

The Vestal Virgins: Guardians or Scapegoats of Ancient Rome?

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Abstract

When disaster struck ancient Rome, someone had to be held responsible. Romans systematically attributed military defeats, natural disasters, and political crises to the moral failures of the Roman Empire and projected them onto the lapses of women in their religious roles, especially the Vestal Virgins. The works of Livy about the Battle of Cannae, the works of Tacitus about the trial of Pomponia Graecina, and the works of Valerius Maximus concerning morality demonstrate trends in how blame was a religious process and a political instrument in Roman culture. Allegations against religious women were predictable and they peaked during crises and declined during stable times. The Romans linked personal moral behavior to community safety through the notion of *pax deorum* (peace with the gods). The Vestal Virgins, who had the duty of keeping the sacred flame at Rome, held a status of extraordinary privilege and vulnerability, and so they served as ideal scapegoats whenever something terrible happened. Religious blame thus fulfilled several roles other than religious issues. However, this also depended greatly on social status; as in the case of Pomponia Graecina, who was acquitted, in contrast to the execution of Vestals of lower status. This

study examines how ancient cultures used religious structures to address challenges, gender influences on religious power, and the role of blame in maintaining social structures during times of disruption.

Keywords: Vestal Virgins, Pax Deorum, Roman religion, persecution, power and gender

Introduction

The Romans were ambivalent about their relationship with the gods. To them, appeasing the gods was necessary to guarantee the survival of the Romans. When the disaster came, be it military loss, plague, or famine, the Romans tried to find a person to blame, and in most times these blames fell on women who occupied religious offices. Being the bearers of the flame of sanctity in Rome, the Vestal Virgins were especially an easy target in times of crisis. When the great Carthaginian general Hannibal defeated the Roman army at Cannae in 216 BCE, the Roman leaders accused two Vestal Virgins of violating their chastity vows and sentenced them to death before the citizens to regain the approval of the gods. This paper proposes that the Romans explicitly used religious blame as a system to explain disasters, take the blame off political and military leaders, consolidate control over women in religious positions, and reduce their authority over the general population. Through the analysis of the instances of the Battle of Cannae, the trial of Pomponia Graecina, and review of other historical events, this paper will discuss the relationship between individual conduct and safety in the community on the basis of *pax deorum* as well as the manner in which prosecutions and prosecution served as a method of worship and political instrument, and what the trends of these tendencies can tell us about gender, authority structure, and coping

with crises in the Roman context. Just as today's governing rulers find scapegoats to shift blame away from their own failures, so did the Roman leaders.

Roman Religion and Community

Roman religion was not a matter of self-faith or personal conviction. It was a civic system meant to ensure that Rome was safe and prosperous (Rives, 2018). Romans believed that the gods would guard the city if they performed the proper rituals at the right time. This human-god relationship was referred to as the *pax deorum*, or peace of the gods. In times of disaster, Romans believed the gods were angry because someone had violated this peace. The entire mechanism was supported by all individuals performing their duty properly. The Romans interpreted the community they lived in religiously. A community did not only exist among the people living in Rome (Albrecht et al., 2018). It encompassed the citizens, the land itself, and the relationship between the people and the gods. This system maintained itself, and everyone had a role to play in it. Most political and military positions were held by men, but women also held key religious positions. Some women worked as priestesses, and the most significant of them were the Vestal Virgins. The work of these women was impossible for men, so their jobs provided them with an exclusive role in Roman culture.

Vestal Virgins were in a special business of their own. They took care of the sacred fire of Vesta, a goddess of fire (Wyrwińska, 2021). This fire symbolized Rome's security and well-being. If the fire were to extinguish, Romans believed that Rome was under threat. The Vestals were obliged to be virgins in the course of their thirty years of service. This promise was not only one of a woman's own moral shortcomings. It was perceived as a crime against the whole state. Roman rationality was quite literal in linking the chastity of the Vestal with

the security of Rome. Moral conduct and religious duty had a distinct relationship in the writings of Rome. It was not just an individual issue when someone did something wrong, particularly when it involved a religious status (Holland, 2012). The individual had failed to keep the contract with the deities. This implied that the deities could avenge not only the guilty one. Such a mentality influenced the way in which the Romans reacted to crises and how they assigned blame as a means of maintaining order. The religious structure offered reasons for experiencing evil and what people could do about it.

This religious concept of the community was practical. It implied that personal actions did not necessarily coincide with political outcomes (Smith, 2020). What one person kept secret would touch the lives of all the others. This dogma was the reason why those in religious offices were tightly monitored. The Vestal Virgins resided in a house near the Roman Forum, which was visible to everyone. Their day-to-day lives were known to everyone. Any suspicious behavior might create suspicions. They were always visible as it was their job, but it also exposed them to accusations. There were also other religious positions held by women, no fewer than the Vestals. The female deities held festivals for women (Hemelrijk, 2020). Well-off women financed the temple and the religious rituals. Some women worked as priestesses of certain gods. All these roles put women into the limelight, as well as positions of responsibility. They can be held accountable in case anything goes wrong in their field of control. The more prominent the position, the more the woman became a target of criticism and even accusations by society.

