

How to Get Away with Murder: Domitian's Execution of Vestal Virgins

In the late first century, Domitian executed four Vestal Virgins, Varronilla and the two Oculata sisters around 81/82 and the *virgo maxima* Cornelia around 91. Apart from Catiline's execution of two Vestal Virgins in 73 B.C., no other cases of Vestal executions are documented after 113 B.C. until the reign of Domitian (Cadoux 2005). Although the act of executing Vestals was not unique to Domitian, the fact that he killed a record number of Vestals makes this revitalized practice unusual. While Pat Southern and Brian Jones state that Domitian's executions of the Vestals were necessary for supporting the state religion, upholding the laws, and expelling evils from Rome, I argue that his treatment of the priestesses was not an act of religious and judicial piety, but a political message to assert his overarching power and desire for prestige (Southern 1997; Jones 1992). By executing the Vestals, he sent a clear, intentional message to the senate that he would go to any length to assert his supreme authority over them, belittle their position in the state, and glorify himself.

First, there is a strong connection between the Vestals and the upper or Senatorial class. Vestals were chosen by the *Pontifex Maximus* from upper class families and retained a close relationship with their kin throughout their appointment. Andrew Gallia argues that the status of a Vestal even brought prestige and honor to her family (Gallia 2015). Domitian's relationship with the senate can be characterized as unamicable at best. Unlike his predecessors, he lacked the tactfulness to strike a balance between his authority as emperor and the senate's power. Rightfully, Domitian grew suspicious of the senate's loyalty after they conspired against him in 83 and 87 and by the second half of his reign he sought to diminish the its authority as a governmental instrument all together (Pleket 1961). This negative attitude is evident in the works of Suetonius, Cassius Dio, and Pliny the Younger. Suetonius remarks the Domitian purged the

senate, including several ex-consuls, as a demonstration of his desire to be a *dominus et deus* (*Dom.* 10; 13). Similarly, Dio accuses Domitian of executing senators in the years 83, 84, 89, 91/92, 93, and 95 (67.3.3; 67.4.5; 9.6; 11.2-13; 12.1-5, 13.1-4; 14.1-3; Jones 1992). Dio further echoes Domitian's manipulative behavior in his retelling of a bizarre dinner party that the emperor invited the senators and their families to. Upon arrival, the senators were greeted with gravestones engraved with their name and then escorted home by strangers (67.9.2-3). Domitian was sending the senate a clear message that he had the power to kill them and their families. The executions of the Vestals conveyed the same message. Given the Vestals' possible kinship with the senate, executing them was a reflection of this desire to control them and diminish their authority.

Furthermore, the actual executions of the Vestals demonstrate Domitian's desire for prestige, manipulation, and control. Both Suetonius and Dio note the differences in the Vestals' executions. While they state that Domitian defied custom in the first three executions by allowing them to choose their death, Pliny the Younger, writing most closely to Domitian, asserts that the emperor returned to the traditional punishment of live burial when he executed Cornelia (*Dom.* 8.4; Dio 67.3.4; *Ep.* 4.11). Allowing his victims to choose their death is not unusual for Domitian, according to Suetonius (*Dom.* 11). Not only does this show his inconsistent nature, it shows that his deviation from traditional customs was an affirmation of his power and his belief that he was not bound by tradition. Pliny affirms this argument by stating that *qui illustrari saeculum suum eiusmodi exemplis arbitraretur* ("from an exemplum of this sort he believed his *saeculum* to be illustrious") (*Ep.* 4.11)). Although Cornelia was executed late in his reign he was still attempting to assert his legitimacy and glorify himself through his inconsistent treatment of the Vestals.

While the deaths of the Vestal Virgins are only four of the many Domitian committed, they encompass the scope of his reign and were an intentional message to manipulate the senate. I argue that they reflect his initiative to minimize the senate's authority, instill an autocratic regime, and set himself apart from his predecessors.

Bibliography

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