, 8.89.5, 9.40.3; Pliny *Ep.* 4.11 (Letter 43 to Cornelius Minucianus).

⁵⁷ *Violence and the Sacred*, 287.

The conclusion that Vestals acted primarily as scapegoats is corroborated by historical context. The tradition of considering Vestals to be *pharmaka*, ritual substitutes, appears to have very early roots; Dionysius reports that in 472 BCE, the Vestal Urbina was buried alive, and cured the women of the plague that had afflicted sterility and miscarriages on them.⁵⁸ What is significant about this incident is that not only were women affected by the pestilence, but cattle were also suffering. J.M. André concludes that Vestals' ritual duties also preserved the fertility of all nature, animals and humans like.⁵⁹ This argument is supported by the Vestals' participation in the fertility rituals of the Fodicidia and Parilia, two old fertility ceremonies that occurred in April.⁶⁰ These rituals protected and purified flocks, preventing wolves and diseases from preying upon them. S. Takács goes so far as to hazard a theory that the condemned Vestal may be placed in the ground to symbolically incite agricultural growth,⁶¹ but this is conjecture.

J. Richardson, on the other hand, theorizes that a non-virginal Vestal was a religious offense, and could only be resolved by removing her from existence. By placing her into the ground, the state neither killed her nor permitted her to live. The punishment perfectly correlates to the liminal status of a Vestal; being underground, she was neither within nor without the walls of the city, and she was neither dead nor alive.⁶² Perhaps both the theories were true to a certain extent for different people at different times. The fertility functions were certainly core to those who considered the Vestals' primary responsibilities to be over fecundity, perhaps more so throughout the Monarchy and early Republic. However, perhaps the consideration for Vestal as dead or alive solidified with the development of the Vestal as an almost interstitial being.

⁵⁸ *Rom. Ant.* 9.40.1.

⁵⁹ André, "La notion de Pestilentia à Rome: du tabou religieux à l'interprétation préscientifique," 5.

⁶⁰ Fodicidia: *Ov. Fast.* 4.631-637; Parilia: *Ov. Fast.* 7.721-734

⁶¹ *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 88.

⁶² "The Vestal Virgins and the Use of the *Annales Maximi*," 103.

In conclusion, the nature of the Vestal Virgins' duties was so intimately related to maintaining the safety of the Roman state that if the state was perceived to be in jeopardy, the Vestals were immediately under suspicion of misconduct. The Vestals' powers to this point have been largely based in religion, and had a tendency to backfire in the cases of prodigies and political crises. When the state began to change, the Vestals expanded their powers into the political realm and affirmed ties to families of high status. They used this power to act as protectors of Roman citizens. They were also perceived as symbols of Rome and what it meant to be a Roman. However, as under Domitian, the Vestals could still be violent examples of power. But as I will demonstrate, the changes within the state would begin to change the relationships between the Vestals, the people, and the ruling powers.

II. Second Century Changes

The Vestals played ancient religious roles guaranteeing the fertility of crops and animals. This allowed for the functions of Vestals as sacrificial victims during times that the *pax deorum* seemed to be in jeopardy. But the changing Italian and Roman demographics and economic spheres in the second century BCE transformed the relationship between the Vestals and Roman society. The growth of vast *latifundia*⁶³ perhaps explains how the fertility roles that Vestals held began to decrease in significance. These large tracts of land were handled by aristocrats, whose crop success or failure was less disastrous than peasants' due to the large amount of land they held. This new system of farming, combined with the gaining of grain-rich provinces such as Africa and Sicily,⁶⁴ gradually diminished the importance of the Vestals' fertility functions beginning in the second century BCE and thereafter. The primary fertility role of the Vestals began to dissipate at this time and created space for the Vestals to shift their focus to political

⁶³ North, "The Development of Roman Imperialism," 5.

⁶⁴ Africa: Cicero, *De Imp. Gn. Pomp.* 34; cf. Plut. *Pomp.* 50; Verbrugghe, "Sicily 210-70 B. C.: Livy, Cicero and Diodorus," 536; Rickman, G.E. "The Grain Trade under the Roman Empire," 264.

affairs. Additionally the social turmoil that the *latifundia* caused by displacing subsistence farmers and driving them to city centers such as Rome created an atmosphere that did not discourage a new political movement initiated by the Vestals.

