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The Vestal Virgins and the Transition From Republic to Principate Under Augustus c. 30 BCE - 14 CE

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The Vestal Virgins and the Transition From Republic to Principate under Augustus

c. 30 BCE - 14 CE

By

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science

in

University Honors

and

the History Department

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THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, ancient historians have been intrigued by the Vestal Virgins, a priestess order older than Rome itself that was dedicated to Vesta, Roman goddess of the hearth. From our ancient sources we can glean that the cult, though shrouded in mystery, was regarded as playing an invaluable role in the prosperity of Rome and notions of what it meant to be Roman. Scholars such as Mary Beard and Ariadne Staples have been pioneers in studies of the Vestals, proposing the widely accepted theories that the Vestals served as physical embodiments of republican values, Roman people, and the city of Rome itself. Operating until the mid-4th century CE, the Vestal Virgins would continue to serve Vesta throughout the civil war, the fall of the republic, the advent of the principate, and centuries of monarchical rule. This paper seeks to understand how and why, particularly in the context of Augustus' reign. How is it that such a robust republican institution was preserved during the transition to autocratic rule, and what allowed for this to happen? Answering these questions will allow us to gain a deeper understanding of Augustus' political strategy, but also the ideological significance of the Vestal Virgins.

Key terms: Vestal Virgins, Augustus, Republic, Principate, Religion, Continuity, Change

I. Introduction

The Vestal Virgins were a priestess order of Ancient Rome dedicated to Vesta, goddess of the hearth, whom Ovid called *custos flammae*, or keeper of the flame.¹ Formally established in Rome by Pompilius Numa between the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, the cult operated into the 4th century CE before being banned by Christian emperor Theodosius in 394.² The main shrine to Vesta was her round temple located in the Roman forum, next to which stood the residence of the Vestals—the *Atrium Vestae*. Vesta's temple housed Rome's sacred hearth, and access inside was strictly restricted to the priestesses tasked with tending it. The innermost part of the temple, the *penus* (pantry), stored sacred cult objects such as the Trojan *Palladium* (a protective cult statue) and the *fascinum*.³ It is noteworthy that Vesta was rarely anthropomorphized like other gods, and her temple did not house any kind of dedicatory cult statue of her image. For Romans, the spirit and iconography of the goddess was manifested in her sacred hearth and the priestesses who devoted their lives to tending it.

The term of service for a Vestal Virgin was highly structured and cyclical, ensuring a smooth succession of priestesses. Six women composed the order, each of whom served for thirty years; during a Vestal's first ten years she learned her duties, during her second ten years she performed them, and in her final ten years she instructed the next generation of Vestals.⁴ The Vestal Virgins played a vital role in numerous state religious festivals, including the *Fordicidia* on 15 April, the *Argei* on 14 May, the *Consualia* on 21 August, the *Opiconsivia* on 25 August,

¹ Ov. *Fast.* 6.258.

² *BNP* s.v. Vesta

³ Ov. *Trist.* 3.1.29; Pliny *NH* 28.39; *OCD* s.v. Vesta; and *OCD* s.v. Palladium. A Palladium was a statue or cult object that guaranteed the protection of a city. According to legend, the Trojan Palladium fell from the sky and was eventually rescued by Aeneas. The safety of Troy was thought to depend on who possessed the Trojan Palladium, which took the form of a small wooden carving of Athena. According to Gordon, the *fascinum* was an erect phallus that averted evil.

⁴ Lora L. Holland, "Women and Roman Religion," in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, ed. S.L. James and S. Dillon (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 208.

and the rites of Bona Dea on 3 December.⁵ Though Vestal Virgins took on various religious and ceremonial roles, they were best known for their preparation of *mola salsa*, a sacrificial substance used notably during the Lupercalia, the Vestalia, and on the Ides of September.⁶ *Mola salsa* was the Vestals' main ritual contribution, but it was so much more than mere ground flour and salt. *Mola salsa* was used in every public animal sacrifice, at the critical *Immolatio* stage of the ritual, described by Caroline Tully (2008) as:

... the point of actual sacrifice, the critical moment of the ritual when the animal was transferred to the ownership of the gods and it was at this moment that the sacrifice became, or failed to become, *litatio* (accepted or rejected by the god). It was the application of *mola salsa* that performed the transformatory action, the sacralising of the ritual offerings, making the bridge between mortals and the gods.⁷

Most Vestals who were inducted into the cult were between the ages of 6 and 13 and came from families of senatorial rank. A Vestal candidate had to be unblemished both physically and socially; both her parents had to be living, neither could be divorced, and the Vestal herself had to be free of any disabilities or physical deformities.⁸ As soon as a Vestal was selected to join the order, she left the control of her father and was "taken" by the chief priest, or Pontifex Maximus, in a ritual known as the *captio*.⁹ Upon the *captio* rite, Vestals immediately left paternal control, entered into the care of their fellow priestesses, and were emancipated without any limitation to their rights. This meant that the Vestals were freed from *patria potestas* without undergoing *capitis deminutio*, a diminished legal position marked by one of three changes in

⁵ *OEAGR* s.v. Vesta and the Vestal Virgins; *BNP* s.v. Argei; *OCD* s.v. Ops; *OCD* s.v. Bona Dea. The significance of the *Argei* festival is unclear, but we know it involved Vestals throwing "dolls in the form of humans made out of rush straw" into the Tiber (Versnel & Eisenhut). *Opiconsivia* was a festival honoring *Ops Consiva*, who was the "personification of abundance" and the "reserved portion of the harvest" (Schied). The main rite of the Bona Dea was an annual nocturnal ceremony; though held at the house of a chief magistrate, men were strictly excluded from the ceremony, which was performed in secret by the women of the magistrate's family and the Vestal Virgins (North). See page 8 for information about the *Fordicidia* and the *Consualia*.

⁶ *OEAGR* s.v. Vesta and the Vestal Virgins.

⁷ Caroline Tully, "Mola Salsa: Sacred Flour from the Hearth of Rome's Vestal Virgins," *Academia* (2008).

⁸ Holt N. Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State," *AJPh* 125, no. 4 (2004): 571.

⁹ Gell. *NA* 1.12.

status, *deminutio capitis maxima*, *minor sive media*, or *minima*; these states respectively referred to a loss of freedom, a loss of citizenship, or a change in family affiliation.¹⁰

Most ordinary Romans, both men and women, were only freed from *patria potestas* with the death or *capitis deminutio* of the *pater*.¹¹ The Vestals, however, were freed immediately upon the *captio* and became a legal entity *sui iuris* without these preconditions.¹² Romans who were *sui iuris* (meaning “of one’s own right”) enjoyed full legal capacity and independence, and were able to act without a male overseer.¹³ The *captio* ritual did not just give Vestals the full range of rights and legal capabilities available to Romans, but it also awarded them extraordinary legal and social privileges. Plutarch, in his *Life of Numa Pompilius*, records that *lictors*—attendants who bore *fascēs* (a bundle of rods with an ax) and were generally granted to magistrates with *imperium*—accompanied the Vestals outside the sacred precinct.¹⁴ In addition, Vestals possessed a *testabilis* status, meaning they could give evidence in court, and had the right to make their own wills.¹⁵

In exchange, however, Vestals were required to take strict vows swearing to maintain their chastity and never let Rome’s sacred fire die out—with brutal repercussions if they failed to do so. Vestals could be accused of *incestus*, a malleable religious offense based on the sexual pollution of a *virgo*.¹⁶ Charges of *incestus* against Vestals took a host of different forms, but all

¹⁰ *BNP* s.v. *deminutio capitis*.

¹¹ *OEAGR* s.v. the Roman family. This was the case for women if they were in a marriage *sine manu*, which meant that they remained under their father’s paternal power after marriage. The other type of union was marriage *cum manu*, which meant that the woman passed into her husband’s *potestas* upon getting wed. Marriage *cum manu* was predominant in the Republican era, but by the first century BCE, marriage *sine manu* was preferred, because it gave women control over their own property upon their father’s death, which would likely be sooner than the death of their husband.

¹² Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 141.

¹³ Inge Kroppenber, “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins,” *Law and Literature* vol. 22, no. 3 (2010): 423.

¹⁴ Plut. *Num.* 10.3; *OEAGR* s.v. *imperium*. *Imperium* is a complex concept in Roman history, but can generally be understood as the military command of the highest officials in Rome.

¹⁵ Plut. *Num.* 10.3.

¹⁶ Kroppenber, “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins,” 428.

were met with violent punishment. Even minor *incestus* transgressions, such as dressing too provocatively or exhibiting licentious behavior ill-suited for a Vestal, were punishable by being stripped down naked and beaten in the dark.¹⁷

The worst offenses a Vestal Virgin could commit, however, were losing her virtue and allowing the sacred flame to extinguish—two acts which Romans regarded as intrinsically linked, regardless of the particular circumstances.¹⁸ If Vesta’s hearth was extinguished, it was considered “a dire omen as well as a preliminary indication of unchastity.”¹⁹ Accusations and proceedings against Vestals undeniably correlated with moments of political crisis. For instance, Vestals Opimia and Floronia were convicted of unchastity in 216 BCE after Rome’s defeat at Cannae; Vestals Aemilia, Licinia, and Marcia were accused of *incestus* in 114 BCE after the defeat of C. Porcius Cato’s army; and Vestal Fabia was tried for *incestus* in the wake of Catiline’s conspiracy in 73 BCE.²⁰ A Vestal convicted of *incestus* was thought to spell doom for the security of the Roman state, and served as a sign that all was not well with the state’s relationship with the gods—hence the brutal punishment for the crime: being buried alive near the Colline Gate.²¹

For centuries, the anomalous legal and social status of the Vestal Virgins has captured the attention of historians seeking to discern the cult’s wider meaning and significance. The Vestal Virgins possessed an entirely unique and ambiguous legal and sacred status that afforded them a great deal of autonomy, power, and accountability, while also serving a deep symbolic function

¹⁷ Plut. *Num.* 9.5-10; and Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins,” 581. Vestal Postumia was accused but acquitted for “dressing too well and being too clever” (Livy 4.44.11-12). Vestal Minucia was buried alive for the same charge in 337 BCE (Livy 8.15.7)

¹⁸ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins,” 574.

¹⁹ *OEAGR* s.v. Vesta and the Vestal Virgins.

²⁰ Livy 22.57 & 63; Sal. *Cat.* 15; and Kroppenberg, “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins,” 438.

²¹ Plut. *Num.* 9.5-10.

integral to the security of the state—but would this remain the case when the nature of the state transformed at the turn of the first century CE?

Born Gaius Octavius in 63 BCE, the future Augustus rose to power in the years following 44 BCE, when he was adopted by his assassinated uncle Julius Caesar and named his chief heir in his will. Between the years of 42 and 30 BCE, Augustus gained notoriety for his defeat of Brutus and Cassius, Sex. Pompeius, and Antony and Cleopatra. In 30 BCE, Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide, leaving Augustus “the undisputed master of the Roman world.”²² However, Augustus still had a host of problems in Rome that demanded his attention. The violence of the late Republic—civil and social wars, slave revolts, proscriptions, and land seizures—took a toll on many Romans.

