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The Vestal Nun: The Afterlife and Reception of Vestal Virgins in Art and Literature in Late Antiquity and After

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Abstract

This article traces some strands of the reception of Vestal Virgins from Late Antiquity through the Middle Ages and to the modern era. An in-depth study of all available sources is beyond the scope of this article, but a survey of some popular and often widely diffused texts from these periods may give us an indication of the “afterlife” of the Vestal Virgins. The study starts by discussing some examples from different kinds of literature where the notion of the Vestal Virgins as “proximate others” to the virgins of the Church is encountered, before turning to the remarkable concept of *incestum* as a term specifically applied to describe the loss of sacred virgins’ virginity. The main argument is that the Vestal Virgins came to be irrevocably entangled with later conceptualisations of Christian virginity, and that the representation and reception of Vestal Virgins as “same but not-same” as Christian virgins played an important part in conveying these underlying comparative conceptualisations of the Vestals.

Keywords: Vestal Virgins; hagiography; Christian virgins; reception history



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Introduction

Pagan virginity was therefore not the dawn of Christian virginity, – it was but a shadow; a shadow more dense than the luminous body is dazzling. But just as, in the polar regions, during the long, nightlike months of winter darkness, a sudden brightness illuminates the shadows, – in the same manner, in the centuries of paganism, at the very centre of error, virginity asserted itself and shone until the day when it pleased God to make the sun of faith rise over the world, and to lead the souls in an even greater light and greater love.¹

As one of the most famous priesthoods of ancient Rome, the Vestal Virgins lingered in collective memory and imagination long after the priestesses were gone from their temple at *Forum Romanum*. Christian writers of Late Antiquity had in various ways evoked the Roman virgin priestesses as foils in their own texts written to recruit more consecrated virgins for the Church. Although the Vestals played no major part in the vast fourth-century “virgin literature,” these implicit and explicit comparisons between “their virgins” and “ours” were elaborated on and found new expressions from the fifth century onwards. Often, the Vestal Virgins were portrayed as antagonists to the “true” virgins of Christ. We do, however, also find that more positive aspects, particularly concerning their virginity, were evoked in Christian texts as shaming devices in Christian virgin rhetoric. In these cases, the chastity of the Vestal Virgins was highlighted and praised as an example Christians should follow.²

This article will trace some strands of the reception of Vestal Virgins from Late Antiquity through the Middle Ages and to the modern era. An in-depth study of all available sources is beyond the scope of this present study, but a survey of some popular and often widely diffused texts from these periods may give us an indication of the “afterlife” of the Vestal Virgins. I will start by discussing some examples from different kinds of literature where we encounter the notion of the Vestal Virgins as “proximate others”³ to the virgins of the Church before I turn to the remarkable concept of *incestum*

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- 1 *La virginité païenne ne fut donc point l'aurore de la virginité chrétienne; elle n'en est qu'une ombre, une ombre d'autant plus épaisse que le corps lumineux est plus éblouissant. Mais de même que dans les régions polaires, durant de longs mois de nuit, les ombres s'illuminent de soudaines clartés, ainsi, dans les siècles du paganisme, au centre même de l'erreur, la virginité s'affirma et resplendit jusqu'au jour où il plut à Dieu de faire lever sur le monde le soleil de la foi, et de conduire les âmes dans une plus grande lumière et un plus grand amour.* Elisee Lazaire, *Etude sur les vestals d'après les classiques et les découverts du Forum* (Paris: Victor Palmé, 1890), 339. This article develops material from two appendices in Sissel Undheim, “*Sanctae Virginitates*. Sacred and Consecrated Virginitates in Late Roman Antiquity” (PhD diss., University of Bergen, 2011).
 - 2 Sissel Undheim, “The Wise and the Foolish Virgins: Representations of Vestal Virginity and Pagan Chastity by Christian Writers in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 25, no. 3 (2017): 383–409.
 - 3 Jonathan Z. Smith, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 251–301. “The radically ‘other’ is merely other; the proximate ‘other’ is problematic, and hence, of supreme interest” (253).

as a term specifically applied to describe the loss of sacred virgins' virginity. My main argument is that the Vestal Virgins came to be irrevocably entangled with later conceptualisations of Christian virginity, and that the representation and reception of Vestal Virgins as "same but not-same" as the Christian virgins played an important part in conveying these underlying comparative conceptualisations of the Vestals.

Vestal and Christian Virgins

When comparing Vestal to Christian virgins, patristic writers such as Ambrose, Athanasius, and Jerome repeatedly insisted on the fundamental difference between these two kinds of sacred virgins. However, these polemical comparisons, as well as some that were slightly more favourable to these pagan virgins (they were after all *virgins* and could thus not possibly be as depraved as other non-virgin pagans) simultaneously juxtaposed and merged these two groups of sacred women. It is important to remember that for most of the fourth century, Vestal and Christian consecrated virgins were contemporary and part of the same cultural environment of upper Roman society. Despite the tone of conflict and confrontation in many of these texts, we should also assume that they all belonged to a shared cultural context, at least among upper-class Christians and non-Christians at that time.⁴

As the pagan institutions disappeared from the public eye, the notion of pagans as "the other" to the Christians was still upheld in literary discourse. Increasing historical distance seems, however, to have opened new ways of representing sacred pagan virgins.

One particular recurring topos found in Christian texts that describe the "transition" from paganism to Christianity—and one that was to survive into and through the Middle Ages—is the story of the Vestal who converts to become a Christian virgin. The earliest example of these stories is the brief line in Prudentius's poem about Saint Lawrence, where he mentions "the Vestal Claudia who enters the Church of Laurentius."⁵ It has been eagerly discussed whether Claudia should be interpreted as a factual Vestal or rather seen as a literary and figural representative for the pagan aristocrats of Rome.⁶ What is nevertheless evident is that this image of the Vestal leaving her temple service

4 René Michel Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Charles W. Hedrick, *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000).