In 143 BCE, the first recorded instance of Vestal interference with Roman political affairs occurs, signifying the beginning of change in the Vestals' roles. When the consul Appius Claudius Pulcher asked the senate for permission to celebrate a triumph, he was refused, and he attempted to celebrate it regardless. A tribune attempted to stop the procession, but the Vestal Claudia, allegedly Pulcher's sister or daughter, threw herself onto the chariot to prevent the tribune from stopping it.⁶⁵ The triumph was successfully held. This incident resulted in the extension of the Vestals' *sanctitas* to something more similar to a tribune's *sacrosanctitas*.⁶⁶

After this event, more instances of Vestals in the role of neutral supplicants for threatened Romans begin to materialize in the literary record. For instance, Cicero, in his speech *Pro Fonteio*, uses the fact that Fonteio had a Vestal for a sister, who was apparently "imploping the Roman people to save her brother."⁶⁷ Tacitus also reports that the emperor Tiberius used the Vestal Torquata, the sister of Silvanus, in a speech advocating for Silvanus' banishment to Cynthus, as opposed to Gyarus, a lonelier island.⁶⁸ In another case, the brief emperor Vitellius had gotten the support of the Vestals,⁶⁹ who went as envoys to Antonius on Vitellius' behalf, but were sent back.⁷⁰ These incidences show that Vestals gained a new function as neutral supplicants, but their legitimacy continued to hinge on the fact that they were socially and religiously neutral, although some could choose to maintain political ties to their families.

⁶⁵ Cic., *Cael.*, 34, Suet., *Tiberius*, 2.4, Val. Max. 5.4.6, Cass. Dio fr. 74,

⁶⁶ R. Bauman 47; Vestal sanctity had been a by-product of her enforced chastity, but with this, it was given a positive, constitutional power.

⁶⁷ 21.47

⁶⁸ *Annales*, 3.69

⁶⁹ Suet., *Vit.*, 16.1.

⁷⁰ Tacitus, *Historiae*, 3.81.

The Vestals continued to use their positions in the political realm to express their opinions. The events of 123 BCE and of 114/113 BCE appear to show certain Vestals deliberately revolting. During a time of renewed political turmoil between the patricians and the plebeians over the question of who should have political power in Rome,⁷¹ the Vestal Licinia dedicated an altar, *aedicule*, and *pulvinar* at the Aventine temple of the Bona Dea in 123 BCE.⁷² This demonstrated the Vestal order's independence from the will of the people,⁷³ in the midst of Populares challenging Optimates for control over religion.⁷⁴ The Vestal Licinia shows that she believes that the Vestal order is not subject to either group.

Another incident in 114 BCE occurred after the daughter of a knight was struck by lightning.⁷⁵ This event was judged a *prodigium*, and the Pontifical college tried the three Vestals Marcia, Aemilia, and Licinia, and only Marcia was found guilty. This verdict angered the Roman populace, who believed that it threatened Rome's safety. Thus, in 113 BCE, a special court headed by Lucius Cassius Longinus was established to reconsider it. Unsurprisingly, this court found Aemilia, Licinia, and a number of their alleged lovers guilty.⁷⁶ All those involved were sentenced to death and the sentences were carried out. On the political side, however, according to Beard et al., this trial called into question the competence of the *pontifices*, and re-asserted the peoples' power over public religious officials.⁷⁷ It is possible, as Wildfang suggests, that the second trial occurred because the plebeians were demanding more power in the religious arena,

⁷¹ Rawson, "Religion and Politics in the Late Second Century BCE at Rome," 93-212.

⁷² Cicero cites it in his speech *de Domo sua*, 53.136.

⁷³ *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 93.

⁷⁴ Heretofore, nobility seems to control and use religion for their own devices. Cicero, *Nat. D.* 2.8, *leg.* 2, 23; Polybius 6.56.6-16. The most prominent example is Cicero's house being consecrated by Clodius; he argues against it in *de Domo sua* 53.136 on the grounds of Clodius' immorality.

⁷⁵ Asconius, *Pro Milo.*, 39-40, Cic. *Brut.* 122, Cass. Dio 87.1-5, Livy *Per.* 63a, Plut. *Mor.* 284.

⁷⁶ See Plates 1 and 2 for a coin commemorating this decision, minted in 63 BCE by a descendant of this L. Cassius Longinus.

⁷⁷ *Religions of Rome*, Vol. 2, 137.

the last bastion of the patricians.⁷⁸ The acquittal of the two Vestals may have been seen by the plebeians as evidence that the religious authorities were unfit to adjudicate correctly.⁷⁹

Bauman and Wildfang believe that the Vestals' actions of 114/113 were deliberate acts of rebellion, in consideration of the contemporary Roman social situation. Wildfang remarks:

“As Roman society in general began to question and discard outmoded beliefs and traditions, so too women in particular also began to rebel against the rules and customs that had always bound them... If the Vestals were guilty as charged, they most probably acted as they did out of a desire to discard the traditional, archaic restraints of their order established in another, more credulous age.”⁸⁰