According to Syme, whose view on Augustus’ political mind is still worth recognizing nearly a century later, Augustus needed to stabilize both his own position and the functioning state by devising a “formula” that would allow members of the governing class to “co-operate in maintaining the new order, ostensibly as servants of the Republic and heirs to a great tradition, not as mere lieutenants of a military leader or subservient agents of arbitrary power.”²³ We can observe two main ways in which the *princeps* did this: framing his actions as measures to restore the republic and “permitting and encouraging the initiatives of others” when it came to honors conferred on himself.²⁴

In January of 27 BCE, Augustus refused to take the position of dictator, later described in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (“the Achievements of the Deified Augustus”), a text published throughout the empire after Augustus’ death.

²² *OEAGR* s.v. Actium, Battle Of.

²³ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1939) 3.

²⁴ Karl Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor* (Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 169.

The dictatorship offered me by the people and the Roman Senate, in my absence and later when present, in the consulship of Marcus Marcellus and Lucius Arruntius I did not accept... The consulship, either yearly or for life, then offered me I did not accept.²⁵

His declaration was met with protests from the senators imploring him “not to abandon the commonwealth,” leading Augustus to assume an alternate role—one that consisted of powers given to him by the people:²⁶

When the Senate and the Roman people unanimously agreed that I should be elected overseer of laws and morals, without a colleague and with the fullest power, I refused to accept any power offered me which was contrary to the traditions of our ancestors. Those things which at that time the Senate wished me to administer I carried out by virtue of my tribunician power. And even in this office I five times received from the Senate a colleague at my own request.²⁷

This symbolic act of giving the republic back to the people is the foundation of Augustus’ rhetoric; as Syme puts it, by rejecting a dictatorship and instead assuming the role of *princeps*, the “first citizen” of Rome, “he had founded—or was soon to found—the Roman State anew.”²⁸ In a sense, Augustus *was* Romulus, and he may have even been called so if the name had not been associated with negative memories of the former king’s execution.²⁹

Augustus has been the subject of many historical biographies seeking to unpack his rhetoric, goals, success, and personal attributes. In his 2005 monograph, *Augustus Caesar*, David Shotter examines “the nature and circumstances” of Augustus’ achievements and how his “personality and political qualities” brought them about.³⁰ Organized thematically and chronologically, Shotter’s survey consists of nine sections ranging from “the crisis of the Roman republic” to the “legacy of Augustus.” Shotter argues that Augustus’ ultimate legacy was the

²⁵ Aug. RG 5.

²⁶ Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 313.

²⁷ Aug. RG 6; Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 313.

²⁸ Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 313.

²⁹ Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 314.

³⁰ David Shotter, *Augustus Caesar* (London: Routledge, 2005) 2.

stability he brought to the Roman world, which was marked by “a combination of institutional features introduced by Augustus and the ability of the *princeps* to guide and persuade through his personal *auctoritas*.”³¹ Through these means, Shotter concludes, “Augustus was able to proceed gradually along a path which led to reconstruction, but the nature of which suited his own temperament.”³²

Karl Galinsky’s well-reviewed 2012 introductory book on Augustus also examines the life and impact of the *princeps*, with abundant references to ancient literary and epigraphical sources throughout. Like Shotter, Galinsky acknowledges Augustus’ greatest achievement as the stability he brought to Rome through the principate, which would last over 200 years. For Galinsky, Augustus’ two main qualities that provided for his success were his “tenacity, combined with perseverance,” in terms of his mental stamina, and his “capacity to grow.”³³ Galinsky acutely sums up Augustus’ technique as a leader, which we will see influence the scope of this paper greatly: “His guiding policy, if we wish to call it that, was to reshape as well as remake. Hence, too, the constant blending of innovation and tradition that is one of the hallmarks of his reign.”³⁴

This paper will examine and build upon previous scholarly interpretations of the Vestals as physical embodiments of the Roman state and its populace, in the hopes of extending this analysis and applying it to a specific time frame: Augustus’ principate. If the Vestals symbolized the *res publica* and the transition from tyranny to law, how did they survive the reverse shift from republic to principate at the turn of the first century CE? Given what contemporary scholarship has shown concerning the symbolic meaning of the Vestals and the nature of Augustan rhetoric,

³¹ Shotter, *Augustus*, 97.

³² Shotter, *Augustus*, 98.

³³ Galinsky, *Augustus*, 185.

³⁴ Galinsky, *Augustus*, 185.

we must conclude that Augustus' relationship with the Vestals had a deeper meaning and significance beyond what's on the surface. Unearthing the larger purpose of Augustus' appeals to the Vestal Virgins will illuminate our understanding of the political utility of the priestesses and reveal how the robust republican institution survived—even thrived—throughout the imperial period.

II. Ancient and Modern Scholarship Concerning the Vestal Virgins

Before we can critically analyze the relationship between Augustus and the Vestal Virgins, it is necessary to conduct a more thorough examination of what modern scholars have to say concerning the Vestals themselves, the rites and origins of the cult, and how they were viewed by their fellow Romans. As stated, the Vestals have gripped the attention of scholars for centuries, but most of the questions that dominate contemporary discourse on the Vestal Virgins center around how we should interpret the mythical origins of the priestess order, the Vestals' rituals and privileges, the importance placed on the the priestesses' physically intact virginity, and what all these factors tell us about the cult's overall function. The scholarship to be discussed in this section offers interpretation and insight into the Vestal Virgins that will come to factor heavily in this paper's examination of the Vestals in the principate.

The origins of the Vestal Virgins are oftentimes traced all the way back to Rome's regal period. R.L. Wildfang, in her 2006 monograph *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, argues that the Vestals appear in numerous significant episodes in our ancient sources for the regal period, all of which connect to "Romans' understanding and construction of the origins of their own culture and identity."³⁵ The earliest Vestal that we have a record of is Rhea Silvia, the mother of Romulus and Remus. Ancient accounts of the legend of Romulus and Remus agree that Rhea Silvia, daughter of the deposed Alban king Numitor's daughter, was made a Vestal by her uncle to prevent her from having any sons. Livy writes,

Proca ruled next. He begat Numitor and Amulius; to Numitor, the elder, he bequeathed the ancient realm of the Silvian family. Yet violence proved more potent than a father's wishes or respect for seniority. Amulius drove out his brother and ruled in his stead. Adding crime to crime, he destroyed Numitor's male issue; and Rhea Silvia, his brother's daughter, he appointed a Vestal under

³⁵ R.L. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 76.

pretense of honoring her, and by consigning her to perpetual virginity, deprived her of the hope of children.³⁶

Despite her uncle's actions, Rhea Silvia was immaculately impregnated by the god Mars and gave birth to the man who would found Rome; thus, the Vestal order and its priestesses were conceived of as an integral part of the myth of Rome's founding.³⁷ Important to note in Livy's presentation, is that the priestess order clearly existed elsewhere prior to the founding of Rome, "only becoming 'Roman' after its arrival."³⁸ According to T.J. Cornell, quoted by Wildfang, the story carries a strong "ideological message" in the way it "defines the identity of the Roman people as a mixture of different ethnic groups, and of Roman culture as the product of various foreign influences."³⁹ Indeed, many of our ancient sources record the Vestal order as originally an Alban priesthood, reinforcing the message that Romans and their state were made up of a variety of different peoples and ethnic influences; it appears that the Vestals were manipulated to further political and social ends from the very beginning of their arrival in Rome.

The central role the Vestal order and cult play in ancient accounts of king Numa's establishment of Roman state religion also emphasize the "ideological message" that the Vestals were intimately tied to the creation of Rome and what it meant to be Roman. In his *Lives*, Plutarch describes the formal solidification of the cult in Rome under Numa:

He was also overseer of the holy virgins called Vestals; for to Numa is ascribed the consecration of the Vestal virgins, and in general the worship and care of the perpetual fire entrusted to their charge.⁴⁰

³⁶ Livy 1.3.

³⁷ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 77.

³⁸ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 77.

³⁹ T.J. Cornell, "The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000-264 BCE)," in *Routledge History of the Ancient World* (New York: Routledge, 1995) quoted in Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 77.

⁴⁰ Plut. *Num.* 9.

Plutarch then details the rites and structure of Vestal priesthood, the extraordinary privileges bestowed upon them, and the punishments that Vestal offenses were met with. Wildfang argues that the Vestals' role in the founding myth of Rome, paired with the degree of prominence assigned to the Vestals and the composition of their priesthood in ancient sources, "suggests that the Romans of our historical period [late Republic - early empire] viewed this cult as an integral part of the means by which their ancestors' lawless and warlike society was transformed into their own legal-minded and religiously dutiful state."⁴¹

Thus, it is generally accepted that Rome's Vestal Virgins date all the way back to the regal period and the founding of Rome, during which they were symbolically seen as part of the family of the early kings. However, there is a critical point of debate amongst scholars concerning the Vestals' original intended role and position: should they be viewed as the *wives* of the early Roman kings, or the *daughters*? This discourse may initially seem insignificant, but it has ramifications for how we interpret other aspects of the Vestals, such as their dress, induction into the cult, and the overall function of their virginity. The suggestion that the Vestals originated as wives of the early Roman kings was posed by (primarily German) scholars throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries and rests on five major claims.⁴²

Firstly, German philologist Georg Wissowa argued that several of the ritual tasks performed by the priestesses resembled those of the early Roman *materfamilias*. Regardless of whether the role of the *materfamilias* was contrived to emulate those of the Vestal Virgins, or vice versa, Wissowa identified a link between the two—arguing that the Vestals' protection of the sacred flame and preparation of *mola salsa* is closely related to the *materfamilias*' tending of the hearth and general domestic management.⁴³ Second, several of the state festivals that the

⁴¹ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 77.

⁴² Mary Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," *JRS* 70 (1980), 13.

⁴³ Georg Wissowa in Roscher, *Myth*, referenced in Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 13.

Vestals participated in had their origins in fertility. In August, the Vestals participated in the *Consualia* and *Fordicidia* festivals, both of which were linked to agricultural fertility and the harvest. During the *Fordicidia* in particular, 30 pregnant cows were sacrificed to Tellus and the unborn calves were then burned by the *Virgo Maximus* (or chief Vestal).⁴⁴ Third, German scholar Hans Dragendorff has argued that the dress of the Vestals did not resemble that of a virginal daughter, but that of a Roman matron. Two components of Vestal dress—the *stola* (a floor-length gown), and *vittae* (cloth ribbons with which the Vestals bound their hair)—were worn by, and closely associated with, Roman matrons.

