

Imperial Connections to the Vestal Virgins and their Symbolic, Sacred Power in Art and
Architecture.

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Abstract: The Vestal Virgins (*virgines Vestales*) were central to Roman religious and political life. Charged with tending to the sacred fire of Vesta, these girls were a symbol of Rome's stability and continuity. As priestesses of the goddess Vesta, their role evolved post-republic and into imperial rule, becoming closely aligned with the emperor's authority. The architectural and artistic remnants of the Vestals, such as the Temple of Vesta, the Atrium Vestae, and imperial coinage, attest to their relationship with the imperial family and reflect both the priestesses' revered status and their strategic appropriation by imperial families, especially in connection to elite women. Through an analysis of these spaces, this study examines how the cult of Vesta was instrumental in reinforcing the moral authority of the imperial family in Rome.

Keywords: Vestal Virgins, Roman Imperialism, Women, Personification, Architectural remnants, Portrait Busts, Imperial Power.

At the heart of Roman religion blazed a perennial fire whose sacred flame was tended to by a select few high priestesses: the Vestal Virgins (*virgines Vestales*). This fire (*ignis Vestae*), representative of the goddess Vesta, was singular in its importance to Rome. The cult of Vesta played a central role in Roman religious and political spheres as the worship of the goddess was deeply intertwined with civic life and rituals. The acolytes of Vesta embodied the symbolic integrity and continuity of the *res publica*, from the time of the republic into the late empire.¹ However, their sacred connection to the welfare of the state was a symbol soon to be co-opted under the reign of Augustus and later imperial rulers. The Vestals' enduring significance in imperial Roman politics and religion is vividly reflected in the architectural and sculptural remnants of their time. Vesta and her cult provided an ideal symbolic association for imperial families to align with, as they personified Roman integrity. It was in the emperor's interest to embody this integrity in his reign.. Their residence, the adjacent temple, and a multitude of representational sculptures and friezes collectively contribute to revealing the distinct and revered status held by these priestesses, and ultimately their role in imperial affairs. They offer invaluable insights into the expectations placed upon the Vestals as guardians of Roman integrity, and reveal later imperial connections to, and appropriations of, the symbolic power inherent to Vesta and her cult.

¹Inge Kroppenber, "Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins," *Law and Literature* 22, no. 3 (2010): 419. <https://doi.org/10.1525/lal.2010.22.3.418>. *res publica: the state, republic, or commonwealth*.

Evaluating the history of the priestesses and their principal deity, Vesta, offers foundational knowledge regarding their significance to Roman religion and later imperial connections to the cult. As a goddess, Vesta was “the original divine virgin” whose image was almost never illustrated in physical form but instead represented as a domestic flame.² Virginité, in Roman society, was a celebrated expression of holiness associated with a state of “physical intactness,” purity, and unity.³ The aniconism related to Vesta’s worship was considered symbolic of her virgin purity, while her presence, on the other hand, was indicated by the flame.⁴ Worshipped as the goddess of the hearth and the life-giving fire within every Roman home, Vesta and her acolytes were deemed indispensable to the preservation and prosperity of the Roman state. They served not only as religious figures but as embodiments of domestic stability and civic welfare. Therefore, the order of priestesses dedicated to Vesta emerged as one of the foremost cults in Roman religion, revered for their sacred duty to ensure the enduring strength and longevity of the state.⁵

The selection process for Vestal Virgins involved choosing six young girls between the ages of six and ten from a pool of twenty candidates. This selection, known as *captio* or “capture,” was conducted by the early kings and later the *pontifex maximus*, underscoring the ritualistic importance of the Vestals’ role in Roman society.⁶ Eligible candidates were required to have both parents alive, possess physical and mental integrity, and be daughters of free-born residents of Rome.⁷ Upon selection, these girls were removed from their familial homes and

²Jean-Joseph Goux, “Vesta, or the Place of Being,” *Representations*, no. 1 (1983): 94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3043761>.