5 Prudentius, *Peristephanon liber*, in *Prudentius opera* vol. 1–2, ed. and trans. H. J. Thompson (London: LCL, 1949–1953), 2:524–28: *Vittatus olim pontifex / adscitur in signum crucis / aedemque, Laurenti, tuam / Vestalis intrat Claudia*.

6 See note to this passage in the Loeb text of Prudentius's *Peristephanon liber*.

of Vesta to become a Christian virgin proved to be a popular and long-lasting motif in later hagiography as well as in modern research.⁷

The very same motif appears again in the story of the popular Christian martyrs Chrysanthus and Daria. In the version found in Aldhelm's seventh-century treatise, *De virginitate*, Daria is depicted as

a very beautiful Vestal virgin of elegant appearance, radiant with jewels and gold [...] well trained in dialectical arts and so well versed in the sophisticated procedures of the syllogism that even the most eloquent orators feared to test the sagacious intellect of the young girl in an argument.⁸

Daria had been summoned by Chrysanthus's father after his attempts to convert Chrysanthus from Christianity with seductive women and wine had failed. Daria's intellect and rhetorical training was believed to match that of Chrysanthus, and his father's plan was that Daria would convince the prodigal son to return to the worship of pagan gods by the help of her learned eloquence and splendidly adorned bosom. Instead, Daria met her superior, and eventually "the man of venerable life achieved the palm of victory in their reciprocal debates, not by an argument of deception, but through the demonstration of reason." Convinced by Chrysanthus, she agrees to be joined with him in a "simulation of marriage" (*simulato hymenaei*) and becomes "purified through the water of the redeeming font."⁹ The fact that we find Daria represented in contemporary

7 See Rodolfo Lanciani, "L' Atrio di Vesta. Con appendice del comm. Gio. Battista De Rossi," *Notizie degli scavi* (Dec. 1883): 454–55, where he interprets the *damnatio memoria* of CIL 6.32422 (=ILS 4938) as a consequence of the Vestal in question having converted to Christianity. He cites Prudentius as testimony to such conversions taking place in this period. Orazio Marucchi, "La vestale cristiana del quarto secolo e il cimitero di Ciriaca," *Nuovo Bullettino di archeologia cristiana* 5 (1899): 199–215, at 207 then identifies the Vestal of the inscription with the Claudia mentioned by Prudentius. Cf. Thomas Cato Worsfold, *The History of the Vestal Virgins of Rome* (London: Rider & Co., 1934), 76–77, and Peter Brown, "Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy," *Journal of Roman Studies* 51 (1961): 1–11, "the doubtful exception of a Vestal Virgin" (7). The hypothesis was convincingly countered by Esther Boise van Deman, "Notes on a Few Vestal Inscriptions," *American Journal of Philology* 29, no. 2 (1908): 172–78, esp. 177–78, but the appeal of this topos seems nevertheless to have been enduring.

8 Aldhelm, *De virg.* 35: *Deinde quidam de contribulibus hortantur patrem ut filius blandis connubii nexibus nodaretur, et illecebroso matrimonii lenocinio vinceretur; quatenus Daria virgo Vestalis satis pulchra, et eleganti forma, gemmis auroque radians ad Chrysantum procaciter ingrederetur, [...] dialecticis artibus imbuta et captiosis syllogismi conclusionibus instructa fuisse ferebatur; ita duntaxat, ut disertissimi oratores tam sagax virginis ingenium alterno experiri conflictu vererentur.* Translation from Michael Lapidge and Michael W. Herren (trans.), *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979), 97 with small amendments. Aldhelm's *De virginitate* is generally dated to the last quarter of the seventh century.

9 Aldhelm, *De virg.* 35: *vir vitae venerabilis non fraudis argumento, sed rationis documento, in reciprocis conflictibus victoriae palmam adeptus, eadem Dariam jam catholicae fidei sacramenta credentem suscipiens, simulato hymenaei commercio simul conversatur, donec ipsa salubris lavacri latice lustratur.*

art in Ravenna may give some indication of her popularity and fame in the seventh century and onwards. Here, she is represented among the female saints in the mosaics both in Sant'Andrea Archiepiscopal chapel and in the procession of virgins in the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo.

In the version of the story narrated in the thirteenth-century hagiographical collection *Legenda Aurea*, Daria is described as “a most decorous virgin dedicated to the goddess Vesta.”¹⁰ Her character is expressed by reference to her virginity and education, which are seemingly interdependent and determined by her social status as a noble priestess. Her otherness is perhaps most evident in the description of her penchant for luxurious ornament, but this also underlines her nobility, and as such her aptness for true, Christian virginity.¹¹ As a Vestal virgin, Daria thus already appears to display many of the virtues valued in medieval ideology and hagiography and is in a sense represented as already almost Christian in her commitment to chastity. Her transformation into a Christian virgin therefore seems to be a natural consequence of her learned conversation with Chrysanthus, where she is won over to the right “party” of virginal devotion.

We also occasionally encounter Vestal Virgins as a more anonymous group in the hagiography of virgin martyrs. As described in the version of the life of Agnes of Rome in the *Gesta St. Agnetis* from the fifth or sixth century, for instance, the devoted and beautiful Christian virgin refused to marry her pagan suitor. She was then given an ultimatum: the choice between being brought to the brothel and forced into prostitution or being handed over to the Vestal Virgins to serve the pagan gods with them. Alexander Joseph Denomy sees Vesta in the *Gesta* as a substitution of Pallas mentioned by Prudentius in his *Peristephanon liber 14 (Passio Agnetis)*.¹² It is however more likely to read Prudentius’s reference to Pallas in his poem about Agnes as a reference to Vesta in the first place. The *Palladium*, a legendary statue of Minerva, was believed to be among the precious pledges of the state that were safeguarded by the Vestal Virgins, and we know of many coins representing Vesta with the *Palladium*, thus making a strong connection between the two goddesses.