The last two components of the “Vestals as wives versus matrons” argument are interrelated, and have to do with the *captio*. Scholars argue that there are parallels between the *captio* ritual and the traditional Roman marriage rite, as well as between the disciplinary power of the Pontifex Maximus over the Vestals and the power of a Roman man over his wife. In a Roman wedding, the groom seized the bride from the arms of her mother—while during the *captio*, the Pontifex Maximus seized the Vestal from the arms of her father. Due to these parallels, some scholars have interpreted the *captio* ritual as a “mock abduction” representing the ancient form of marriage by rape, possibly evoking the memory of the rape of the Sabine women.⁴⁵ Scholars who support this interpretation of the *captio* essentially hold that the Vestals may have been symbolically married to the state.⁴⁶ Additionally, it has been argued that

⁴⁴ *BNP* s.v. *Fordicidia*, and *BNP* s.v. *Consualia*. Tellus was a Roman earth-goddess. The function of the *Fordicidia* was invigoration, highlighted by Ovid who described the earth and the cattle as “pregnant” (*Ov. Fast.* 4.629-637). During the *Consualia*, another harvest festival, the Vestals sacrificed the first crops of the harvest at the underground altar of the *Consus*.

⁴⁵ Jeanne Lorraine Schroeder, *The Vestal and the Fasces: Hegel, Lacan, Property, and the Feminine* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1998), xiii, note 12. For more information about the history of marriage by rape, I recommend referring to Jeanne L. Schroeder, “Feminism Historicized,” *Jurisprudence*, 75 *Iowa Law Review* 1135 (1990) and Angeliki E. Laiou, ed., *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1993), esp. Diana Moses, “Livy’s Lucretia and the Validity of Coerced Consent in Roman Law,” 39-83.

⁴⁶ Schroeder, *The Vestal and the Fasces*, xiii.

following the *captio*, the Pontifex Maximus's right to punish Vestals mirrored that of a Roman man's power over his wife—especially in the wake of a Vestal losing her chastity, when the actions taken against her resembled those taken by a husband reacting to an adulterous wife.⁴⁷

However, not all scholars adhere to the view that the Vestal Virgins were originally the wives of the early kings. An alternate line of argument, supported by scholars such as Theodor Mommsen, holds that the Vestals were originally the daughters of the early kings, with reasoning that largely rests on a reinterpretation of the evidence presented by scholars with the opposite view.⁴⁸

First, the supposition that the tasks carried out by Vestals were directly coordinated to those of matrons can be challenged, for the domestic tasks relating to the priestesses' ritual duties may just as well have been performed by the daughters of the household as by the *materfamilias*. Mary Beard, for instance, cites a passage from Plutarch that seemingly confirms this, in which the ancient historian states that early Roman wives were not even allowed to grind grain or cook—two integral components to preparing *mola salsa*.⁴⁹ Secondly, the dress of the Vestals was ambiguous, and cannot be placed into a singular category. In addition to matronal elements, the Vestal costume also had similarities to that of a Roman bride—particularly their plaited hairstyle known as *seni crines* and the woolen belts (*cingulum*) they wore tied in the square or “herculanean” knot.⁵⁰ Third, Wildfang points out that fertility had a vaguer meaning in the ancient world—it did not directly denote virility and fecundity as it might today. The fertility, or “procreative power,” of the Vestals encompassed rites of invigoration and harvest, as well as

⁴⁷ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 14.

⁴⁸ As presented in Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 14.

⁴⁹ Plut. *QR* 85.

⁵⁰ Andrew B. Gallia, “The Vestal Habit,” *CPh* 109, no. 3 (2014): 235.

purificatory rites.⁵¹ Additionally, fertility cults and festivals in the ancient world were often associated with virginal or chaste priests and priestesses.⁵²

Lastly, again comes the issue of the *captio*. Scholars have cast doubt on the claim that the *captio* symbolized the Roman marriage rite, and have asserted that the Vestal being taken from her father's arms and a bride being taken from the arms of her mother should be interpreted as a difference between the *captio* and the marriage ceremony, not a similarity. Additionally, Aulus Gellius—who most fully describes the *captio* in his *Noctes Atticae*—states that the Pontifex Maximus refers to the new Vestal as “Amata.” Although some have interpreted “Amata” as an archaic form of the word “beloved,” we have no reason to be certain of this translation, given that it is seemingly contested by Gellius himself, who writes: “The Pontifex Maximus calls the girl ‘Amata’ when he takes her because that is the traditional name of the first Vestal Virgin to be taken.”⁵³ Furthermore, the interchangeable social similarities between Roman wives and daughters provide for the argument that the power of a *paterfamilias* over his wife would be almost identical to his control over his daughter.

Right away from this discourse about whether or not the Vestals symbolized the wives or daughters of the early kings, we can glean that the Vestal Virgins were a cult marked by ambiguities. The many anomalies of the priestess order present difficulties for historians seeking to understand the cult, but a number of brilliant analyses of the Vestals have been born from this challenge. Few studies of the Vestals can rival Beard's analysis of the sexual status of Vestal Virgins, which continues to be cited over 40 years later. Beard takes an entirely new position on

⁵¹ Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 15; R.L. Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 4. Mircea Eliade, quoted by Wildfang, defines rites of invigoration “as aimed at stimulating the growth of crops, the fecundity of men and beasts, and the supply of needed sunshine and rainfall throughout the year;” while rites of harvest are those which “celebrate the successful completion of the agricultural year.” Purificatory rites are those that “involve the cleansing of a sacred object, place or person from all forms of pollution that would render it or them unfit to come in contact with the religious sphere.”

⁵² Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 14.

⁵³ Gell. *NA* 1.12; Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 14; Schroeder, *The Vestal and the Fasces*, xiv.

the familiar “Vestals as wives versus daughters” debate, rejecting the premise that Vestals must have been one or the other, and instead arguing that they were perceived as both wives *and* daughters of the early Roman kings. Rather than tearing down the analysis on either side of the debate, Beard acknowledges that both arguments have merit, and expands their boundaries to show how they fit into her interpretation.

According to Beard, when one really examines the evidence that we have concerning the Vestals, we come face-to-face with clearly co-existent and contradictory roles of the priestesses as both matrons and virgins. Beard holds that we need not try to craft explanations that “accommodate the ambivalent status of the priestesses,” but we must see the “ambiguity running through the whole cult as the central element and key to any explanation.”⁵⁴ Beard’s conclusion has been supported by numerous other studies of the Vestal Virgins. Building upon Beard’s emphasis on ambiguity, Andrew Gallia has argued that a normal feature of the Roman system of dress was for the same basic categories of a garment to be worn by different types of people in different contexts, with the specific meaning of these articles defined largely by context and manner in which they were worn.⁵⁵ Thus, we must be careful not to over interpret the anomalies of the Vestals’ dress—and perhaps we should simply view these anomalies as a further marker of their special sacred status.

However, Gallia has also identified some shortcomings with the lines of inquiry that continue to branch out from Beard’s argument some 35 years later. In his 2015 *Classical*

⁵⁴ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 19. Beard’s conclusion that the Vestals embodied characteristics of *both* wives and daughters has come to be generally accepted by scholars, including L.L. Holland, in her companion piece “Women and Roman Religion,” where she concurs that this ambiguity and dual-embodiment contributed to the Vestals’ sacred status as priestesses.

⁵⁵ Gallia, “The Vestal Habit,” 235. Gallia argues that elements of dress/ ornamentation associated with Vestals—such as *vittae*, *seni crines*, or the *stola*—did not necessarily denote any particular stage of the female life course, and were available to unmarried girls, matrons, and the Vestal Virgins alike. Gallia concludes that Romans used clothing to express concepts of gender and sexuality more *generally*, and—although they did allow for extreme forms of purity to be made comparable to other, less restrictive types of chastity—one should not over-emphasize or impose rigid classifications among these lines.

Antiquity article, “Vestal Virgins and their Families,” Gallia reexamines a familiar component of the wives versus daughters debate and Beard’s analysis: the *captio* ritual and relationship between the Vestal, her biological family, and the Pontifex Maximus. As previously discussed, scholars on both sides of the discourse on the original function of Vestals liken the disciplinary power of the Pontifex Maximus over the priestesses to that of a husband or a father respectively. Even Beard’s alternate hypothesis supports this assumption; by arguing that the relationship of the Vestals to the Pontifex Maximus equally resembled that of a wife *and* daughter, and was thus a signal of their sexual and social ambiguity, she upholds the notion that Vestals’ ties to their legal families were completely severed upon the *captio* ritual and their induction into the cult. Beard’s student Ariadne Staples, who will be further discussed below, particularly places a good deal of emphasis on the *captio* ritual, interpreting it as a means of further isolating Vestals from traditional kinship roles so they could embody the populace and state of Rome as a whole.

Gallia speaks highly of Beard’s analysis and methodology, but he does note:

In the years that have followed Beard’s seminal contribution, a number of (mostly anglophone) scholars have come to place increasing emphasis on the process, described by Aulus Gellius, whereby a young girl was ‘captured’ by the Pontifex Maximus in the course of her entry into the priesthood.⁵⁶

According to Gallia, Gellius’s description of a Vestal’s “capture” has been over dissected and prioritized by previous scholars, particularly the following excerpt:

Moreover, as soon as a Vestal Virgin is taken and led into the house of Vesta and handed over to the pontifices, at that very moment, without emancipation or a loss of status, she leaves her father’s authority and acquires the right to make a will.⁵⁷

Gallia does not disagree with the arguments put forth by Beard and Staples, but he does assert that subsequent analyses of the *captio* ritual have gone a bit too far in uncritically accepting the initiation as a literal, rather than symbolic, severing of familial ties. Citing a

⁵⁶ Andrew B. Gallia, “Vestal Virgins and Their Families,” *Classical Antiquity* 34, no. 1 (2015): 75.

⁵⁷ Gell. *NA* 1.12.9.

plethora of inscriptions dating from the Republic up until the third century CE, Gallia asserts that to take Gellius at face value is to overlook a considerable body of evidence that clearly suggests Vestal Virgins displayed public and continued commitment and attachment to members of their families.⁵⁸

Inge Kroppenber, in her 2010 *Law and Literature* article, “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins,” offers another fresh interpretation of the *captio* initiation ritual. In setting up her argument, Kroppenber concurs with Beard and Staples’ interpretation of the symbolic function of the Vestals—asserting that they served as embodiments of the Roman state and its people, particularly during the time of the Republic.⁵⁹ Kroppenber extends upon this logic and attests that the *captio* was a symbolic reenactment of the founding of Rome, signifying the transition from a state of tyranny and chaos to a new order of peace and law.⁶⁰ Kroppenber’s analysis also perhaps laid the foundation for Gallia’s argument about the legal emancipation of Vestals; the *captio* was less a matter of severing personal connections with family members and more a matter of creating a distinct and sovereign legal identity for Vestals.

Briefly returning to Beard, there is one final component of her analysis that merits discussion. Beard takes her argument a step further and identifies the sexual ambiguity of Vestals as three-fold, combining not only virginal and matronal elements, but *male* elements as well. The privileges awarded to Vestals—such as the services of a lictor, their *testabilis* status, and the ability to write their own will—were exclusively un-female, devised and described in men’s terms, and therefore “invested the virgins with elements of a masculine status.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Gallia, “Vestal Virgins and Their Families,” 76.