Bauman suggests that it was a “revolt.”⁸¹ Wildfang theorizes that the charges had a basis in reality, and the Vestals deliberately broke their vows in order to express a desire for social change that was inspired or influenced by Roman society at large. However, it need not be true that the Vestals were in fact guilty. H. Parker is altogether suspicious of every charge of *incestum*, for there “is no case recorded of a Vestal Virgin suspected or convicted because she was pregnant.”⁸² In addition, the relatively few incidents of male codefendants suggest that men were not necessary to find a Vestal guilty.⁸³ In addition, Parker's article examines the social roles that a convicted Vestal played *devotio*, *prodigium*, and *pharmakos*, explains that being guilt was a vital part of their social role.⁸⁴ This view, however, tends to consider Vestals as a single, homogenous group whose roles were uninfluenced by and completely separate from the Roman society at large. I must disagree with Parker, since it is unlikely that the Vestals were completely

⁷⁸ *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 94.

⁷⁹ *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 95.

⁸⁰ *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 94.

⁸¹ *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, 215.

⁸² “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?,” 582.

⁸³ “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?,” 581.

⁸⁴ “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?,” 582.

separate from Roman life and were completely innocent in every case. While I agree that the Vestals may have been influenced, as Wildfang and Bauman suggest, by the overall mood of contemporary Roman society, the evidence is lacking in either case.

Vestals throughout the second and first centuries CE, on the other hand, increased their political involvement. When Sulla was punishing Caesar as dictator in about 85/84, the Vestal Virgins and others supported Caesar and he was eventually pardoned by Sulla.⁸⁵ What is significant about this episode is that Suetonius writes about the actions of the Vestals as a whole, suggesting that the entire order was involved, rather than one or two Vestals acting individually as seen earlier.⁸⁶ Instead of individuals making personal political statements, as in the case of Licinia, the Vestals begin participating in politics as a whole, perhaps agreeing to exercise their power as a unit. In another event, in 73 BCE, two Vestals were individually accused of *incestum*. The first, Fabia, was accused of an affair with Lucius Sergius Catalina. The second, Licinia, was accused of relations with her cousin Marcus Licinius Crassus, consul of 70 BCE.⁸⁷

However, in stark contrast to the trials of 114/113 BCE, both Vestals were acquitted and the people accepted the ruling. Wildfang reasons that the Vestals had increased in independence and sophistication, and were able to pull influential strings. There is evidence of the social power they were able to exert over the pontifical college. Fabia supposedly gained her acquittal because of the spirited defense of either M. Piso, Cato, or Q. Lutatius Catulus; sources disagree. Licinia received hers because Crassus was able to prove that he was interested in buying some of her property and they were not improperly meeting.⁸⁸ This event is remarkable for the fact that times were highly precarious in Rome; the ongoing struggle between the patricians and plebeians had

⁸⁵ Suet., *Iul.*, 1.2.6.

⁸⁶ Bauman, *Women and Politics and Ancient Rome*, 62.

⁸⁷ On Fabia: Orosius 6.3.1, Plu. *Cat. Mi.* 19.3, Sal. *Cat.* 15.1. Licinia: Cic. *Cat.* 3.9, Macr. 3.13.10, Plu. *Crass.* 1.2.

⁸⁸ *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 96, 97.

been worsened by the granting of citizen rights to all Italian communities; pirate attacks on shipping were affecting food supplies in Rome, and the former slave gladiator, Spartacus, was leading a massive slave revolt in close proximity to Rome. In such dire straits, suspicion had naturally fallen on the Vestals. Yet the people did not contest the verdicts of innocence, perhaps due to the increased political presence and cunning of the Vestals. The political power that the Vestals had accrued showed in their willingness and ability to defend themselves, with the help of important men. The Vestals were no longer a guaranteed scapegoat, but instead they united to demonstrate their power. Another symbol of their growing political power is evidenced by the fact that Vestals also successfully gained the right to be tried in the regular courts in the open air, instead of alone in the *regia*.⁸⁹ The fate of the Vestals could no longer be quietly manipulated to appease one group or another, but had to be decided in the presence of the people. This change increased the accountability of the pontiffs, and increased the sway that the people could have over the trials.

As seen above, during the early first century BCE, the Vestals' participation and expressions of power in public affairs spiked. However, it began to fade under the First and Second Triumvirates, correlating with a decrease in the Senate's power as well as in the mobility of other political actors. During this period, Vestal involvement regresses to keeping records, including wills; in this period, these important documents included Julius Caesar's will.⁹⁰ They also held the treaty agreed upon by the Second Triumvirate, Sextus Pompeius at Misenum in 39.⁹¹ It is also attested that they held Antony's will, famously taken from the Vestals and read by Octavian after Antony's final departure to the east,⁹² although some say Octavian read a forgery

⁸⁹ Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*, 212.