Vesta is also mentioned in the version of the martyrdom of Agnes rendered in *Legenda Aurea*. Here too, Agnes is given the choice between entering the service of the goddess

10 Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea* 152: *Daria virgo prudentissima Deae Vestae dicata*. Translation from William Granger Ryan (trans.), *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

11 For more on nobility and virginity, see Sissel Undheim, *Borderline Virginities: Sacred and Secular Virgins in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2018), 83–85 *et ad pass.*

12 Joseph Alexander Denomy, *The Old French lives of Saint Agnes and Other Vernacular Versions of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 25–26 and 106. In a note to the Old French A version of the fifth- or sixth-century *Gesta*, Denomy argues that the anonymous writer substitutes Vesta for Minerva as the goddess Agnes is forced to sacrifice to in *Perist. lib.* 14.25–27. Ambrose sees the two goddesses Vesta and Minerva as two of a kind when it comes to the Vestals (cf. Ambrose, *De virg.* 1.15: *Quis mihi praeferendit Vestae virgines et Palladis sacerdotes?* [Gori]).

as a virgin or being sent to a brothel. The virtuous virgin chooses the brothel before pagan worship in a powerful demonstration of her contempt for paganism that surpasses her fear of losing her consecrated virginity. In this version, the pagans are scorned for their inability to see the fundamental difference between virginity dedicated to Christ and virginity dedicated to Vesta, as they cannot identify the difference between the two and try to make the Christian virgin into a Vestal virgin.¹³ The devoted virgin Agnes chooses the brothel over the pagan temple in her stern conviction that her faith will preserve her virginity.¹⁴

Moreover, the *Legenda Aurea*'s story of St. Callistus features an unspecified "temple virgin named Juliana" who, seized by a demon, testifies that "the God of Callistus is the true and living God, and he is enraged by our filthy practices." Although we are not told the fate of the virgin, it is her testimony that leads to the conversion of a certain consul named Palmatus, who then was baptised by Callistus.¹⁵ The Roman temple virgin accordingly has the ability to prophesy on behalf of the Christian god, a notion that testifies to the close link between virgins and the ability to prophesy that we find in pagan as well as Christian sources.¹⁶

Yet another hagiographical motif that features the Vestal Virgins appears in the legend of St. Silvester, who, according to the legend, killed a dragon that these pagan virgins were said to feed to keep under control. Saving virgins and towns or villages from the devil under the guise of a vicious serpent dragon becomes a famed deed for many a male medieval heroic saint. The idea that the Vestal Virgins of Rome had to feed a serpent also appears in a poem attributed to Paulinus of Nola:

I gather that every five years the so-called Vestal virgins take a feast to a serpent who either does not exist at all, or else is the Devil himself, who formerly persuaded the

13 Cf. *Acts of Paul and Thecla* a. 44: "And certain men of the city, being Greeks by religion, and physicians by profession, sent to her insolent young men to destroy her. For they said: She is a virgin, and serves Artemis, and from this she has virtue in healing." Translation from J. K. Elliott (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). The episode is expanded in the manuscript edited by Grabe and rendered in Richard A. Lipsius and Maximilian Bonnet (eds.), *Acta apostolorum apocrypha* (Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1891), 271–72 and Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 372–74. Cf. Mark Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 65.

14 In the Norse version of the myth, *Agnesar saga*, Vesta is identified with the local female deity Gefion, Birte Carlé, *Jomfru-fortællingen: Et bidrag til genrehistorien* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1985), 73. The anonymous virgin of Antioch is also given the choice between the brothel and sacrificing to pagan gods in Ambrose, *De virg.* 2.23 (Gori). Like Agnes, she chooses the brothel. The "virgin in the brothel" motif is also found in other ancient literary genres, such as Greek novels.

15 *Legenda Aurea* 154 (s.v. De sancto Calixto): *Quod dum fieret, virgo quaedam templi, nomine Juliana, arrepta a daemone exclamavit: Deus Calixti est verus et vivus Deus, qui nostris est pollutionibus indignatus.* Translation in Ryan, *Golden Legend*. Cf. *Acts* 16:16.

16 Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 180 and 256; cf. Undheim, *Borderline Virginites*, 50n111.

human race to its ruin. But they venerate him, even though he now trembles and hangs imprisoned by the name of Christ and confesses to his evil deeds.¹⁷

Paulinus portrays the dragon as an epitome of pagan worship, which can only be for the benefit of the Devil. His image of the Vestals worshipping a dragon is likely to have been inspired by rhetoric such as that of Tertullian, in which the Devil is concretised and identified as a dragon. Tertullian's text deals again with the Vestals as "chaste pagans," and they appear in the double role as shaming device as well as a negative example of the pagans' "otherness":

A hard and arduous thing enough, surely, is the continence for God's sake of a holy woman after her husband's decease, when Gentiles, in honour of their own Satan, endure sacerdotal offices which involve both virginity and widowhood! At Rome, for instance, they who have to do with the type of that "inextinguishable fire," keeping watch over the omens of their own (future) penalty, in company with the (old) dragon himself, are appointed on the ground of virginity.¹⁸

Over time, this image of virgins feeding the dragon seems to have appealed to hagiographers, who had the fourth-century pope Silvester kill this dragon/serpent, freeing the Vestals as well as the people of Rome from its terror. According to the logic of hagiography, the citizens' collective conversion to Christianity was the immediate consequence of such a heroic act.¹⁹ Although admittedly rare encounters, the Vestal Virgins thus continued to lurk in the background of various hagiographical narratives in the Middle Ages. The Roman virgin priestesses appear to have served different literary or rhetorical purposes. As already indicated, they featured in these texts in different ways as symbols of Christian victory over paganism. This was most commonly depicted as the conversion of a Vestal to Christianity and Christian virginity, as in the stories of Claudia and Daria, but it could also be as the pagan agent miraculously acting in favour

17 Paulinus of Nola (Pseudo-Paulinus), *Carm* 32.140–50 (Carmen ad Antonium): *Additur hic aliud: Vestae quas virgines aiunt / Quinquennes epulas audis portare draconi, / Qui tamen aut non est, aut si est, diabolus ipse est, / Humani generis contrarius antea suasor. / Et venerantur eum, qui nunc in nomine Christi/ Et tremat, et pendet, suaque omnia facta fatetur.* Translation in Brian Croke and Jill Harries, *Religious Conflict in Fourth-Century Rome: A Documentary Study* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1982), 89.