³Kroppenberg, “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins,” 419.

⁴Kroppenberg, “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins,” 419.

⁵Joanne Elizabeth Thompson, “Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins in Roman State Religion and Imperial Policy of the First and Second Centuries A.D.” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2005), 1 and 61.

⁶Thompson, “Images of Vesta,” 30.

⁷Kroppenberg, “Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins,” 423.

brought to the *Atrium Vestae*, where their careers as moral guardians over Rome began within the boundaries of the Forum.

As explored by Joanne Elizabeth Thompson in her dissertation "Images of Vesta and the Vestal Virgins in Roman State Religion and Imperial Policy of the First and Second Centuries A.D.," The association between the *pontifex maximus* and the Vestals held particular significance in the imperial period. As the emperor assumed the role of chief priest, imperial patronage of the Vestals was elevated under the reign of Augustus, who looked to parallel his new rule as both *princeps* and *pontifex maximus* with the integrity of the state, as embodied by the Vestals.⁸ The priestesses of Vesta were part of the *collegium pontificium*, of which the emperor was the leader. This order was of the highest priestly rank and connected the priestesses to the emperor directly. The Augustan principate was critical in establishing the traditional imagery of the Vestals in Roman relief sculpture.⁹ Acknowledging this, imperial connections to the order of the Vestals is irrevocably part of their appearances in art, as well as the remains of their built environment and their duties to the state.

The architectural remains of the Temple of Vesta (*Aedes Vesta*), the House of the Vestals (*Atrium Vestae*), and the Regia in the *Area Vestae* serve as the earliest tangible evidence of the Cult of Vesta in the Roman Forum (*fig 1*).¹⁰ The Regia and the *Aedes Vesta*'s first constructions have been dated back as early as the sixth century BCE, with the *Atrium Vestae* built toward the end of the 3rd century (alongside a newer version of the temple as it had been destroyed by a fire in 241 BCE).¹¹ Each building once served the order of the Vestals, and their close proximity

⁸Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 16.

⁹Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 16.

¹⁰Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 27.

See fig. 1 for Forum Plan with Temple and Regia

The Regia was the early Palace of the Kings and later the office to the *pontifex maximus*, the building is significant but will not be further explored outside of this necessary context.

¹¹Molly Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, priestesses of Ancient Rome*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 13.

to the Palace of the Emperors, along with centuries of redevelopment under imperial authority, reveals how intertwined imperial powers and the Vestal priestesses were.

Originally a round wooden hut with a thatched straw roof, the *Aedes Vesta* (fig 2-3) is recognized in Roman myth as having first been constructed by Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome, in the Forum Romanum.¹² The 'temple' of Vesta was, strictly speaking, a small structure created to be a 'house' for the deity.¹³ Having been destroyed and reconstructed multiple times, it was first rebuilt as a marble *tholus* (circular building) during the reign of Augustus and continuously redone by emperors that succeeded him.¹⁴ Nestled in the northeast corner of the *Area Vestae*, the temple served as a repository of sacred objects; including the Palladium, a guardian statue of Athena brought from Troy by Aeneas.¹⁵ Central to the temple's essence, however, was the eternal flame of Vesta, meticulously tended to by the Vestal Virgins. Two Vestals would protect and care for the flame, with the threat of public flogging looming if they let it burn out.¹⁶ Throughout the existence of the cult of Vesta, the temple and its constituents symbolized *the fatale pignus*, "the fate of [the] city—its identity and continued existence."¹⁷ The Vestals were guardians of this continuation, and it was imperative that they maintained the sacred objects and the fire within the temple as part of their religious duties.¹⁸

Noting the temple's religious importance to Rome, Augustus's new role as *Pontifex Maximus* deeply impacted its symbolic perception through his decision to move the traditional

¹²Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, "Religions of Rome Vol 1," (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22.

See fig 2. For a contemporary image of the temple, and fig 3 for temple plan.

¹³Beard, North, and Price, "Religions of Rome Vol 1," 23.

