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Rome, Women and Religion: Asserting Agency through Decoration

The Roman *domus* was utilized to facilitate a social system that privileged the power, status, and rights of men and male interests. The domestic sphere was generally regarded as a demonstration of morality and cultural values in reflection of the *paterfamilias’* identity. The *domus* possessed a very different position in Roman society than private residences do in our society. The roles of men and women, husband and wife, and father and mother were most rigid in the Roman *domus*. The home was not used as an escape from the public but rather as a means of presenting a cultivated material identity to a spectrum of viewers. The connection between physical space and identity construction is an example of an institutional patriarchy. Within Roman culture the social perception of decorative elements almost always reflected upon the male patron of the space. The reliance upon the decorative program to guide a guest in forming an impression of the owner is indicative of the role visual propaganda played throughout the Empire. It is this programmatic tendency that allows art historians to apply the same process of evaluation to imagery that is both religious and domestic in context. The visual material presented in this paper reveals that while gender roles may have been strict in the home, they were much more fluid in the religious experiences of the late Republic and early Empire. This paper will engage in a process of rethinking how past, present, and hopefully future scholarship identifies the position of women in Roman society, specifically in religious participation, through domestic decoration and visual motifs.

**Public-Male and Domestic-Female**

The blurred conceptions of what was public and private prompts the argument that there were differing aspirations for agency by Roman women. The binary of public and private activity also prompts the consideration of what was socially accepted and what was deemed inappropriate or destabilizing. The spectrum of female social participation makes it appropriate
to explore two examples of decoration schemes, one being the state-sanctioned Vestal Priesthood and the other is the private, often subversive Bacchic cult activity that is presumed to have occurred in the initiation room at the Villa of Mysteries. It is important to recognize that Roman women most likely did not possess what one would consider to be normative feminist beliefs yet the cultural recognition of this patriarchal system presents an undeniable reality of social oppression. In the context of the classical period, Roman society was a traditional one where men and women had few if any experiences that were commonly undertaken (Kraemer). This imbalance across genders is exacerbated by the fact that the lives of Roman women were inadequately documented in comparison to their male counterparts (Blok). The present body of surviving textual material represents “the literary output of educated men who belonged to an extremely small but privileged sector” (Shumka 22). These men were generally concerned with politics, intellectual pursuits, and military stratagems. The disparity between gendered opportunities demonstrates the extent that women were defined by their relationships to other individuals – especially males. The societal awareness of “socio-biological relationships” is another example of institutional patriarchy (Kraemer 80). However, it was through the practice of religion, whether state sanctioned or mysterious, that a woman was able to become more than an extension of her male counterpart – husband, father, brother or the like.

The decision to analyze evidence that is specifically domestic in context is derived from the contradiction between the feminization of domestic activities and the male dominated clientele system that relied upon a sustained public gaze (Clarke). The two sites utilized in this investigation derive social and religious significance from their inherently domestic structures. The general inequality between gender agencies in the domus is specifically transfigured in the relations of the Vestal Virgins and the pontifex maximus. The focus on domestic decoration also
is relevant to the inherent connections between traditional Roman religious practices associated with the hearth and ancestral rituals contained in the Vestal cult (Hales).

**Adornment and Self-Representation**

It is necessary to consider the importance of self-representation to the Roman individual – male and female. Men were able to define themselves through politics and business, which were often public matters or conducted in the public space. The interconnected nature of public work and private home is evident in the idea that “a public figure went home not so much to shield himself from the public gaze, but as to present himself to in the best light” (Wallace-Hadrill). Women of all social classes actively adorned themselves as evidenced by a variety of material goods and visual representations – especially toilette iconography. The decorative motifs and material evidence that signal these activities is intrinsically feminine given that gender norms prevented men from representing themselves in a similar manner (Shumka). The gendering of domestic visual material in relation to Roman social practices is an example of Kraemer’s argument regarding “socio-biological” experiences (Kraemer 80). Men were not permitted to experience the home in the same way as women.