18 Tertullian, *Ux.* 1.6: *Durum plane et arduum satis continentia sanctae foeminae post viri excessum Dei caussa, cum gentiles Satanae suo et virginitatis et viduitatis sacerdotio perferant? Romae quidem, quae ignis illius inextinguibilis imaginem tractant, auspicia poenae suae cum ipso dracone curantes, de virginitate censentur.* Translation in ANF.

19 H. J. Rose, "Juno Sospita and St. Silvester," *Classical Review* 36, no. 7–8 (1922), 167–68; Jaakko Aronen, "La sopravvivenza dei cultu pagani e la topografia cristiana dell'area di Giuturna e delle sue adiacenze," in Lacus Iuturnae I, ed. *Eva Margareta Steinby* (Rome: De Luca edizioni d'arte, 1989), 161–67; Kirsti Gullowsen, "Den innestengte dragen på Forum," *Klassisk Forum*, (2000, 1): 84–90. This narrative features several familiar motifs, echoing not only the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, but also a curious rite in Lanuvium, a city not far from Rome, which featured virgins feeding a sacred snake. For the rite at Lanuvium, see Elizabeth Douglas Van Buren, "Juno Sospita of Lanuvium," *Journal of Roman Studies* 3 (1913): 60–72 and Undheim, *Borderline Virginites*, 177.

of Christianity, like Juliana in the story of Callistus. Here, it seems to be the priestess's virginity that qualifies her for the prophetic outburst. In medieval *vitae* of St. Agnes, Vesta and her priestesses represent pagan authorities' complete lack of understanding of Christianity and Christian values, as they assume Agnes's virginity to be equal to that of their own priestesses. This misapprehension fits well with the image of the pagan authorities as not able to "get" the true message of Christianity and Christian asceticism, making them apt antagonists in the narratives that were to convey Christian ideals.

In sum, we see that the Vestals of medieval hagiography could appear both in connection with representations of Christian virginity as a sort of twisted reflection of Christian virgins (such as in the stories of Agnes and Daria) as well as in stories without this explicit virginal connection. Their status as "sacred virgins" nevertheless seems to have shielded them from the stereotypical negative representations of other pagan officials. They are not as much active agents as they are innocent victims of paganism's cruelty (as in the story of St. Silvester) and their (virginal) prophetic powers could make them bear testimony to the truth and superiority of Christianity, as in the story of Callistus and the temple virgin Juliana.

Crimen incesti

A number of ancient sources provide evidence for the use of the term *incestum* to specifically describe the crime of which a Vestal virgin was accused and sometimes convicted if she was found to be no longer a virgin.²⁰

Despite the fact that the term also appears in texts concerning so-called lapsed virgins in Christians texts, it seems that most scholars have overlooked the term's potential semantic connection to the *incestum* of Vestal Virgins. Lucetta Desanti is in fact the only scholar who, to my knowledge, has indicated such an overlap between the crime that was prosecuted against fallen Vestal Virgins and similar accusations against Christian virgins. Desanti has drawn attention to the way the terminology of *incestae*

20 Tim Cornell, "Some Observations on the 'crimen incesti'," *Le délit religieux dans la cite antique* (Rome: Collection de l'école Française de Rome 48, 1981), 27–37; Augusto Frascchetti, "La sepoltura delle vestali e la città," *Du chatiment dans la cité. Supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique* (Rome: Collection de l'école Française de Rome 79, 1984), 97–128; Katariina Mustakallio, "The 'crimen incesti' of the Vestal Virgins and the Prodigious Pestilence," in *Crudelitas: The Politics of Cruelty in the Ancient and Medieval World*, ed. T. Viljamaa, A. Timonen and C. Krötzel (Krems: Medium Aevum Quotidianum, 1992), 56–62; Claire Lovisi, "Vestale, incestus et juridiction pontificale sous la République romaine," *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'école français de Rome* 109, no. 2 (1997): 699–735; Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (London: Routledge 1998), 131–35.

nuptiae was applied in Justinian's legislation and other legal documents that concerned Christian virgins' marriage and/or sexual affairs.²¹

It is my contention that an understanding of the meaning inherent in the term *incestum*, as it was used by Romans to specifically denote the crime of Vestal Virgins, will add to our understanding of how and why terminology related to this very concept continue to appear in Christian literature to describe a similar crime attributed to Christian virgins. For any Roman with some acquaintance with Rome's history and religion, the term *incestum* as it was used in Late Antique Latin texts, and probably also later texts, would clearly call to mind the gravity of the crime that Vestals had been condemned for, as well as the severity of the punishment and the implications of sacrilege and pollution that were linked to the crime. As Plutarch stated in his descriptions of the ceremony leading up to the live interment of a Vestal *incesta*, "Everyone stands aside silently to let her pass, and without a sound, they escort the litter in dreadful sorrow. There is no other sight more awful than this; nor does the city experience a day more gloomy."²²

The *incestum* of Virgins in Christian Texts

In the papal decree known as *Ad Gallos episcopos*, dated to the late fourth century, the author used *incestum* to describe the crime of consecrated virgins who had broken their vow of virginity.²³ This was, however, not an isolated event in early Christian writings. More than a century earlier, Cyprian of Carthage had applied the term in his letter to Pomponius when condemning the so-called *subintroductae*, arrangements where dedicated virgins lived together with clerics and other men sworn to celibacy:

21 Lucetta Desanti, "Sul matrimonio di donne consacrate a Dio nel diritto Romano cristiano," *Studia et documenta historiae et iuris* 53 (1987): 291–92, in particular note 106, and Lucetta Desanti, "Vestali e vergini cristiane," *Atti del Accademia Romanistica Costantiniana, VIII Convegno Internazionale* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1990), 480–83.