¹⁴John Henry Middleton, "XV.—The Temple and Atrium of Vesta and the Regia" (January 1, 1886), 396.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0261340900006366>

¹⁵ Middleton, "XV.—The Temple and Atrium of Vesta and the Regia", 393.

According to legend, Aeneas, fleeing the burning city of Troy, carried with him to Lavinium the sacred fire of Vesta, along with the penates, the guardian spirits of the penus, or store chamber, and the palladium, the small wooden image of Athena also equated with guardianship.

¹⁶Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 13.

¹⁷Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 19.

¹⁸Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 9.

home of the *Pontifex Maximus*. Originally, the *Pontifex Maximus* would be housed in the *Domus Publica*, a structure belonging to the House of the Vestals throughout the Republic.¹⁹ However, as he took power, he changed it to his own residence on the Palatine hill. Here, he dedicated a temple to Vesta in a public part of his residence in 12 B.C.²⁰ The Sorrento base (*fig 4*), covered in Augustan relief sculpture, commemorates this dedication; showing the Vestals and Vesta herself presiding over a sacrifice alongside Augustus.²¹ The argument that Livia, the wife of Augustus, is positioned next to the Goddess is supported by scholars Johanna Thompson and Molly Linder. Although this remains uncertain, it undeniably highlights the intensified relationship between the Vestals and the imperial family. The new imperial regime emphasized the priestesses' status in Rome and utilized their ethos as the longest and most revered religious order to symbolically enhance the role of the imperial family, especially in connection to imperial women. While the *Aedes Vesta* remained the primary space of worship to the goddess, welcoming Vesta into his residence cast her and her priestesses as symbols reflective of the emperor's guardianship over Rome.²²

The *Aedes Vesta*'s last reconstruction was done under the Emperor Septimius Severus by his wife Julia Domna.²³ Continuing the precedent set by Augustus nearly two hundred years prior, Julia Domna's reconstruction offers modern scholarship insights into the temple's appearance, with the complete structure's details known primarily through images featured on coins dedicated to the reconstruction. One particular coin, the *Aureus of Caracalla* (214 CE) (*fig 5*) depicts on its reverse side the emperor sacrificing before the *Aedes Vesta* alongside two Vestal Virgins.²⁴ This specific coin expressly demonstrates the emperor's choice to emphasize his

¹⁹Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 26.

²⁰Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 75.

²¹Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 84.

²²Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 84.

²³Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 23 and 358.

²⁴Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 23 and 358.

connection to the cult of Vesta and their ritual practices— enhancing his moral authority through close association with the goddess and her acolytes. The coin shows the Temple's round structure, and reveals the Vestals religious distinction and their significance to the imperial family. This patronage and its evidence on Roman coinage speaks to the importance of maintaining the Cult of Vesta as part of creating a strong resonance between the Vestals' power and the emperor as Rome's benevolent unifiers.

Particularly significant in regards to this last reconstruction is the patronage of Julia Domna herself, as the Vestals held a clear connection to the empress and other imperial women by the time of Augustus, as he granted the empress the same social privileges as the Vestals.²⁵ Relationships were encouraged between the Vestals and the women of the imperial family by the ruling emperor as the Vestals took on a role in shaping the status of elite women and protecting them.²⁶ The Vestals' power and influence were already revered in Rome and used as a precedent for imperial women to imitate, though they held more elite authority through their connection to the emperor. Empresses had a history of calling upon the Vestals for aid, whether this be to receive sanctuary in times of disaster, or to seek their guardianship should they be in need of support.²⁷ Their closeness led to a symbiotic relationship that allowed the Vestals to seek the influence and patronage of imperial women, and in turn these elite women could associate with the Vestals as moral guardians— ultimately attesting to imperial connections to, and appropriations of, the symbolic power inherent in Vesta and her cult.

