The Priests of Vesta

The fourth century CE gave birth to many modifications in the Imperial policy regarding religion in the Roman Empire. The acceptance, and later monopoly, of Christianity and the interactions between Christians and pagans of the period usually receive the majority of scholars’ attention. What happens less often are studies about the internal evolution of the religions of this time, particularly among the pagan cults. There is no doubt that alterations occurred, but their significance is largely overlooked and overwhelmed by the Christian-pagan discussion. One of these many changes transpired in the worship of the goddess Vesta and those responsible for administering her cult.

Anyone who studies ancient history is acquainted with the symbolic figures of Vesta’s chief priestesses, the Vestal Virgins. However, what they are less likely to know is that for the first time in the fourth century there are men who claimed some variation of the title “priest of Vesta”. Although these officials are occasionally mentioned by scholars, no one, to my knowledge, has provided any explanation about when or why this position was created. This seems a serious oversight in the scholarship of such a popular cult that is by and large considered to be controlled by six women.

There are at least five men identified by inscriptions as priests of Vesta during the fourth century. Vettius Agorius Praetextatus was a *pontifex Vestae* (*CIL* VI 1779), in addition to holding several other religious and administrative offices. Next, Memmius Vitrasius Orfitus provides the first example of a *pontifex maior Vestae* (*CIL* VI 1741), and like Praetextatus he could claim numerous other religious and civic positions. The third example is Lucius Ragonius Venustus who was an augur as well as a *pontifex Vestalis maior*. Finally, CIL VI 2158 tells us that the *pontifices Vestae* Plotius Acilius Lucillus and Vitrasius Praetextatus repaired the mansion of the Salii Palatini at their own expense.

Everything written—ancient or modern—about these “priests of Vesta” is presented as a matter of fact. There were priests of Vesta in the fourth century. Yet no source tells us why at least five documented men suddenly carry a title heretofore unused. M. Kahlos has suggested that the old *pontifices* took on longer names (*pontifex maior* or *pontifex Deae Vestae*) to distinguish their priesthoods from new ones such as the *pontifices Dei Solis* (Kahlos, 68); however, I feel that further explanation remains. In addition, the inscriptions of Orfitus and Venustus include the modifier *maior*, which could indicate a hierarchy of Vesta’s priests and not only a combination of various titles. Thus, this paper will examine the origins of the “priest of Vesta” phenomenon, the membership and organization of this group, and their role in a society continuously moving away from its pagan origins.

Works Cited

Kahlos, Maijastina. *Vettius Agorius Praetextatus: A senatorial life in between*. Rome : Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2002.