

Piety and Practicality: The Virginity of Rome's Vestal Priestesses

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What is a Vestal?

In ancient Rome, the vestal virgins were the priestesses of the goddess Vesta. Though the cult lasted for over a thousand years, vestal practices and origins are a mystery. One question that has no clear answer is, why was virginity a requirement for the priestesses of Vesta? I argue that vestal virginity was a requirement for pragmatic reasons and not necessarily a spiritual one.

Historians on Vestals

- Early scholars considered the vestal cult as a proto-nunnery
- Mary Beard argues that the vestal's virginity created an ambiguous social status which gave them certain social privileges reserved for men
- Ariadne Staples argued the vestal's virginity made them an easy scape goat for Rome. Roman leaders could blame their failures on a vestals lack of chastity



Keeper of the Flame, Louis Hector Leroux, late nineteenth century



Inauguration of a Vestal Virgin, Louis Hector Leroux, 1863



Remains of the Temple of Vesta



The Vestal Virgins making an offering in a Roman temple. Wood engraving, 19th century.



Statue of a Vestal Virgin, mid-late second century CE



Vestal Maxima Burning Incense, ca. 125–130 CE

The Vestal Cult

- Prosperity of Rome rested on the continual burning of the vestal fire.
- Vestals tended to the sacred flame and preformed other sacred rituals
- Vestal's term of service was thirty years
- Vestals were chosen between the ages of six and ten
- There were between four and 6 vestals active in the cult
- Vestals had no family ties and were semi-independent

Rules of the Cult

- Vestals were free from familial obligations and loyalty
- Vestals could not marry
- Vestals were exempt from the duties expected of Roman women
- If a vestal lost her virginity, she was sentenced to death by live burial
- If the state required a scape goat, a vestal could be put to death without fear of retribution from a father, brother, husband, or son

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Waring for his help and support during the creation of this project, Dr. Gandila and Dr. Joyce for their unwavering support throughout my academic career and my husband, Jake, for his love and support in all my endeavors.