Adornment was also an integral component of ritual activity. The Vestal Virgins ceremonially dressed in marital garb and wore their hair in traditional marital style\(^1\). This was meant to signify their purity, dedication to the Roman state, and their potential fertility (McClure). Further, in the ninth initiation scene from Villa dei Misteri a maid is attending to a female initiate. It is argued that this could be a representation of a bride being prepared for a marriage scene while others believe it is a depiction of a woman recovering from the initiation rite (Fierz-David). I think both conclusions of this scene signal the general integration of

\(^1\) Figure 1
adornment in Roman society. In my view of the initiation scene, I do believe the adornment is a sign of recovery and a visual representation that the initiate has undergone a marked transformation. Despite the conflict of interpretation, the inclusion of adornment imagery in ritual context demonstrates the importance of self-identification in daily life since it has carried over into religious practice. The presence of such a scene within the religious framework of the initiation – scene 9 is at the end of the fresco cycle— elevates the act of adornment and its significance as a method of asserting agency. The act of adornment was a way of reintroducing the initiate back into society after her transformational, spiritual experience in the earlier panels. The inclusion of a male youth at the beginning of the fresco cycle, a figure that has been suggested to represent Dionysus, frames the activity as a method of growth (Kraemer). This visual representation is contained in a private home and an intimate space that would not have been exposed to general guests or clientele (Gazda).

The Roman domestic environment was physically implicated by social conditions and traditions. Vitruvius asserts that *propria* (private) and *communia* (public) spatial designations allowed the *paterfamilias* to dictate his relations and intimacy with a spectrum of *clientele* by restricting access to certain parts of his home (Wallace-Hadrill). In this way it is the male identity that was most often visually constructed despite the social generalizations of the *domus* being the women’s realm. When discussing the use of spatial designation and notions of privacy one must also consider the relative freedom Roman women had in comparison to their Greek ancestors. The Hellenized *domus* did not contain women’s quarters known as the *gynaeceum*. This space was utilized in Greek homes to restrict movement of women and to dictate or prevent male-female interactions. The architectural elimination of this gender restricted space should be viewed as progressive development but inequality was still endemic to Roman society and politics. Roman women unquestionably engaged in more diverse and public activities then their
5th century Greek counterparts (yet they did not exist within a social environment that could be considered on par with modern western society). It is the fluidity and dominance of male identity in regards to the ‘Hellenized’ domus that does not allow for feminine identity to receive equal recognition given the conditioned reaction of the viewer to associate decorative motifs with the paterfamilias’ identity (Cooper). The strict social spheres of the Roman Empire did not require structural assistance to be enforced (as seen in the Greek gynaeceum) but rather relied on the previously mentioned social conditions. Roman social systems were built upon moral ideals that did not require the use of separate, gender-specific spaces. Further, those who possessed identities that did not conform to strict social expectation were often labeled as immoral which perpetuated rigid gender archetypes seen in domestic decorative schemes (Takács). It is understood socio-spatial connections that allow the structural and decorative integration to be considered social norms. The available visual material presented will be regarded as an aesthetic experience rather than just as material property (Devereux).

**Religious Participation and Identity**

The Roman state was dependent upon the domus for its integral economic role as an organizational locus. Similarly, the State was also dependent upon religious organizations and cults as a method of sustaining a collective, vital Roman identity. The assertion that there were unequal opportunities for women to assert agency does not wholly apply to the realm of religion in the Roman Empire. Religion “meant an exception in women’s life, since mainly religious occasions drew women out of their homes” (Hänninen 112). However, this exception went beyond spatial exposure in public and private environs. Strict religious adherence was crucial to maintaining Roman ideals and state peace. “Women were involved and important to the upkeep of the integrated community of Rome, the Empire, its inhabitants and its gods” which in turn emphasized the importance of the feminine archetype
to the perpetuation of Roman society (Takács 26). This is most evident in the priesthood of
the Vestals – often referred to as the Vestal Virgins. The authoritative position of being a
Vestal Virgin distinguished this practice from the general experience of average Roman
women. The bestowment of tribucian sacrosanctity among other honors is illustrative of how
Roman women’s identities and power were derived from males (Kleiner and Matheson). This
specific example of demonstrated female agency was an extension of the status quo being
maintained through state controls.