⁵⁹ Kroppenber, “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins,” 423.

⁶⁰ Kroppenber, “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins,” 424.

⁶¹ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 17.

Acknowledging that the male element of the Vestals is not as clear nor as central as the virginal and matronal aspects of the priestesses, Beard maintains that we must not overlook the fact that the exclusively-male privileges enjoyed by the Vestals suggest they “were regarded as playing a male role and were, in part, classified as masculine.”⁶² Though Beard’s statement creates some difficulties, as we cannot ascertain with certainty how actual Romans understood the gendering of the Vestals, we can at least consider how Romans would have physically viewed the priestesses and the effect this may have had. When Romans viewed the priestesses outside the *Atrium Vestae*, they were surrounded by *lictors* carrying *fascēs*, powerful symbols of one’s authority and prestige that normally were only granted to men holding *imperium*. With this in mind, we may venture to conclude that the Vestals’ were not necessarily *classified* as masculine, so much as they were *associated* with the masculine through their elevated status and privileges.

As we have come to see, implicit in the work of Beard and the debate surrounding the origins of the Vestals in the ancient royal household, is their sexual status as virgins and what this signifies. Again we find ourselves returning to the wives versus daughters debate; scholars who support the view that the Vestals originated as wives of the early kings argue that the virginity of the Vestals was a generalized form of chastity, comparable to the *pudicitia* (or modesty) of the Roman matron.⁶³ Beard regards this hypothesis as unacceptable, however, pointing out that all ancient sources regarding the priesthood place great stress on the physical virginity of the Vestals. The integration of Vestals’ virginity into both their mythology and suspicions against them during times of crisis suggests that the Vestals’ virginity was not a mere characteristic of youth or *pudicitia*, nor an anomaly requiring explanation. Rather, Beard concludes that physically intact virginity was required of Vestals, and served a deeper symbolic function as a

⁶² Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 17.

⁶³ Beard, "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins," 15.

marker of their ambiguous sexual status and isolation from “the traditional family and social structure of the Roman community.”⁶⁴

To further understand this deeper symbolic significance of the Vestals’ virginity, let us turn to the work of Beard’s pupil, Ariadne Staples, and her 1998 monograph *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins*. Framing her analysis around the question, “how and why were the Vestals different?” Staples identifies the injunction that the unchaste Vestal must be buried alive as “extraordinary” in the context of the Roman religious system—asserting that it is the only instance we know of wherein “a ritual transgression was punishable by death.”⁶⁵ According to Staples, the stakes associated with Vestals’ virginity indicate that it must have been ideological, with a unique religious function much more powerful than the chastity of a matron. Therefore, the virginity of a Vestal was far more than mere physical virginity (although that was a necessary component of their identity); a Vestal’s virginity was indispensable for the political stability of Rome, and loss of it represented chaos for the state, as well as a deteriorating relationship with the Gods. Staples continues to analyze the aforementioned anomalies in the Vestals’ legal, familial, and sexual status to support her argument, which has since been accepted by nearly all those who study the Vestal Virgins: “because the Vestals were set apart from the collectivity and could not represent any single ritual category, they were able to represent the whole. In a ritual sense the Vestals *were* Rome.”⁶⁶

Influenced by the theories put forward by Beard and Staples, Holt Parker (2004) seeks to offer an explanation of the specific function of virginity in the cult, but also insight into how the Vestals—vital to the functioning of the Roman state—were murdered routinely at moments of

⁶⁴ Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins,” 21.

⁶⁵ Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins*, 133.

⁶⁶ Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins*, 130.

political crisis.”⁶⁷ Parker examines the wider symbolic role played by women's chastity and cites several Roman authors including Livy, Tacitus, and Juvenal to argue that it was used in antiquity as a sign of the moral health of the commonwealth. Concurring with Staples, Parker interprets the “untouched” body of the Vestal Virgin as an emblem of the “untouched city of Rome,” stating that “when Rome was subject to violence, it was because she had been violated.”⁶⁸ In contrast to Staples, however, Parker generally reads the virginity of the Vestals through their scapegoat status—asserting that the Vestals’ freedom from legal family ties, paired with their expected chastity, was a measure allowing them to serve as a *pharmakos* in times of crisis.⁶⁹ *Pharmakos* is a Greek term, defined by *Oxford Classical Dictionary* as a human scapegoat who was expelled in order to “purify” a city.⁷⁰ Heavily citing Rene Girard’s exploration of the roles and patterns of sacrifice (1977), Parker argues that the Vestals embodied the paradoxical nature of the *pharmakos* in which the ritual victim is both disease and cure, endangerment and protection.⁷¹

Let us take a final moment to consider what all the aforementioned scholarship seeks to discern: the overall symbolic role and function of the Vestal Virgins. Wildfang interprets the role of the Vestals as purificatory, and argues that they were charged with the ritual purification of the city and the storage and preparation of ritual materials. Wildfang’s argument rests on the ritual obligations performed by the priestesses, but also Vesta’s fire itself, which she claims was associated with sterility and purity, and should be understood as having a purificatory significance. Wildfang’s argument has been generally accepted, and is supported by scholars such as Beard, Staples, Parker, and Holland who concur that purity—linked to, but also distinct

⁶⁷ Parker, “Why were the Vestals Virgins?” 564.

⁶⁸ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” 563.

⁶⁹ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” 578.

⁷⁰ *OCD* s.v. *Pharmakos*.

⁷¹ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” 587.

from fertility—was an integral part of the holiness of Vestals and their ritual duties.⁷² However, these scholars disagree that purity was the sole defining component of Vestals' sacred status and the cult itself.

Beard stressed the legal, social, and sexual ambiguity of the Vestals and how it prevented them from fitting neatly into the category of virgins, matrons, or men; however, Staples extended her analysis to argue that Vestals' unique status and isolation served their overall function—to serve as physical embodiments of the city and citizens of Rome. Staples' conclusion that the Vestals themselves symbolized the *res publica* has been supported by numerous other authors and is now somewhat of a mainstay in studies of the Vestals. Kroppenberg, for example, upholds Staples' assessment, again citing the *captio* ritual and the exceptional status it awarded to Vestals as evidence that they needed to exist outside of Roman legal and familial conventions to represent the entire Roman populace. Parker also concurs with Staples' hypothesis, describing it as “an insight fundamental to a correct interpretation of [the Vestals'] role and cult,” which he integrates into his examination of Vestal virginity.⁷³ Similar to Staples and Kroppenberg, Parker concludes that the Vestal's unique legal status freed her from all family ties so that she could “incarnate the collective.”⁷⁴

This paper also draws heavily upon Joanne Thomson's 2005 Yale dissertation entitled “Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins in Roman State Religion and Imperial Policy of the First and Second Centuries A.D.” Thomson's paper offers a thorough examination of the imagery of the cult of Vesta in various reliefs, shrines, altars, and statues; she provides images and then breaks down what is actually being depicted and the layers of its possible meaning and

⁷² Beard, “The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins” (1980); Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins* (1998); Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” (2004); Holland, “Women and Roman Religion” (2012).

⁷³ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” 567.

⁷⁴ Parker, “Why Were the Vestals Virgins?” 571.

significance. Thompson's central goal is to "yield essential information regarding imperial appropriation of the cult of Vesta, the role of the Vestal Virgins as guardians and moral *exempla* in Rome, and more broadly, the ways in which religion and politics were inextricably bound together in the Roman world" through taking an in-depth look at the visual representations of the cult in the early imperial period.⁷⁵ The introduction and first two chapters of Thompson's dissertation center around images of the Vestals in the Augustan period, and thus are heavily cited in this paper. While the goal of this paper is similar to Thompson's, my approach will differ in a few ways: my central question is more focused on the political transformation of the late first century BCE and how the Vestals were affected by it. Whereas Thompson's paper covers the entire first two centuries CE, this paper will focus solely on the transition period from republic to principate, roughly from 31 BCE to Augustus' death in 14 CE. Focusing on a smaller time frame will allow us to more thoroughly assess the relationship between Augustus and the Vestals through a variety of other factors as well as their imagery.

To summarize, through an examination of modern scholarship concerning the Vestal Virgins, it becomes clear that it is futile to attempt to classify vestals along normal Roman gender lines—matron, virgin, male, daughter, etc.—as studies over the years have clearly shown that Vestals were an exception, and we should regard them as such. The physical appearance of the Vestals themselves, their ritual duties, and intact virginity served deep symbolic functions; they allowed the priestesses to exist outside of Roman society so they could represent it, and they were also understood as integral to the security and prosperity of the state. It is clear that during the Republic the Vestals enjoyed profound religious, social, and legal authority that was intimately linked to their sacred status and connection to Rome's founding. If we move forward

⁷⁵ Joanne Elizabeth Thompson, "Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins in Roman State Religion and Imperial Policy of the First and Second Centuries A.D." PhD diss., (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2005) 1.

in time, however, past the days of the Republic and into the advent of the principate and autocratic rule, how do the Vestals fare? Would the Vestals' significance as embodiments of Rome itself and republican values help or hurt them in a period of drastic state transformation? To better answer this question, we need to go back to Augustus, and take a more in-depth look at his life, the historical context of his rise to power, and how he interacted with Roman religion during his reign.

III. Augustus and Religion

By 31 BCE, the young Caesar had managed to assume a position of preeminent power, but he still had a fractured empire to run—for Augustus started his rise to power through a bloody civil war. In 42 BCE, after Julius Caesar was assassinated, Augustus (still called Octavian at the time), Mark Antony, and Lepidus launched an attack on Caesar’s assassins, led by Brutus and Cassius, at the battle of Philippi, and effectively crushed their opponents’ forces. In the following year, the men legalized their alliance and formed what is known as the “second triumvirate”; the empire was divided among the three triumvirs, each of whom was vested with “dictatorial powers to enact legislation, influence legal proceedings, and manipulate elections.”⁷⁶

Unsurprisingly, three quasi-dictators proved to be an unsustainable method of government—the relationship between the triumvirs was fraught with disagreement and tension, and would increasingly deteriorate throughout the next several years. Tensions came to a head in 31 BCE, when Augustus declared war on Antony and Cleopatra, and subsequently defeated their forces in the Battle of Actium. Perhaps the most devastating part of this prolonged conflict for Romans was the lengthy lists of proscriptions, public lists that bore the name of “outlaws” who were considered to be opponents to the triumvirs, and were “free game” to be murdered.⁷⁷ After the bouts of proscriptions under Antony, Lepidus, and Augustus beginning in 43 BCE, “300 senators, including M. Tullius Cicero, and 2,000 equestrians were killed.”⁷⁸

Thus, by the time Augustus rose to power in the 30s BCE, the late Republic had long been plagued with domestic and foreign conflict, and this instability caused the people’s sense of

⁷⁶ *OEAGR* s.v. Triumvirs.

⁷⁷ *BNP* s.v. Proscriptions.