The Vestal Virgins and Community Safety

The example of the Vestal Virgins illustrates how the inhabitants of Rome linked personal conduct to the existence of a community. When there was a crisis, Vestals were

found guilty of defying their oaths of chastity (Parker, 2004). These charges were higher when the military was overpowered or when a natural calamity occurred. The most popular one is that of 216 BC, following Rome's crushing defeat in the Battle of Cannae. This was a military disaster among the worst events in history, and the shock was felt by Roman society. The army's defeat brought doubt on how the gods had made it possible to happen. The Battle of Cannae was disastrous to Rome. In just one day, the army of Hannibal massacred tens of thousands of the Romans (Livius, 1905). Consul Lucius Aemilius Paulus fell on the battlefield. The other consul, Gaius Terentius Varro, fled away with the rest. Panic occurred when the news was announced in Rome. They had to know the reasoning as to why the gods had permitted this to occur. Roman governors consulted religious texts and sought signs of divine wrath. They had their response in two Vestal Virgins, Opimia and Floronia. The fact that these women were the cause of divine wrath gave an answer that was easily comprehensible.

This is what Livy writes about these two women: they were convicted of unchastity immediately after the catastrophe at Cannae. One was buried alive, as was the custom, and the other committed suicide (Livius, 1905). The suspect man, who was supposed to have been having a relationship with Floronia, was flogged to death recently in the street. This cruel action was not only about the punishment of sexual misconduct. It was of the restoration of the *pax deorum*. This was because Romans believed that, by punishing the guilty and eliminating the pollution in their community, the gods would forgive them and offer them protection once more. Punishment must have been high and open so as to convey the correct message to the gods. Information about the execution of Vestals reveals Roman views on pollution and punishment. Even when still alive, the guilty Vestal was taken

through a funeral procession (Speed, 1678). She was transported to Campus Sceleratus, which is a place close to Colline Gate. There, she was put in a dug-out cell with very little food, water, or a lamp. Then the chamber was sealed. The Vestals were technically not executed due to the reason that it was impossible for the Romans to take away the life of a sacred individual. They were instead buried in the ground, where they would be killed. This technique met the punishment goal, as well as the inability to kill a priestess directly.

The Vestal virginity was necessary for certain reasons. According to Roman mythology, the goddess Vesta required pure servants (Parker, 2004). In case a Vestal engaged in sex, she was no longer pure and could not serve the goddess properly any longer, as her hands would contaminate the sacred fire, which she cared for. This contamination would be transferred to the rest of the religious practices. This would later enrage the entire deity, not just Vesta. This would then result in the gods failing to protect Rome. The enemies would defeat their Roman armies. Plagues would hit the city. Harvests would fail. All this disaster could be ascribed to the lustful Vestal. The timing of these allegations matters. The majority of charges brought against Vestals occurred whenever there was a crisis in either political or military affairs (Wyrwińska, 2021). Accusations took place very infrequently in the times of peace and prosperity. This tendency suggests that the Vestals were scapegoats. When Romans could not explain how the disasters occurred, they blamed the women, whose role was to ensure Rome's safety. Had Rome been conquered, it must have been through the negligence of the Vestals. This reasoning not only shielded political and military leaders but also gave a clear explanation as to the cause of the crisis.

There were various functions of punishing the Vestals. First, it has been determined that divine anger has an origin (Smith, 2020). Second, it eliminated the contamination in

society. Third, it also showed the gods that the Romans were serious about their religious duties. Through the execution of the guilty women, the Romans would like to have the gods revert their attention. This demonstrates the role of blame as a religious structure, intended to restore the damaged association between Rome and its gods. The Roman society was characterized by power distance in the accusatory process. The first accusation had to be established by somebody (Phang, 2022). In the majority of cases, this was a male priest or politician. The accused Vestal was not able to protect herself in the same manner as a male citizen would defend himself. There had been no political power or voice for her.

Male religious authorities judged her case. Male priests would preside over her execution if found guilty. At all levels, the process was dominated by men. Virginity and the religious status of the Vestal afforded her certain privileges, but it was up to men to determine her fate. The evidence presented during these trials was questionable. In other cases, enslaved people may have been tortured and thus leveled accusations (Livius, 1905). On some occasions, it was only suspicion due to the sight or manners of the Vestal. One of the Vestals had been suspected partly because she was too fashionably dressed. The other one was charged on the grounds that she appeared to be overly friendly with men. These imprecise norms indicated that just about any Vestal could be accused in any situation where a scapegoat was needed. This is because many of the cases do not indicate any obvious evidence, and this results in the allegations acting in other ways, presumably as an instrument for punishing actual guilt.

How Individual Actions Threatened the Community

According to Romans, some forms of wrongdoing caused pollution that affected all of them. This belief was particularly high in the religious crimes (Rives, 2018). A Vestal who

violated her pledge did not simply sin against himself or against the goddess. She had ruined the rapport that Rome had with all the gods. Such destruction might result in a military loss, plague, famine, etc. The society was unambiguous and direct in the Roman thought on the relationship between community consequence and individual action. This relationship was explained clearly by Roman writers. Following the defeat at Cannae, Livy describes how the Romans referred to the Sibylline books, divine texts that provided guidelines on how to deal with divine wrath (Livius, 1905). The books informed them of the several rituals and sacrifices to be conducted. Another thing they had to contend with was pollution caused by the unchaste Vestals. Until these women were blamed and the rituals were conducted, only then could the Romans expect divine forgiveness to be restored. The order of events mattered. Cleanse it (first) and then perform the rituals, and then anticipate divine forgiveness.