22 Plutarch, *Num.* 10.6, translation from Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: A Sourcebook*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 203.

23 *Ad Gall. Ep.* (1) 3: "Quaeritur de virginibus velatis et, mutato proposito, (†) qui⟨d⟩ exinde iudicatum sit. Si virgo velata iam ⟨in⟩ Christo, quae, intergitatem publico testimonio professa, a sacerdote prece[t] fusa benedictionis, valemē accepit, sive incestum commiserit furtim, seu, volens crimen protegere, adultero mariti nomen imposuerit, tollens membra Christi, faciens membra meretricis, ut quae sponsa Christi fuerit coniunx hominis diceretur, in eiusmodi muliere quot ⟨o⟩ausae sunt, tot reatus: integritatis propositum mutatum, velamen amissum, fides prima depravata atque ⟨in⟩ inritum devocata. Quali[s] huius et quanta satisfactione opus est! Quam magna paenitentia ei quae interitum carnis incurrit! Non est parva culpa requilisse Deum et isse post hominem. Unde, annis quam plurimis deflendum ei est, ⟨ut⟩ dignae fructu[m] pœnitentia facto, possit aliquando ad veniam pervenire, si tamen paenitens paenitenda faciat;" from Yves-Marie Duval, *La décrétale 'Ad gallos episcopos': son texte et son auteur: Texte critique, traduction française et commentaire*, *Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae* 73 (Leiden: Brill, 2005). For a discussion of this passage in the papal letter and the use of *incestum* in this context, see Undheim, *Borderline Virginities*, 150–52.

And what shall Christ and our Lord the Judge think, when He sees His virgin, dedicated to Him, and destined for His holiness, lying with another? How indignant and angry is He, and what penalties does he threaten against such unchaste connections (*incestis ... conjunctionibus*)? ²⁴

Another North African writer, Optatus of Milevis, applied the term *incestum* in connection with the “fall” of a consecrated virgin in his treatise *Against the Donatists*, written in or after 384.²⁵ In his rendering of the heinous crimes of the heretical bishop Felix, who “violated everything sacrosanct” (*omnia sacrosancta ... violarent*), Optatus depicts how he had desecrated a veiled virgin: “he did not hesitate to nefariously incest a girl whom he had captured, on whom he himself had placed the headband, and who had shortly before called him father.”²⁶ In this case, the referral to a pseudo-family relation between bishop and consecrated virgins could indeed explain the author’s choice of words. This however does not exclude that the crime of *nefarie incestare* might also encompass the desecration of her consecrated virginity, and then with strong allusions to another sinister offense against God(s), one that was not determined by the reference to family ties.

Interestingly, terminology pertaining to *incestum* does continue to appear sporadically when the subject is fallen Christian virgins, also in some later authoritative texts and rulings, for instance in the letters of the two fifth-century popes Celestine I (422–432)²⁷ and Gelasius I (492–496).²⁸

24 Cyprian, *Ep.* 62.3: *Quid Christus et Dominus et iudex noster, cum virginem suam sibi dicatam et sanctitati suae destinatam jacere cum altero cernit, quam indignatur et irascitur, et quas poenas incestis ejusmodi conjunctionibus comminatur, cujus ut gladium spiritalem et venturum iudicii diem unusquisque fratrum possit evadere omni consilio providere et elaborare debemus? Cf. Cyprian, Hab. virg. 12: Fugiant castae virgines et pudicae incestarum cultus, habitus impudicarum, lupanarium insignia, ornamenta meretricum.* Translation from ANF. Cf. idem, 15: *Ut enim impudica circa homines et incesta fucus lenocinantibus non sis*, and 18 *colloquia incesta. Incestum* in these instances seems to work more along the lines of unchastity, representing a stark contrast to what the virgin should be and do.

25 This makes it contemporary with Jerome’s letter to Eustochium. For the dating, see Mark Edwards (ed. and trans.), *Against the Donatists* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), xvii–xviii.

26 Optatus, *De schismate Donatistarum* 2.19: *Interea supra memoratus Felix inter crimina sua, et facinora nefanda, ab eo comprehensa puella cui mitram ipse imposuerat, a qua paulo ante pater vocabatur, nefarie incestare minime dubitavit.* Translation in Edwards, *Against the Donatists*, 47, with my changes.

27 Coelestin I, *Ep.* 4.5: *Tantis gravatus testimoniis, tanta facinorum accusatione pulsatus, sacrarum, ut dicitur, virginum pollutus incestu, episcopus asseritur ordinatus (in nostris libelli scriniis continentur, quorum ad vos quoque exemplaria direximus), in pontificii dignitatem hoc tempore quo ad causam dicendam missis a nobis litteris vocabatur, obrepsit. Sacro nomini absit injuria* (PL 50).

28 Gelasius, *Ep.* 9.20: *Virginibus autem sacris temere se quosdam sociare cognovimus, et post dicatum Deo propositum, incesta foedera sacrilegaque miscere. Quos protinus aequum est a sacra communione detrudi, et nisi per publicam probatamque poenitentiam, omnino non recipi, sed tamen vaticum de saeculo transeuntibus, si tamen poenituerint, non negetur* (PL 59).

