Domitian and the Vestals

Suetonius, *Domitian*, 8.3-4

*incesta Vestalium virginum, a patre quoque suo et fratre neglecta, varie ac severe coercuit, priora capitali supplicio, posteriora more veteri.  Nam cum Oculatis sororibus, item Varronillae liberum mortis permisisset arbitrium corruptoresque pearum relegasset, mox Corneliam maximam virginem absolutam olim, dein longo intervallo repetitam atque convictam defodi imperavit stupratoresque virgis in Comitio ad necem caedi, excepto praetorio viro, cui, dubia etiam tum causa et incertis quaestionibus atque tormentis de semet professo, exsilium indulsit.*

“…And the incest of Vestal virgins, condoned even by his father and his brother, he punished severely in divers ways, at first by capital punishment, and afterwards in the ancient fashion. 4 For while he allowed the sisters Oculata and also Varronilla free choice of the manner of p357their death, and banished their paramours, he later ordered that Cornelia, a chief-vestal who had been acquitted once but after a long interval again arraigned and found guilty, be buried alive; and her lovers were beaten to death with rods in the Comitium, with the exception of an ex-praetor, whom he allowed to go into exile, because he admitted his guilt while the case was still unsettled and the examination and torture of the witnesses had led to no result.” (*translated by* J. C. Rolfe)

Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 4.11: To Cornelius Minicianus

Have you heard that Valerius Licinianus is teaching rhetoric in Sicily? I do not think you can have done, for the news is quite fresh. He is of praetorian rank, and he used at one time to be considered one of our most eloquent pleaders at the bar, but now he has fallen so low that he is an exile instead of being a senator, and a mere teacher of rhetoric instead of being a prominent advocate. Consequently in his opening remarks he exclaimed, sorrowfully and solemnly: "O Fortune, what sport you make to amuse yourself! For you turn senators into professors, and professors into senators." There is so much gall and bitterness in that expression that it seems to me that he became a professor merely to have the opportunity of uttering it. Again, when he entered the hall wearing a Greek pallium--for those who have been banished with the fire-and- water formula are not allowed to wear the toga--he first pulled himself together and then, glancing at his dress, he said, "I shall speak my declamations in Latin."

You will say that this is all very sad and pitiful, but that a man who defiled his profession of letters by the guilt of incest deserves to suffer. It is true that he confessed his guilt, but it is an open question whether he did so because he was guilty or because he feared an even heavier punishment if he denied it. For Domitian was in a great rage and was boiling over with fury because his witnesses had left him in the lurch. His mind was set upon burying alive Cornelia, the chief of the Vestal Virgins, as he thought to make his age memorable by such an example of severity, and, using his authority as Chief Pontiff, or rather exercising the cruelty of a tyrant and the wanton caprice of a ruler, he summoned the rest of the pontiffs not to the Palace but to his Villa at Alba. There, with a wickedness just as monstrous as the crime which he pretended to be punishing, he declared her guilty of incest, without summoning her before him and giving her a hearing, though he himself had not only committed incest with his brother's daughter but had even caused her death, for she died of abortion during her widowhood. He immediately despatched some of the pontiffs to see that his victim was buried alive and put to death. Cornelia invoked in turns the aid of Vesta and of the rest of the deities, and amid her many cries this was repeated most frequently: "How can Caesar think me guilty of incest, when he has conquered and triumphed after my hands have performed the sacred rites?" It is not known whether her purpose was to soften Caesar's heart or to deride him, whether she spoke the words to show her confidence in herself or her contempt of the Emperor. Yet she continued to utter them until she was led to the place of execution, and whether she was innocent or not, she certainly appeared to be so. Nay, even when she was being let down into the dreadful pit and her dress caught as she was being lowered, she turned and readjusted it, and when the executioner offered her his hand she declined it and drew back, as though she put away from her with horror the idea of having her chaste and pure body defiled by his loathsome touch. Thus she preserved her sanctity to the last and displayed all the tokens of a chaste woman, like Hecuba, "taking care that she might fall in seemly wise."

Moreover, when Celer, the Roman knight who was accused of having intrigued with Cornelia, was being scourged with rods in the Forum, he did nothing but cry out, "What have I done? I have done nothing." Consequently Domitian's evil reputation for cruelty and injustice blazed up on all hands. He fastened upon Licinianus for hiding a freedwoman of Cornelia on one of his farms. Licinianus was advised by his friends who interested themselves on his behalf to take refuge in making a confession and beg for pardon, if he wished to escape being flogged in the Forum, and he did so. Herennius Senecio spoke for him in his absence very much in the words of Homer, "Patroclus is fallen," for he said, "Instead of being an advocate, I am the bearer of news: Licinianus has removed himself." This so pleased Domitian that he allowed his gratification to betray him into exclaiming, "Licinianus has cleared us." He even went on to say that it would not do to press a man who admitted his fault too hard, and gave him permission to get together what he could of his belongings before his goods were confiscated, and granted him a pleasant place of exile as a reward for his consideration. Subsequently, by the clemency of the Emperor Nerva, he was removed to Sicily, where he now is a Professor of Rhetoric and takes his revenge upon Fortune in his prefatory remarks.

You see how careful I am to obey your wishes, as I not only give you the news of the town, but news from abroad, and minutely trace a story from its very beginning. I took for granted that, as you were away from Rome at the time, all you heard of Licinianus was that he had been banished for incest. For rumour only gives one the gist of the matter, not the various stages through which it passes. Surely I deserve that you should return the compliment and write and tell me what is going on in your town and neighbourhood, for something worthy of note is always happening. But say what you will, provided you give me the news in as long a letter as I have written to you. I shall count up not only the pages, but the lines and the syllables. Farewell. (translated by John B. Firth)

**Other sources:**

Cassius Dio, 67.3.

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