⁷⁸ *BNP* s.v. Proscriptions.

security and previous notions of what it meant to be Roman to collapse.⁷⁹ Augustus prided himself on his support from all of Italy, and he knew that for this to be true he had to reframe what it meant to be Roman to include the Italians.⁸⁰ Religion can bridge political and cultural spheres, and is a useful tool in forming group identity. This was especially the case for the Romans—religion played a critical role in the cohesiveness of their state and how they understood themselves.⁸¹ Thus, Orlin concludes that the “construction of a unified sense of cultural identity comprising both Romans and Italians” was one of Augustus’ paramount goals as *princeps*, and religion was a vital part of this process.⁸²

Numerous other scholars have reached the consensus that religious restoration played a crucial part in Augustus’ political agenda, for the *princeps* devoted a great deal of energy and resources to religious reform. But how did Augustus go about this program of religious restoration, and what did he do? The most well-cited component of Augustus’ religious program was the restoration of temples throughout Rome. In the *Res Gestae*, the *princeps* details his military and civilian achievements, honors bestowed upon himself and his late sons, as well as his generosity to the people of Rome:

20. (1) I restored the Capitol and the Theatre of Pompey, both at great expense, but without inscribing my name on them ... (4) In my sixth consulship [28 BCE], I restored eighty-two temples of the gods in the city of Rome at the Senate’s suggestion, without neglecting any that had to be restored at this date.
21. (1) I constructed on private land the Temple of Mars Ultor [“the Avenger”] and the Forum Augustum with funds derived from the spoils of war.⁸³

It is worth clarifying that scholars have concluded it is extremely unlikely that Augustus started and completed all eighty-two building projects in one year; he more likely *began*

⁷⁹ For more information on the internal and external conflicts that destabilized the late Republic, I recommend referring to David Shotter, *The Fall of the Roman Republic* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁸⁰ Aug. *RG* 25.

⁸¹ Eric Orlin, “Augustan Religion and the Reshaping of Roman Memory,” *Arethusa* 40, no. 1 (2007) 75.

⁸² Orlin, “Augustan Religion and the Reshaping of Roman Memory,” 75.

⁸³ *OEAGR* s.v. Res Gestae Divi Augusti.

reconstruction of eighty-two temples during this time—still an astounding accomplishment when considering the amount of resources and manpower required.⁸⁴ According to Scheid, Augustus' numerous major building projects were rooted in his traditionalist political agenda; the *princeps* framed his repair and reconstruction of religious temples as a re-establishment of the institutions his rivals had neglected during the previous years of political turmoil. Thus, Augustus' restorative construction projects lent strength to his claim that he was reviving republican institutions and further legitimized his power.⁸⁵

In addition to positioning himself in contrast to previous leaders, Augustus' religious restoration efforts also assisted in constructing an image of himself as a benevolent emperor. Firstly, Scheid points out that a large proportion of the population of Rome was affected by Augustus' restoration of numerous cult places. Whether they were employed as workers, walked past building projects when going about their business in the *Forum Romanum*, or simply regularly heard the noises of construction—nearly everyone in Rome was aware of the initiative to rebuild the city's temples, and exactly who was to thank.

However, Augustus' rebuilding projects also cultivated his image long after they were completed. Galinsky makes the distinction that restitutions of buildings in ancient Rome did not mean constructing an exact replica of the original structure like one might assume; rather, "a new and changed, even if not radically changed, edifice would be erected on the old foundation."⁸⁶ What Augustus seems to have most commonly changed during his rebuilding program was the day of the dedication of the restored building, which he moved to coincide with a private anniversary within his family. The dedication date of Roman temples may initially appear like an

⁸⁴ Orlin, "Augustan Religion and the Reshaping of Roman Memory," 82.

⁸⁵ John Scheid, "To Honor the Princeps and Venerate the Gods: Public Cult, Neighborhood Cults, and Imperial Cult in Augustan Rome," in *Augustus*, ed. Jonathan Edmondson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 278.

⁸⁶ K. Galinsky, "Continuity and Change: Religion in the Augustan Semi-Century," *A Companion to Roman Religion*, edited by J. Rüpke (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 71.

insignificant factor, but anniversaries of dedications were commemorated each year by Romans and reserved for celebration.⁸⁷ Thus, in changing the dedication dates of the buildings he restored, Augustus made sure that public festivals coincided with celebrations of his family members. As Roman historian Tom Stevenson phrases it, “The ritual symbolism was all about concordance between the Julian family and the state under Augustus’ headship.”⁸⁸

Augustus’ religious program also included the construction of new temples, built exclusively by him or members of his family.⁸⁹ The Temples of Palatine Apollo and Mars Ultor particularly transformed social life and became cultural and political centers in Augustan Rome, serving as the sites for senatorial debates and state-led activities.⁹⁰ Augustus’ construction of new buildings that served a political and religious function ensured that people would frequent these new spaces which, simply by existing, made reference to the *princeps* and his accomplishments. However, Augustus’ religious program extended beyond rebuilding projects, he also revitalized various priesthoods.

In the chaos of the civil war, certain priestly colleges had been somewhat neglected and positions had long gone unfilled; the position of the priest of Jupiter, for example, had been vacant since the mid-60s BCE.⁹¹ According to Suetonius, Augustus responded by increasing “the priesthoods in numbers and dignity, and also in privileges.”⁹² Galinsky cites Augustus’ transformation of the “Brotherhood of the Cultivated Fields” (*Arvales*) as an example illustrating how he restored Roman priesthoods. Although the *Arvales* were very old, possibly dating to the 4th century BCE, the college did not seem to have much public significance until after the civil war—when Augustus constructed a temple and stadium on their precinct, rebranded the

⁸⁷ Schied, “To Honor the Princeps and Venerate the Gods,” 281.

⁸⁸ Tom Stevenson, “The Succession Planning of Augustus,” *Antichthon* 47 (2013): 130.

⁸⁹ Galinsky, “Continuity and Change: Religion in the Augustan Semi-Century,” 74.

⁹⁰ Schied, “To Honor the Princeps and Venerate the Gods,” 285.

⁹¹ Galinsky, “Continuity and Change: Religion in the Augustan Semi-Century,” 76.

⁹² Suet. *Aug.* 31.

brotherhood as representing Romulus and his brothers, and increased the fraternity's prominence by nominating princes and leading aristocrats to its rank.⁹³ Indeed, none of our ancient literary sources that mention the *Arvales* predate the principate; but by 20 BCE, Augustus had transformed the *Arval* brothers into a high-profile senatorial priesthood, of which he was a member.⁹⁴ In a 1991 book review, Linderski offers a discussion on the *Arvales* with language that directly parallels that which is used to talk about the Vestal Virgins, writing about the former:

Their cult was *part of Rome*; when their grove and the shrines were invaded and plundered in the fourth century, *with the Arvals the old Rome, too, faded away*.⁹⁵

Augustus' restoration also extended to cults that were far from the center of the city, on the boundaries of Rome's territory. In 29 BCE, Augustus restored the sacred grove of Dea Dia, an obscure agricultural goddess that the *Arvales* were originally dedicated to, on the Via Campana road outside of Rome.⁹⁶ Revitalizing the cult of Dea Dia allowed Augustus to diffuse his glory to different areas of Rome's territory, but it may also be interpreted as having a deeper symbolic purpose. Similar to the *Arval* Brothers, Dea Dia was associated with Romulus, who established her cult with his brothers according to an "aetiological myth."⁹⁷ Augustus' revitalization of ancient cults whose origins were associated with Romulus directly connects to his rhetoric of restoring the state and bestowing it to the Roman people anew. In restoring the *Arvales* and the cult of Dea Dia, Augustus cultivated an image of himself as a "new Romulus," showing loyalty to the traditions and memories of the past while reshaping the future of Rome in his image.⁹⁸

⁹³ *OEAGR* s.v. Arval Brothers.

⁹⁴ *BNP* s.v. Arvales Fratres, and J. Linderski, "Fratres Arvales: Storia di un collegio sacerdotale romano," *CPh* 86, no. 1 (1991): 84.

⁹⁵ Linderski, "Fratres Arvales," 85.

⁹⁶ *OEAGR* s.v. Priesthoods, Roman.

⁹⁷ Scheid, "To Honor the Princeps and Venerate the Gods," 285.

⁹⁸ Scheid, "To Honor the Princeps and Venerate the Gods," 285.

To fully understand Roman religion in the principate, we must also briefly discuss the crystallization of the imperial cult under Augustus' rule. Galinsky clearly sums up the parameters by which we must consider imperial worship in Rome:

The cult of the emperor was, like so many others in the ancient world, part of the civil religion. It was a civic cult that had nothing to do with a moral code, eternal salvation, or an exquisite theology. Neither, as scholars have emphasized, was there such a thing as *the* imperial cult. Instead, and in accord with the diversity of Roman and imperial civilization, it was the result of local and regional initiatives and therefore was multifarious. Starting in the east, which had a previous tradition of ruler worship, it was adapted in the other areas of the empire, too. It met the need for a unifying figure and was another way of highlighting Augustus as the representative and symbol of the empire's unity.⁹⁹

Though ruler worship was common among Hellenistic kings in the east, the posthumous deification of Julius Caesar in 42 BCE was crucial to the legitimacy of his adoptive son and paved the way for imperial worship under Augustus. As Galinsky states, the imperial cult was “multifaceted,” but several key forms that it took were the “neighborhood cults” of the Augustan *lares* and the *genius* of Augustus, unofficial cults such as the Augustales outside Rome, and the establishment of cult places also outside Rome, for, “within the limits of the city, he positively refused any honour of that kind.”¹⁰⁰ As we have seen, public worship dedicated to himself definitely fell into the category of excessive honors Augustus sought to avoid in his lifetime, so what was his role in the imperial cult? According to Galinsky, “we are looking at a familiar pattern: he mostly enabled the initiatives of others.”¹⁰¹ In keeping his image of the “first citizen” who restored the republic, Augustus' actions “did not manifest the heavy hand of the empire squelching their [Romans'] local or larger identity;” rather, Augustus acted *in response* to requests for cults and temples honoring himself and the deified Caesar, and refused the title of

⁹⁹ Galinsky, *Augustus*, 169.

¹⁰⁰ Suet. *Aug.* 52 and *OEAGR* s.v. Imperial cult, Roman. For example, sacred temples of Augustus and Julius Caesar were established in Nicomedia and Pergamum at the request of the provinces of Asia and Bithynia (Dio. Cass. 51.20.7).

¹⁰¹ Galinsky, *Augustus*, 169.

theos, or God, while living.¹⁰² Always acting in accordance with tradition, Van Andringa of Princeton Institute for Advanced Study writes, “like Romulus... Augustus left to join the gods only at his death.”¹⁰³

In summation, upon his succession Augustus prided himself on physically unifying Italy, but was then tasked with doing so culturally. Religion proved to be an important tool for Augustus in returning stability to the city and reshaping what it meant to be Roman. Devoting extensive time and resources towards religious reform, the *princeps* restored dozens of temples and cult places, constructed new buildings and places of worship, revitalized various priesthoods, and encouraged—rather than proposed—initiatives honoring himself. Augustus’ religious program not only constructed a new image of Roman identity, but a new and widespread image of the emperor and his glory. Augustus’ reconstruction projects allowed him to boast of his accomplishments and generosity in public spaces, ensuring that all Romans would be constantly reminded of the glory of his regime. Furthermore, because Augustus commonly changed the dedication dates of buildings he reconstructed, annual celebrations of the restored temples fell on personal anniversaries within his family, further associating the Julian family with Roman identity.