It is evident that the term was well enough known as a specific description of the sexual crime of Vestal Virgins. What is interesting is what kind of conceptual framework it confers when it was used as a reference for apparently similar “crimes” ascribed to Christian virgins.²⁹ Terminology pertaining to *incestum* in all its semantic range seems to have presented itself as an apt term for Christian writers who wanted to convey the gravity of what these Christian virgins had been exposed to, and to evoke meaning beyond what the more common description of the crime as “adultery” would.³⁰ Although the authors’ personal intentions behind these rare, yet rhetorically laden, uses of *incestum* in connection with the “fall” of Christian virgins can evidently never be established, it is certainly not impossible that the different ways these texts link the term to sacred virgins’ loss of virginity could evoke for the reader or listener the image of *crimen incesti* as it was known by Romans. This aspect of *incestum*, so specifically linked to the sacred Vestal Virgins in Rome, does not necessarily exclude other attempts to explain the occurrence of this term when applied to consecrated virgins in Christian contexts, but adds to it by evoking a complex semantic range that was already established when Christian authors began to use it as such. The explicitly religious dimension of chastity/unchastity in terms of violation of sacred virginity would thus, in addition to providing a rhetorical effect with impact on the audience, lend added significance to the potential crime committed by, with, or against Christian consecrated virgins.

Elizabeth Archibald, in her study of incest in the Middle Ages, has noted the connection that was made between the crime of the Vestals and that of monastic regulations. Archibald refers to two fifteenth-century texts where the story of the rape of Rhea Silvia, who subsequently became the mother of the founding twins of Rome, is held up as an explanation of why scholars/clerics of this period call sexual incontinence *incestus*. The story of the pregnant Vestal here came to function as a bad example and a warning for contemporary nuns, in line with Boccaccio’s use of the same story in his treatise *Famous Women*. Boccaccio too, in fact, described the wanton crimes of cloistered nuns in terms of *incestum*.³¹ *Incesta*, as a concept describing a “fallen” consecrated virgin, had thus

29 Cornell, “Some Observations” and Frascchetti, “La sepoltura delle vestali” give the details of episodes from the republic and principate. Livy and Augustine also applied the term *stuprum* to designate the crime of Vestal Virgins; cf. Augustine, *Civ.* 3.5 and Livy 22.57.2. The majority of the sources nevertheless refer to the crime by variations of *incestum*.

30 Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 98 concludes in his analysis of incest (in the traditional sense of the term) in Greek material: “[Incest] lies in a sense beyond pollution, because it is beyond purification.” For the term *incestus* as associated with religious transgression, see also Philippe Moreau, *Incestus et Prohibitiae Nuptiae: Conception romane de l’inceste et histoire des prohibitions matrimoniales pour cause de parenté dans la Rome antique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres 2002), 18–19.

31 Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 39–40 and Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris* 45.6: *incestu querentes agere furtim quod pallam illis sublatum est fecisse coniugio*. Archibald also refers to Gratian’s *Decretum* (twelfth century) where the explanation for this use of *incestus* is that “since all nuns are the brides of Christ and God is the father of all humans,

specific allusions to different kinds of sexual offenses and religious transgressions than what references to *incest* otherwise had. The examples discussed here demonstrate that the term continued to be used to denote the religious crime of “a fallen, consecrated virgin,” at least sporadically, all the way up to the Renaissance, to the occasional puzzlement of commentators both then and now.

Towards Reformation, Counter-Reformation and Neo-Classicism

[...] - the Vestal returns, adorned with different meanings, as a result of new ideological, aesthetical, ethical and political stakes.³²

Boccaccio’s *Famous Women*, composed mainly in 1361 and 1362, lists the deeds and misdeeds of 106 famous and infamous women from history, from Eve, the mother of the human race, to his contemporary, Queen Joanna of Jerusalem and Sicily. Among these women, several of them well-known for their virtue and chastity, we find two Vestal Virgins: Rhea Silvia, the mother of Romulus and Remus (XLV), and Claudia, who defended her triumphant father with her sacred immunity (LXII). As mentioned above, Boccaccio recounts the well-known story of how Rhea Silvia came to be the mother of Romulus and Remus. His ensuing reflections can however also serve as yet another example of the inextricable web that continued to connect Vestals and Christian virgins:

So, when I reflect upon the case of this woman and see the holy vestments of nuns hiding furtive love, I cannot help laughing at the madness of some people. There are certain individuals who are greedy enough to take away from their daughters their pittance of a dowry. Under the pretext of religion, they confine – or should I say condemn? – these girls to nuns’ cells, sometimes when they are still very young, sometimes when almost mature, but always under force. Then the claim is made that a virgin has been dedicated to God, and her prayers will advance her father’s affairs and gain paradise for him when he dies.³³

there is a relationship of affinity between all men and all nuns, and therefore any sexual activity is for them a form of incest.” Cf. Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent* (London: Penguin, 2004), 145–46, and 232n18, where she refers to some attempts by other scholars to explain why fallen virgins were charged with incest in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Renaissance Venice, which, reminiscent of the Decretal of Gratian, refer to some kind of understanding of “all Christians as family.” As Archibald has demonstrated, however, *incestum* as a term describing a Vestal’s sexual “misconduct” was known and linked to nuns’ unchastity also in the fifteenth century. It is likely then, that also other references to *incestum* in connection to “fallen nuns” also carried these connotations in Late Antique and medieval texts.

32 [...] la vestale revient parée de significations différentes, à la faveur de nouveaux enjeux idéologique, esthétiques, éthiques, politiques [...], Guillaume Faroult, “Les fortunes de la Vertu. Origines et évolution de l’iconographie des vestales jusqu’au XVIIIe siècle,” *Revue de l’art* 152, no. 2 (2006): 24.