⁹⁰ Suet., *Iul.*, 83.

⁹¹ App., *B. Civ.*, 5.73, Cassius Dio 48.37.

⁹² Suet. *Tib.* 76

to exaggerate the threat of Antony and Cleopatra.⁹³ The Vestals were the obvious choice as the repository for such important documents, due to their long-standing neutrality made possible by their perpetuated liminal state. As with the sacred items in the storehouse, the Vestals could not easily betray the state that they were so dependent upon. This fact or the perception of it as fact made the Vestals the only option.

Finally, under the Principate the Vestal order became a tool for political gain; by tying themselves close to the Vestals, the Julio-Claudians increased their strength as a dynasty. The expressions of power that the Vestals used in the first century are no longer the dominant action. Augustus initiates these changes by having the Senate add the new duty of a yearly sacrifice by the Vestals, magistrates, and priests at his *Ara Pacis*, the Altar of Peace.⁹⁴ This was be the first sign that Vestals and the Julio-Claudians would both play greater roles in overseeing the safety of the state rather than the Vestals alone. In 12 BCE, Augustus became Pontifex Maximus, and made a new Vestal shrine in his house.⁹⁵ However, contrary to popular belief, Augustus' house cult did not form part of the new state cult on the Palatine.⁹⁶ The passage of Ovid usually quoted as evidence only mentions Vesta in the new cult on the Palatine. Ovid states that "one house holds three eternal gods," Augustus, Apollo of the Palatine, whose temple was built by Augustus by to his house, and Vesta, but this is poetic hyperbole, calling the whole Palatine complex Augustus' *domus*.⁹⁷ The temple of Apollo and the new cult of Vesta were part of Augustus' domestic cults and were thus private, not public. This did, however, change the ties between the

⁹³ F.A. Sirianni (1984) and J.R. Johnson (1976, 1978) argue that it was a forgery at least in part, see J. Crook (1989) for the opposing view.

⁹⁴ *Res Gestae* 11.

⁹⁵ So that he would not have to move from his house on the Palatine to the *regia*, an official building by the aedes Vestae. See Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 101.

⁹⁶ Scholars who have claimed that Augustus made part of his house public and thereby turned his private household cult into a public one: Wissowa 1912, 77; Taylor 1931, 183ff, generally accepted by later scholars, e.g. Liebeschuetz 1979, 70; restated by Fraschetti 1990, 358ff, Fishwick, *Historia* 1990, 478; Gradel 2002, 115-116; Beard, North, and Price 191.

⁹⁷ Ov. *Fast.* 4.949ff.

public hearth and his family cult. The treatment of the goddess Vesta by Augustus shows a move away from the concepts of being tied to the earth as articulated above by Pliny; Vesta could have her shrine moved from the Forum to the Palatine with no apparent violation of her rites. Augustus managed to change the way in which Vesta was envisioned, and created a new association between the goddess and the figure of the emperor.

Concurrently, Augustus also increased the Vestals' social power. He assigned special seats to the Vestals at the games, and ensured that they received the same rights that other women gained under his *ius trium liberorum* of 18 CE.⁹⁸ This is also the period in which they gained a lictor.⁹⁹ Augustus entrusted his own will to the Vestals.¹⁰⁰ These acts served as an official propaganda doctrine; Ovid describes Augustus as a relative of Vesta,¹⁰¹ Virgil emphasizes the importance of Vesta to Augustus and his ancestors.¹⁰² Mentions of this relationship also occur in Propertius,¹⁰³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus,¹⁰⁴ and other writings of Ovid.¹⁰⁵ This doctrine increased the power that the Vestals had, but only by virtue of Augustus' granting of it. The Vestals did not win these rights for themselves, but received them from Augustus, who enjoyed the appearance of Vestal concern for his family.¹⁰⁶

Augustus' joining the political and the social realms can also be viewed from the religious and political standpoint. Feldherr's work on sacrifice and *imperium*, from a larger work specific to Livy's *History*, explores the necessity of both religious and political behavior.¹⁰⁷ The importance of Augustus' increase in religious power via the Vestal Virgins contrasts his

⁹⁸ Plut. *Num.* 10.5; Dio 56.10.2.

⁹⁹ Cassius Dio 47.19.4, Plut. *Num.* 10.

¹⁰⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 1.8.

¹⁰¹ *Fasti* 3.423-426.

¹⁰² *Aeneid* 2.296, 567.

¹⁰³ 4.4.69.

¹⁰⁴ 2.65.2.

¹⁰⁵ *Metamorphoses* 15.730-731, *Fasti* 3.29.

