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The Veiled Exploitation of the Vestal Virgins

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L. Keldorf

History 101: Period 1

8 November 2017

The Political Exploitation of the Vestal Virgins

Research Question: To what extent was the religious aspect and perceived empowerment of the Vestal Virgins a charade?

“I shall increase and grow ever more famous, so long as the priest
and the silent Virgin solemnly climb to the Capitol,” (Horace. *Ode*.

3.30.8-9)

Ancient Rome was a systematically patriarchal society. Decisions concerning women and their lives were under the jurisdiction of their male guardians as stipulated by the laws of *paterfamilias*, and as a result women were essentially invisible and voiceless (Wasson 3). There was nothing particularly powerful about being a Roman woman. They had no agency, they could not participate in affairs of the state, and they were virtually confined to their households (Wasson). However, there was one highly selective group of six women who lived lives of spectacle and influence. These were the Vestal Virgins, and they were arguably the most powerful women in Rome (DiLuzio 120). The Vestals were the priestesses of the cult of Vesta, Vesta being the goddess of the hearth. These religious figures had an omnipresence in Roman religion and consequently society (Roberts 4). Yet to characterize these women as simply religious figures would be a gross trivialization of the vast influence and role of the Vestals in nearly every feature of the Roman state. The Vestal Virgins were a political tool operating under

the charade of religion that demonstrate Rome's ability to build public spectacles and use them for the purpose of maintaining power and preserving traditional Roman values.

The Vestal Virgins enjoyed a lengthy existence. The priesthood developed from Etruscan religious traditions (Roberts 2), and it was sustained through the rise and fall of the seven kings, the shift from Etruscan to Roman, the Punic Wars, and the shift from Republic to Empire (Mark, "Ancient Rome"). The cult of Vesta is said to have developed in the 8th century BCE during the reign of the semi-mythical king Numa Pompilius (Mark, "Vestal Virgin"). Numa Pompilius, the second of Rome's seven kings and successor of Romulus, is recognized as the founder of many of Rome's lasting religious traditions including the cult of Vesta and the position of *pontifex maximus*, or head priest, whom the Vestals worked with frequently ("Numa Pompilius"). The Vestal Virgins were prominent religious figures until Theodosius I banned the cult in 394 CE through his efforts to secure the dominance of Christianity in the Roman Empire (Mark, "Vestal Virgin").

To understand the Vestal Virgins and their position in Roman society one must be aware of their limitations, privileges, and duties. As the name suggests the Vestal Virgins were required to be chaste, like their patron goddess Vesta, who asked her brother, the god Jupiter, to, "Grant her the privilege of remaining a virgin," (Kroppenberg 418). Any Vestal who violated this condition was condemned to death (Plutarch). The Vestals' virginity represented the impenetrable status of the Roman state, therefore maintaining their virginity meant that the Vestals were protecting Rome and its people (Parker 567). Yet maintaining virginity was not the only duty of the Vestals that was taken to represent the safety and fortune of the Roman territory and people.

The primary duty of the Vestals was to keep the sacred flame of Vesta alight. The flame was the goddess Vesta's earthly representation, rather than a statue that one might find in a temple to any other god or goddess. The flame also represented the continuing prosperity in Rome, so its condition was paramount to the safety of Rome and its people (Greenfield). This flame was located in the temple of Vesta and its smoke was visible to the public. If the flame went out, the people would know (Roberts 67). The temple of Vesta was located in the Forum, the epicenter of Roman culture, politics, and religion (Mark, "Vestal Virgin"). Each inducted Vestal was expected to serve 30 years: ten in training, ten in service, and ten in training novice priestesses (Roberts 67). After this point, Vestals were permitted to leave the order and marry, though many stayed on in service (Plutarch). On the training and duties of the Vestal Virgins, Joshua M. Roberts writes in his masters thesis for Western Washington University, "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," (Roberts iv). The training that the Vestals underwent further established their role as a symbol in Roman society. They not only represented impenetrable Rome, they also represented the quintessential Roman.

Vestals were granted certain rights that were not available to other Roman women. These women were free from the control of a male guardian and could draft their own wills and conduct their own business affairs. If a person condemned to death met with a Vestal on their path to execution, they would be spared (Plutarch), and the mere presence of a Vestal was an assurance of nonviolence (Cadoux 164). Unlike other Roman women, Vestals could give public legal testimony, though they were never obligated to (Roberts 125). It is an undisputed fact that

the Vestal Virgins were a unique entity within Ancient Roman society, regardless of which sphere they happened to be operating in.

The Vestal Virgins' location in the Forum is indicative of their use as a political tool. David Watkin, author of *The Roman Forum*, writes that, "The Forum was established from the start as the political and symbolic centre of this Republican city state," (Watkin 20). Everything happened in the Forum, including the cremation of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony's famous "friends, Romans, countrymen" speech, and the assassination of the emperor Galba (Watkin II). It was also the meeting place for all manner of Roman citizens, from the very lowest to the most venerated and respected. Gladiatorial combats were held in the Forum, people peddled their wares, and prostitutes loitered (Watkin 13). It was truly the hub of the city and as Watkin puts it, "For the ancient Romans, the Forum was many things: market, exchange, tribunal, open-air public meeting hall, and setting for the sacrifices to the gods on which the stability of the state was believed to depend," (Watkin II). The Forum was the heart of Rome through which the lifeblood coursed.