33 Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris* 45.5: *Hanc dum mente intueor videoque sacras vestes et sanctimonialium velamenta Veneris aliquandiu tegere furta, quin quorundam insaniam rideam*

Boccaccio departs completely from Rhea Silvia to launch a lengthy criticism of those parents who dedicate their daughters before they are old enough to choose lifelong virginity for themselves. On the other hand, in a new entry, he praises Martia, an eternal virgin (*perpetua virgo*), and allegedly the daughter of Varro, because she was legally independent and

preserved her virginity in its full integrity by her own free will and not because she was coerced by a higher authority. As a matter of fact, I do not find that she was bound by holy orders to Vesta or subject to a vow made to Diana or entangled in another commitment – all reasons which curb and restrain many women. I believe it was through the purity of mind alone that she conquered the sting of the flesh, which occasionally overcomes even the most illustrious men, and she kept her body unblemished by any relations with men until her death.³⁴

Martia here appears as a pretext for the same criticism he raised in his entry on Rhea Silvia, namely that virginity should be voluntary and not dedicated to deities. The next Vestal virgin Boccaccio mentions is Claudia, who used her inviolability as a priestess to protect her father from danger when he celebrated triumph. Here, Boccaccio is not as explicit in bringing in an analogy to Christian virgins. He does however describe the Vestal as a *sanctimoniale virgo*, a term that at least from Augustine on had been used to denote virgins consecrated to God.³⁵ Interestingly, Boccaccio does not include other famous Vestals from the ancient exempla stories, such as Aemilia and Tuccia.³⁶ Tuccia, however, although not named, came to figure as an eroticised model of chastity in Petrarch's *Triumph of Chastity*.³⁷ Literary evidence indicates that Tuccia's deed was famous in antiquity.³⁸ Petrarch's allusion seems to assume that this fame still lingered, since no name was necessary, but according to Guillaume Faroult this appears to have

continere nequeo. Sunt quidam qui, ut avari portiunculam ditis natis subtrahant, sub pretextu devotionis parvulas filias aut quandoque puberes sed coactas monasticis claustris, nescio utrum dicam, claudunt aut perdunt: aientes se Deo dicasse virginem que intenta precibus rem suam deducet in melius morientique piorum lucrabitur sedes. Translation from Virginia Brown (ed. and trans.), *Boccaccio: Famous Women (De mulieribus claris)* (London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 187–89, slightly adapted.

34 Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris* 66.1–2: *Hanc ego, ob servatam virginitatem, tanto egregiori laude extollendam puto, quanto sui iuris femina, sua sponte, non superioris coactione, integriorem servaverit. Non enim aut Veste sacerdotio alligatam aut Dyane voto obnoxiam seu alterius professionem implicitam, quibus plurime aut cohercentur aut retinentur, invenio; sed sola mentis integritate, superato carnis aculeo, cui etiam prestantissimi nonnumquam succubere viri, illibatum a contagione hominis corpus in mortem usque servasse.*

35 Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris* 62; cf. e.g., Augustine, *Faust.* 20.21.

36 A number of other female exempla from classical literature, known, for instance, from Valerius Maximus, are represented in Boccaccio's catalogue, such as Lucretia and Verginia.

37 *Trionfo della Pudicitia*: "Fra l'altre la vestale vergine pia / che baldanzosamente corse al Tibro, / e per purgarsi d'ogni fama ria / portò del fiume al tempio acqua col cribro."

38 Cf. Undheim, *Borderline Virginites*, 177–78; Amy Richlin, "Carrying Water in a Sieve: Class and Body in Roman Women's Religion," in *Women and Goddess Traditions in Antiquity and Today*, ed. Karen L. King and Karen Jo Torjesen (Augsburg: Fortress, 1997), 330–76.

been one of the first attempts to “redeem” the Vestals and apply them in art as ambiguous and eroticised symbols of female virtues. Faroult has argued that Petrarch’s literary evocation of the Vestal who miraculously proved her virginity inspired several subsequent representations of Tuccia in literature as well as in visual arts, particularly in Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.³⁹

Sacred virgins, which by this time were synonymous with Christian nuns, became a hot topic again during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation of Christian Europe. In this dramatic period, we find that some of the very same accusations that were once directed against pagan virgins by the early Christian writers were now flung at Catholic nuns by Protestants opposing Catholic institutions. The nuns’ chastity was not only questioned, but their protected life was polemically presented as a pretext for licentious and sordid sexual encounters. As Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Lesile have noted, “In Protestant Europe, the nunnery became synonymous with the brothel, making Hamlet’s well-known advice to Ophelia a brutal pun.”⁴⁰ The lack of free choice was one of the main objections to the way new novices were recruited, as the nuns were represented as victims, forced to make the vow of virginity in early childhood by their parents and by religious authorities.⁴¹

Faroult has demonstrated how a different strategy was taken by the counter-reformist Alvaro Gomez de Castro, who wrote the first scholarly study of the Vestal Virgins: *Del orden y origen de las vestales romanas*. The book was dedicated to Dona Maria de Mendoza, a Spanish lady who wanted to found a monastery for nuns. According to Faroult, de Castro’s project was to present the community of Vestal Virgins as a model of emulation for Christian morality.⁴² Justius Lipsius’s *De Vesta et vestalibus syntagma* from 1603 added to the interest in the topic and was to become the authoritative source for the editors of Migne in their scattered commentaries on Vestal Virgins in the *Patrologia Latina*. As one of the great Christian humanists of the Counter-Reformation, Lipsius’s approach to the Vestal Virgins was similar to that of de Castro. The role of the Vestals thus became one where they would provide arguments for Catholic institutions, against the criticism raised by Protestant reformers. As honourable prefigurations of the

39 Faroult, “Les fortunes de la Vertu,” 12–13. For Tuccia in antiquity and in Renaissance representations, see also Helen King, “Opening the Body of Fluids. Taking In and Pouring Out in Renaissance Readings of Classical Women,” in *Bodily Fluids in Antiquity*, ed. M. Bradley, V. Leonard and L. Totelin (London: Routledge, 2021), 381–98. A very interesting observation King makes here is how Tuccia, on the one hand, could be compared even to the Virgin Mary as a model for Christian chastity, while, on the other hand, she could also be associated with witchcraft in the Salem witch trials (394–95).