¹⁰⁶ E.g., Vestals put in charge of the cult of the deified Livia, Cassius Dio 60.5.2.

¹⁰⁷ *Spectacle and Society in Livy's History*, 155-164.

comparatively modest gains in political power. Livy does attach religious and political behaviors in significant ways, beginning naturally with Numa, legendary second king of Rome. Livy claims that Numa decided to establish *metus deorum*¹⁰⁸ as a substitute for military discipline.¹⁰⁹ The social utility of religious rituals is established early on in Livy's mind, which may be a result of his knowledge of Augustus' policies at this time. For instance, Livy hints that Augustus was following in Numa's steps when he closed the Gates of Janus, which Numa established, and brought peace to land and sea.¹¹⁰ Numa is also credited with building the first *aedes Vestae* in the Forum.¹¹¹ Considering the fact that Augustus also built a new shrine to Vesta in his own home, I believe that Augustus conscientiously patterned at least part of his official image after the achievements of Numa. In order to suit his own need to appear more concerned for religion than for amassing dictatorial power, Augustus asserted greater control over religious affairs.

The other Julio-Claudians followed Augustus' example of expression their power through the Vestals. Tiberius placed Augusta in the Vestal box at the games and thus linked the Vestals to the imperial family, and he also increased the sum given on a Vestal's entry to the order¹¹² to two million sesterces.¹¹³ By showing reverence for the Vestals, he in turn increased the image of his own piety and respect for the care of the Roman state. He even allegedly gave one million sesterces as a consolation prize to a rejected Vestal candidate.¹¹⁴ Caligula gave Vestal privileges to his grandmother and three sisters,¹¹⁵ showing that Vestals were granted more power than an imperial woman, since the imperial members were the ones who received the status of Vestals

¹⁰⁸ "Fear of the gods."

¹⁰⁹ Feldherr 155 discussing Livy 1.19.4.

¹¹⁰ Livy 1.19.3.

¹¹¹ See Scott, "Excavations in the Area of Sacra Vesta: Final Report," 356 for evidence that several phases of construction exist, dating as far back as the late 7th century BCE.

¹¹² Livy 1.20.3, Numa "*ut adsiduae templi antistites essent, stipendium de publico statuit*" (in order that they might be perpetual priestesses, he assigned a public stipend to them).

¹¹³ Tac., *Ann.*, 4.16.

¹¹⁴ Tac., *Ann.*, 4.16.

¹¹⁵ PIR (Prosopographia Imperil Romani) 319.

and not the other way around. In this way, Caligula slightly increased the imperial family's women to the same status as Vestals. Claudius also designated the Vestals as the officials responsible for the cult of Augusta,¹¹⁶ rather than appointing a new priesthood as with the cult of Divus Augustus.¹¹⁷ By giving the Vestals more responsibilities, Claudius amplified the Vestals' presence and relevance at Rome. Claudius' wife Messalina asked the chief Vestal, Vibidia, to appeal to Claudius to give her a hearing when her affair had been exposed.¹¹⁸ Vibidia was successful in acquiring a trial for Messalina, although the outcome of the hearing was probably guaranteed.¹¹⁹

Nero also invited the Vestals to athletic contests, although his reasons may have been to increase the prestige of Ceres and her priestesses, who were particularly important to him, by association.¹²⁰ On a separate note Nero also raped the Vestal Rubia according to Suetonius.¹²¹ However, if the account is truthful, this too would have demonstrated the power over the Vestals that Nero wished to show. All the Julio-Claudians expressed power through their interactions with the Vestals in order to increase the prestige of a certain person or group close to the emperor. They accomplished this by creating the sense that the Vestals in some way approved of such people or groups. This treatment shows the fact that Augustus likely realized first, namely that the Vestals were at the heart of what it meant to be a Roman. As long as the Vestals appeared to give their approval to new customs, the people would accept them.

During the year of the four emperors and through the reigns of Vespasian and Titus, the Vestals recede back into their old roles, out of the political scene. The two recorded actions that

¹¹⁶ Cassius Dio 60.5.2., Suetonius, *Claudius*, 25.5

¹¹⁷ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 102.

¹¹⁸ Tacitus, *Annales*, 11.34. The Vestal was involved because Claudius was the Pontifex Maximus.

¹¹⁹ Tacitus, *Annales*, 11.38, Messalina senses her fate, and kills herself (with the help of the tribune).

¹²⁰ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 103.

