September 2001

From Vestal Virgin to Bride of Christ: Elements of a Roman Cult in Early Christian Asceticism

Ariel E. Bybee

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studia Antiqua by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Many histories of Christian asceticism concern themselves with the Middle Eastern origins of the movement. Henry Chadwick and other historians of early Christianity attribute the movement's beginning to Judaism. Centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, religious cults departed into the desert to form communities. Jewish fringe groups such as the Essenes in Israel and the Therapeutae in Egypt sought a closer relationship with divinity through the strict, religious practice of celibacy and communal living in the wilderness. Hermits wandered the desert, living on wild plants and honey, hoping to find spiritual communion with God through the denial of all physical appetites. The ascetic practices of these zealous Jewish believers were later echoed in the religious patterns and institutions of Christianity. Often unrecognized, however, are the precedents set by the pagan cults of Rome that influenced the evolving Christian ideology.

Asceticism was not unknown in pagan Rome, especially among the philosophers. For example, Plotinus, one of the most famous of the second century A.D. Neo-Platonists, lived a rigorously ascetic life, rejecting marriage, eating as little as possible, and seeming to be ashamed of his body. Also, the Salian priests, the cult of the Magna Mater, the Seven of the Banquets, the cult of Bona Dea, and the Fifteen in charge of the Sibylline Books were among the Roman religious institutions and priesthoods whose responsibilities and societies later influenced Christian ascetic practices.
One of the most fascinating and influential of all these Roman priesthoods was the cult of the goddess Vesta. Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth, was served by six virgins whose duty was to maintain the sacred flame that served as the cult statue within her temple. The institution of the priesthood was attributed to Numa Pompilius, the religious second king of Rome, who purportedly lived in the seventh century B.C. It continued to be one of the most prominent cults throughout the duration of the empire. The cult of Vesta was one of the only full-time priesthoods in Rome. The Vestal Temple and the virgins who lived there were maintained by public funds.

Commonly overlooked are the many similarities of the Vestal Virgins to early Christian ascetic women. As a prominent and enduring institution within the Roman Empire, this cult helped to pave the way within Roman society for the practice of female Christian virginity. This fact, however, has been obscured due to a difficult historiographical problem. Criteria for a comparison of this type must be divided into two categories. One set of criteria for a comparison are the concrete and visible, the most easily recognized characteristics lying in such categories as the appearance, communal structure, legal rights, and privileges of the different women. The second group of criteria is more abstract and difficult to identify as it deals more with the ideological similarities that surround these women and give them identity in their respective worlds. Existing similarities, or a lack of them, are usually readily identifiable when evidence is examined for the first type of characteristics. However, too often the mistake is made of ending comparison at this point. Many times, only by sorting through the more complex categories of cultural ideology—such as gender—can we find the underlying and often more important patterns which we seek. Using this second category facilitates a deeper understanding of the cultural structures of Rome, as well as of human nature in general.

The Vestals and the first Christian virgins of Rome have often
been compared under the set of more physical criteria and been found lacking in similarities worth writing about. The Vestals were a very small and exclusive group of aristocratic women who were either forced into the order by their parents or drawn in by losing the lottery of the Pontifex Maximus. Nevertheless, they had great freedoms and lived and were entertained as most aristocratic Romans. Christian virgins came to be numbered into the thousands and volunteered out of all classes of society, often against parental wishes, to be “eunuchs for the love of heaven.” Many of them lived in total isolation, devoting all time to prayer and fasting. In dress, community, religious practice, status, and legal rights they also seem to be at odds with each other in many cases. Yet such a superficial evaluation fails to expose the solid core of Roman ideology which held these two groups of women in almost identical positions within their societies.

The Vestals and the Christian virgins were tangibly different, but conceptually very similar. The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss those social constructs and conceptions about the Vestal cult and fourth-century A.D. Christian virginity that unify them ideologically: their purposes for celibacy, its results, and their status and situation in Roman society. In the process of doing so, several of the readily “visible” criteria will be discussed and many parallels that are superficially unclear between them will be exposed. The vital role the Vestal Virgins played in preparing Roman society to receive Christian virgins will become clear.

The Politics of Celibacy

The predominant and defining characteristic of both the Vestals and the later Christian virgins is celibacy. Sexual abstinence is the basis of all that set them apart from other women. In Roman society, womanhood was defined solely in terms of marriage and reproduction. A daughter was born to be married and reproduce to continue the family line and secure property and alliances. For a
woman to be anything else would leave her a social anomaly. As women living in this society, albeit at different time periods, both the Vestals and Christian virgins had to be defined in these terms. A careful examination reveals how similar the two institutions were within the Roman mind despite their tangible differences.