The Vestal Virgins and State-Sanctioned Religion

The priesthood of Vesta in many ways worked to enforce a masculine public civic
identity through the cultivated utility of the female body. The Vestal precinct contained both
private (the *atrium vestae*) and public (the *temple*) spaces but as previously discussed it is
important to remember the unique framework of these distinctions. Once a woman was selected
as a Vestal Virgin she no longer was in her father’s control (*patria potestas*) and was now under
the care of the *pontifex maximus* (the chief priest who was also the reigning emperor), essentially
she was now property of the state (Balsdon). The feminine community of the Vestal priesthood
was dynamic since its members were of varying ages and therefore different ranks of power.
There were “Three Seniors” who had certain privileges. Finally, the most senior known as *Virgo
Vestalis Maxima* enjoyed a presidency of power through administrative duties and regard
(Gorrie). There was a range of responsibilities as well from drawing water and to tending to the
hearth in shifts. It is necessary to draw a connection between these seemingly domestic duties
and the identity of those who would actually perform them in the average Roman household. The
Vestals came from families that would almost definitely possess help, in the form of maids or
servants, that would be responsible for these tasks yet in the charge of the Roman state their roles
were reversed. Participation in the Vestal Priesthood prompted the reversal or mutation of
general societal feminine responsibilities and expectations.

The most important facet was that these women acquired legal independence on
becoming a Vestal Virgin as evidenced by the creation of wills since their property would not be
given to their original families since it was state property (Balsdon). The relation between the
Vestals and the State is well displayed through their introduction to the cult of Vesta. Takács
provides an explanation of the captio (the capture) which was the Vestal induction ceremony that
was very similar to a marriage rite:

“The pontifex maximus called the inductee Amata. A Vestal’s hair was styled in the
fashion of a bride (with linen headbands, vittae), but she wore the long dress of Roman
matron (stola)\(^2\). The Vestals were not allowed to mill and cook, and yet the three oldest
Vestals prepared sacrificial cake (mola salsa) for the Roman citizenry. Thus the vestal
seemed both bride and matron, or neither bride nor matron. Because Rome was originally
a monarchy, Vesta’s attendants were linked to the king, who had sacrificial duties.”

(Takács 83).

While this passage illustrates the spectrum of exceptional rights and privileges afforded
to the Vestals it also outlines how their autonomy was defined by masculine authority. Vestals
were not allowed to cook or prepare food probably as a way of protecting the sanctity of their
ritualistic responsibilities. The reversal of gender roles is apparent here given the assumption that
the Vestals were considered wedded to the state but not expected to perform typical matron
duties (Michele).

\(^2\) Figure 4
There is a tendency for Roman Empresses to align themselves with the Vestals through patronage programs and iconographic use of Vestal imagery on coins. Empresses’ played a significant role in the promotion of their husband’s political and social aspirations. This relationship is vividly evident in the late second century AD reign of Septimius Severus. Septimius came to power after civil war and a main objective of his rule was to establish stability through restoration and a “renewal of the Roman state” (Gorrie 61). The establishment of a dynasty, seen in the use of family portraiture on coins, was one attempt to convey present and future stability. The iconographic inclusion of Severus’ wife Julia Domna alongside their two sons Geta and Caracalla implies an “encouragement of family life” which carries connotations of moral values such as fidelity, chastity, and fertility (Pomeroy). These connotations were visible in the Cult of Vesta and its six attendants. It should come to no surprise that Julia Domna aligned herself with these pious women as an attempt to expand upon her husband’s ideological goals.

The empress enjoyed a high profile during her family’s time in the imperial office. Her likeness and title appear frequently in inscriptions, on coinage and upon public monuments that were produced during the period. She was also awarded the title of *Mater Castrorum* in 195. This title was first given to Faustina II by Marcus Aurelius which will become much more significant when the spatial relations of the campus Vesta are explored. The title bestowed to Julia Domna made her the “rightful successor of Faustina” (Gorrie 64).

Julia’s alignment with the Vestals is most explicitly expressed in her coinage. A fire in 191 or 192 AD left the temple in a state of disrepair. It is believed that the restoration that

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3 Figure 9
occurred during Septimius’ reign was undertaken exclusively by Julia Domna. This opinion is substantiated by the exclusive use of the restored temple on the coins of Julia but not Septimius\(^4\).

