**How to get Away with Murder: Domitian’s Execution of the Vestal Virgins**

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1. Pliny the Younger to Cornelius Minicianus 4.11.4-9

Dices tristia et miseranda, dignum tamen illum qui haec ispa studia incesti scelere macularit. Confessus est quidem incestum, sed incertum utrum quia verum erat, an quia graviora metuebat si negasset. Fremebat enim Domitianus aestuabatque in ingenti invidia destitutus. Nam cum Corneliam Vestalium maximam defodere vivam concupisset, ut qui inlustrari saeculum suum eiusmodi exemplis arbitraretur, pontificis maximi iure, seu potius immanitate tyranni licentia domini, reliquos pontifices non in Regiam sed in Albanam villam convocavit. Nec minore scelere quam quod ulcisci videbatur, absentem inauditamque damnavit incesti, cum ipse fratris filiam incesto non polluisset solum verum etiam occidisset; nam vidua abortu periit. Missi statim pontifices qui defodiendam necandamque curarent. Illa nunc ad Vestam, nunc ad ceteros deos manus tendens, multa sed hoc frequentissime clamitabat: **“Me Caesar incestam putat, qua sacra faciente vicit triumphavit!” Blandiens haec an inridens, ex fiducia sui an ex contemptu principis, dixerit dubium est. Dixit donec ad supplicium, nescio an innocens, certe tamquam innocens ducta est**. Quin etiam cum in illud subterraneum demitteretur, haesissetque descendenti stola, vertit se ac recollegit, cumque ei manum carnifex daret, aversata est et resiluit foedumque contactum quasi plane a casto puroque corpore novissima sanctitate reiecit omnibusque numeris pudoris πoλλὴν πρόνιαν ἔσχεν εὐσχὴµων πεσεῖν.

All this, you may say, is pitiably sad but no more than the just fate of a man who disgraced his profession by the crime of *incestum*. But having confessed this *incestum*, it is not clear whether because it was true or because he feared a worse charge if he denied it. For at the time Domitian was raging and agitating at having been being left in great hatred. For when he had been inclined to bury alive Cornelia, the chief priestess of the Vestal Virgins, so that his age be considered famous by an example of this kind, by the law of the Chief Pontiff, or rather imitating the license of a tyrant, he summoned the other priests to meet not in Regia, but at his Alban palace. He condemned her for *incestum* in absence and unheard, a crime greater than the one he made a show of punishing, when he had not only violated the daughter of his own brother but even had killed her, for she died as a result of an abortion during her widowhood. Cornelia, raising up her hand first to Vesta and then the other gods, but she cried out most frequently: **“how can my Caesar believed me unchaste, by doing these sacred rites he conquered and triumphed!” It is know known whether she said this flattering or mocking the emperor, from confidence in herself or contempt for him. She said this until he was led to supplication, I do not know whether she was innocent, but she certainly appeared innocent.**

Moreover, even when she was taken down into that underground chamber, and her stola caught as she descended, she turned and picked it up again, when the assassin offered his hand to her, she drew away and thrust back his loathsome touch from her pure and spotless person as if by a last act of chastity, and then, with due observance of the rules of modesty, she “took great care to fall gracefully.”

1. Cassius Dio 67.9.2

Τὸ μὲν οὖν πλῆθος οὕτως τότε ἐδείπνισεν, αὖθις δὲ τοὺς πρώτους τῆς γερουσίας καὶ τῶν ἱππέων τόνδε τὸν τρόπον… ἐσεκάλεσεν αὐτοὺς μόνους νυκτὸς ἄνευ τῶν ἀκολούθων. καὶ πρῶτον μὲν στήλην ταφοειδῆ ἑκάστῳ σφῶν παρέστησε, τό τε ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἔχουσαν καὶ λυχνοῦχον μικρόν, οἷος ἐν τοῖς μνημείοις κρεμάννυται.