Vesta, or Hestia in Greek mythology, was the goddess of the hearth and its fire, as well as the patron deity of all household activities. As she spurned the amorous advances of Neptune and Apollo and chose to remain virginal, she was also honored as a goddess of chastity and virtue. When Numa Pompilius established the Cult of Vesta, he chose four young women to serve as priestesses. In order to be worthy for service to the virgin goddess, it was mandatory that they were celibate, undefiled by sexual relations, and without speech or hearing defect or any other bodily imperfection. They served for a term of at least thirty years, allowing them ten years to learn their responsibilities, ten years to perform what they had learned, and ten to teach others their duties.

For Christian virgins, life-long celibacy was neither compulsory nor institutionalized as it had been for the Vestals. Virginity as a religious practice first appeared in the young Christian church as the members interpreted the admonition of Paul in Corinthians as an exhortation of the practice: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman…For I would that all men were even as myself…It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry” (1 Cor. 7:1, 7-9). Celibacy rose in popularity for several centuries, and virginity became a standard institution within the church by the time of Constantine, much as the cult of Vesta was within the Roman state. However, the ascetic practice of virginity was largely disorganized and generally practiced on an individual basis. Although local congregations had begun to band together under the ideal of worldly renunciation and suppression of the flesh, they still lacked the common rule, dress, and purse that would characterize later communities.

Yet with the rapid expansion of the church in the third centu-
ry, a double ethical standard became more pronounced which made the celibate lifestyle increasingly popular. It was acceptable for average Christians to marry but preferable to remain chaste and celibate, as those who sacrificed more for Christ would surely receive the greater reward. The Church Fathers were largely responsible for this doctrine. “Those who decide to marry . . . must of necessity confess that they are inferior to virgins,” wrote Ambrose. Augustine also perpetuated this idea in his treatise *On the Good of Widowhood*, where he praised the young Roman girl Demitrias for choosing to dedicate her life to virginity. He extols her above her own mother, Juliana. “[She], coming after you in birth, has gone before you in conduct; descended from you in lineage has risen above you in honor; following you in age has gone before you in holiness . . . spiritually enriched in a higher degree than yourself, since, even with this augmentation, you are inferior to her.” Thus, the new ideology was that to be of the holier part of the church, it was implicit that a girl dedicate her life to chastity and virginity. As the Vestal Virgins, who had to be more pure than others to serve their deity, the virginal Christian woman became more pure and holy than those married around her. They were the earthly counterpart of the angels, more worthy to serve her god on earth and to achieve the first rank of his heaven in death. As women flocked to take vows of celibacy, virginity became not only a sexual status but an important institution within Christian society, eventually becoming as central to the church as the Vestal Virgins had been within the civic religion of the Roman state.

The virginity of both the Vestals and many Christians women was seen as a personal sacrifice made for the good of the entire community in which they lived. The Vestal Virgins were chosen for the priesthood between the ages of six and ten and then served for at least thirty years. Although they were free to marry once their service had ended, Plutarch states that only a few took this opportunity, and those who did were less than successful. “But rather because they were afflicted by regret and depression for the rest of
their lives they inspired pious reverence in the others, so that they remained constant in their virginity until old age and death.”  

The service of the Vestal Virgins stipulated absolute celibacy between the ages of ten and forty—the entirety of her reproductive years. In essence, the Vestals sacrificed their fertility for the benefit of the community. The welfare of the state of Rome was dependent upon the maintenance of the sacred flame of Vesta and the rituals associated with her cult. In order to guarantee continual prosperity and stability, they personally forsook their reproductive powers and channeled these energies into the constant regeneration of the Roman state.

As the Vestal Virgins who inspired “pious reverence” in others, the Christian virgins also merited honor in their celibacy. Virginity was seen as a self-inflicted martyrdom. The carnal desires were suppressed, pleasure and reproduction were sacrificed, and, therefore, the physical body was, in a manner, killed for the cause of spirituality. The spiritual power thought to be achieved through a life of chastity was similar to the powers which martyrs obtained for the giving of their lives. “For virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs, but because itself makes martyrs,” Ambrose explained. Just as martyrs could use their powers to benefit others in the Christian community, virgins could also bring public benefit. By renouncing their personal potential for fertility, they were seen as symbols that could bring fruitfulness or prosperity to the community at large. Often the virgin is referred to by the Church Fathers as being a garden or a fountain or as other images of fertility. Just as that of the Vestal Virgins, the reproductive powers of Christian virgins were channeled in a public direction to regenerate the community and renew the church.

