

Perpetua Virgines: Materiality of Vestal Virgins

The Vestal Virgins, situated at the heart of the Roman state, have long been interpreted as a silent and secluded group of priestesses. Scholarship paired with existing literary sources has done little to dispel this notion; the ‘ambiguity’ of Vestals’ sexuality places them in a grey area that many scholars have tried to make sense of by placing them into existing social strata (i.e. Beard 1980). Rather than pin the Vestals with pre-conceived ideals, I explore ways in which these women may have been viewed in public, on the streets or in the Colosseum, by the general populace. By viewing them against the backdrop of their larger society, I argue that Vestals present a unique expression of femininity different from other Roman women.

A successful Vestal performance starts with the legal rights she acquires, allowing her to assume the Vestal identity. Beginning with emancipation from *patria potestas* at the ripe age of 10, she undergoes a symbolic ritual signifying her ‘rebirth’ as a Vestal. Other laws elevated her status above your typical Roman woman, such as the right to a will and to testify for herself in court. Since Vestals did not cease to be female upon selection, such rights freed them from restrictions inherently placed on women. Indeed, while other women experienced milestones such as marriage, childbirth, and divorce, Vestals underwent several, somewhat parallel, processes to come into their complete role. Most notably this allowed them to move freely in spaces denied to most other women, such as government meetings and prime seating in the Colosseum. While it is unclear how much people knew about Vestal law, it is reasonable to assume people knew that Vestals were governed by laws different than their own, because they would have been able to see them physically moving in these different spaces.

Epigraphic evidence provides a much clearer image of the way in which Vestals were viewed by society. These pieces of material culture provide powerful insight into the integration of Vestals in Rome and the bonds they maintained. For instance, in *CIL 6. 2131* the chief Vestal Campia Severina is thanked for the military position she secured for her client. In another, *CIL 6.*

2135, the chief Vestal Flavia Publicia is honored by the parents of a (presumably) younger or newer Vestal. Despite the isolative connotation of ‘emancipation,’ these inscriptions show how Vestals forged pseudo-kinship bonds with their fellow priestesses and families, as well as the socio-political influence they held. Additionally, the *stola*, worn by both the priestesses themselves and their statues, serves as an easily visible, physical show of a Vestal’s chastity.

This amalgamation of legal processes, inscriptions, and wardrobe provides a clear and conscious sense of how a Vestal performed her role through the eyes of the public. In viewing them as parallel to other women, I argue that Vestal Virgins forged an expression of femininity unique to their cult, which may not have been as ambiguous in antiquity as it may seem today.

Bibliography

Beard, Mary. 1980. "The Sexual Status of Vestal Virgins." *The Journal of Roman Studies* (Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies) 70: 12-27.