It was not only the Vestals who conceived of the idea that the actions of one individual might put the lives of all in danger. It was relevant to anyone who had the religious responsibility (Holland, 2012). Moreover, no single group of individuals was more exposed to this type of reasoning than the Vestals, given the prominence of their position and its value. They resided in Rome, in the heart of the city, the Forum. Anyone was able to view them as they engaged in their activities. When bad things happened, people preferred to seek help from the most prominent religious leaders. Vestals were targets as well because of the visibility, which accorded them some respect. The Church of Romans considered the community as one body in the view of the gods. Gods did not draw a line between guilty and innocent persons (Albrecht et al., 2018). That is how they viewed Rome. If that unit was contaminated, the deities punished it. The action by this faith resulted in pressure on the

community to self-police. Those who could put everyone at risk needed to be identified and eliminated within a short period. The community's coexistence was based on maintaining purity. This was a community duty that defined the way Romans reacted to the accusation of religious women.

Community was a central concept in Roman religion and thought, and was not limited to the living. It contained the ancestors and future generations, as well as the gods themselves (Denham, 2025). Even when a Vestal had disavowed her vow, she was miscreed to all these. She jeopardized her contemporaries, disrespected the ancestors who instituted these traditions, and jeopardized the Rome of tomorrow. It was extreme reactions that were justified by this expansive range of consequences. The penalty must be proportional to the crime. It would only be appropriate since she was supposed to present so much danger to so many people to bury her alive. Romans also believed that pollution caused by religious crimes could spread like a disease. Otherwise, it may infect a number of individuals without treatment and lead to additional catastrophes (Chester et al., 2025). This faith made a rapid response critical. Immediately, a person recognized that the cause of the pollution had to be addressed to eliminate it. One of these steps was the burial of those Vestals who were unchaste. By excommunication, Romans believed they could prevent the propagation of divine wrath by removing the contaminated member of society. The facility that buried her made her a closed-off chamber to the rest of the world so that the pollution she caused could not be spread further.

The practical consequences of religious reasoning in everyday life were significant. People closely monitored religious women to ensure that they did not behave inappropriately (Phang, 2022). Suspicions were reported to the authorities by the neighboring people. Slaves

were interviewed about the activities of their mistresses. It was a kind of constant monitoring which led to feelings of suspicion. Religious women were compelled to take care not only regarding real evil but also regarding image. Just a suspicious appearance would subject one to accusations. The various forms of pollution need dissimilar responses. A disgraceful Vestal who was born pregnant necessitated her killing as part of sexual pollution (Parker, 2004). But other categories of misconduct in religious affairs could be cured by way of rituals or sacrifices. The response showed the degree of offense taken, depending on how seriously the Romans considered the issue. Delinquencies that posed a direct threat to the *pax deorum* were the gravest. These demanded the utmost remedies. Accurate minor crimes can be dealt with through warnings or minor punishments. Such elasticity in reaction demonstrates that Romans did not respond only reflexively; it was not automatic.

The Case of Pomponia Graecina

A death sentence did not necessarily follow some of the accusations brought against religious women. Pomponia Graecina demonstrates the opposite result and leaves more impressions regarding how Romans thought about blame and religious deviation (Church & Brodribb, 2026). Pomponia was a senatorial lady, mistress of Aulus Plautius, who was a prosperous Roman general who had presided over the capture of Britain. The accusations leveled against her in 57 CE were that she followed an alien superstition. This was a serious charge, given the fact that Romans thought foreign religions had the potential of angering the traditional Roman deities. The foreign manners brought with them pollution to the community and posed a threat to the *pax deorum* (Greene, 2016). This charge against Pomponia was brought after his forty years of grieving. Her cousin Julia had been executed at the emperor's behest, and Pomponia had worn mourning clothes since that time (Church &

Brodrigg, 2026). This was a protest in itself, a form of protest against imperial power. It implied that the emperor had been unfair and deserved to be mourned. Her mourning was long-lasting, which made her outstanding. Normal grieving eras were significantly less.

Tacitus has made no express statement as to the sex of the foreign superstition of Pomponia. It was later speculated by many writers to be Christianity (Janssen, 2024). The question at issue when it comes to understanding the blame is how the accusation was handled. Pomponia was not taken to the court of law by religious leaders, but was instead given to her husband, as she was to be judged. He took a trial in her family's presence and proved her innocence. It was also a unique case of religious crime, as it was a trial that was held privately within the family. This was an outstanding result. The majority of the representatives of religious crimes were publicly put on trial and were usually severely punished (Kinzig, 2024). Nevertheless, Pomponia's high-society position and her husband's fame as a soldier saved her. As presented in this case, blame in Roman society was not equally applied to all people. The nature of the accusations depended on social status, family relationships, and political conditions. A lower social woman who had been caught committing the same offence would most probably have had a very different verdict (Dio, 2022). The fact that the religious accusations were handled differently shows that religion was not the main factor influencing them.

Romans use old practices in new circumstances, as observed in the case. According to Tacitus, it was customary in the Roman Republic to hand over Pomponia to her husband and leave him to her judgment (Church & Brodrigg, 2026). In earlier times, the head of the family was at liberty to decide the fate of the female members of the family in cases where the same allegations were leveled against them. Reviving this ancient custom, the government of Nero

could seem to have reverence for history without having to try him publicly and embarrass him. It was a continuance of this ancient practice, which had political meanings in a different context. Pomponia is still alive, suggesting that the issue of divine favor was not as insular in the name of religious blame as it may have appeared. It had also been a political instrument (Ferguson, 2024). Religious deviance could be attributed to enemies or those who were a pain to others. The fact that Pomponia was acquitted implies that not all people thought that the accusations were real. Her family and husband preferred to defend her rather than alienate her based on others' opinions or politics. They could do this because of their wealth and status, which was not afforded to the majority of the Romans.