However, it is clear that the masculine identity is dominant in the motivations of the Vestal rituals and as previously discussed it is through male activity that the Vestal is initiated into her duties on behalf of the state. Women were evident in more obscure elements of civic monumental programs – the most notable example being the dedication of the Ara Pacis to Livia on her birthday in 9 B.C.E. and her visual presence within the processional panels alongside other imperial men, women, and children (Boatwright). However, the feminine emphasis of the Shrine of Vesta and surrounding areas would have been widely recognized as distinct from its civic neighbors. The association of female agency with the Temple of Vesta explains the construction of the temple of deified Faustina in 141 which contained a colossal statue of the empress that is said to have towered over the Vestal grounds (Boatwright). It was often the case that esteemed empresses such as Faustina or Livia would garner strong associations with the cult of Vesta. The priestesses’ importance to State prosperity offered very useful iconographic associations that worked to portray these imperial matrons as chaste, pure, and integral to empire. The use of gender iconography – marital adornment and imposed chastity – situates the six Vestal women as inherently connected to the protection and longevity of the state yet they possessed an exceptional status that did not convey societal norms. The presence of the Vestal virgins worked to remind Roman women of their primary functions in society as mothers and their devotion to their families.

The priesthood of the Vestals was comprised of six virginal women who were selected from upper class families. These women were in charge of maintaining the public hearth and performing specific rituals that corresponded with important dates of agricultural and spiritual

\(^4\) Figure 8
significance. The Vestals signified the ideal Roman matron while “their service, based strictly on prescribed behavior and ritual, was for the benefit of Rome, the city, and the Empire” (Takács 81). The duties of the Vestals were similar to the responsibilities of the materfamilias and this connection is visually apparent in the surviving sculptures.

The Vestals lived in the Atrium Vestae, which was adjacent to the temple of Vesta. The only time a Vestal could leave the atrium was on behalf of the State or to attend an eight-hour shift attending to the sacred hearth in the Sacra vesta (Balsdon)\(^5\). The Vestals were under the control of the College of Pontiffs. The pontiffs and their president, the pontifex maximus, would make all major decisions regarding the welfare and character of the women. Further, men were permitted to enter the atrium during the day but their presence come nightfall would have been inappropriate given the token purity of these women (McClure).

The remaining visual material from the Vestal campus is primarily female portrait sculpture. Excavations of the Atrium vestae occurred in 1882 and 1883 where a number of fragmented busts and statues were unearthed (Van Deman)\(^6\). It is believed that twelve visual objects were discovered including four busts and two relief fragments. These portraits are believed to be representative of Senior Vestal Virgins and some contain inscribed pedestals. The sculptures depict women in matronly dress with suggestions of once-existing cornucopias and other Vestal symbols attached (Van Deman). There is variability in the portrait type as well – some are veiled while others are not figure 16, 17. It is clear that these statues were not generic in composition and given the importance of legacy and virtue it is appropriate to assume that they commemorated notable Vestals. The varying sculptural styles and dress depicted suggest that the tradition of sculptural commemoration was embedded into the cult of Vesta at the Forum

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\(^5\) Figure 6  
\(^6\) Figure 7
Romanum. However, it is important to note that the sculptures do appear to be replicas of Greek forms and that is likely that the sculptures were shop-made with unique portrait heads attached (Van Deman). One is able to identify these statues as vestals given the inclusion of “the insignia of their priestly office” (Van Deman 341). The emblems include “the sex crines, used also by Roman brides, the infula and vittae, which formed a part also of the matron’s dress, the veil, and the suffibulum fastened with its special brooch” (Van Deman 341). For clarification, sex crines are the six braids wound about the head. The infulae and vittae are apparent while the suffibulum fastened with the brooch is found only on two statues. There is one statue that possesses all of the Vestal insignias which also happens to be the most complete.

It is the civic importance of the Vestals that granted them the agency that was not afforded to average women in Rome. The Vestal Virgins interacted with society in a very unique way that transcended gender norms:

“A lictor, an attendant of praetors and consuls accompanied them. The priestesses sat with senators at games, another aspect that moved them into the male social sphere and gendered them male. Their priesthood was part of the college of pontiffs. In compensation for holding such powers, however, the priestesses had to remain in a virginal state or rather, in a perpetual state of being between unmarried and married” (Takács 83).

From this description it seems that Vestals were anomalies in regard to their Roman sisters but perhaps the honors afforded to them were a fair compensation for their state-sanctioned chastity and subsequent fertility.