Two significant events that could occur during a Vestal's life were conducted before the Forum. While ordinary women could not publicly testify with regard to legal matters, Vestals were permitted this privilege, though they were never obligated to give evidence (Kroppenberg 421). If a Vestal did choose to testify, she would typically do so in the Forum before senators and a crowd of onlookers (Roberts 125). If a Vestal was charged with and found guilty of unchastity, she would be paraded through the Forum prior to her execution by live burial (Cadoux 164). If a man was charged with and found guilty of having sex with a Vestal, he would be scourged (whipped to death ("Scourging." *Merriam-Webster*)) in the Forum by the *pontifex maximus* and

his servants (Cadoux 165). The outlandish manner of these events has contributed to the evident fascination in the world of academia with the legal status and public executions of the Vestal Virgins.

Matters regarding the Roman state were primarily conducted in the Forum, so the political significance of this location is vast. As David Watkin writes, “The Forum was a public space for a range of activities including political meetings, riots, gladiatorial combats and funerals,” (Watkin 20). According to Dr. Ellen Millender, professor of classics at Reed College, blood sports were a means by which Rome’s elite could gain political backing. Organizing these bloody spectacles was a way to cultivate reverence among the populace, which translated into political support (Millender). Political meetings were conducted on the steps of the four temples that were situated in the Forum (Watkin 13) and the senate met in the temples of the Forum (Watkin 15), though not the Temple of Vesta (Roberts 7). Amidst the lawmaking, the discourse of the political elite, the rioting of the body politic, and the spectacles for procuring political support resided the Vestal Virgins.

Even so, the Vestal Virgins were not an anomaly in a sea of political actors. The Vestals were as political as the senators they shared the Forum with. The Vestals could be used by the Roman state for various political purposes, including diplomacy. In an examination of the political role of the Vestal Virgins, Dr. Inge Kroppenber, professor of Roman Law at the University of Gottingen, writes:

They [the Vestal Virgins] were deployed on delicate diplomatic missions, often with the continued existence of the Roman state at risk. However, on these missions they did not have any influence or powers as regards the contents of the talks, but conveyed messages

and put forward petitions. Consequently, they were not politicians as such, although their appearance as a state symbol was highly political. An episode taken from the *historia augusta* illustrates just how big the symbolic potential of the *virgines Vestales* was. In AD 193, the senate contemplated sending Vestals to Septimius Severus to convince him to release the fleet he was holding. (Kroppenberg 421)

The symbolic political power of the Vestals in situations such as the above mentioned confirms that the Vestals were used as a political spectacle. The fact that they could not negotiate as politicians compels one to wonder why the Roman state wouldn't send messengers instead of these priestesses. But therein lies the use of the Vestals in politically charged situations. Sending the Vestals on a sensitive political mission proves the Vestals' use as a political spectacle. Deploying the Vestals emphasized Rome's determination with regard to the safety of the state, as the Vestals themselves were a representation of the intact status of Rome (Kroppenberg 419). The Roman state's uses of the Vestal Virgins was informed by the impression that could be cultivated through their appearances and actions.

It is vital to understand that the Vestal Virgins, though granted privileges not available to other women, were not empowered by any means. It is true that a Vestal was relieved from the control of her father but the control of her father was replaced with control by the state. In this way, part of a Vestal's humanity was eliminated as she became an instrument of political significance. In Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae*, he describes the ceremony in which a Vestal was transferred from the control of her father to the control of the state. He writes, "The word 'taken' is used, so it seems, because the Pontifex Maximus literally takes her by the hand and leads her away from the parent in whose power she is, as though she had been captured in war," (Gellius).

The “taking” of the girls is reminiscent of the capture of the Sabine women upon the founding of Rome, and by reviving this cultural memory the Roman state established the Vestal Virgins as symbols rather than individuals (Roberts 89). This ritualistic and violent act is the beginning of the process of transforming young girls into the politicized spectacles that were the Vestal Virgins.

The presence of the Vestal Virgins would have been evident in the Forum. Each day, they could be seen crossing the Forum to fetch water to clean the *aedes Vestae*, their temple and home (Roberts 81). If a citizen brought an offering to the goddess Vesta, they would have been met outside the temple by the Vestals as non-religious figures were typically banned from entrance to the temple of Vesta (DiLuzio 206). According to Kroppenberg the public appearances by the Vestal Virgins would have been, “Virtually orchestrated, for instance by the fact that lictors would accompany her outside the sacred precinct, that consuls and praetors made way for her and lowered their *fascēs* before her,” (Kroppenberg 420). A lictor typically accompanied chief magistrates on public expeditions, but these officials were also detailed to accompany Vestals (“Lictor.” *Merriam-Webster*). The garb of a Vestal was certain to set her apart from everyone else present in the Forum. The Vestals wore white robes that were exclusive to elite Roman matrons, and a distinctive braided hairstyle (Roberts 59). The spectacular nature of the Vestal Virgins’ appearance made these already public figures immensely conspicuous in the bustling rabble of the Forum.