What is especially pertinent, however, is the hallmark of Augustus’ religious program: an emphasis on rebuilding and restoration. Augustus’ portrayal of his religious innovations and new constructions as a return to older traditions, regardless of whether this was actually the case or not, was a strategic move aimed at fortifying his image as the reviver of the state and its institutions. “A proper balance between change and continuity,” Orlin notes, “was integral to

¹⁰² Galinsky, *Augustus*, 170.

¹⁰³ William Van Andringa, “Rhetoric and Divine Honours: On the ‘Imperial Cult’ in the Reigns of Augustus and Constantine,” *Collegium: Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences* vol. 20 (2016): 15.

Augustus' reign."¹⁰⁴ Thus we now understand Augustus' religious program and why he went about it the way he did; through his restoration of various temples and priesthods, Augustus sought to reshape Roman memory and identity; restore a sense of religious stability that had been neglected by those who preceded him; keep good on his promise to return to republican institutions; and enhance the public image of himself and his *gens*. But how do the Vestals fit into Augustus's religious program, and what made his interactions with them distinct from the other cults he restored?

¹⁰⁴ Orlin, "Augustan Religion and the Reshaping of Roman Memory," 88.

IV. Augustus and the Vestal Virgins

We have established that the foundation of Augustus' religious program was the restoration of various cult places and priesthoods; did this extend to the Vestal Virgins, who did not really need any "restoring" to begin with? Was the priesthood's mythic connection to the founding of Rome understood by Augustus as a useful tool for cultivating his image, or was it too powerful and volatile, and thus a potential threat to the *princeps*? When examining the evidence regarding how Augustus specifically interacted with the Vestals during his reign, the former option undoubtedly seems to have been his rationale.

Firstly, Augustus' aforementioned revitalization of various Roman priesthoods included the Vestal Virgins. When Suetonius describes how Augustus increased the "number and dignity" of the priesthoods, he deems it worth mentioning that the "advantages" of the Vestal Virgins were "especially" enhanced.¹⁰⁵ For example, Suetonius tells us that when reorganizing the seating arrangements at the games in hopes of a more "orderly" show, Augustus gave the Vestals special consideration.¹⁰⁶ It is unclear what particular arena Suetonius is referencing; McElduff, in her 2020 source book on Roman spectacle, reminds readers that "Rome had no permanent theatre, so we are frequently referring to seats set up in an ad hoc fashion, around the Forum and on the steps of temples and various buildings."¹⁰⁷ However, the general system of seating in Rome seems to have been consistent with the social hierarchy, regardless of the specific physical space in which people were sitting.

According to Suetonius, Augustus decreed that "the first row of seats should be reserved for senators," to ensure that they would never go without seating; at times they sat in the

¹⁰⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 31. Given that he never mentions anything about Vestals being granted money, Suetonius' use of the word "advantages" seems to have been intended as a synonym for "privileges" or "honors."

¹⁰⁶ Suet. *Aug.* 44.

¹⁰⁷ Siobhán McElduff, "Seating in the Arena and Society," in *Spectacles in the Roman World: A Source Book* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2020).

Orchestra, the space directly in front of the *scaena*, as well.¹⁰⁸ Augustus' *lex Iulia theatralis*, introduced around 18 BCE, decreed that *equites*, or "the second aristocracy of the state," should occupy the next fourteen rows of seats behind the senators.¹⁰⁹ Behind the *equites* then sat the average citizens, the *plebs Romana*, with separate sections for various social groups including retired veterans, married Plebeian men, and young boys who had not yet received the *toga virilis*.¹¹⁰ Women were relegated to the highest seats, furthest away from the *scaena*. Only the Vestals were "assigned a place to themselves" and not exiled to the uppermost rows of the stadium with the other women, for Suetonius describes their seats as "opposite the praetor's tribunal."¹¹¹ According to Cassius Dio, Augustus gave the praetors responsibility over the games, so the praetor's tribunal, sometimes referred to as the president's tribunal, was one of the best seats, situated closest to the *scaena* at one of its front corners.¹¹² Thus, the Vestal's tribunal was on the opposite side of the *scaena*, essentially just as good a seat as the one the senior magistrate enjoyed.

Augustus also seemingly took steps to account for and preserve the special legal status of Vestal Virgins. The aforementioned fact that the Vestal Virgins were given special seating at the gladiatorial games and were not required to sit in the back with the rest of the women is in itself significant because it illustrates Augustus' awareness that the Vestals possessed a unique sacred status that superseded their gender status. This sense of protective awareness when it came to the special ambiguous status of Vestal Virgins can also be observed in legislation passed by Augustus. In 18 BCE, Augustus passed the *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus*, a law which

¹⁰⁸ Suet. *Aug.* 44.1. According to Suetonius, a story about a Roman senator who had to stand at the games in Puteoli because no one would offer him their seat prompted Augustus to reserve the first row of seats for senators.

¹⁰⁹ *OEAGR* s.v. *equites*, and Jonathan Edmondson, "Public Spectacles and Roman Public Relations," *Ludi Romani: espectáculos en Hispania romana* (2002): 12.

¹¹⁰ Edmondson, "Public Spectacles and Roman Public Relations," 14. The *toga virilis* was the "toga of manhood," given to a boy who had come of age by his *paterfamilias*.

¹¹¹ Edmondson, "Public Spectacles and Roman Public Relations," 14.

¹¹² Dio. Cass. 54.2.3-4, and Edmondson, "Public Spectacles and Roman Public Relations," 21.

stipulated that unmarried or childless women between the ages of 20 and 50 would be heavily taxed, or lose their rights of inheritance. If this law had been strictly imposed, the Vestal Virgins would have lost their testamentary rights as well. To prevent this, however, Augustus granted the Vestals the *ius trium liberorum*, or “the right of three children,” a status that denoted the privileges given to fathers of three or more children, and would exempt them from the restrictions of the *lex Iulia* and subsequent *lex Papia Poppaea* of 9 BCE. Dio describes this special attention given to the Vestals:

Contrary to the Lex Voconia, according to which no woman could inherit property to the value of more than one hundred thousand sesterces, he permitted some women to inherit larger amounts; and he granted the Vestal Virgins all the privileges enjoyed by women who had borne children.¹¹³

Since the Vestals were free from *tutela*, they already possessed most of the privileges that came with having *ius trium liberorum*—such as emancipation from guardianship and full legal capability, including the right to inherit and make one’s own will. Thus, in legally granting the status to the priestesses, Augustus seems to have been doing two things: specifically making sure that the Vestals’ power and inheritance rights were protected from his marriage legislation in 18 and 9 BCE, and giving “legal form” to the “existing social practice” of exempting Vestals from social and marriage legislation that related to the kinship ties they were removed from.¹¹⁴ This distinction in Augustus’s legislation may seem insignificant, but it’s more than just due diligence—it illuminates how the *princeps* took care to sustain the “special status that had defined their [the Vestals’] order from Rome's earliest days” through concrete legal measures.¹¹⁵ Augustus’ actions display an awareness that the special (legal, social, gender, and sexual) status

¹¹³ Dio. Cass. 56.10.2

¹¹⁴ Kit Morrell, "Tutela Mulierum and the Augustan Marriage Laws," *Eugesta, Journal on Gender Studies in Antiquity* vol. 10 (2020): 90.

¹¹⁵ Thompson, "Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins," 68.

of Vestal Virgins demanded special attention in his restructuring of the empire, and he seemingly took care to preserve the privileged position of the Vestals throughout this legalistic era.

Not only did Augustus protect the legal privileges enjoyed by Vestals, he also supported—even enhanced—their religious relevancy by creating new annual festivals and recurring celebrations that called for the priestess’ participation. The *Augustalia*, for instance, was a festival celebrating the Senate’s commemoration of the altar of Fortuna Redux and Augustus’ return to Rome in October of 19 BCE. In the *Res Gestae*, Augustus writes that the pontifices and Vestal Virgins were required to sacrifice annually at the altar of Fortuna Redux on the day that he had returned from his 22 BCE Eastern tour.¹¹⁶ The *Augustalia* became a major celebration in the years following; its central sacrifice was preceded by festivities and games hosted for the Roman people—no doubt making October 12 a day that the whole city could look forward to. The festival would continue to be celebrated by Romans into the 3rd century, meaning that Vestals maintained the high-profile position of providing the *mola salsa* needed to perform the *Augustalia*’s main sacrifice for nearly 300 years.

Though it may not necessarily have been his motive in doing so, the Vestals’ participation in the *Augustalia* ensured that they would continue to be regarded as priestesses vital to the ritual functioning of the Roman state for centuries to come. Augustus’ paramount motivation was more likely to further enhance his status, as the institution of the *Augustalia* afforded the *princeps* “‘his own’ great festival day similar to Ceres’ *Cerialia*, Vesta’s *Vestalia*, or Saturn’s *Saturnalia*,” an honor which was “‘fitting for the gods.’”¹¹⁷ Use of the Vestals in celebrations of Augustus’ own glory not only sent the message that he was a man deserving of god-like veneration, but by

¹¹⁶ Aug. *RG* 11.

¹¹⁷ Schied, “To Honor the Princeps and Venerate the Gods,” 289.

appealing to the Vestals' deep ideological connection to the founding of Rome, he showed that he was also a man who still had a profound respect for tradition and republican institutions.

Similarly, Augustus enlisted the Vestal Virgins in the ritual of the *anniversarium sacrificium*, a celebration held every January on the anniversary of the dedication of the *Ara Pacis*, or “altar of Augustan peace.” The imperial monument was constructed in the northern Campus Martius of Rome in 13 BCE—in honor of Augustus' return from Spain and Gaul—and it ordered that the magistrates, priests, and Vestal Virgins offer an annual sacrifice on the site.¹¹⁸ Made out of marble, the *Ara Pacis* was rectangular in shape, with walls that enclosed the innermost portion: a courtyard that housed an altar with a U-shaped sacrificing table. There were two entrances to the interior altar on either side, facing out to the Northeast and Southwest.¹¹⁹ The remarkable memorial is considered one of the major products of Augustan public art, best known for the elaborate reliefs that adorn its panels.¹²⁰

The elevated enclosure walls were embellished with detailed friezes depicting a long religious procession. On the northern wall, Roman senators and their families were pictured, while the southern wall featured the priests of the four state cults, Augustus, his general Agrippa, and the imperial family.¹²¹ The outermost walls of the *Ara Pacis* also depicted various mythological reliefs, but the ones on the west wall are particularly notable. As Kathleen Lamp describes:

The first on the west wall features Aeneas making a sacrifice to the penates, household gods associated with the pantry, along with his son and the mythic white sow. The other panel features Mars presumably at the Lupercal, the wolf's cave where Romulus and Remus were nursed. Both the scenes ‘refer to the

¹¹⁸ Aug. *RG* 12.