Then he invited in his guests alone at night without their attendants. And first he set beside each of them a slab shaped like a gravestone, bearing the guest’s name and also a small lamp, such as hang in tombs. (Translation by Earnest Cary in the Loeb)

1. Cassius Dio 67.9.5

ἄρτι δὲ ἕκαστός σφων οἴκαδε ἐσεληλύθει καὶ τρόπον τινὰ ἀναπνεῖν ἤρχετο, καὶ αὐτῷ ἐσηγγέλθη ὅτι παρὰ τοῦ Αὐγούστου τις ἥκοι. προσδοκώντων τε ἐκ τούτου τότε δὴ πάντως ἀπολεῖσθαι, ἐσεκόμισέ τις τὴν στήλην ἀργυρᾶν οὖσαν, εἶτ᾿ ἄλλος ἄλλο τι καὶ ἕτερος ἕτερον τῶν σκευῶν τῶν ἐν τῷ δείπνῳ παρατεθέντων, πολυτελεστάτου τινὸς γένους πεποιημένα· καὶ τέλος ὁ παῖς ἐκεῖνος, τὸ δαιμόνιον ἑκάστῳ, λελουμένος τε καὶ κεκοσμημένος… καὶ οὕτω διὰ πάσης τῆς νυκτὸς φοβούμενοι τὰ δῶρα ἔλαβον.

And scarcely had each guest reached his home and was beginning to get his breath again, as one might say, when word was brought him that a messenger from the Augustus had come. While they were accordingly expecting to perish this time in any case, one person brought in the slab, which was of silver, and then others in turn brought in various articles, including the dishes that had been set before them at the dinner, which were constructed of very costly material; and last of all [came] that particular boy who had been each guest’s familiar spirit, now washed and adorned. Thus, after having passed the entire night in terror, they received the gifts. (Translation by Earnest Cary in the Loeb)

1. Aulus Gellius *N.A.* 1.12.1-5

Qui de virgine capienda scripserunt, quorum diligentissime scripsit Labeo Antistius, minorem quam annos sex, maiorem quam annos decem natam negaverunt capi fas esse; item quae non sit patrima et matrima; item quae lingua debili sensuve aurium deminuta aliave qua corporis labe insignita sit; item quae ipsa aut cuius pater emancipatus sit, etiamsi vivo patre in avi potestate sit; item cuius parentes alter ambove servitutem servierunt aut in negotiis sordidis versantur.

Those who have written about the taking of a Virgin, of whom Labeo Antistius wrote most diligently, deny that it is permitted to take a girl who is less than six years in age or greater than ten; or to take one whose father or mother is not living; or one who has been shown to be lacking in speech or hearing or has some other bodily fault. Nor is it permitted to take one whose father has been emancipated or one who has been emancipated herself, even if her father is living and she is in the *potestas* of her grandfather, nor one whose parents, either one, has been slaves or engaged in a low occupation.

1. Plutarch *Num.,*10

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She that hath broken her vow of chastity is buried alive near the Colline gate. Here a little ridge of earth extends for some distance along the inside of the city wall;…Under it a small chamber is constructed, with steps leading down from above. In this are placed a couch with its coverings, a lighted lamp, and very small portions of the necessities of life, such as bread, a bowl of milk, and oil, as though they were thereby absolved themselves of the charge of destroying by hunger a life which had been consecrated to the highest services of religion…No spectacle is more appalling nor does any other day bring more gloom to the city than this. (Translation by Ariadne Staples)

1. Suetonius *Dom*. 8.4

Incesta Vestalium virginum…varie ac severe coercuit, priora capitali supplicio, posteriora more veteri. Nam cum Oculatis sororibus, item Varronillae liberum mortis permisisset arbitrium corruptoresque earum relegasset, mox Corneliam maximam virginem absolutam olim, dein longo intervallo repetitam atque convictam defodi imperavit…

The incest of the Vestal Virgins…he punished in various ways and severely, at first by capital punishment, then in the ancient way. For when he allowed the Oculata sisters and also Varronilla free choice of death and banished their corruptors, soon he ordered Cornelia, the *virgo maxima* once absolved then brought back and convicted, to live burial.

1. Cassius Dio 67.3.4

Ὅτι καὶ ἐπὶ τούτῳ ἠγάλλετο, ὅτι τὰς ἀειπαρθένους ὡς ἠνδρωμένας οὐ κατώρυξεν, ὡς ἦν ἔθος, ἀλλὰ ἄλλως ἀποθνήσκειν ἐκέλευσε.

Domitian prided himself also on the fact that he did not bury alive, as was the custom, the Vestals whom he found to have had intercourse with men, but ordered them to be put to death in some other way. (Translation by Earnest Cary in the Loeb)

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