



Rome's Vestal Virgins

A study of Rome's
Vestal priestesses in the late
Republic and early Empire

Robin Lorsch Wildfang

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Rome's Vestal Virgins examines one of the most important state cults in ancient Rome and the role of the virgin priestesses in ancient Roman religion and society. It analyses the rituals these priestesses enacted, both the public rituals performed in connection with official state rites and festivals, and the private rites associated only with the order itself.

Wildfang argues that the Vestals did not participate in Rome's family structure and that this was done to ensure that the Vestals could represent Rome as a whole in the religious sphere without any risk of pollution from a family cult. She contends that the rituals the Vestals performed on behalf of the Roman state were neither fertility rites nor reflections of traditional female activities. Instead they were rites concerned with purification, storage and the preparation of harvested grain for food use, or sometimes a combination of all three areas at once.

This exploration of the function of the Vestal Virgins in the changing Roman world, exposed to new and different cultures through the expansion of the Roman Empire, provides a new and penetrating investigation of a cult which was at the very centre of ancient Roman religion.

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To Leah who (almost) arrived with this book

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Preface

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, scholarly interest in the history of women in antiquity has grown steadily, until now, at the beginning of the twenty-first, it encompasses countless books and articles on almost every aspect of ancient women's lives. Women's roles in marriage have been examined,¹ as have their roles in the family.² Women's influence on Roman politics has been discussed,³ as has their legal position, their economic possibilities and, most recently, their place in religion.⁴ Yet, surprisingly, despite this interest and the many advances in knowledge and methodology that have resulted from it, while scholars have examined various important aspects of the Vestal Virgins, the only major female Roman state priesthood, and their cult, no one has undertaken a thorough monographic examination of the ancient literary sources for these priestesses since Guizzi's well-known but largely legalistic Italian study in the 1960s.⁵

This omission is even more singular in that the Vestal order was at the heart of the Romans' state religion, and necessary to the city's continued existence. An understanding of the Vestals' rites, activities and historical roles, as portrayed in our ancient sources, ought to be of interest, not only to those studying women and gender in antiquity, but also to scholars of ancient religion and indeed to anyone interested in the Romans' views of themselves and their state.

This work is an attempt to fill this void. It focuses primarily on the Vestals and their cult in the years between the end of the Second Punic War and the end of the first century CE, the period in which most of our ancient sources for these priestesses were writing, and the period of greatest interest to students of classical literature. The rituals, privileges and restrictions which surrounded these priestesses, and made up the body of their cult, provide the framework for most of this book, but to these considerations are appended two chapters, which examine the Vestals' history as recorded by the Romans.

Within this framework, the book considers the significance of these various rituals, privileges and duties, and develops a two-pronged argument. On the one hand, it argues that the rituals the Vestals performed on behalf of the Roman state were neither fertility rites nor reflections of traditional female activities as has so often been postulated. Instead, they were rituals concerned