¹²¹ Suet., *Nero*, 28.1

occur between the death of Nero and the death of Vespasian were both minimal. First, as mentioned above, the Vestals attempted to intercede unsuccessfully for the life of Vitellius with Vespasian's general, Antoninus.¹²² Second, the Vestals helped dedicate the Capitol after its rebuilding.¹²³ Neither reflects the high political involvement that occurred earlier, nor is there much evidence that either Vespasian or Titus attempted to follow the Julio-Claudian model of using the Vestals to gain acceptance by the Roman people. There are two coins issued, one in 73 and one in 80/81 that do portray the Vestals, however, which may indicate that the Vestals were still held in high regard.¹²⁴ The earlier trend among the imperial family was increasing the importance of Vestals in order to show religious power. Vespasian instead focused on public munificence, namely the building of the Flavian Amphitheater. Vespasian's move perhaps shows that the Vestals returned to symbolic and religious figures by his time.

However, under Domitian, the most interesting events that have enormous implications for an understanding of the Vestals occur. Wildfang suggests that, based on the accounts of Suetonius and Pliny, the Vestals had in fact broken with the requirement of chastity during this time. The argument hinges upon the comment of Suetonius that "the *incestum* of the Vestals, which had been overlooked by his father and brother Vespasian and Titus, Domitian punished variously and severely."¹²⁵ This may provide a reason for the Vestals' decrease in political power under Vespasian—perhaps they agreed to stay politically inactive in exchange for more personal freedom. On the other hand, Pliny's account Pliny, H. Parker claims, "hated Domitian, was deeply suspicious of his motives for attacking the Vestal, and denounced the illegality of her trial and execution, could not bring himself to believe that the charge was utterly without

¹²² Tac., *Hist.*, 3.81.

¹²³ Tac., *Hist.*, 4.53.

¹²⁴ See Plates 3 and 4 for 73 CE, and 5 and 6 for 80/81.

¹²⁵ Suet., *Dom.*, 8.3.

foundation.”¹²⁶ Let it be noted, however, that Wildfang reads the same account in a very different way, suggesting that “it sounds as if the letter writer would like to be able to claim that her burial alive was yet another unjustified act on the part of Domitian, but recognizes that there may well have been some truth to the accusations.”¹²⁷ Both readings may tell us more about the mindset of the authors than Pliny, Domitian, or Cornelia, but each has an important subtext—no one ever knew if a Vestal was guilty, but her condemnation was dependent on the power of the accuser.

In the case of Domitian, the same power over religion that the Julio-Claudians demonstrated was taken to a new extreme in the opposite way. Through the Vestals, whose sexuality was connected to their religious power and status, Domitian also expressed further condemnation of sexual behavior. Vinson suggests that “Domitian’s punishment of the Vestals... represents but one side of the coin which on its reverse displays his political repression of the Roman elite.”¹²⁸ Domitian’s condemnation of the three Vestals in 83 CE shows his uncompromising readiness and capability to exert power over religion, and even morality as a whole, at Rome. Because of the severity of his actions, Domitian also displays incredible power over all Rome, elite or not. Additionally, the connection of the Vestals back to the hearths of private citizens made every Roman family vulnerable and at the mercy of the emperor. Domitian’s series of executions in 83 is followed by a long period without any convictions; the next known occurrence is in 213, under Caracalla¹²⁹ and out of the purview of this particular paper.

This concludes the discussion of the changing power dynamics between the Vestals and the heads of state. Depending on the individual Vestal and on the ruler, the relationship could

¹²⁶ “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?,” 576. In reference to Pliny, *Epist.* 4.11.

¹²⁷ *Rome’s Vestal Virgins*, 105.

¹²⁸ Vinson, “Domitia Longina, Julia Titi, and the Literary Tradition,” 447.

¹²⁹ Cassius Dio 77.16, Herodian, *Roman History*, 4.6.

transform unexpectedly and for reasons that remain obscure to modernity. The dialogue between the Vestals and the Roman people likewise changed over time, but because the main writers of this time were among the upper classes, this conversation is even less clear. The Vestals were liable to the control of the people, in particular through the events of 143 BCE. However, the attitudes toward the Vestals and the perception of Vestal power became more positive through the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Principate. In some cases, the Vestals were able to win and express political and social power. However, as the empire grew, the Vestal order became the medium through which an emperor could express his own power over religion and the behavior of individual Romans.

III. Theory

While the first two sections have argued that the Vestals have been alternately vessels and agents of particular power, the final third is dedicated to the exploration of Roman consciousness and how power and location relate. This section shows that Vestal power was contingent upon Roman social consciousness, using the events of 114/113 BCE as an example. The underlying premise of this particular episode is that the Vestals either expressed their political opinions by willfully casting off the requirement of chastity, or were perceived as doing so. In placing the dynamics of power in the context of a Roman consciousness, I show that the Vestals gained power by their unique religious and political positions. The Vestals became living embodiments of Rome, moving into a new social geographic location. The elite members in the second and first centuries BCE realized that the support of the Vestals could be extremely valuable. Accordingly, the Roman consciousness began to change its perception of the Vestals, granting them legal and political concessions.