The imperial *Atrium Vestae* (fig 6-8), home to the order of Vestals, was an exceptional, two-storied building built from the ashes of the older Republic Atrium that had burned in 64

²⁵Vestals were allowed to attend the games in the arena, write their own will, buy and sell property, testify in court, and more. These privileges were extended to Imperial women. Find more in Robin Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the late Republic and Early Empire*, (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006).

²⁶Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 28.

²⁷For anecdotal examples of this, go to Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 28-30.

CE.²⁸ Situated between the *Via Sacra* and the *Via Nova*, the building stood no more than a few yards from the *Aedes Vesta*.²⁹ Having been altered and reconstructed on multiple occasions, phases of the Atrium's development can be credited to various emperors much like the temple, underscoring the patronage of imperial families and their maintenance of the Vestal cult.³⁰ The Atrium also served as a repository for documents of utmost importance, such as the emperor's will.³¹ Outside their pious duties, The Vestal's guardianship over the will of the emperor found within the Atrium demonstrates both their significance as a trusted religious order and their connection to imperial affairs.

Inside the Atrium, one would find a diverse array of spaces, including reception rooms, storerooms, individual apartments for each Vestal, and a peristyle courtyard at its center.³² The colonnaded courtyard of the Atrium most notably served as a gallery for the display of statuary, encompassing both images of the Vestals themselves (*fig 9*) and portraits of the imperial family. Displaying honorific statuary of the imperial household as well as the Priestesses own images communicated the express relation between the two powers.

In evaluating the statues placement, appearance, and their pedestals, it is evident that they were intended to honor the *Virgines Vestales Maxima*, or the Chief Vestals, for their role as guardians and sacred beings. The Atrium was not singularly used as a residence, in fact it was a place of business where the Vestals met with clients and individuals who sought their assistance.³³ Regarding this fact, the honorific statues of the Vestals found in the Atrium and the

²⁸ Middleton, "XV.—The Temple and Atrium of Vesta and the Regia," 408.

²⁹ Middleton, "XV.—The Temple and Atrium of Vesta and the Regia," 408.

³⁰ Thompson, "Images of Vesta," 22.

Domitian re-oriented the axis of the building, Trajan enlarged it eastward and included a peristyle court, it is here that most of the statues were found.

³¹ Molly Lindner, "The Vestal Virgins and their Imperial Patrons: Sculptures and Inscriptions from the Atrium Vestae in the Roman Forum," (PhD., Diss. The University of Michigan, 1996), 161.

³² Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 39.

³³ Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 64.

dedicatory marble bases that once accompanied them speak to the relations between the cult of Vesta and those who sought out their order. The inscribed bases of each statue preserve testimonies of the Chief Vestal's virtues and the gratefulness of her clients, in what was a relatively public display.³⁴ The Vestal's statue would have been visible to anyone standing in the forecourt of the *Atrium Vestae*, and their proximity to the portrait statues of imperial women such as Julia Domna and Faustina the Younger connected the cult visually to the imperial household to all who observed the space.³⁵

As with the aforementioned reconstruction of the temple, aligning the portraits of the Vestals with those of the empresses proved advantageous for both powers. Honorific statues needed the emperor's approval to be showcased in the forum.³⁶ In some ways, it would have been considered customary to have displays of imperial portraiture as a sign of loyalty to the royal family.³⁷ However, the ongoing display of royal women alongside the Vestals in the Atrium across several imperial generations illustrates the enduring support for a mutually beneficial relationship between the Vestals and the imperial family supported by the emperor, who personally gained public favor through such association.

The statues of the Vestals themselves made considerable references to portraits of the empresses. Official relief sculptures from the time of Augustus were rather uniform and distinguishable only through context and the standard iconography of a Vestal, but the *palla*, a garment that covered the priestesses' heads, likely required artists to draw on other, more contemporary sources of sculptural representation for specific detailing, such as images of the

³⁴Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 71.

³⁵Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 73.

The portraits of the imperial women were simply the heads of the statues, yet the amount of headless statues in the courtyard implies that they may have belonged to one of them. They have not yet been given a match, but locationally they were still found in the Atrium and near to the Vestal statues.

