

Snuffing the Fire: Contextualizing the Temple of Vesta in the Late Antique Roman Forum

The *Actus Silvestri*, a legendary account of the deeds of Pope Sylvester dating to the late fourth or early fifth century CE at the earliest (Pohlkamp 1980), recounts a story of a battle between Sylvester (acting on behalf of the emperor Constantine) and a demonic dragon dwelling beneath the Roman Forum. The anonymous Latin text suggests that the Vestal Virgins were responsible for feeding the dragon each month until Sylvester descended into the dragon's lair and locked the dragon behind a closed door, nullifying its threat to the city and making the actions of the cult of Vesta unnecessary (Kalas 2015).

Taking this legend as a departure point, this paper examines how and why the Late Antique Temple of Vesta and its surroundings were a locus of particular concern for Christians and became ripe for the kind of mythological treatment observed in the *Actus Silvestri*. Prior scholarship on the cult of Vesta's activities in Late Antiquity (Lizzi Testa 2007; Mahieu 2015) has traced the stages of the cult's demise as an official entity, including the revocation of its privileges by Gratian following the Altar of Victory controversy in 382 and the subsequent legislation of Theodosius I that closed the temple a decade later. My analysis treats the issue through a more spatial lens – I argue that the physical space of the Vestal complex itself presented a unique problem for Christian authorities in the late fourth century, since its prominent place in the Forum, unusual built form, and long history of mytho-religious importance made it a location where contesting narratives of Roman identity and the sacred and profane collided.

According to my analysis, the Vestal complex of the late fourth century should be understood as a liminal zone at the edge of the Late Antique forum, whose form blurred the

boundaries between public and private space. Although the complex and its resident priestesses had long been associated with liminality and chthonic ritual (Beard 1980; Wildfang 2006), I suggest these associations became newly fraught amid the religious and social transitions of the late fourth century. Furthermore, I argue that architectural changes to the Roman Forum in the fourth century continued a longstanding process of closing off the Vestal complex from the Forum proper, while the official severance of the link between the Vestal cult and imperial power reduced the visibility and perceived legitimacy of the cult's activities.

Taken as a whole, I suggest that these changes are indicative of a major shift in the symbolic charge of the southeastern corner of the corner of the forum, which by the late fourth century had largely shed its overt connection to the stability of the Roman state. Instead, I argue that the Vestal complex began to take on the qualities of what Daniel Ogden has described as a "dragnscape" – a landscape of longstanding ritual importance suffused with superstition and dread (Ogden 2018). Thus, I propose that the legend in the *Actus Silvestri*, which seems to blend the Vestal cult's activities with those of a serpent cult attested outside of Rome at Lanuvium (Hermans 2016), should be understood not merely as a mistaken Christian interpretation of actual pagan ritual but as an attempt by the text's unidentified and anonymous Christian author(s) to "deal with" the physical prominence of the Vestal complex in the Late Antique city through counter-mythologization.

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