It is important to localize this example to 114/113 BCE because it is the period in which the motives for the actors is most transparent. This particular approach first imagines a “Roman consciousness,” according to Bataille’s definition of consciousness, which imagined or deconstructed the power of the Vestals. This connection locates the role of Vestals as ritual substitutes, as per R. Girard’s theory on sacrifice, in the social consciousness of Rome in 114/113 BCE. When located, it is then possible to view the connection between the social atmosphere at Rome to the expectation of social violence arising from a culture of constant warfare. This analysis provides a close cross-section of a series of events concentrated in a small amount of time in order to provide a focused perspective on why the Vestals in 114/113 were convicted and executed. This is a small sample of the analyses available to modern scholars who examine religious, political, and social relationships in the appropriate historical context.

Bataille wrote, “A clan, a city, a state are like persons, beings in possession of a single consciousness... which is a field of concentration, the ill-defined field of a concentration which is never complete, never closed.”¹³⁰ Rome has its own consciousness, as an aggregate environment that its people influenced and could be influenced by, whose minute details are indiscernible. But it is possible to perceive the relationship between the consciousness of Rome and the behavior of the Vestals, for instance, as Wildfang and Bauman suggest occurred in 114/113 BCE. In that instance, perhaps Vestals were encouraged by the changing social environment to rebel in the name of changing the traditional requirement of chastity. However, society at large determined that their actions, if they indeed existed, were unacceptable, and demanded punishment. The reaction is not surprising, but the fact that the people successfully exerted power over the pontiffs and thus the Vestals is indicative of the contemporary power relationship.

¹³⁰ *Theory of Religion*, 62.

This rejection of the Vestals' actions led to a reinforcement of the power assertion that the people needed to feel secure. However, the simplicity of this statement obscures the particular motivations for the original use of the Vestals as sacrifices. Bataille describes the divisions between sacred and profane, remarking, "undoubtedly, what is sacred attracts and possesses an incomparable value, but at the same time it appears vertiginously dangerous for that clear and profane world where mankind situates its privileged domain."¹³¹ This provides a perspective on the situation that emphasizes that the Vestals were marked as ritual outsiders, from hairstyle to legal and social statuses. The outsider is an ideal sacrificial victim, according to R. Girard, but the victim must also be similar enough to create a sympathetic force.¹³² Bataille, in considering the "intimate" world, states that "intimacy is violence, and it is destruction... but, if sacrifice is distressing, the reason is that the individual takes part in it."¹³³ Thus, the religious functions of the Vestals as outsiders also assisted the argument against allowing them to express power in this case. The unique liminal status of the Vestals made it highly unlikely for the Roman consciousness at the time to accept political power expressions from a religion-based minority.

The connection between the sacrificial victim and those involved with the sacrificial process serves as the basis of the sacredness of the ritual. Without the march through the forum, with her own family along mourning as though in a funeral procession, reestablishing the Vestal's connection to the citizens, the ritual would not matter, it would not effuse the whole city in sadness.¹³⁴ In such a way, the city consciousness is reminded that the Vestals were the daughters of their citizens and were once a part of their families. It is this pathos-inspiring

¹³¹ *Theory of Religion*, 36.

¹³² *Violence and the Sacred*, 39.

¹³³ *Theory of Religion*, 51.

¹³⁴ Suet., *Numa*, 10.6-7, Dion. Hal., *Rom. Ant.*, 2.67.4-5.

display that allows the Vestal to fully shift into the realm of “sacrificial victim”— in a way, she is already dead, already mourned. There is no record of her family remaining at her burial site until she eventually starved or suffocated to death. The trials of 114/113 BCE demonstrated the vicious social need for a reinforcement of normal, familiar, and traditional social structures.

The demand for the Vestals’ deaths was an expression of the constantly shifting struggle for power at Rome, perpetuated through militant imperialism, bloody combat in arenas, and moral policing. The power dynamic typically manifested in highly violent ways; many veterans and deserters became bandits throughout the empire, noted in the records of Juvenal, although a satirist, as well as Pliny the Younger.¹³⁵ Additionally, in response to crime, Roman punishment was highly visible; crucifixions lining the highways, gallows at crossroads, and executions carried out in the arena.¹³⁶ Jackman describes several motivations for social violence, but the applicable one here is the incidental occurrence of violence in the pursuit of another goal. In the case of 114/113 BCE, the violence occurred as a result of the assertion of the peoples’ power. The expression of power over religion and female behavior did reassure the social consciousness at Rome. Conversely, in the cases in 73 BCE, the Roman consciousness no longer perceived the Vestals as powerless. The elite perceived the Vestals as valuable and a relationship, apparently based in land and money, formed and empowered both sides. The Vestals of 73 BCE were acquitted, and the people accepted the judgment, even though the state was facing many perils.¹³⁷

The instability inherent to human civilization prompted a desire to ensure the safety of the community, thus the Roman obsession with the safekeeping of the sacred objects in the

¹³⁵ Study on bandits: Shaw, “Bandits in the Roman Empire,” *Past and Present* 105 (1984): 3-52. Juvenal, *Sat.* 3.288-301 describes graphic muggings in Rome’s streets at night; Pliny, *Epist.*, 6.25 reports people who had disappeared travelling through Italy.