³⁶Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 26.

³⁷Lindner, "The Vestal Virgins and their Imperial Patrons: Sculptures and Inscriptions from the Atrium Vestae in the Roman Forum," 162.

empresses.³⁸ For example, one particular sculpture found in the Atrium, considered the highest in quality of all those that still survive by Linder, exhibits a strong resemblance to the Atrium's portrait of Faustina the Younger in terms of her face shape, eyes, hair style, and expression (*fig 10*). Imperial women were known to emulate the Vestals in their images as well, having referenced the intricate headdresses that identified Vestals as can be seen in portraits such as Matilda the Elder when compared to a Chief Vestal statue (*fig 11*).³⁹

The statuary of the Atrium easily exhibits one of the strongest ties between the Vestals and the imperial families. It is worth noting that several images of emperors' were displayed as well, namely portraits of Augustus, Tiberius, Marcus Aurelius, and Caracalla were identified in the home of the Vestals.⁴⁰ The images of the Vestals also, of course, clearly served to revere the order and their great duty to Rome, as evident by the inscriptions on the pedestals and the craftsmanship of the statues. Integrating these portraits into the Atrium made a poignant statement aligning the role of the Priestesses with that of the imperial family.

In essence, the cult of Vesta played a central role in Roman religious and political spheres, and the architectural history of the *Aedes Vestae* and the *Atrium Vestae* serve as evidence of their significance to Rome and to the imperial family. Honorific statues and reliefs within the Atrium, and outside of it, as seen on the Sorrento base relief, underscore their close

³⁸Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 70.

³⁹Lindner, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins*, 168.

⁴⁰Middleton, "XV.—The Temple and Atrium of Vesta and the Regia," 410.

The following are the chief among the sculpture found in the Atrium Vestae:

- Two busts of Diana.
- Statuette of Aesculapius.
- Seated statuette of Cybele on a throne, with lions at the sides.
- Statuette of Venus, and heads of Bacchus, Cupid, and other deities.
- Several portrait busts, namely Augustus, Tiberius, Marcus Aurelius,

Caracalla, Julia Domna, and other late empresses.

- Two heads and many fragments of statues of Vestals."

association with the imperial household from the moment Rome transitioned out of the republic. With the Vestals' status as moral guardians over Roman integrity, imperial families secured the usage of their symbolic power and maintained the order across generations, relating to them as embodiments of Roman stability. By including them on official imperial monuments, coinage, and even in their personal homes, as seen by Augustus, the Vestals held a clear power needed by the elite, revered in Roman religion, and respected by the people.

Figures

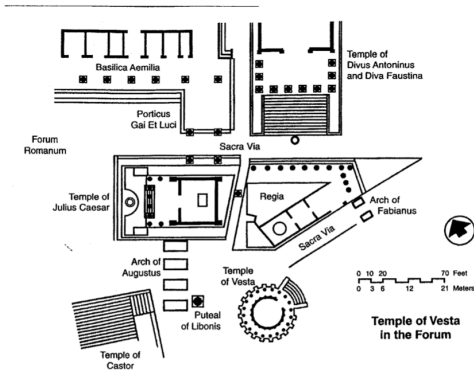


Fig.1: Plan of Forum Romanum with Temple of Vesta and Regia.

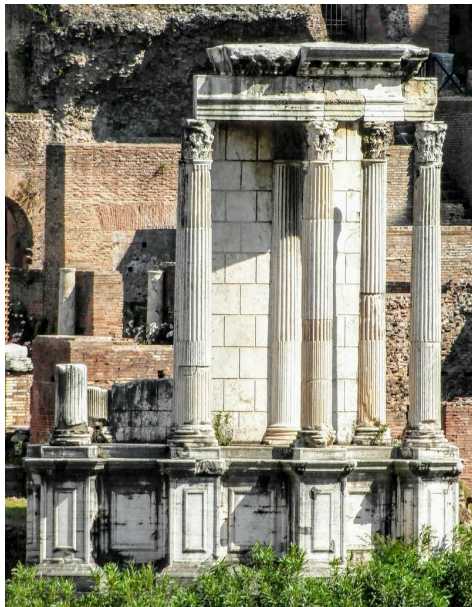


Fig 2: Contemporary image of the *Aedes Vesta*, partially reconstructed ruins from its last construction. (Photograph courtesy of Lown, David on walksinrome.com.)

