

## Domitian and the Vestals

As emperor and high priest of Rome, Domitian involved himself with moral and religious matters. Unfortunately, at least one group paid the price for his religious zeal—the Vestal Virgins. During his reign Domitian convicted four priestesses of *incestum* (broken vows of chastity) along with numerous alleged male conspirators. Concentrated attacks on this priesthood had not happened since 114/113 BCE and a Vestal had not been condemned for many generations.

Domitian's first assault against the Vestal Virgins occurred shortly after his accession. The year of the trial is uncertain, but 81-82 BCE seems likely (Southern, *Domitian*, 79) although 83 BCE is also proposed (Bauman, *Crime and Punishment in Ancient Rome*, 93). On this occasion the Emperor found guilty three of the six priestesses, the Oculata sisters and Varronilla. Remarkably, Domitian did not rely on the traditional punishment of inhumation for Vestals convicted of *incestum*, but instead let them choose the manner of their deaths. Moreover, their lovers were merely exiled and not beaten to death which was the standard punishment for violating a Vestal Virgin. These events must be compared with the trial of the chief Vestal at the time, Cornelia. Although she was not part of the case mentioned above, we are told that Cornelia had been accused and acquitted of breaking her vows once before (Suetonius, *Dom.*, 8). During her second trial in 91 BCE she was found guilty. However, this time Domitian reverted to the customary punishment and ordered that Cornelia be buried alive. Likewise, her alleged lovers were beaten to death with the exception of Valerius Licinianus who admitted his crime and was instead exiled.

These two trials of Vestal Virgins happened no more than ten years apart from one another. Yet, the Emperor allowed for a more 'humane' treatment of the accused in the first case

and fell back on tradition in the second. How can this be explained? Prior scholarship tends to identify the harsher punishments as Domitian's increased focus on moral reform (Bauman, 94). However, while Vestal *incestum* may have been a matter of indecency, it never fell under the scope of public morality since these priestesses belonged to a special category of society and had different, stricter rules. A better justification may come from Domitian's increased preoccupation with justice and stern adherence to religious practices. Moreover, one fundamental difference between the trials seems to be the avowal of 'certain' guilt. Both Pliny (*Ep.*, 4.11) and Suetonius (*Dom.*, 8) suggest that by confessing, Valerius Licinianus had proven Cornelia's culpability. As such, Domitian could punish her—even in the traditional way—without reproach. In contrast, no one confessed in the earlier trial. Further influences may have been timing (early in his reign Domitian may have felt it wise to show more leniency than later in his tenure when he was more secure in his power), and the status of Cornelia as chief Vestal facing her second accusation. Moreover, the identity and position of the male participants need also be examined as do the similarities between the Vestal trials of Domitian and the last mass persecution of Vestal priestesses in 114 BCE. This paper will examine all of these issues in order to bring about a better understanding of the relationship between Domitian and the Vestals.

### Bibliography

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Southern, Pat. *Domitian: tragic tyrant*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.