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7 Figures 2-10, Vestal Statuary
8 Figure 3
The marital-like adornment of the Vestals was a method of establishing a notion of femininity that worked to cement the vitality and fertile potential of the Roman identity. The public hearth that they worked to sustain also contained similar connotations of prosperity and continuity. The utilization of fertility most likely stems from the association of Vesta with agricultural and organic perpetuation. The fact that these women actively chose to be celibate while engaging in ritual activity that allowed for birth (and growth) to occur in the home, in the fields, and in the political arena does not make their lack of sexual activity one of sterility but one of vitality. Further, the concern with a vestal’s chastity is connected to its association with a variety of fertility cults and their matronly relationship with the Roman state. It is important to distinguish the ritual adornment of the Vestals from the more quotidian adornment of their wealthy and middle class sisters since the “ideals of femininity and female self-management were reinforced in both public and private settings” (Shumka 90).

**Attaining Agency through Female-led Cult Activity**

The public nature of the Vestal Priesthood worked to perpetuate state myths and collective Roman identities. The assertion of feminine agency in this specific religious sublimation was one of duty and spiritual patriotism. The state cult was not the only religious experience Romans could participate in. There were a myriad of mystery cults that proliferated during the time of the Empire. Many of these cults focused on foreign deities such as Mithras or specific archetypes from the Greek pantheon like Dionysus. To call a cult mysterious is to convey that the “the drama of the cult was a deep secret that could not be exploited; as the Greeks also said, the mystery is an arrheton, that is, something ineffable.” (Fierz-David 33). It is clear that communal ritual celebration ensured the survival of communities and cohesive identities but what is most significant is the reliance upon women for these social phenomena to occur. These circumstances are not present when one evaluates the Bacchic cults that were
contemporarily present. Bacchic cults are significant when one is considering the exercise of religion as a method of asserting female agency through communal ritual actions.

The most dynamic visual material representing this experience are at the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii. The villa was constructed in the first half of the 2nd C. BCE while the megalographic frieze – the focus of this study – was painted around 60-40 BCE. As previously mentioned, the distinction between private and public space is blurred given the use of the domestic space to exert one’s identity. The initiation scene is contained in oecus 5 which was far removed from the main entrance of the home. The space contains a fresco cycle of ten interconnected scenes that form a visual narrative of what appears to be a Bacchic initiation rite. The oecus would have only been accessible through a small hallway which would have allowed the villa’s patrons to restrict access to the space⁹. This suggests that the room was utilized “for the performance of secret Bacchic rites” (Gazda 6). These rites allowed women to sublimate their desires for agency.

The entire fresco cycle is dominated by a backdrop of Pompeiian red that works to place the narrative in a familiar perhaps even ritualistic setting. A meandering frieze on top frames the narrative while the figures are placed on an elevated foreground. The viewer would have been gazing slightly upward. The cycle began on the left side of the viewer and continued clockwise to end on the other side of the entrance. The oecus contained a window and an exit onto a terrace, which would have provided a dramatic view to the east to an already mystifying experience (Foster).

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⁹ Figure 10
The first scene depicts a veiled female who is listening to a naked boy read from a scroll. A priestess sitting behind him appears to be directing the boy while also recognizing the initiate. The nakedness of the boy is “a sign of the divine” (Fierz-David 35). Further, the boy wears laced boots known as *cothurni*. These shoes have associations with Greek theater and subsequently the cult of Dionysus (find source). Through the inclusion of the boots, it seems highly likely that the boy is an introduction to Dionysus himself. The priestess is unveiled and seems to be holding an object in her hand. There appears to be a clear distinction between the two women – one has an experience the other has not received. The veiled woman is dressed in a matronly dress, similar to those seen in the Vestal statuary portraits. The inclusion of both a veiled and unveiled figure suggests that the act of veiling is symbolic. To veil oneself outside the bridal ritual was a decisive choice to shield appearance. The removal of ‘Self’ from communal life perhaps is a signal of spiritual action, which foreshadows the rites the initiate will soon face in the forthcoming narrative scenes. The act of initiation is essentially a lesson or method of teaching. The priestess is shown directing the boy while also recognizing the female initiate – this dynamic suggests both matronly duty and sisterhood. Unlike the Vestals, there is a notable absence of a *paterfamilias* figure that would have typically been present in standard religious rites. The dominance of women will continue in the narrative cycle.

