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All Roads Lead to Rome Final Paper

### **Life as a Vestal Virgin: A Blessing or a Curse?**

The Vestal Virgins: a priesthood that protects the city of Rome. A group of women granted much more freedom than the average Roman woman. Women whose advice is taken seriously by those in positions of power. Girls taken from their homes at the age of 6, forced to take a vow of chastity for 30 years. Women paraded around as symbols of the quintessential woman. Vestals buried alive for supposedly breaking their vows. In initially looking at the lives of the Vestal Virgins, it may seem that they were granted a blessing in being chosen to become a part of this exclusive priesthood. It brought great honor to their families, and they were granted many privileges in exchange for 30 years of devotion to the group and to a vow of chastity. When analyzing the group further, it becomes obvious that there is much more to it than this. These Vestal Virgins lived in a state of constant limbo, between the status of a woman and a man, isolating them from most of society, and were essentially used by men as a symbol of what the quintessential Roman woman should be, equating the duties that the women had to the state to the duties a woman had to her family and her household. In this paper, I aim to look at the question of whether being chosen for the life of a Vestal Virgin is a blessing or a curse. I will present the benefits that have been historically accorded to the Vestal Virgins and demonstrate the other side of these benefits: the sacrifice that comes along with them. This will lead to my ultimate argument that though there are many privileges that come with being a Vestal Virgin, the sacrifices seem to outweigh the benefits, and that entrance into the priesthood was more of a curse than a blessing.

The Vestals were made up of a group of six women, ranging in age from six to mid or late-thirties. These women were chosen at a young age and dedicated themselves to thirty years in the priesthood. This entailed spending thirty years tending to the fire in the Temple of Vesta, which was thought that, if kept burning, allowed for the continued success of the Roman State, as well as performing various religious rituals. In entering the priesthood of the Vestal Virgins, the women also made a vow of thirty years of chastity. The Vestal Virgins dedicated their lives to the state for the thirty years that they were a Vestal, performing duties to ensure the success of the Republic and acting as a symbol of freedom and incorruptibility of Rome for all of its people, though this sometimes occurred at great sacrifice to them.

A first of the so-considered advantages of becoming a Vestal Virgin is that once initiated, the Vestal is freed from the *paterfamilias*, or the male head of household, whom Roman women had to consult before making almost any decision (Walker 3). Although it seems that she is gaining a sort of freedom from the binds of her family, the Virgin, once initiated, comes under the control of the *pontifex maximus*, yet another man, who controls her behavior through imposing the duties she holds to the priesthood, and therefore to the state and the people of Rome. It is also he who determines consequences should the priestess falter in her duties. It is important to consider, however, that legally, the Vestal Virgin does not belong to the *pontifex maximus*, but rather is sovereign in the legal realm of Roman civilization (Kroppenberg 426), granting her rights to do things such as make a will and testify in court. It is only in the religious sense that the Virgin is technically under control of the *pontifex maximus*. However, due to the fact that the Vestal is in protection of the fire that allows for the continued success of the Roman state, if there is suspicion that she has neglected her duties or lost her

chastity, it becomes the concern of the entire state and not simply the person in charge of disciplining the Virgins. In addition, during the time of the emperors, the emperor himself was the *pontifex maximus*, giving the state control of the Vestals. Furthermore, whether during the Empire or the Republic, if a Virgin is accused of breaking her chastity vow, she is in no way protected by the State if the College of Pontiffs decides that she is guilty and condemns her to be buried alive. In this way, although Vestal Virgins are granted legal freedom and privileges over common Roman women in some ways, they are failed by the state in terms of their legal rights in other ways. More than that, they are failed by it in what may be said is the most important way: the protection of their lives.

