*Tunica* or *Stola*? The Dress of the Vestal Virgins

This paper considers the dress of the Vestal Virgins. Clothing and other physical adornment constructs and communicates social identity and therefore provides a unique opportunity to analyze the ways in which the Vestals’ sacerdotal identity was represented on a daily basis, as well as how they chose to represent themselves in their portraits. Although it is often assumed that the Vestals wore the *stola*, the traditional overdress of the married woman (see, for example, Beard 1980; Staples 1998; Scheid 2003; Wildfang 2006), I argue that the ancient evidence does not support this claim. The Vestals’ costume was unique to their order and did not borrow from the dress of other women. It communicated their sacred status as priestesses of Vesta and underscored their ritual obligations.

The paper begins with an analysis of the relevant literary and visual evidence. Our literary sources reveal that the Vestals were expected to dress modestly. Generally speaking, however, ancient references to the Vestals’ clothing are vague and uninformative. Only one ancient source, a letter of Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 4.11.9), associates a Vestal Virgin with the *stola*. The disgraced Vestal Cornelia, Pliny tells us, wore a *stola* to her grave in A.D. 90. I argue, however, that this passage offers little in support of the notion that Vestals wore this garment on a regular basis. In fact, other literary evidence for the treatment of disgraced Vestals suggests that it may actually prove the opposite conclusion.

The visual evidence also fails to confirm the assumption that the *stola* was an important part of the Vestals’ costume. All of the portrait statues from the House of the Vestals show the women wearing a long *tunica* and *palla* (mantle).The Vestals also appear on nine sculpted reliefs dating from the late first century B.C. through the late second century A.D. Although the portraits may depict the Vestals in less than their full ritual regalia, I argue that the state monuments likely depict the Vestals as they appeared in public during this period. Unfortunately, many of the reliefs are badly damaged and reveal little about the specifics of the Vestals’ dress and adornment. Those monuments that do preserve enough detail for analysis show the Vestals wearing a long tunic and *palla*.

Finally, I argue that the Vestals were distinguished more by their shoes, distinctive ritual headgear and accessories than by their actual *tunicae*, which must originally have been standard dress for all Roman women. The emphasis on head covering, in particular on the *suffibulum*, the ritual veil, suggests the importance of the Vestals’ sacrificial role. This special veil would have distinguished them from other Romans and, in a religious system that required sacrificants to veil their heads, allowed them to perform their ritual obligations.

Precision regarding the dress of the Vestals is imperative. Nearly all recent studies of these priestesses have assumed that they were liminal figures, whose costume and adornment created a deeply ambiguous status between the virgin, the bride and the *matrona* (Beard 1980; Scheid 1992; Staples 1998; Takács 2008). By borrowing from the costume of the *matrona* and the bride – it has been argued – the Vestal appeared as a perpetually transitional figure. This paper demonstrates that the Vestals’ dress was unique to their order and did not borrow from the dress of other women. Rather, it was the bride who borrowed elements from the costume of the Vestals and the costume of the *flaminica Dialis* in order to mark her liminal status on her day of personal transition. My reading of the Vestals’ costume suggests that we should replace the “liminal” model with one that recognizes the important transition made by a new Vestal upon her initiation into the order. Though she remained an unmarried *virgo*, she had exchanged her place in her father’s household for a life marked by official religious service.Neither her costume nor her identity was ambiguous.

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