In the second scene, the initiate is now unveiled and uncloaked. She is also now adorned with a myrtle crown. The woman is also carrying what is widely believed to be a sacrificial cake in one hand and a piece of laurel in the other. She is shown walking towards a group of women at an altar table. At the table, there is an older, more visually dominant priestess alongside a younger priestess on the right and an attendant on her left. The younger priestess is

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10 Figure 11
11 Figure 12
identified as such through the inclusion of another myrtle crown (Gazda). It appears that the dominant priestess is ready to receive sacrificial cake. In the scene there are numerous Bacchic allusions. First, a basket underneath the table appears to be a *kista mystika* (a basket used for spiritual purposes). Linda Fierz-David believes this basket to be the receptacle for the laurel that is being carried by the younger priestess and the initiate. The basket is a well-known symbol of Dionysus – it appears on coins and other orphic objects. A similar basket is also depicted on a mural outside of the initiation room in the Villa dei Misteri. In this specific visual motif, the basket contains a snake that is peeking out. The snake is also a symbol of Dionysus and while a snake is not visually present in this specific scene it would not be inappropriate to transitorily consider a snake is contained inside (Fierz-David). Alternatively, the basket can be interpreted as a feminine, matronly symbol. The vessel has protective properties that can be projected upon the larger initiation space. Ultimately, this scene depicts the sacramental aspects of the initiation through female-led action.

It is in the third scene that the narrative moves into a more pronounced spiritual, mystical phase. The previous two scenes contained mostly mortal female figures with the exception of the divine boy and possibly the snake who both signified Dionysus. It is in this panel that a male presence is more apparent despite it being a largely mythical one. The scene commences with Silenus leaning upon a column. It is interesting to note that Silenus is wearing a myrtle crown – something that has been gendered feminine in the preceding scenes. Silenus is a well-known companion to Dionysus and was his tutor. One is able to identify him through his half-nude, pudgy form. Like the nude boy in the first scene, the half-nakedness is meant to signify that he is half-divine. He is also playing a lyre which further cements his close connection to Dionysus given that musical instruments have long been associated with the god (Gazda). The well-known

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12 Figure 13
association of music and Dionysus suggests that the placement of Silenus is meant to serve as a direct and pure introduction to the rites. However, the female initiate is noticeably absent so perhaps this scene is purely an introduction to the traditions and practices of the cult.

The fourth scene contains the most dramatic sense of movement and action within the visual narrative. The scene depicts just one figure, an apparently terrified female initiate. Her facial expression suggests that she is in the process of expressing a scream or some type of audible alarm while her upper torso is dramatically framed by her billowing cloak. The figure appears to be gazing at the flagellation in scene seven. The initiate, while scared, is presented as strong and singular. Her stance is open, her legs apart as if moving towards the thing which she fears, and her open hand suggests an agency to engage in the rites.

The male-dominated fifth, sixth, and seventh scenes contrast the presentation of a singular female figure. In the fifth scene, we again see Silenus, this time he is turned towards the fearful initiate. He is still wearing the crown of myrtle which works to place him in some type of comradeship with the mortal females. Further, he is holding a wine glass for a young boy which cements that the narrative has now moved into the transformational, ritual practices of the cult. This also emphasizes his relationship with Dionysus as friend and tutor. The consumption of wine is an essential element of the cult of Dionysus and its social understanding in Rome. It is undeniable that wine would have been heavily involved in the rituals of the cult. Another iconic Dionysian motif is the theatrical mask held above the drinking boy which ritualizes the act itself. The inclusion of men in these transformational scenes demonstrates the importance of gender equality to the cult and its tenets. This is elaborated upon in the next scene with the reclining Dionysus and the presumed Ariadne.

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13 Figures 15, 16, and 17
Scene six is the central panel of the *megolagraphic* frieze. The fresco is badly damaged, with most of the female figure’s torso removed while the figure of Dionysus is fully intact. He is leaning upon the lap of Ariadne, his wife. She is elevated above him which presents themes of dependency and strength. There are no mortal female initiates or mythic male figures in this scene. The conjunction of Dionysus and Ariadne presents an ideal of love or harmony which is rather significant given the preceding fear of the female initiate in the fourth scene and the drunkenness and theatricality of the fifth.