¹¹⁹ Vance R. Tiede, "Ara Pacis Augustae: An Astro-Archaeological analysis," *Mediterranean Archaeology & Archaeometry* vol. 16, no. 4 (2016): 268.

¹²⁰ *OCD* s.v. Ara Pacis.

¹²¹ Kathleen Lamp, "The Ara Pacis Augustae: Visual Rhetoric in Augustus' Principate," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* vol. 39, no. 1 (2009): 6.

mythical founding of Rome and the lineage of the Roman people, as well as the Julian line.”¹²²

The interior of the *Ara Pacis* also featured wall-to-wall friezes that seemingly depict a continuation of the procession portrayed on the exterior walls. Despite damage to the innermost altar frieze on the northern wing, we can still tell that it depicts a procession of six Vestals, arranged in order of height and all seemingly wearing their traditional long *tunica* and *suffibulum*.¹²³ In the hands of each Vestal is a sacred ritual item, including incense jars, tablets likely holding ritual instructions, and a *simpulum* (a ladle used for dipping wine during sacrifice). The first and last figures in the interior procession of Vestals are two *lictors* carrying *fascas*, visually expressing the recognized authority and sacred status of the priestesses. Following the Vestals is a continuing procession of sacrificial victims depicted on the exterior side of the wall, the last of which carries a plate that would have held the Vestals’ *mola salsa*.¹²⁴

The specific event being referenced by the procession on the *Ara Pacis* has been widely accepted as a representation of the *anniversarium sacrificium*, but even regardless of the particular festival being depicted, Thompson argues:

The presence of the Vestals ... on the *Ara Pacis* is critical for understanding the role played by the cult of Vesta and her priestesses in Augustus' program for the renewal—political, social, and religious—of the city of Rome in the late first century BCE.¹²⁵

The religious imagery on the *Ara Pacis*—but especially the ritual involvement of the Vestals, who were particularly associated with the longevity of the Roman state and republican virtues, allowed Augustus to distract from his “dynastic ambitions while de facto usurping the Republic and, in the process, also absorbing the genealogy of the official world of gods.”¹²⁶

¹²² Lamp, “The Ara Pacis Augustae,” 6.

¹²³ Thompson, “Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins,” 45.

¹²⁴ Thompson, “Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins,” 47.

¹²⁵ Thompson, “Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins,” 41.

¹²⁶ *OCD* s.v. Ara Pacis.

Augustus also made changes to the spaces the Vestal Virgins operated in. When he assumed the office of Pontifex Maximus in 12 BCE, Augustus gave the Vestal Virgins the *Domus Publica*, the chief priest's residence adjacent to the *Atrium Vestae*.¹²⁷ While it makes sense that Augustus would continue to live on the Palatine, logistically, there was no real reason or need for him to give the *Domus Publica* to the Vestals, for they already had an adequate precinct next door.¹²⁸ Rationally speaking, it actually made less sense for Augustus to hand over the *Domus Publica* to the Vestals; surely he had to know that he was not going to be Pontifex Maximus forever, and if a new chief priest was appointed, they would need somewhere to live. Augustus' actions implied that the next Pontifex Maximus would also reside on the Palatine, and thus also be emperor. Giving the *Domus Publica* to the Vestals was a strategic move on Augustus' part because it cultivated his public image of a humble leader who rejected unnecessary honors, but it also spatially united the two posts of Pontifex Maximus and *princeps*.¹²⁹

Perhaps to further recreate the *Domus Publica* and the *Atrium Vestae* on the Palatine and associate the power of the Pontifex Maximus with the power of the *princeps*, later that same year, Augustus dedicated an *aedicula* and *ara* of Vesta as an additional cult site connected to his home.¹³⁰ Ovid gushes over the degree of divinity on the Palatine at this time in book 4 of his *Fasti*:

O Vesta, take thy day! Vesta has been received in the home of her kinsman: so have the Fathers righteously decreed. Phoebus owns part of the house; another part has been given up to Vesta; what remains is occupied by Caesar himself.

¹²⁷ *OEAGR* s.v. Vesta and the Vestal Virgins

¹²⁸ Peter Aicher, *Rome Alive: A Source Guide to the Ancient City* vol. 1 (Wauconda, Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2004).

¹²⁹ Aicher, *Rome Alive: A Source Guide to the Ancient City*.

¹³⁰ *BNP* s.v. Vesta.

Long live the laurels of the Palatine! Long live the house wreathed with oaken boughs! A single house holds three eternal gods.¹³¹

Lastly, we cannot overlook the ways in which Augustus associated his *family* with the Vestal Virgins. Augustus bestowed upon his sister Octavia, but particularly his wife Livia, many of the privileges that the Vestals enjoyed, despite the fact that they were not a part of the order. In 35 BCE, Octavia and Livia were freed from *tutela* and given tribunician *sacrosanctitas* under a special grant; the pair shared these privileges with the Vestal Virgins, and were the only women at the time who did.¹³² According to Dio, Livia—who only had two children—was also granted *ius trium liberorum* by the Senate in 9 BCE, another distinction that she shared with the Vestals.¹³³ Even after Augustus’s death, the connections between Livia and the priestesses would only grow stronger, as she was granted the privilege of being accompanied by a *lictore* as well as a theater seat in the Vestals’ tribune in 24 CE.¹³⁴

Furthermore, the previously discussed *Ara Pacis* also illuminates Augustus’ attempts to link his family with the Vestals. The *dedicatio* of the *Ara Pacis* (and thus the *anniversarium sacrificium* rites) fell not-so-coincidentally on Livia’s birthday, and the presence of Augustus and his relatives alongside the Vestal Virgins on its friezes made it conceivable “almost as a family monument” illustrating the *princeps*’ “self-concept of the Augustan state.”¹³⁵ Given the aforementioned discourse surrounding the Vestal Virgins’ origins in the households of the early kings, it seems like Augustus was trying to emulate this relationship and symbolically incorporate the Vestals into his family by dedicating an altar to Vesta inside his home by

¹³¹ Ov. *Fast.* 4.943; Dio. Cass. 54, 27.3. While it is worth noting that Ovid was a creative poet, known for his elegies and didactic poems, we know from other ancient sources such as Cassius Dio that Augustus did indeed designate part of his house on the Palatine as public property and construct a shrine of Vesta there.

¹³² Dio. Cass. 49.38.1; *BNP* s.v. Sacrosanctus. *Sacrosanctitas* “described objects or persons who were protected by oath in such a way that by harming them the culprit came under the threat of the death penalty.”

¹³³ Dio. Cass. 55.2.5-7; Morrell, “Tutela mulierum and the Augustan marriage laws,” 93.

¹³⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 4.16; Richard Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1992), 125.

¹³⁵ *OCD* s.v. Ara Pacis.

featuring images of the priestesses alongside his family in imperial imagery and bestowing some of their very public privileges upon his female relatives.

This can of course take us back to the question, what symbolic role did the Vestal Virgins occupy in the family of *this princeps*, his wives or daughters? The fact that Livia was so directly connected to the priesthood through the privileges and legal status that she shared with the Vestals points to the priestesses filling a more matronal role. However, as Beard hypothesized, I believe it is arguable that they were both. Through Augustus, the other women of the imperial family were still associated with the Vestal Virgins, and Suetonius even tells us of an occasion where Augustus “solemnly swore that if anyone of his grand-daughters were of eligible age, he would have proposed her name” to become a Vestal after one had died and no father was willing to submit his daughter to enter the college.¹³⁶ Given Augustus’ concern for dynastic succession, we can say with near certainty that this was a bluff, for submitting one of his grand-daughters to be a Vestal would eliminate her ability to provide him with valuable potential heirs. However, this statement can be interpreted as a glimpse into what role Augustus himself saw the Vestals as filling in his own family.

To summarize, Augustus not only preserved the privileged status of the Vestals, but enhanced it, and bestowed upon them new distinctions such as special seats at the games and *ius trium liberorum* status. Augustus established new celebrations, such as the *Augustalia* and the *anniversarium sacrificium*, that annually required the participation of the Vestals for the focal sacrifice. In imperial imagery, particularly the friezes of the *Ara Pacis*, Augustus appealed to the Vestal Virgins, and depicted them in a religious procession that included himself and his family. The Vestals were further associated with Augustus’ *gens* when he established a cult site for them in his home on the Palatine, and conferred upon his wife many of their special privileges. Thus,

¹³⁶ Suet. *Aug.* 31.

we can safely say that the Vestals undoubtedly maintained their privileged status under Augustus, even more so, they gained further distinction in the empire and were often directly associated with the *princeps* and the imperial family.

V. Why the Vestal Virgins?

In the previous section we examined Augustus' interactions with the Vestal Virgins to assess whether or not they maintained their privileged status during the shift from republic to principate. Through reference to modern scholarship but also ancient accounts by Suetonius, Ovid and the *princeps* himself, we found that the Vestals not only survived, but *thrived* during this time, for Augustus enhanced their privileges and kept them close to him and his family both literally and figuratively. But one last question remains: why? What was Augustus' motivation in doing this, and what did he get out of it? Can this tell us anything new about the Vestals?

Syme reminds us that “domination is never the less effective for being veiled”; whether he called himself so or not, Augustus went on to inhabit the position of emperor and drastically transformed Rome. According to George Kennedy, Augustus was able to “mask the reality of his power because” he had a “profound understanding of the rhetoric of empire,” and “developed new techniques of verbal and visual persuasion” to “win men’s minds without opening the door to the dangers of public debate.” Augustus’ relationship with the Vestals was one of these techniques.¹³⁷

It was critical for Augustus to frame his actions as not only reviving the republic, but also returning it to the Romans, as Lamp has noted that “Augustus’s reign depended on its acceptance by and popularity with the Roman people,” especially the governing class.¹³⁸ Gaining that popularity of course rested on addressing and remedying what had gone wrong in the late republic—which, according to popular sentiment, stemmed from a departure from traditional values that prioritized the common good ahead of private interests.¹³⁹ Thus, we can see how

¹³⁷ Kennedy, quoted by Kathleen S. Lamp, *A City of Marble: The Rhetoric of Augustan Rome*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2013) 2.

¹³⁸ Lamp, *A City of Marble*, 13.

¹³⁹ Lamp, *A City of Marble*, 13.