The legal status of the Vestal Virgins and their cult is indicative of their position as a political spectacle. With regard to their duties, “The state religious tasks of a *virgo Vestalis* were regulated by (constitutional) law. Therefore, her duties were not confined exclusively to the

religious sphere (*fas*),” (Kroppenberg 427). The formal legal sanctioning of the Vestal Virgins’ religious duties blurs the line between religion and government, and establishes the Vestals as a political entity. One of the Vestals’ duties was an annual rekindling of the flame in their temple. The ritual involved, “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,” and this spectacle served as a pledge to the people of the continuing vigilance of the Vestals (Roberts 84). The emphasis on obligation to the people and the publicly demonstrative nature of this event are reminiscent of a politician taking office. That this event occurred in the Forum is more evidence that the Vestal Virgins were a political entity used by the Roman state as a spectacle with which to influence the people.

Every facet of a Vestal Virgin was at the disposal of the Roman state, including her life (Greenfield). Livy records the execution of a Vestal in a time of crisis in his book *The History of Rome*. The book details Hannibal’s advance towards Rome and the destruction he left in his wake. Livy writes of the mounting terror and grief as lists of those killed by Hannibal were published. Amidst all of this, “Two Vestal virgins, Opimia and Floronia, were found guilty of unchastity. One was buried alive, as is the custom, at the Colline Gate, the other committed suicide,” (Livy). The correlation between the conviction of Opimia and Floronia and Hannibal’s approach towards Rome is evidence of the Roman state’s use of the Vestals as a spectacle for the promotion of a political objective, the objective in this case being creating a scapegoat or, “pharmakos/pharmakon,” (Parker 563) for Hannibal’s success in overcoming Rome’s attempts to stem his advance. Executing these prominent priestesses was a very public way for Rome to placate its people, and this action confirms that the Vestals were used as a political tool.

The exclusive nature of the cult of Vesta confirms the priesthood's use as a political tool and is evidence of how the Vestals maintained power and traditional values in Rome. Being Rome's only significant, recognized, female religious cult (Wildfang ix), becoming a part of the cult of Vesta was a great honor and a rare option for women. To make the cult even more exclusive, entrance was typically only available to Rome's elite families (DiLuzio 10). The requirements to be considered for the position were strict. A girl must be between six and ten years old. She must have no verbal, auditory, or physical defects. Both parents must be alive and citizens of Rome. And furthermore, her guardian must be her father, not another male relative (Gellius). She should also be from an aristocratic family, specifically of patrician lineage (Greenfield). These extensive prerequisites significantly decreased the numbers of qualified candidates.

The Vestal Virgins gave their families an avenue into higher spheres of political influence. The Vestals' relationship to the *pontifex maximus* gave their families an opportunity to mix with the religious elite, and the Vestals' proximity to Rome's political hub gave their families an in with the political elite (Kroppenberg 420). With regard to royal relationship, the Vestals, "Maintained close personal relationships with the imperial household. On one hand this originated from the fact that the Vestals were recruited from families of a higher social standing," (Kroppenberg 420). In 12 BCE when the emperor Augustus made himself *pontifex maximus*, he attached his personal home to the *aedes Vestae*, the home and temple of the Vestals (Roberts 9). The mingling of the Vestals with the political and monarchical powers of Rome further blurs the line of religion and politics. The cult of Vesta allowed for the Roman nobility to cultivate a tight network of political influence and exclusivity.

The evolution of patrician interest in volunteering daughters to the cult of Vesta further illustrates the political nature of the Vestals. The *Lex Papia*, a third century BCE code of law, initially required there to be 20 eligible applicants when there was demand for a new Vestal (Kroppenberg 427). During the Roman Republic, there was no shortage of prospective candidates as noble families willingly offered their daughters to the priesthood (Cadoux 163). The 20 eligible applicants were evaluated by an informal people's assembly called a *contio*. But as Rome shifted to an empire, noble families became reluctant to volunteer their daughters to the priesthood as marriageable daughters became more politically valuable. Essentially, the political value of a marriage became greater than the political value of a daughter in the cult of Vesta (Kroppenberg 427).

Although the Vestal Virgins have been inactive for more than 1,600 years, their influence on society in the modern West abides. The cult of Vesta is the prototype for the bond between religion and politics, a bond that politicians continue both to struggle against and to uphold. This system constructed by the Roman state that blurs the line between religion and politics has defined myriad global conflicts for hundreds of years. Secularism was a principal objective for the United States' founding fathers. Secularism was a hot-button issue for philosophers of the 20th century. Furthermore, in terms of gender expectations, the Vestal Virgins represent the paradigm of female roles accepted in Western society. Emphasis on chastity infiltrated the Christian church and therefore European society. Chastity has been woven into the western construct of an ideal woman. The Vestal Virgins may have been six women watching over a fire in one unassuming temple, but they set the groundwork for the political and social systems that rule the modern world.

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