Lives of Privilege

This fertility, a uniquely feminine characteristic, resulted in a great deal of power and many privileges for both those taken into
the cult of Vesta and Christian women who chose the celibate life. When the Vestal Virgins went outside, they were preceded by lictors with faces. The lictor was a symbol of sacred power; only certain magistrates had right to its company. Most priests and tribunes traveled without this emblem. A Vestal Virgin was immediately identifiable on the streets as no other women in Rome had this privilege. Other rights set them apart from the other women of their day as well. All Roman women, despite their age, remained under male guardianship “because of their levity of mind” with exception only to the Vestal Virgins, who were free from that male authority. Although women were generally prohibited from athletic displays and matches in the theater, Augustus himself assigned them reserved seats facing the tribunal of the praetor, who presided over the games. They had the right to make a will during their father’s lifetime and to conduct their own business affairs. Although regular women were excluded from the Roman court system, a Vestal Virgin had the right to appear in court and serve as an instrument in a Senate investigation.

Likewise, Christian virgins enjoyed privileges which exceeded those of the regular women of their day. In the fourth century A.D., the emperor Constantine repealed the imperial legislation which had granted extra privileges for those who married. He allowed unmarried women to draw up a will before reaching adulthood, just as the Vestal Virgins had. The old “patriarchal power” of the Roman imperial period had virtually dissolved by this time. Virgins were free to exercise control over their income and could increasingly handle legal matters without the mediation of a guardian. Free from the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, they also had a wealth of time in which they could educate themselves. Some virgins became renowned as intellectuals, such as Anonyma of Alexandria, who was “famous on account of her wealth, her origins, and her education.” Melania the Younger, another celebrated virgin, made several pilgrimages, traveled widely preaching the
Gospel, and was so respected and trusted in her celibacy as to be admitted by the male monks into their monasteries—a privilege never extended to regular women.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Creating Ambiguity}

The extraordinary rights allowed to the Vestal Virgins and later to their Christian sisters are accounted for by the ambiguous position they both held within their societal structures. Mary Beard wrote the authoritative work on the stance of the Vestal Virgins in Roman society as she addressed the classic debate over the origins of the Vestal priesthood. Were the first Vestal Virgins daughters of the kings or their wives? In searching for a definite role in which to classify the Vestals, she concluded that they fit into none of the natural categories existing in Roman society. They seemed to be daughters as they were always virgins and plural. Yet they resisted simple classification. Their dress was the \textit{stola}, a wide band of color sewn onto the tunic indicating that the wearer was a matron. They wore their hair in the \textit{sex crines} or “six curls,” the traditional style of brides on their wedding days. The Vestals were overseen by a Pontifex Maximus who in some ways acted as a husband or father figure among his wives. In other words, they were neither daughters nor matrons but both in some ambiguous way.\textsuperscript{31}

Perhaps more importantly, the Vestal Virgins not only crossed categorical lines within their own gender but also entered into the opposite one. The unusual privileges which they enjoyed—a lictor to precede them, seats with the senators at games, and the right to testify in court, among others—generally belonged to aristocratic Roman men. Why was this group of women allowed so many male freedoms? Beard later explains that the Virgins were categorically men as much as they were daughters and matrons.\textsuperscript{32} The order of the Vestal Virgins was created by a man and held in place within society through male initiative and interest. These young women were taken into the order before reaching puberty and then, under
the restriction of celibacy, never achieved sexual maturity. Rather, they were held in a unisexual, undeveloped state—a female variety of social eunuchism. Deborah Sawyer suggests that only in this circumstance, as “de-sexed” creatures, are they safe for men to grant power and privileges to. As the legal privileges enjoyed by the Vestals do not nearly add up to those enjoyed by Roman men, this argument seems valid. They do not exist as pseudo-males or females but outside of all Roman gender categories. They existed instead within one that was uniquely their own—a male-created gender defined by de-sexualization. Dwelling within this state of neither traditional womanhood nor manhood, the Vestal Virgins were set apart and transformed into beings capable of giving the energy and fertility of their lives to the essence of the Roman state, and as such merited privileges and freedoms known by few.

Like the Vestal Virgins, the Christian ascetics achieved their power and privilege by not fitting into categorical norms. These women asserted autonomy and self-control by purposely not fitting into traditional gender roles through making vows of celibacy as the Virgins had. In rejecting marriage, they rejected those paradigms which defined them in Roman society. Marriage was seen as a social, familial, and legal necessity in late-imperial Rome—a daughter’s very reason for existence was to marry and have children, so as to assure the preservation of private property.