Augustus' solution of returning to and re-articulating basic Roman values and principles would have been readily accepted by the populace and governing class.¹⁴⁰

Syme notes that “the Romans as a people were possessed by an especial veneration for authority, precedent and tradition, by a rooted distaste of change unless change could be shown to be in harmony with ancestral custom, ‘*mos maiorum*’—which in practice meant the sentiments of the oldest living senators.”¹⁴¹ Valentina Arena, writing 76 years after Syme, takes a different approach in her interpretation of *mos maiorum*, and argues that it was an unwritten set of rules and principles—largely expressed by the nobility, yes—but it was more “fluid, flexible, and diverse” than previous scholarship has articulated.¹⁴² Arena describes *mos maiorum* as a widespread but unofficial “set of moral rules, or code of behavior,” and while adherence to tradition may have been one offshoot of *mos maiorum*, the concept itself “centered around essential values such as *auctoritas*, *dignitas*, *libertas*, *gratia*, and *honor*.”¹⁴³ Since the Vestal Virgins were priestesses of a cult associated with Rome's earliest days, as well as the values of *puicitia* and *dignitas*, we can see how appeals to Vestals might appease those who sought to preserve ancestral custom—possibly even distracting from Augustus' increasingly centralized power over the empire.

Augustus' relationship with the Vestals also reinforced his status as Pontifex Maximus. As mentioned previously, Augustus took the position of Rome's chief priest in 12 CE, with which he assumed formal legal and religious authority over the Vestals as head of the *Collegium Pontificum*. This allows us to hone in on another reason why association with the Vestals benefited Augustus's image: his pontifical role would have been “reinforced by the inclusion of

¹⁴⁰ Lamp, *A City of Marble*, 13.

¹⁴¹ Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 315.

¹⁴² Valentina Arena, "Informal Norms, Values, and Social Control in the Roman Participatory Context," in *A Companion to Greek Democracy and the Roman Republic*, ed. Dean Hammer (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 218.

¹⁴³ Arena, "Informal Norms, Values, and Social Control in the Roman Participatory Context," 217.

the Vestals, whose duties and proper conduct he directly oversaw.”¹⁴⁴ The impact that Vestal unchastity was thought to have on the state was disastrous, and signaled that Rome’s stability and morality were declining. Augustus obviously could not let this happen under his watch, and thus we may interpret his close relationship with the Vestals as a way to ensure they behaved properly and were never accused of *incestum*—which would have reflected poorly on him as Pontifex Maximus. We know that Augustus was not able to secure this degree of proper conduct among his own female relatives, particularly his daughter Julia the Elder, whom he banished in 2 BCE for her promiscuous behavior. Perhaps being able to assume responsibility for the chastity and virtuous behavior of the six Vestals was a way for Augustus to counteract his inability to control some of the women in his own family.

Stemming from this, Augustus’ close relationship with the Vestals, paired with their proper conduct under him, also would have reinforced his status as an effective ruler and bringer of stability and *pax*. As previously mentioned, Augustus’ positive relationship with the Vestals would have appealed to the governing class, particularly the older senators that Syme mentions. The governing class would undoubtedly at least be familiar with the severity of the *incestus* charge and previous Vestal trials and executions from Livy’s *Ab urb conditia*, which he began writing in 27 BC. The most recent instance of a Vestal Virgin being accused of unchastity before Augustus’ reign occurred in 73 BCE against Vestals Fabia and Lucinia.¹⁴⁵ The pair ended up being acquitted of their charges, but this is the last instance we hear of a Vestal even being accused of unchastity until 90 CE, during the reign of Domitian.¹⁴⁶ The fact that under his rule, the Vestals were closely linked to Augustus and *none* were accused of *incestum*—an occurrence

¹⁴⁴ Thompson, “Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins,” 63.

¹⁴⁵ T.J. Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” *Historia* vol. 2 (2005): 166. Two pairs of lovers are named in accounts of the trial: Fabia and Cataline, and Lucinia and Crassus.

¹⁴⁶ Cadoux, “Catiline and the Vestal Virgins,” 165.

thought to coordinate directly to instability in the empire—would have sent a clear message to all Romans, particularly the governing class: Rome under Augustus was secure, virtuous, and infallible.

The links that Augustus established between his family and the Vestal Virgins discussed in the previous section also served the *princeps* by allowing him to further his dynastic goals. According to Thompson, the connections that Augustus formed between his *gens* and the Vestals, a cult that had maintained a smooth line of succession since its conception, “underscores his personal commitment to establish a dynasty.”¹⁴⁷ Erich Gruen (2005) has questioned the notion of “succession planning” under Augustus, arguing that the princeps was careful to avoid giving the impression that he wanted to create a heritable dynasty, for it was not in his interest to emphasize autocracy.¹⁴⁸ Gruen’s argument, though thoughtful, has been challenged by Stevenson, who argues:

Augustus soon set about promoting his family and creating lines of succession, though he was at first circumspect about the political implications of his succession planning. Two points seem fundamental. First, Augustus was vitally concerned with descent by blood. Second, in contrast to republican practice, which often cast a wide net for suitable marriage partners, Augustus constructed a string of endogamous marriages within the imperial family.¹⁴⁹

Augustus never quite found the formula for a smooth dynastic succession, and grudgingly was compelled to name his step-son Tiberius as his heir after his presumed first-choices Marcellus, Agrippa, Lucius, and Gaius all died before the *princeps*.¹⁵⁰ However, we can still see how the Vestals, whose succession had been unbroken since the order’s conception predating the

¹⁴⁷ Thompson, “Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins,” 65.

¹⁴⁸ E.S. Gruen, “Augustus and the Making of the Principate,” in K. Galinsky (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus* (Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 33-51.

¹⁴⁹ Stevenson, “The Succession Planning of Augustus,” 124. Stevenson also cites a quote from Eck, *Age of Augustus*, 157: “When it came to the descent of his line of blood the behavior of Augustus could almost be described as obsessive.”

¹⁵⁰ Stevenson, “The Succession Planning of Augustus.”

Republic, “were ideal embodiments of Augustus’ hopes for his own family as well as the extended family of the Roman state.”¹⁵¹

Lastly, Augustus’s claims to authority rested on the narrative that he was restoring the state, and what better way to convey this than associating himself with a priestess order older than Rome itself and linked to its founding? Vestals were associated with the founding of Rome through the etiological myth of Rhea Silvia, as well as the longevity of the state through their sacred status as caretakers of the flame symbolizing Rome’s eternal existence. The Vestals’ connection to Romulus and status as symbols of Rome coordinated with Augustus’ rhetoric of himself as the ‘re-founder’ of Rome; the priestesses would have been extremely useful to him in cultivating his image, as they represented “a critical link to the past and the traditions that Augustus, as both the new Romulus and the descendant of Aeneas, succeeded in reviving.”¹⁵²

If the Vestals symbolically represented Rome, then they represented a republican state for nearly 500 years, and had to shift to represent a principate at the turn of the first century CE. However, there is one last critical distinction to be made: though the Vestals were undoubtedly linked to republican values and the state itself, the cult’s origins are still in the *regal period*. Yes, Romulus did found Rome and usher in the transition from anarchy to law, but he did so by establishing a monarchy, of which he was the first king. Does this sound familiar? At first this specification seemingly presents a contradiction, but it actually adds yet another layer to Augustus’ rhetoric of a balance between continuity and change. As an institution widely *associated* with the republic but technically of *regal* origin, appeals to the Vestals were a perfect device for Augustus to embrace while centralizing the empire under the guise of returning to tradition.

¹⁵¹ Thompson, “Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins,” 66.

¹⁵² Thompson, “Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins,” 71.

This paper began with an overview of the ancient accounts and works of various contemporary scholars that have greatly furthered our studies of the Vestal Virgins to establish a better understanding of who the Vestals were, what they did, why they did it, and what made the cult so important. Discussing the work of Beard, Staples, Wildfang, Parker, Gallia, and others shed light on the symbolic significance of the order, and established two parameters that weighed heavily into this paper's analysis: 1.) The Vestal Virgins were seen as intimately linked to the founding of Rome through the legend of Rhea Silvia and Romulus, and 2.) their extraordinary and ambiguous legal, social, sexual, and sacred status allowed them to physically embody the Roman state and its people.

With a foundational understanding of the Vestals in place, I then raised the question: how did an institution that represented the republic for over 400 years survive the transition into representing an autocratic principate, and what did it look like? Scholars have shown that religion played a major role in Augustus' politics, and religious restoration was one of many ways that he walked the line between continuity and change. By referencing ancient accounts from Ovid, Suetonius, Dio, and Augustus himself, we were able to see how the *princeps* repeatedly aligned himself with the priestesses by legally enhancing their privileges, creating new annual celebrations that called for their participation, featuring them heavily on the friezes of the *Ara Pacis*, and connecting them with his female family members through imagery, privileges, and festival dates. We discussed the numerous ways in which Augustus' close relationship with the Vestals benefited him, which was primarily through reinforcing his image as *princeps*, Pontifex Maximus, *paterfamilias* of a dynasty, and a second Romulus, or restorer of Rome. Shotter and Galinsky both attribute the long-term stability he brought to Rome as

Augustus' preeminent achievement, and it seems fitting that innate in the symbolism of the Vestal Virgins was the theme of continuity—in terms of the order's continuous succession of priestesses, their maintenance of the sacred flame, and its implications for Rome's stability and longevity.

This thesis has also presented numerous opportunities for new lines of inquiry and further study; that is, there is much more to be said on this topic. However, my intention was to put the relationship between Augustus and the Vestal Virgins under a microscope, and in doing so we were able to gain a deeper understanding of how religion was a tool in Augustus' political rhetoric, and how the somewhat malleable nature of the Vestals allowed them to be manipulated to serve his interests. Though the latter half of this paper centers largely around the actions of Augustus, this has first and foremost been a study of the Vestal Virgins, and my main hope is that readers will walk away knowing more about the priestesses and the indispensable role they played in Rome. Wildfang begins her book with a quote that feels more pertinent now, at the end of my research than ever:

Whatever else one says about the Vestals, these priestesses were, in the eye of Romans themselves, from Rome's very beginning at the heart of what it was to be Roman. Without the Vestals and their cult, Rome as we know it would not have existed. Without the Vestals and their cult, what it was to be Roman would have had a very different meaning.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins*, 1.

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Bibliographic Abbreviations

<i>OCD</i>	<i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2012).
<i>OEAGR</i>	<i>The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome</i> (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2010).
<i>BNP</i>	<i>Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World</i> (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
<i>AJPh</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i> .
<i>JRS</i>	<i>The Journal of Roman Studies</i> .
<i>CPh</i>	<i>Classical Philology</i> .

Ancient text abbreviations

<i>Aug.</i>	Augustus
	<i>RG</i> <i>Res Gestae</i>
<i>Dio. Cass.</i>	Cassius Dio
<i>Gell.</i>	Aulus Gellius
	<i>NA</i> <i>Noctes Atticae</i>
<i>Ov.</i>	Ovid
	<i>Fast.</i> <i>Fasti</i>
	<i>Trist.</i> <i>Tristia</i>
<i>Pliny</i>	Pliny the Elder
	<i>NH</i> <i>Natural History</i>
<i>Plut.</i>	Plutarch
	<i>Num.</i> <i>Life of Numa Pompilius in The Parallel Lives</i>
	<i>QR</i> <i>Quaestiones Romanae</i>
<i>Sal.</i>	Sallust

Cat. The War with Cataline

Suet. Suetonius

Aug. Augustus

Tac. Tacitus

Ann. Annales