The cause of the accusation is also essential because foreign superstition was more averse than unchastity (Christian Publishing House, 2025). What counted as foreign? What was considered to be superstition? Such questions lacked definite answers, and this ambiguity offered opportunities for interpretation and negotiation. The family of Pomponia might claim that there was nothing wrong with what she had done, that her practices were good, or that the allegation was incorrect. There was also the advantage that there were no distinct lines for determining who committed foreign superstition, meaning it was defensible when it would not have been regarding unchastity. Certainly, one cannot disregard the political situation of the accusation. Aristocrats were accused of numerous things in the reign of Nero (Ferguson, 2024). Some were real threats to his rule. Some of them were innocent individuals who got involved in politics. The fact that Pomponia is mourning so long over Julia might have been regarded as an indication of disapproval towards Nero. Wearing mourning clothes, she was constantly reminding people of someone killed by Nero. This act of protest caused her to be

politically suspect. The charge of alien superstition provided the followers of Nero with the religious reason to assault her.

How Roman Writers Connected Moral Judgment to Religious Blame

This is because Roman historians never distinguished between moral conduct and religious obligation. In instances where they wrote concerning religious inferences, when people disobeyed, they noted that they not only did something wrong but also contravened the gods (Livius, 1905). This relation is evident when they talked about Vestal Virgins and other women of religion. The way the readers comprehended these events was influenced by the language that they used. The passage on Livy's Vestals after Cannae focuses on the relationship between the moral lapse of the latter and the military catastrophe of Rome. He explains in great detail how the punishment was carried out, and it was directly connected to the restoration of divinity (Livius, 1905). The implication is clear. This unchastity of the Vestals brought about or contributed to the defeat. To restore the damage, they had to be punished. This is the logic that Livy does not doubt. He makes it clear and natural that these events would be related. It is how readers had to think after reading this presentation.

Valerius Maximus was a man who gathered tales of the Vestals, which bolstered the emphasis on chastity and its loss (Speed, 1678). His descriptions were ethical teachings. They also taught Romans what could go wrong when human beings neglected their religious obligations. These legends made it clear that moral conduct was impossible without religious duty. In each story, there was an instance of cause and effect. Punishment was a result of unchastity. Purity led to Rome's safety. This correlation can be seen in the way the writers of Rome described religious crimes. They avoided terms that are not neutral in use (Church & Brodribb, 2026). They employed expressions that were morally judgmental and divine wrath.

The word superstition itself carries a negative connotation when Tacitus reports that Pomponia was accused of foreign superstition. It implied nonsensicality, violated good practice, and posed a potential risk to society. This word helped Tacitus create an impression of how readers would view the allegation, although later he states that she was not guilty (Plutarch, 1919).

Religious reliability was also linked with personal character by Roman writers. In the cases when people were accused of crimes, they tended to give information on their behavior, the way they dress, and their associations (Livius, 1905). Such information indicated that external indications have the potential of revealing moral character. A Vestal who wore fancied too much, or appeared too sociable with men, was signified a weak mind. This is also the weakness that made religious accusations more realistic. The interrelation between the exterior conduct and the inner nature gave the Romans the chance to detect the possible religious felons even before they could perform any crimes. Roman writers were associated with the morality that was presented in their moral framework. Women had to be modest, quiet, and obedient (Xie, 2021). Females who deviated from these norms were suspected of immorality. Even religious women who had gone astray were subjected to more scrutiny since their act was deemed to have an impact on everyone. Roman writers supported these norms by glorifying those women who followed them and condemning those who disobeyed them.

The relationship between religion and religious blame was significant. It enabled Romans to interpret calamities according to their own comprehension and to respond to them (Mann, 2024). In case military failure occurred due to the unchasteness of a Vestal, the punishment of said Vestal may be used to restore success. If the plague was caused by an

individual practicing foreign rituals, then ending those rituals would mark the end of the plague. This cause-and-effect thinking led the Romans to believe they had control over events they could not influence. The world made sense with the moral framework. Roman writers also used these stories to comment on events in progress. By the time Livy wrote about Vestals following Cannae, he had been writing in the period of Augustus (Livius, 1905). Augustus was attempting to revive the ancient Roman religion following civil wars. Augustus's program was endorsed by Livy's stories on the issue of religious purity. Livy provided his readers with reasons to endorse religious reforms by illustrating the consequences of failing to meet religious obligations. Historical writing was utilized in present-day politics.

Crisis and Divine Favor

The religious accusation mode during the crisis period reveals the meaning of the Romans' relationship with the gods. If things went well, Romans were convinced that the gods were satisfied (Rives, 2018). In times of calamity, they believed the deities were in a bad mood. It then became the reason why the gods were enraged and how to prove this wrong. Religious women could answer these questions in two ways: they achieved success through serving, or they served as scapegoats when things failed. The disasters at Cannae provide a good illustration of this trend, in which the Romans conducted several religious rituals following the battle (Livius, 1905). They referred to the Sibylline Books, had specific special festivals, swore fresh temples, and also made human sacrifices, burying two Greeks and two Gauls alive. All these were aimed at determining the cause of divine wrath and reestablishing divine love. The punishment of the Vestal Virgins was a portion of this still

greater. All rituals addressed a distinct issue related to the crisis, and they sought to mend a different aspect of the relationship with the gods.