¹³⁶ Not the scope of this paper, but see Coleman, “The Contagion of the Throng,” 65-88 for a good start.

¹³⁷ As discussed on pages 18-19.

storehouse of the Vestals and the sacred virginity of young, elite girls.¹³⁸ In order to protect the fertility of all animals, the Vestal had to be pure; the discussion above on the role of scapegoat or human sacrifice is highly relevant. When Roman society felt threatened, it sought to reassert its power in whatever ways it could, which resulted in the violence against the Vestals for the good of the community. The punishment of Vestals may also have been motivated by beneficial intentions for the victim herself, providing a way for the Vestal to continue her service to Vesta and the Roman state even in her contradictory state. The other reason, violence simply as a by-product, may have acted as the justification in the event of an attempt by plebeians to assert a claim over religious power. Perhaps all three desires, for community, for the Vestal herself, and for a statement of power, played a role in the decisions to condemn the Vestals in 114/113 BCE.

These motivations are not mutually exclusive, and it is indeed possible that the actions of 114/113 BCE were a result of different entities pushing for the same result. In other words, while the social consciousness of Rome may have been difficult to read, the expectation and desire for violence precipitated the trials, and perhaps the verdicts, of the Vestals in 114/113. Jackman also theorizes that there are different kinds of violence; for instance, the violence of revolting slaves or bandits is harshly put down, whereas the violence inherent to warfare, expansion, and gladiatorial shows was intensely admired.¹³⁹ This confusion of socially acceptable and unacceptable violence leads to an obfuscation of when precisely it changes from one to the other. The early Vestal Virgins were largely at the mercy of the social atmosphere of Rome, and perhaps feeling threatened by the populace, the later Vestals may have been driven to foster their political relationships, thereby decreasing their expendability and amassing resources to fight against a charge of *incestum*.

¹³⁸ For this desire to benefit society as well as the following two motivations, see Jackman, "Social Violence," 400-401.

¹³⁹ "Social Violence," 403.

In conclusion, the power and perception of the Vestals was highly dependent upon changing social consciousness at Rome. The Vestals' liminality was the basis for both their immense gains in power in the first century BCE as well as for their susceptibility to accusations of impropriety. As outsiders, the Vestals alternately gained and lost power as the Roman consciousness shifted. The changes that occurred through the transition of government may have made the city's consciousness extreme in its perceptions of power. These extremes are demonstrated in the stark differences between 114/113 BCE and 73 BCE. By 73 BCE, the people felt more threatened personally and allowed the defenses of great men to stand. The complexity of the power dynamics further shows through in the decline of the political involvement of both the people and the Vestals through the early Empire. In the end, the Roman consciousness continued to perceive power in different ways for different people. The Vestals became symbols of Rome with social and political significance, thus gaining powers in those areas. The Vestals also became assimilated with mainstream Roman consciousness under the rule of the Emperors. When power became localized in such a way, the Vestals were no longer the out group, but rather, a similarly oppressed group that the people identified with. Even as the Vestals represented Rome, Rome became less and less vital to the Roman Empire. Precisely as the perceived power of the Vestals peaked and dwindled, so too did the Eternal city.

List of Plates:

Plate 1: Vesta with a veil over her diadem



Plate 2: Togate male voting, about to drop a tablet (ballot) into a cista



This coin was issued by Lucius Cassius Longinus in the year 63 BCE. Boston 32.746 (Coin) at Perseus Digital Library. Sources used: BMCRR I, 494, no. 3934; pl. 49.6; RRC no. 413.

Plate 3: Vespasian with laurels



Plate 4: Vesta in her Temple, flanked by statues of two female figures



Issued by Vespasian in 73. Boston 1975.779 (Coin) at Perseus Digital Library. Sources used:
 BMCRE II, 21, no. 107.

Plate 5: Julia Titi



Plate 6: Vesta seated with palladium and scepter



Senate-issued dupondius dated to 80/81. Boston 1997.94 (Coin) from Perseus Digital Library.
 Sources used: BMCREII, 279, no. 257.

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