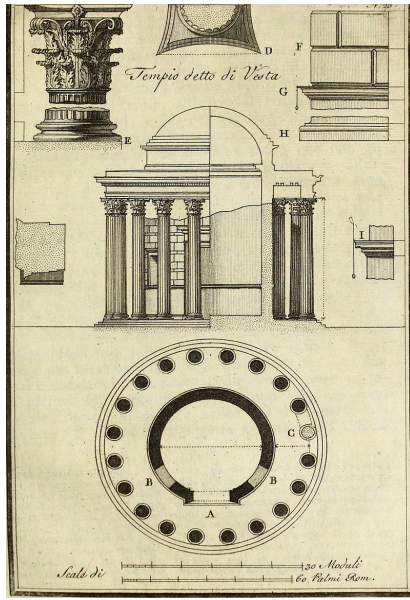


Fig 3: 1805 Illustration of the plan for the Temple of Vesta. Guattani, Giuseppe Antonio. *Roma descritta ed illustrata*, 93.



Fig 4 : *The Sorrento relief of Vesta and Vestal Virgins sacrificing*, first century. Museo Correale di Terranova.



Fig 5: *Aureus of Caracalla*, Rome, A.D. 214: Portrait of Emperor (front) Temple of Vesta (reverse)



Fig 6: Contemporary image of the Atrium Vestae, Viewed from the Palatine Hill. Photograph courtesy of Andy Montgomery, Created: January 8, 2019.

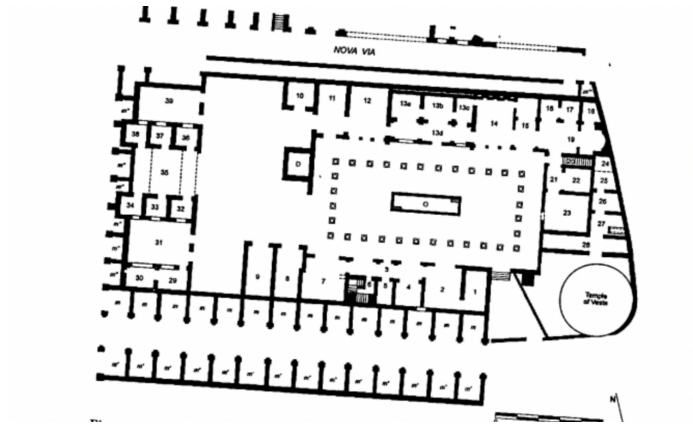


Fig 7: Plan of Atrium Vestae, Neronian-Hadrianic construction. (Drawing by Lorene Sterner) Linder, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 50.

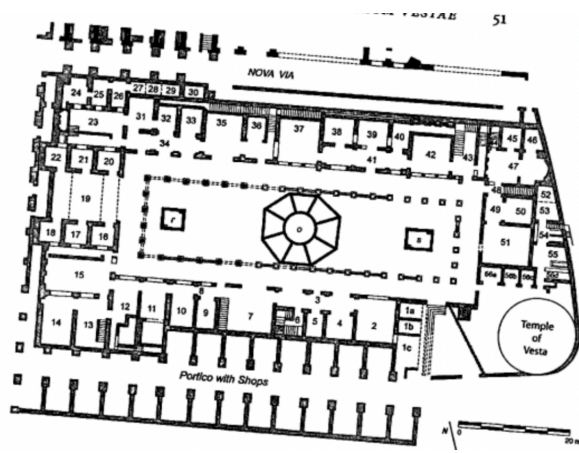


Fig 8: Atrium Vestae, Antonine-Severan construction. (Drawing by Lorene Sterner) Linder, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 51.