To the Romans, the sacrificial offering and the ritual were a type of transaction with the gods. People practiced the proper rituals, and deities ensured their safety and well-being (Rives, 2018). If there was no success, it was something that went amiss with the transaction. The rituals must have been performed incorrectly, or someone had caused some form of pollution that interfered with the relationship. This pollution needed to be identified and eliminated once a crisis occurred. The need arose from fear that further disasters would occur due to ongoing pollution. Time was crucial in regaining divine approval. There were various intentions behind the accusations and punishments of religious women whenever a crisis occurred. To begin with, it established a specific factor that made God angry (Smith, 2020). This meant that instead of having to deal with an incomprehensible or uncontrollable issue, Romans could refer to a tangible failure. Second, it brought about a tangible solution. Penalize the guilty, clean the pollution, and divine blessing would come. Capitalism would be back. Third, it showed the gods that the Romans did not ignore their responsibilities and that they considered it possible to enforce their religious laws. Crisis management was also a strong instrument of religious accusation because of the combination of these purposes.

This trend was observed during Rome's transition from a Republic to an Empire. Nonetheless, despite the political morphology, the fundamental reason for religious blame remained unchanged (Ferguson, 2024). The religious explanations were sought, and solutions to the problems were provided through religious means. Such continuity implies that the blame directed at religious women was not aimed at any particular woman. There are also clashes between the parties in power in these cases. In Pomponia's case, the choice had to

address the emperor, her husband, and family tradition when she was accused (Church & Brodribb, 2026). They all had various interests and even disagreed on how things should turn out. The emperor desired to hold his own. His husband needed to protect his family. Variables predetermined some steps of traditional customs. Her case was resolved through negotiations among the various authorities. This negotiation, in turn, was part of how Romans endeavored to balance the times of change and uncertainty.

The crises in religion might provide political prospects. Those leaders who were able to address religious crises achieved prestige and power, while those who failed lost power. Religious reasons were among those cited for criticizing the defeated consuls at Cannae (Ferguson, 2024). They had also disregarded bad omens before the battle. They paid little attention to divine signs, which facilitated the tragedy. Even the gods were known to communicate through signs and omens. Romans were very alert about these divinations (Chester et al., 2025). Divine communications were seen when unusual incidents such as lightning strikes or flights of birds, or unusual births occurred. In times of disaster, Romans would look to the past and examine previous omens to determine whether the deities had been trying to warn them. This retroactive interpretation never neglected omens or misinterpreted them. These omens that were not achieved contributed to another reason for the occurrence of disasters and another explanation for carrying out rituals to bring back the divine favor.

Women's Roles and Religious Authority

Women played a significant role in the Roman religion, yet they had a considerable amount of risk associated with it. The other women, unlike the Vestal Virgins, had privileges (Hemelrijk, 2020). They were able to own land, will, and move easily in society. They were

allowed to get their own seats in town matches. They were cleared in the streets by people. These were privileges that set them apart. These privileges, however, were conditional on the upholding of their vows. They were to be killed in case they were found guilty of violating those vows. Its privileges were their weakness because of the same status. Additionally, other women were available in religious positions. Some festivals and rituals were undertaken by matrons (Holland, 2012). Rich women were sponsors of religious constructions and rituals. Other women were priestesses to the different gods. Both of these roles put women at least partially in the public eye and empowered their roles, though at the cost of being looked at and possibly slandered. The more the religious role of a woman could be seen, the more blame she could be attributed with in case something wrong happened. The visibility was one that came with power and risk.

The Roman concept of gender and power envisioned the role of women in religion. Women were considered to be inherently religious as compared to men, yet this made them more vulnerable to harmful influences (Phang, 2022). This rendered them beneficial in their religious affairs as well as dangerous. Their control over religion had reality and was restrained and subjected to male control. Religion was one way in which women could exercise power, although only to a limited extent, as dictated and imposed by men. Going any further, or even appearing to do so, would prompt a swift retaliation. The best illustration of this trend is the Vestal Virgins. They possessed real power and respect; nevertheless, their power was applied in particular ways and in the place of constant control (Wyrwińska, 2021). Their supervisor was the chief priest, who was always a man. Male political leaders could accuse them. Male religious officials judged the female religious leaders. Even when entrusted to a husband, as was the case with Pomponia, the final control was male. The

modes of power meant that the religious authority of women never threatened the patriarchal power.

This organization implied the religious power of women to be based on the model of male domination. Women might have had a significant impact on their religious transactions, yet they were never sure of the aftermath because they were subject to male decisions (Manolian, 2021). Women in religious offices were convenient targets for scapegoating during times of crisis, when Rome required them. Their visibility was such that their penalty was not futile, and their weakness was such that they could not protect themselves effectively. This, coupled with them, created ideal scapegoats. The fact that women of religion were weak just made them more significant to the system. The fact that they were caught between tension and obligation towards god and were always under observation placed them in the perfect position as the middle between the gods and Rome (Manolian, 2021). Whenever things went right, a positive performance of tasks was credited. In the event of failure, their failures were an explanation. In any case, the logic of the system has not been affected. The system required religious women to act, but this required them to be weak enough to blame.

Women's roles in religion were not limited to official positions. Common women included domestic religious ceremonies (Finnigan, 2023). They offered sacrifices in shrines. They supplicated towards their families. Such activities were not as notable as the priestesses' work, although they were equally significant in people's daily religious life. The role that women played throughout every period of religious activity is indicative of their centrality to the religion. They were involved to ensure the system was operational; however, they should still take the blame in the event of a hiccup. The religious women were being trained, which

influenced their roles. Vestal Virgins were recruited as young ladies, and it took them years of training (Parker, 2004). They were taught rituals that they were to perform. They got acquainted with the conditions they have to live by. They learned what failure entails. As part of this training, the significance of their work was highlighted, along with the risks of error.