40 Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie, “Introduction: The Epistemology of Virginity,” in *Menacing Virgins: Representing Virginity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 20; cf. Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007), 46–52. Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 25 is an example of how early Christian writers directed similar accusations at the Vestal Virgins.

41 Laven, *Virgins of Venice*, 80; cf. Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris* 45.5–9.

42 Faroult “Les fortunes de la Vertu,” 13.

Christian nuns, favourable images of Vestals could justify Catholic practice.⁴³ A century later, the French abbot Augustin Nadal presented his thesis on the Vestal Virgins, *Histoire des Vestales avec une traité du luxe des dames romaines*, published in 1725 and a subsequent success. The abbot's ongoing project against Voltaire and the positivist agnosticism of Enlightenment Paris is reflected in his study of the Vestals, as well as in his other, more literary works.⁴⁴

As Faroult has emphasized in his study of how Vestal Virgins were represented in eighteenth century France, the remarkable interest in these pagan priestesses reflected ideological and political, as well as ethic and aesthetic concerns.⁴⁵ Michel Delon has argued that the obvious analogy to ecclesiastic celibacy made the Vestals a transparent metaphor used to critique Catholic institutions.⁴⁶ Just as Basil of Caesarea⁴⁷ and Boccaccio had criticised Christian parents who dedicated daughters who were too young to see the consequences of a life of virginity, and thus questioned their actual "choice," French novelists and playwrights as well as painters explored tragic depictions of Vestals' misfortunes. The "heroides" of Robert-Martin Lesiure, which appeared in 1776, presented the love-struck Vestal Claudia, condemned to death for her violation of virginity, as the victim of a vow taken at such a young age that it could not have been voluntary.⁴⁸ The connection between age, free will, and subjection to the will of the parents thus echoes as perhaps the most enduring of the themes in the discourses concerning consecrated virgins. The need to understand the Vestals as both fundamentally different, yet somewhat similar, was the struggle Elisee Lazaire faced when he in 1890 published his study *Etude sur les vestals d'après les classiques et les découverts du Forum*.⁴⁹ Seeing the Vestals as prefigurations, as flashes of Aurora Borealis representing the Christian light of sacred virginity in the midst of pagan darkness, Lazaire attempted to reconcile the contempt for paganism with a contemporary fascination for these sacred virgins of the Romans that, at least in their virginity, resembled the nuns of his own faith. Although Christian sacred virgins in time came to outshine the pagan virgins by far, the latter's reception history inevitably became deeply entangled with that of the former.

43 Faroult, "Les fortunes de la Vertu," 13–14.

44 Faroult, "Les fortunes de la Vertu," 16–17.

45 Faroult, "Les fortunes de la Vertu," 24; cf. Kathleen Nicholson, "The Ideology of Feminine 'Virtue': The Vestal Virgin in French Eighteenth-Century Allegorical Portraiture," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 52–72.

46 Michel Delon, "Mythologie de la vestale," *Dix-huitième siècle* 27 (1995): 159.

47 Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 199.18; cf. Undheim, *Borderline Virginites*, 64–66.

48 Faroult, "Les fortunes de la Vertu," 24. Henrik Ibsen's first drama, *Catilina*, from 1849, also featured the punishment of a Vestal, one that he appropriately named Furia. For the potential historical scandal that involved Catilina and a Vestal named Fabia (Cicero's sister-in-law), a scandal which seems to have been avoided, see R. G. Lewis, "Catilina and the Vestal," *Classical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2001): 141–49.

49 See note 1 above.

Conclusion

In medieval hagiography, the Vestals' "virginal vocation" seems to somehow redeem them in the eyes of many a narrator, especially when they are compared to other images of pagans in this period. Pagans were generally depicted in negative and stereotypical terms, as the necessary antagonists to heroic and chaste Christian martyrs.⁵⁰ The occasional Vestal still represents the "proximate other," as she also had in the polemics of the Church Fathers, yet now in response to changed religious and cultural circumstances. Although Greco-Roman paganism no longer represented an imminent "threat" that was to be countered polemically, the appearance of these pagan priestesses in different texts (and in hagiography in particular) seems to continue to explore comparisons with Christian virginity that highlight similarities and identification and simultaneously demarcate differences and distance. Conversion stories are particularly noteworthy as they clearly reflect the general "victory motif" in Christian texts, one that was underlined by the popularity of martyr passions. Unlike another very common motif, that of the penitent prostitute, where conversion represented a great change in lifestyle,⁵¹ the conduct and virtues ascribed to the pagan virgin priestesses are represented as more "natural," almost logical, explanations for their smooth transition from paganism to Christianity, as they in virtue and lifestyle already were almost "as good as" Christians. Whereas the stories of the penitent prostitute effectively depicted the transition brought about by conversion in terms of a dramatic change of conduct, the story of the converted Vestal thus focuses on Christian faith as the principal distinction between "us" and the "like-us." Again, we find that the Vestals as chaste, or even virtuous, pagans could encompass sameness and difference at the same time, depending on the author's message. Representations of Vestals from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and to the Age of Enlightenment thus demonstrate a wide variety of approaches and themes, yet one aspect seems to recur. The Vestals could always be evoked to mirror contemporary Christian nuns, who in turn reflected and shaped how the Vestal Virgins were represented.

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50 On (Christian) virginity in the Middle ages, see e.g., R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000); Maud Burnett McNerney, *Eloquent Virgins from Thecla to Joan of Arc* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

51 Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

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