Also in existence in Late Antiquity were classic stereotypes for male and female behavior and characteristics. Women were seen as carnal while men were primarily spiritual. Men were considered holy when they exhibited male characteristics of power and spirituality. Their sanctity emerged from their natural masculinity. Thus, women who aspired to be holy had to renounce those things which made them women, or in other words, reject or transcend their gender.

For a woman to take her sexual destiny into her own hands was to make an assertion of independence which was considered to be the prerogative of men alone. In going against society and often her family by declaring celibacy, she was seen as having passed the
boundaries of her own sex through her forceful and aggressive decision, entering into the role of the opposite. The Church Fathers praised the masculinity of this decision. Jerome said, “As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from men as body is from soul. But if she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man.” Gregory of Nazianzus praised the masculine soul of his widowed mother. Ambrose wrote: “She who believes progresses to complete manhood ... She then does without worldly name, gender of body, youthful seductiveness, and garrulousness of old age.” JoAnn McNamara points out that at the turn of the third century, “... African churches were afire with the question of whether or not virgins were still women.”

As in the case of the Vestal Virgins, the Christian virgins only gained respect and privilege through womanhood. Women were seen as being “in transition” towards a “transcendence of female-ness.” However, as much as the Church Fathers encouraged a masculinity of spirit, they were not recommended to actual physical manhood. Jerome and Chrysostom decried feminine clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics, but they did not wish for women to become men in appearance. Rather, they advocated de-sexualization through a neutralization of feminine features. Many women, upon their conversions to Christianity, had been cutting off their hair and adopting male dress, but these masculinising practices were frowned on by Jerome and Tertullian. In 340, the Council of Gangra in Paphlagonia met to firmly check these tendencies.

Thus, Christian virgins, who with dressed in clothing ambiguous to either gender, physically remained women but possessed masculine souls. Where the Vestals were dressed so as to create this ambiguity in their social position within their own gender, the Christian virgins were attired to create equivocacy between both genders. Both had the same result: a new category within their societies defined by de-sexualization.
Accompanying Consequences

This hybrid gender construct was, as has been shown, extremely complex and difficult to create. Its very existence was a disturbance to normal social patterns. Membership came only with significant sacrifice but won great status and privilege. However, if a Vestal Virgin or a Christian ascetic renounced her vow to celibacy, the punishments for the loss of virginity were severe.

In Rome the adultery of a woman was not tolerated. For the first several hundred years of government, the husband had a legal right to kill his adulterous wife. Augustan legislation later forbade this, but permitted a husband to kill the lover if caught in his house or if he was of a lower class. Augustus made adultery a crime punishable by exile not only on request of the husband but by any citizen of Rome. The powers of a woman's father were more extensive in this case, however. He could kill his daughter and her lover regardless of his social standing with the condition that he kill both of them and not just one or the other. 42

For a Vestal Virgin, the consequences of lost chastity were even higher. As an amorphous mixture of societal categories which included some characteristics of a wife, she was subject to adultery laws. But as a consecrated priestess in the service of Vesta, her virginity was vital to the well-being of Rome; her sexual transgression was an infidelity to the Roman state, a form of high treason. Rather than being quickly murdered by an enraged spouse or father, a seduced Virgin was buried alive. The Vestal was placed on a litter, bound down with straps, and covered so her voice could not be heard. She was carried that way through the Forum to the Colline Gate. A room had been dug underground and prepared there for her, and she, with her face veiled, descended down into it as the chief priest intoned certain secret prayers to the gods. Finally, the entrance to the room was buried and she was left to starve to death underground where no one could hear her screaming and wailing. Plutarch records that there is no day more distasteful for the
people of Rome than that of such an execution. Although this grand execution ceremony is painstakingly recorded by several Roman historians, the histories record no more than two cases of Vestal Virgins who were ever actually entombed alive.

For the Christian virgins, the consequences of lost chastity were serious as well. They were subject to Augustan law and its punishments, but since they were not legally married, did not qualify as adulteresses in the case of lost virginity in secular courts. However, the fall of a virgin was considered adultery within the church. St. Matthew recorded the words of Jesus Christ taking a hard position against adultery in his gospel. “Thou shalt not commit adultery. But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:27–28). A virgin was a “spouse of Christ and a holy vessel dedicated to the Lord.” For her to betray her Husband was the gravest and worst of sins. The church itself had no power to inflict capital punishment. Its course of action for adultery was excommunication, perhaps a more terrifying prospect for a faithful Christian woman. Disfellowshipped from among Christ’s followers on earth and denied the sacraments and ordinances of the church, only endless torment awaited her after she died. Her crime was so severe that repentance was impossible.