Another side of the work of religious women is demonstrated through their retirement. Vestals served for a minimum of 30 years, after which they were allowed to leave and get married (Wyrwińska, 2021). Few chose to do so. The majority of them continued to be attached to the cult. This option means that their identity has become so tied to their religious role. Having served for three decades, they were unable to quickly return to their normal lives. This very identification made them even more terrible in case accusations were made against them. It was not merely their position in committing a crime, but their whole identity was under attack.

Comparing Different Types of Accusations

The accusations of all religious women were not alike. All of that depended on the nature of the charge, the position of the accused, and political conditions (Wyrwińska, 2021). When different cases are compared, it becomes clear that there were trends in how blame worked. These trends indicate that religious blame was not automatic. It entailed judging, interpreting, and political calculating at each level. Unchastity amongst Vestal Virgins was the most serious offense and usually led to death. These allegations directly opposed the basis of the relationship between Rome and Vesta (Parker, 2004). They indicated that the holy fire was under the care of contaminated hands. It needed to be a swift, harsh reaction. The contaminated Vestal had to be expelled, and the rest of the Vestals needed to prove their

innocence. There was no chance of any negotiation or mitigation. The offense was too gigantic and the threat too great to Rome.

The practice of a foreign religion, or the accusation of such, was not very dangerous at first instance, yet it was still a serious matter. The foreign religions were cause for concern among the Romans since they came with new behaviours and new deities that could turn out to be unfriendly to Rome (Chester et al., 2025). These allegations, however, were more ambivalent. It was not always clear what was considered a foreign religion, or whether practicing it amounted to a violation of Roman religious law. Such ambiguity opened the door to negotiation and other outcomes. Such could be said in the case of accused unchastity, where there might be confusion of definitions and interpretation. The accusations regarding the actions or the looks were even less clear. One Vestal was accused partly because of the way she dressed and behaved (Livius, 1905). The accusations were supported by moral judgments about the proper feminine conduct to highlight the religious inappropriateness. They were also worried about social order, just as they were about religious purity. The women who were too independent or sexy could be treated as a possible danger to the stability of religion. The ambiguity of these norms implied that virtually any woman could be accused of misbehaving at the discretion of a person.

Even the penalty was case-specific. Vestals who had committed unchastity were only to be buried alive (Speed, 1678). It was a particular reaction to a specific crime. Other religious crimes could attract fines, a ban, or social disapproval. The acquittal of Pomponia demonstrates that part of the charges led to no punishment whatsoever. These differences indicate that the ability to blame in religion was not an automatic reaction. Romans had their judgments concerning the severity and the correct response. There was a need for solutions to

various crimes. The facts necessary to convict also differed. Theoretical required evidence in cases of unchastity was that the requirements were ambiguous (Parker, 2004). The testimony of slaves who could have been tortured was admissible. Circumstantial evidence, such as being too friendly with men, may help secure a conviction. The limited evidence standards ensured that one could be convicted of something if the police intended to convict them. However, when the authorities sought to defend an individual, they would ignore the charges, claiming they had no substantial evidence. The standards of evidence are flexible, allowing authorities to manipulate the results.

Social status is distinct here upon the comparison of cases. There were high-status women able to defend themselves, such as Pomponia (Denham, 2025). They were also influential among family members. Their social networks were able to help them. Low-status women enjoyed all of these. A slave or freedwoman who committed religious crimes very little got a chance of any successful defense. The disparity in resources implied that justice was based on factors such as wealth and connections, rather than on facts and religious law. What was most important was the political situation of each accusation. During the period of political stability, accusations were rare (Carlà-Uhink & Morcillo, 2025). The accusations were more frequent during periods of crisis or political war. This trend indicates that many accusations were used in political games rather than genuine issues regarding religious holiness. Influential individuals would employ religious accusations to attack their enemies or eliminate obstacles. These political attacks were legitimate, and they were the most difficult to resist as the religious system supported them.

The Social Context of Religious Blame

There were no instances of religious accusations in isolation. They took place in a complex social and political situation, in which several interests and concerns intersected (Albrecht et al., 2018). The larger social forces influenced the operation of religious blame and the manner in which it targeted people. Roman society was extremely stratified. Most political power in the Republic belonged to patricians who were representatives of old aristocratic families (Ferguson, 2024). The ordinary people, or Plebeians, were less powerful but had the strength to affect politics in terms of numbers and sometimes through direct action. This class conflict affected the use and reception of religious accusations. Allegations might also serve the interests of the classes by blaming the upper classes to evade the blame that bodies fail to perform their relevant roles.

Such social tensions were usually raised during military crises. Defeats in war caused problems with leadership (Mann, 2024). Why had the generals failed? Why then had the senators failed in their decisions? What had happened to Rome? Why was Italy forsaken? Blaming the Vestal Virgins was a response that did not question the political or military leadership. The fault was those of the Vestals and not those of the generals or senators. This misdirection of responsibility served the political purpose well of those who were really answerable for the matter of military decision. Romans reflected on corruption and cynicism in the political sphere. In the case of the collapse of institutions, Romans sought moral explanations (Carlà-Uhink & Morcillo, 2025). The leaders were corrupt, the officials were incompetent, or the religious obligation was neglected. It was safer to blame individuals, particularly those in religious positions, than to question the system. The blame on individuals maintained the mirage that the system was inherently good and only required better individuals in order to work appropriately.

Pomponia's example demonstrates the impact of social status. She was born in a great family and was the wife of a prominent general (Church & Brodribb, 2026). These ties helped her during the time accusations were brought against her. Even a woman in a lower situation would have been treated more harshly. This is where religious blame was not applied equally, and it shows that religious accusations did not constitute a religious issue. They are also concerned with power, status, and politics. The patronage networks were operating in Roman society. Those who had power defended their clients and family members (Denham, 2025). These dependents, in their turn, offered support and loyalty. These networks came into effect when Pomponia was accused of defending her. Because of his personal belief, her husband was not only asserting her innocence but also defending the family's pride and preserving political connections. Religious accusations were also influenced by the networks that Roman society was based on.

