

Livia and Vesta: The Overemphasized Relationship between Empress and Goddess

Scholarship often stresses the connection between Vesta and her priestesses with Livia, wife of Augustus. To be sure, Livia was associated with several Roman goddesses (Juno, Ceres, Magna Mater) including Vesta. Major points of comparison include literary or material sources linking Livia to Vesta or one of the goddess's physical attributes or characteristics (temple, priestesses, Palladium, chastity), the appearance and demeanor of the empress that evoked the Vestals, and exceptional legal rights and privileges held by the priestesses and Livia. Similarities in these areas have led modern scholars to make extraordinary claims for a connection between Livia and Vesta and Livia and the Vestal Virgins. These range from "Livia modeled herself upon Vesta in official cult as a mother figure of exemplary chastity," (Newlands 1995, 131) to, "Livia thus established herself as the fertile counterpart to the Vestal Virgins," (Severy 2003, 135) and "The allusions to Vesta, however, are the most potent in Livia's iconographic arsenal." (Bartman 1999, 94) These statements are not completely unfounded, but the evidence does not support them to the extent that typically appears in scholarship.

Greater caution must be used when making comparisons between Livia and Vesta, and Livia and the Vestals. In his study of imperial women and their assimilations to goddesses as seen in objects, Mikocki's fails to find any unusually strong connection. Vesta was one of 17 divinities with whom Livia was assimilated, and of the 132 total examples he found only six between Livia and Vesta. (Mikocki 1995, 125) Yet, while the frequency of their associations is less than impressive, the type and quality are more remarkable. The passage providing the strongest link between them comes from Ovid's *Pontus* (4.13.29) in which he calls Livia the "Vesta of chaste matrons" (*pudicarum Vesta matrum*). Moreover, several visual aspects about Livia would have reinforced the connection between the empress and the Vestals. In public

Livia often wore the standard divine costume of *chiton* and *himation*, the *sex crines* hairstyle (worn only by brides and Vestal priestesses), and covered herself with a heavy veil. (Bartman 1999, 94-5) Additionally, Livia was given grants of legal rights and special privileges, many of which had never been previously given to any woman other than a Vestal. These included freedom from tutelage, sacrosanctity, the right to be honored by statues, accompaniment by a *lictor*, and the use of a *carpentum*. (Cassius Dio, 49.38 and 60.22.2; Tacitus, *Annales*, 1.14; Grether 1946, 234; Purcell 1986, 85).

I contend that the relationship between Livia and Vesta and the commonalities between the empress and the Vestals has been greatly overstressed, and that those that actually existed can be explained by additional factors. Livia and the Vestal Virgins lay beyond the “normal” boundaries of womanhood not only legally, but also socially, and religiously (Livia was priestess of Augustus after his death). However, just because both groups of women wore similar clothing and enjoyed the same rights does not warrant the claims of scholars for a connection that is not justified by our sources, and exists in large part due to a lack of other groups of women from which they could be compared. (Wildfang 2006, 102; Mekacher 2006, 51) Indeed, close analysis demonstrates that many—if not all—of Livia’s privileges were given to her for specific reasons that had nothing to do with making her like the Vestal Virgins. Furthermore, when there was direct intent to compare Livia to Vesta the most important question is why Vesta was the preferred deity. Since she was not employed in great numbers, Vesta was surely chosen with great care when she does appear. This also leads to problems of agency and motive: who in fact instigated the connection and why? Although this is a problem that cannot easily be solved, if answered at all, careful consideration of what all parties had to gain does influence our reading of the evidence and our understanding of the relationship between Livia and Vesta.

Bibliography

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