Both the Vestal Virgins and their Christian sisters paid the utmost price which their controlling bodies could extract for the loss of their virginity. They had both, in their respective manners, asserted an independence and received, at the hands of men, some power and privileges by leaving womanhood behind. When they made the choice to leave their de-sexed state and return to the traditional female role of reproducer, they violated the trust of those who had given them their rights and the conditions upon which their rights were given. Therefore, they were punished to the greatest extent possible, often suffering more than an average woman would have for the same transgression.
Conclusion

Vestal Virgins and Christian virgins have much more in common than has been previously recognized. Through examining the implications of celibacy in Rome and the Christian church, a thread of common ideology is found which brings the Vestals and Christians into a close proximity. Although the origins of their virginity differ, the meanings given to their celibacy were essentially the same. Being women, they possessed a fertile capacity which, as virgins, they channeled into the renewal and regeneration of their respective communities. With an inherent power of life within them that they sacrificed for the good of the state, they received many rights and privileges generally given only to men. These concessions came to them only after they had de-sexed themselves through vows of celibacy, not necessarily becoming males but transcending womanhood and the frailties it was commonly held to embody. In doing so, they created a new gender category within Roman society and the Christian church. However, once a virgin had crossed into this new classification there were the stiffest possible penalties for leaving it—alive entombment or spiritual damnation.

It is clear that these Vestals and Christians occupied the same ambiguous position within their respective societies. These strikingly-similar factors, as well as chronology, suggest that the Order of Virgins was not an innovation on the part of Christianity but rather a continuance of a Roman tradition. The institutionalization of virginity within the church at the beginning of the fourth century was merely an adaptation of a Roman pattern of organization which had already been in existence for nearly eight hundred years. Over the course of time, the Vestal cult had created a role within Roman society in which unmarried women could be accepted as a legitimate and contributing part of the state. The Christian virgins slipped into a category within their society which had already been defined by their pagan sisters, a category in which celibacy brought ambiguity, privilege, power, and extreme punishment.
The incorporation of this Roman element into the church structure is only a small part of a larger, well-documented Romanization of Christianity. Although the church decried pagan cults, many of their ideas would be incorporated into the Christian church in the centuries that succeeded the death of Christ. The cult of Vesta was merely one of the many Roman elements which would affect the dogma, although perhaps their legacy is one of the greatest and most long-standing. Their virgin sisters still in existence today within the walls of convents retain much of a role defined thousands of years ago by women who dedicated their lives to preserving the sacred flame of Vesta and the welfare of the Roman state.

Ariel E. Bybee is currently a graduate student in Ancient History. She finished her B.A. from Brigham Young University in History, and hopes to pursue further graduate work in the history and religions of late antiquity.

Notes

6. Aulus Gellius, Attic Nights, 1.12 in Lefkowitz, 290. The Pontifex Maximus was the chief priest over the Vestal Virgins. This position was always filled by a male, usually a senator, and then later by the emperor.
8. For a more in-depth discussion about the ideological status of women

9. The number of Vestal Virgins was purportedly expanded under the Roman king Servius to bring the number up to six in the sixth century B.C. The number remained unchanged after that. See Plut. *Num.* 10.1.


13. Chadwick, 176.


17. Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1996), 70. Plutarch gives further evidence of the power of renewal the Vestals possessed: “When they [the Vestal Virgins] go out . . . if they accidentally happen to meet a criminal being led to execution, his life is spared.” (Plut. *Num.*, 10.3, cited in Lefkowitz, 289.) The power of regeneration which they possessed was so great and inherent within them that a criminal coming near them was cleaned and forgiven of his crime.


22. Staples, 145.


26. Sawyer, 126.

27. Anne Jensen, *God’s Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the*
29. Jensen, 27.
33. Sawyer, 127.
38. JoAnn McNamara, Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginity in Scholer, 152.
41. Simpson, 56.
42. Eva Cantarella, Pandora’s Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 123.
44. On both occasions, the accusations of Vestal immorality came in the aftermath of disastrous defeats of the Roman army. For the specific cases, see Staples, 136.


47. In Augustine’s Sermons 9.4, he becomes one of the first men to argue that repentance is possible for an adulterous wife. Apparently adultery is still an unpardonable sin within the Church in the fifth century A.D. See Cloke, 107.