Doubts about change and alien impact were evident even in religious blame. Due to Rome's growth, numerous other peoples and cultures encountered it (Aregbeshola & Ayoade Adekunle, 2024). Other Romans feared that foreign concepts and practices would pollute Roman values. These fears were manifested through allegations of the practice of alien religions. They created demarcating definite limits of good and bad religious conduct and secured Roman identity through foreign examples. The attacks not only fulfill cultural functions in the immediate religious context. They cannot disregard the military context of most accusations. Most of the time, Rome was engaged in war (Mann, 2024). Success in the military hinged on numerous geographic factors, including leadership, training, provisions, and fortuitous circumstances. However, Romans explained military results in religious ways. Victory meant divine favor. Defeat meant divine anger. This interpretation of military events

by religion strained to find religious reasons for defeat. These explanations were provided by religious women whenever the military and political leaders required them.

There was also a contribution by economic factors. In good times, there were diminished social tensions (Finnigan, 2023). People had enough to eat and to work. Tensions had increased in challenging economic times. Human beings sought answers to why they are suffering. The accusations of religion could fit the frustration about the economy into religious discourse. Religious failures could be blamed on people instead of pointing the finger at a particular economic system or political choices. This channeling was in the interest of people who were enjoying the current economic setup. The physical structure of Rome influenced the religious lives. There were also religious structures and facilities spread throughout the city (Chester et al., 2025). The worship practices occurred in open places where people could see them. This exposure kept the actions of religious women in view at all times. Privacy was not possible for the holder of a religious position, given that the Roman religion was open to all. All their actions were subject to scrutiny, which would be used against them.

Implications for Understanding Roman Religion

The trend of blaming religious women for crises also sheds light on how the Roman religion operated. The Roman religion was not very much about faith or individual devotion (Rives, 2018). Practice, ritual, and proper relationships with the gods were of concern. In the event of a disaster, Romans sought ritual malfunctions or moral shortcomings to attribute the deity's wrath. This quest for understanding shaped how they perceived religion and society. The practical orientation implied that even religious crimes were not defined in ways a modern person would accept. A Vestal would not have sinned theologically by having defied

her virginity (Parker, 2004). She had broken a contract. Her offense was not against morality as such but the one form of her service to Vesta. The contractual view of religion influenced the thinking about blame and punishment. The penalty was commensurate with the violation of the contract and not abstract concepts of sin.

Emphasis on the religious female as a pollutant demonstrates the Roman insecurities of female sexuality and power. Vestals were required to be virgins since their sexual purity was related to the well-being of Rome in some way (Wyrwińska, 2021). This linkage implies profound cultural links between female sexuality and the social order of divine goodwill. Violating such associations led to the destruction of various strata of social and cosmic order simultaneously. It was not only a threat to religion, but also to social and political order. The differences in how they treated accusations indicate that Roman religion was neither uniform nor continuous. Different individuals could interpret religious demands in various ways (Albrecht et al., 2018). Religious decisions were affected by political factors. Outcomes were influenced by personal relationships and a person's status. The Roman religion was practiced and experienced by real people in specific situations rather than governed by indirect adherence to strict rules. Such flexibility allowed the system to be flexible and unpredictable.

The examples demonstrate that the religious explanations of the disaster had religious, psychological, and social purposes. People should have explanations when dreadful events take place (Mann, 2024). Religious answers were commendable as they could be related to Roman cultural settings. Solutions, they were also able to provide. Gods would also have their wrath over the issue; hence, it would be resolved through satisfying the deities. This made people feel they had some control and hope in hopeless circumstances. The interpretations were not purely intellectual but also emotional and practical. Several gods and

religions were incorporated into the Roman religion. Gods had various demands and various areas of duty (FRAZER, n.d.). Certain gods were concerned with certain rituals. Others were mindful of the moral conduct. The existence of numerous gods and needs provided numerous chances for something not to go right. During various calamities, the Romans had a variety of religious interpretations. This plurality provided the subject matter of shifting responsibility, but also confused the issue of overlapping explanations.

The relationship between religion and the state in Rome was rather complex. Religious positions were occupied by the political leaders (Rives, 2018). The political influence was on the side of the religious leaders. Religious ceremonies were the state ceremonies. The state occasions were religious festivals. The fact that religious failures were also political failures implied this integration. The implication of blaming religious women for disasters was political. It implied that it was not about political or military leadership, but rather about the performance of rituals. This interpretation shielded the political leaders, preserving the religious structure. Religious accusations have an educational dimension worth noting. In telling the stories about unchaste Vestals being punished, the Romans were also giving lessons (Speed, 1678). Youths were taught what will become of them if they do not fulfill their religious obligations. The women were taught the value of purity and good behavior. The men were taught how to be attentive to religious deviance. This taxation of religious functions led to religious accusations serving purposes beyond addressing the immediate situation. They determined the future behavior and attitudes.