The Vestal Virgins were some of the most, if not *the* most, respected women of their time, by common people and politicians alike. The fire in the Temple of Vesta that they tended to was invaluable to the people of Rome, as they truly believed that only as long as it kept burning, would Rome continue to thrive as a civilization. Because the Vestal Virgins were the ones that watched over this fire and were charged with ensuring that it continued to burn, they were held in high esteem by the citizens of the state that so strongly depended on them to do their duty. However, this also allowed the people to use the Virgins as a scapegoat when things started to take a turn for the worse for Rome. According to Takács, “(Vestal Virgins) carried the guilt and failing of men as a scapegoat” and “paid the price for men’s failings in the political sphere” (Takács 89). When men as political leaders were failing at their jobs and the economy was bad or wartime was going poorly for the civilization of Rome, the Romans oftentimes blamed this on the gods being angry with them, and said that they were taking this anger out on them through any problem that was prevalent at that time period. One reason that the gods

might be angry was if a Vestal had broken her vow of chastity, which is considered to interrupt or destroy the relationship between Rome and the gods. The people of Rome would then accuse a Vestal of breaking her vow of chastity, essentially with no evidence. The punishment: to be buried alive. The reasoning: that the Vestal had diverted her energies from the state of Rome to a single man, or jeopardized the good of the whole for a single entity (Takács 87), and risked the entire future of Rome. In further analyzation of the times throughout Roman history at which Vestal Virgins were accused of breaking their vows of chastity and put to death, researchers have found evidence showing that these accusations frequently happened in times of political crisis or devastation for the city. Between the first Punic War and the end of the Republic, there were two recorded accusations against and executions of Vestal Virgins for breaking this vow of chastity. The first was in 214 and the other 114 BC. The timing of both of these recorded instances aligned with a time when Romans had just received news that their army had been annihilated (Staples 134). This devastating news for the city was, naturally, not received well, and rather than blame the politicians who ran the military campaign, or simply accept that the defeat was no one's wrongdoing but rather simply a sad loss for the city, the people needed a scapegoat, one that could not punish them for their accusation and one that they could essentially accuse without tangible evidence. And so they turned on the Vestals. In a sad reality, the people of Rome executed women who were likely innocent of breaking their vow of chastity, and who didn't deserve to be buried alive even if they had, because they could not deal with their grief in a realistic way. Through this, one is able to understand that it was extremely dangerous to be a Vestal Virgin in a time of political turmoil, whether one was following their vow of chastity or not.

While the sacrifices of entering into the Vestal priesthood were great, such as committing to not having a family and risking execution by people who once adored them, there were benefits provided to the Vestals that may, in some part, make up for these sacrifices or downfalls of the life they led. First, the Vestals were paid a significant sum at their initial entrance into the priesthood, and then at yearly intervals thereafter (Takács 81). This sum was used as a way to interest citizens in a life as a Vestal, or in other words, to interest people to put up their daughters for candidacy. In fact, during the rule of Tiberius, the sum a Vestal Virgin received upon entering the priesthood was double the monetary qualification for the highest Senatorial rank in the state. Naturally, this was a phenomenon of supply in demand, due to the fact that at this time there weren't enough Vestal Virgin candidates and so the government had to increase demand by increasing the benefit of becoming a Vestal Virgin. This is especially important given the fact that Vestal Virgins are granted legal freedom at their entrance into the priesthood and were therefore allowed to leave a will when they died. So the Virgins not only had money to spend in their own lifetime, but they were granted the right leave money to their family or those that they cared about after their death, and it was an amount that would let those they loved live comfortably.

Due to the fact that the Vestal Virgins were well respected in Roman civilization, their advice on political matters were taken seriously, which gave them more of a voice than any other women of Rome at the time. It seems that many Vestal Virgins cherished the power that they had in their time as a priestess, because it has been recorded that some were reluctant to leave the priesthood at the end of their 30 years and give up the power and social status that they had gained in their years as a Vestal. While many people in positions of power did take

their advice seriously, the Vestals could not hold any actual political power, further advancing the idea that they lived in a constant limbo, one between power and lack thereof. While the Vestals were able to sit in on Senate meetings and hear all that the men of the Senate had to say, they could not speak and therefore give their input on the matter being discussed at these meetings, and essentially were allowed only to be flies on the wall. One can only imagine how frustrating it must have been for the Vestals to hear men debating a subject that they have a strong opinion on, or possibly a solution for, and yet cannot say anything in that moment.

Although they may be able to give their input to a political contact they have later on, they knew that they were not going to get the credit for ideas that they propose. They could work behind the scenes as much as they like, but they would never have the opportunity to express their intelligence and their opinions to the Senate or the people of Rome. Although intrinsically the power that they did have may have held value for the Virgins, as they were bettering the city of Rome that they had devoted their lives to, it must have been bothersome to see men take credit for any advice they may have given them. It may make an outsider wonder whether or not the privilege that these women have to sit in on Senate meetings or hold company with politically powerful men is worth the sacrifice of having to sit by quietly while decisions are made without your input or recognition for your ideas in all cases of government.