Fig 9: Contemporary image of the Atrium Vestae and the statues of the Vestals that align it.(photograph courtesy of <https://colosseumrometickets.com/ticket/colosseum-and-ancient-rome-walking-tour/>)



Fig 10: Portrait head of Faustina, the younger. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano. Linder, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 168.

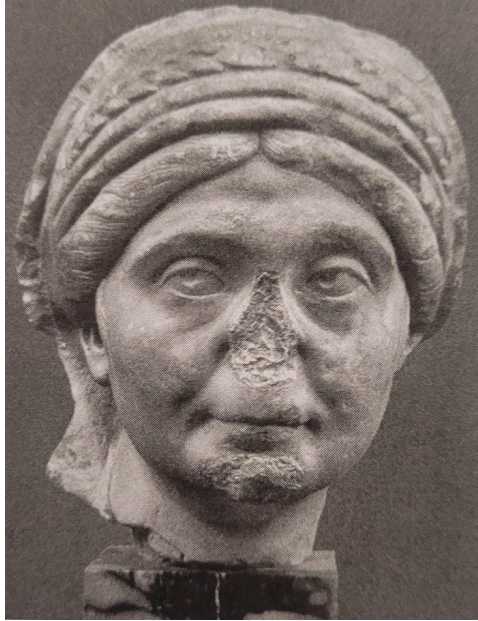


Fig 11: Portrait head of Vestal Virgin, Rome, Musei Capitolini, Centrale Montemartini. (Photograph courtesy of the Musei Capitolini.) Used as a comparative piece to *fig 10*.

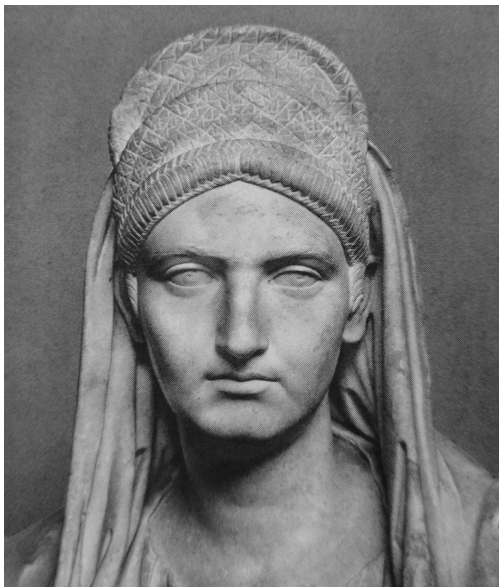


Fig 10: Bust of Matidia the Elder. Naples, Museo Nazionale di Archeologia. Linder, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 165.

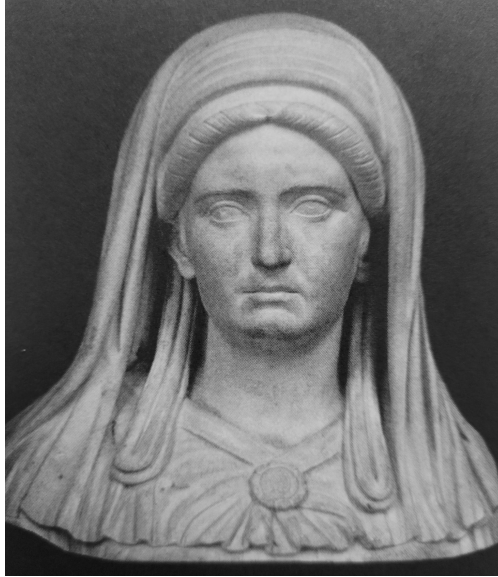


Fig 10: Statue of a Chief Vestal Virgin, detail of headdress. Linder, *Portraits of the Vestal Virgins, Priestesses of Ancient Rome*, 165.

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