Changes Over Time

The Republic to the Empire also influenced the developing mode of functioning of the religious blame. Under the Republic, religious rule was shared among many priests,

magistrates, and the Senate (Ferguson, 2024). This situation under the Empire led to the emperor becoming the primary priest and centralizing religious power in his hands. Such a transformation influenced the way religious female accusations were treated. The presence of Imperial interests introduced political considerations where none had existed before, but not religious ones. An example of this is that of Pomponia, which took place at the beginning of the Empire under Nero. It indicates how the imperial power had transformed religious authority since the emperor became involved in the case, even though she was merely deflecting judgment to her husband (Church & Brodribb, 2026). Such a case could have been dealt with entirely by the family or other religious authorities in the Republic. When the case fell under the Empire, there was one more level of politicking in the matter, courtesy of the interest of the emperor. Imperial preferences and policies were to be taken into account in religious choices.

These changes notwithstanding, there were cases of consistent basic logic of religious blame. People still believed that to remain in the gods' favor, it was essential to perform religious obligations appropriately (Kinzig, 2024). Even failure to carry out these functions may result in a disaster. The female population in the religion could also be blamed whenever things went off track. The acculturation of the structure changed, yet the cultural presuppositions persisted. This continuity demonstrates the extent to which these patterns were well ingrained within the Roman culture. In the course of Christianity, increasing questioning of traditional Roman religious practices began with the dissemination that had begun in the Empire. Christians disapproved of the sacrifices in the past, and they did not accept the Roman gods (Janssen, 2024). This conflict between the old and new religious practices was establishing new forms of religious war. These early conflicts between

traditional Roman religion and new Christianity may have been captured in the accusation of the practice of foreign superstitions, as was the case of the allegation against Pomponia. The limits of religion were being redefined.

This is the final manifestation of a kind of religious power over women, the actual collapse of the Vestal Virgins in the latter half of the fourth century. The emperors who converted to Christianity dismantled the cult and redistributed its wealth (Kinzig, 2024). The Vestals themselves even vanished into history. They brought in their wake a woman religious power and a religious blame pattern peculiar to themselves. Religious buildings also introduced novel sources of power and novel patterns of thought about moral and religious ineffectiveness. The conversion to Christianity altered the Romans' conception of divine punishment. Christian theology stressed personal sin and salvation rather than the collective obligation to secure divine favor (Janssen, 2024). This turn diminished the rationale for attributing the community's disasters to the fault of individual religious women.

Modern Understanding and Historical Interpretation

Contemporary thinkers do not view these cases the same way the ancient Romans did. We are not sure that deities punish individuals for the moral failures of communities (Smith, 2020). We are aware that most of the accusations against the female religious citizens could have been untrue or politically inclined. We comprehend that the scapegoat of women had both a social and a political role, other than a religious one. This new outlook can enable us to get perspectives that Romans might not have identified. We can see the growth of the accusation during times of crisis. We can mention the influence of social status (Kelley, 2023). We are able to see how gender influenced the individuals who were accused and the way they were convicted. These trends indicate that blame served as a social process rather

than only a religious one. The trends suggest that human societies tend to find scapegoats when under stress. The role of religious women in Rome is due to their visibility and the symbolic significance they had.

However, we should not also be too strict in imposing modern categories on the ancient evidence. Romans actually believed in the existence of their deities and believed that disasters could occur due to the failure of rituals (Rives, 2018). As we may find political motives behind the accusations, the Romans regarded them as genuine religious crises. Both views are valid in one way or another. Political calculations and honest religious faith did not necessarily conflict with each other. Individuals can also firmly believe in something that benefits them. These dynamics have been clarified especially by modern feminist scholars in terms of gender influence. The bodies of women and the sexuality of women were regarded as possible causes of a threat to the community (Xie, 2021). Women's religious leadership was not only appreciated but also feared. These sentiments indicated greater trends of patriarchal dominance over the life and body of women. These patterns became cosmic patterns and were given divine approval in the religious structure. What was actually regarding the control of women was being taken as protection of the community.

The sources available have also influenced the interpretation of history. The majority of the information available about these cases is provided by male authors addressing a male audience (Kelley, 2023). There is little firsthand information about what the women themselves thought or what they experienced. This restriction determines what we are able to know and what we do not know. We are able to work and study the texts that we have, but we must remember their limitations and biases. Our sources are largely silent about the women's part. Recent scholarship has highlighted the significance of interpreting Roman religion as it

was actually experienced rather than as it is reflected in elite literature from antiquity. The common people had their methods of identity with gods that could be quite different, as prescribed by the authorities (Albrecht et al., 2018). The yearning of women in the religious life was not limited to the few bright examples with whom we have become acquainted. When our perspective is extended to cover these other dimensions, it can provide a more detailed and more accurate image of Roman religion. The spectacular cases did not represent a typical life in religion.

Conclusion

Blame was a key influential tool in the religious and social life of Rome, operating at the theological, political, and social levels. The facts show that Romans began systematically moving to attack women in the religious posts in times of crisis, attributing the defeat in wars and occurrences of nature to their moral incompetence instead of questioning the political and military leadership. Although the Vestal Virgins had privileges and divine authority, they were not safe. Rather, their visibility and symbolism made them the perfect scapegoats in cases whenever Romans had to find an explanation for why they suffered. Roman authors supported this order, which connected vicarious ethics with a religious duty, in their historical works, and they taught readers that personal wrongdoing might jeopardize the whole society. The example of Pomponia Graecina, however, shows that religious issues could be subordinated to social status and political connections, and this is reflected in the fact that blame was not evenly distributed in Roman society. The knowledge of these patterns sheds light on how religious structures helped people in ancient society cope with uncertainty, and the anonymity of women with religious authority were targeted in times of crisis. It explains why people holding positions of symbolic power and low levels of political defensibility

were always susceptible to accusations. Scapegoating of religious women in Rome was an unfortunate outcome of human nature to explain uncontrolled situations by punishing the readily available scapegoats.

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