The Vestal Virgins were, in some ways, important to the politics of Rome in the way that Senators were not, giving them power in a unique way. One such example is the fact that Vestal Virgins were regularly employed on important diplomatic missions in times of crisis (Kroppenberg 421). As a symbol of political peacemakers, their status throughout the Roman Empire allowed them to lead these missions and bring peace back to their beloved city, because

as long as the receivers of the message understood the symbol that the Vestals embodied, they understood that the empire wanted peace with them, and were more likely to cooperate. However, although the Virgins had the power of being the messengers in these situations, a job seemingly extremely important and not given lightly, messengers were truly all that the Virgins were in these situations. They had no say over the content of the messages that they were delivering, and were given no authority to negotiate or speak freely. So this again becomes a way in which the Vestal Virgins are used for their symbolism rather than their abilities, becoming clear after further analyzation of something that is at first seemingly a privilege for members of this priesthood.

There were ways in which the Vestals truly did hold powers unknown to women of their time which were a privilege and a great responsibility. One such duty was functioning as state notaries and maintaining an archive of extremely important documents of public law and state policy, as well as documents such as the wills of people such as Caesar, Antoninus, and Augustus (Kroppenberg 421). In this way, the virgins were truly carrying out their symbolic duty as protectors of their great city. The fact that the Virgins were given such a significant responsibility demonstrates that the politicians of their time trusted the Virgins to do their job effectively and keep the city safe by doing something much more significant and impactful than keeping a fire burning, and that they counted on these women to be more than just an example of the perfect women to be paraded around. In addition, the Vestal Virgins were the only women with the ability to appear in court and give testimony in person, whereas any other woman would have to do it at home in private. Legally, they also had privileges that no other women in the city of Rome had. When the Virgins were taken out of control of their family,

they were given the ability to make a will, and leave some of her money to living people. There are varying perspectives on this privilege granted to this particular set of women. Some suggest that this is a legal masculinization of the vestals, as it breaks from the societal tradition of women being legally controlled by men, whereas the Virgins had no such attachment. Others said that it is simply the fact that because the Vestal Virgins are a symbol of freedom for the Republic, it would be extremely hypocritical to curtail their civil rights.

Although the legal masculinization perspective is quite speculative, it brings up the interesting point that the Vestal Virgins do in fact live in a constant state of limbo, between man and woman in social and legal terms. In the highly patriarchal society that was Ancient Rome, the main social expectation of women was that they marry and have children (Takács 83). The Virgins, of course, are not allowed this way of life, leaving them significantly isolated from the idea of what a woman is, in societal terms, and moving them into a state of in-between when it came to the male and female genders. As has been discussed previously, the Vestal Virgins were in fact given many more rights and privileges than other women in Ancient Rome, and yet they were still a) not granted all the rights that men were and b) were still not completely out from under control of a man, with the *pontifex maximus* controlling their behaviors and punishing them if they didn't complete their duties. This left them somewhere between the male and female legal status, something that may have left them fairly isolated within society (Mustakallio 234). When one considers that they were allowed to attend gladiatorial games with seats near those of Senators, attend Senate meetings but not speak, and could freely move around Rome but only with the chaperone of a lictor and oftentimes with grand shows being made out of their appearances, one can realize just how isolating this

life could be. They were not a Roman woman, and they didn't spend much time with them, yet they were not granted the same status as a man, though it seems like they spent time outside their house and the Temple with Senators, or their lictors. Therein lies a feeling of separation from all but 5 other women in Roman society.

I acknowledge that the answer to the question I aimed to answer in this paper may be situationally dependent as to the priorities of each Vestal Virgin and what would make her content with the life that she is living as a Vestal. However, I also argue that while the life a Vestal Virgin may seem to be one of privilege and power when looking at it initially, when one further analyzes the sacrifices made by and duties imposed on the women of this priesthood, it becomes clear that it is a life much more difficult than it seems to be at first look. For every privilege, there is a sacrifice. For every freedom, a constraint. While there are many benefits to leading the life of a Vestal Virgin, I hold that these benefits are outweighed by greater disadvantages, and that being chosen for life as a Vestal Virgin is less of a blessing and more of a curse.

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