The notion that this union is an ideal of sorts is evident perhaps in the seventh scene which depicts the female initiate either in the act of flagellation or immediate recovery (Fierz-David). This scene is immediately to the right of Dionysus and Ariadne on the back wall of the *oecus*. It is also necessary to note that from this scene forward there are no more male figures. The intimacies of the mysteries are for the women alone to experience. The transformation that occurred in scenes four, five, and six were not dependent upon a male presence but were rather improved or encouraged by them given their mythical origin or purpose. The truth that the woman just completed a transformational experience is evidenced by the reappearance of the *kitsa mystika*. This Dionysiac vessel was first visually introduced underneath the altar table in the second scene. There is also a torch on resting on her right shoulder suggesting a procession (Fierz-David). Additionally, while the woman is depicted tired and languid, it appears that she is about to reveal a phallic object further completing the transformational rite. There are two female figures behind the kneeling woman while this portion is highly damaged one can tell that the women on the right is repulsing away from the covered phallus. The physical aversion to the object is likely more spiritual in origin than erotic or physical. The winged female demon to the right of figures who is in the act of flagellating the kneeling woman cements the spiritual origin of this aversion. The angel is also wearing *corthini*, the same boots worn by the divine boy in the
The absence of Man after the locus of the transformative events suggests that the decision to engage in the rites was a self-determined choice or rather an exertion of agency.

The eighth, ninth and tenth scenes are ones of sisterhood, recognized transformation, and resolution. The female initiate is overcome and is resting upon the lap of the priestess. The woman appears to be recovering from an intense spiritual experience and is finding solace in a woman who has endured and synthesized the rites. The phallic presence and divinely originated flagellation in the previous scene also reinforces the femininity and mortality of the priestesses and the initiate. These scenes are located on the wall of the oecus that contains a window onto the terrace. The penetration of natural light could be interpreted as a restorative element. There is not supportive evidence to offer any type of opinion on the time that this room would have been utilized for initiation rites or cult activity but it is fair to assert that the utility of the window would have invoked this restorative property in the viewer/cult member/initiate. The notion of resolution is seen in the ninth scene where it appears that a maid who is also flanked by a cupid figure is attending to the initiate. This act of adornment and the fixing of the hair demonstrate that while this initiation was a significant, intense experience it is also a part of daily life. The inclusion of the cupid figure demonstrates the daily rituals Roman women encountered but perhaps more importantly the variety of archetypal characters or religious opportunities present in society. It is imperative to mention that Bacchic Cult activity was not legally recognized in the Empire (Gazda). The Roman State saw Bacchic activity as an act of conspiracy, a sentiment that was derived from the foreign origins of the rites (Walsh). The state imposed limitations on the cult in 186 BCE, a move that was known and made famous by Livy with his account of the Bacchanalia Scandal in his eighth pentad (Walsh). Livy cites a variety of reasons why Bacchic cult activity was outlawed: lawless gatherings, immorality, criminality, and an “alienation from

\[14\] Figures 17, 18, and 19
the Roman religious tradition” (Walsh 194). The decision to ban Bacchic cult activity is not far from the masculine framework of Vestal agency previously discussed. The Roman Republic and state were very aware of the power of religion and its larger effects in society.

Therefore, to engage in this cult was to make a definitive break away from the status quo. The notion of separation is discussed in the first scene with the veiling of the female initiate. A Roman woman had few avenues to pursue as a method of asserting her identity and it was religion that afforded her the most accepted platform. The desire to experience change or transformation, despite its mysteries, is evident in the circumbulatio the viewer would have engaged in the analysis of this fresco. The visual narrative ends with a portrait of a lady, referred to as “Domina” (Fierz-David 141). The woman is seated on an armchair. She is luxuriously dressed and is resting her head on her left hand. Her gaze appears to be oriented toward the central scene of Dionysus and Ariadne. This portrait is located next to the door offering some alignment with a resolution of the previous spiritual experience but also a signal to remember what has occurred in this space.

It is widely believed that the farther the room was from the entrance, the more private its function (Gazda). The utilization of architectural elements and layouts to moderate and restrict access is a general element of current academic analyses of the domus (Saller). The oecus is considered to be a space for special occasions and was only accessible to a limited echelon of visitors (Saller). At the Villa of the Mysteries oecus 5 is one of the farthest spaces from the entrance therefore being the least accessible to visitors (Ray). A peristyle (porch or colonnade) controlled access to room 5. The most interesting example of this is that the dominance of women in the visual narrative negates the idea that this room could have been wholly restricted to men. However, given the megalographic content of the fresco cycle it seems that this room
had very specific ritual purposes that were “diurnally gendered” given the inclusion of men, regardless of initiation levels, in the Dionysiac cult (Longfellow 33).

The presence of specific iconographic elements also works to place the importance of women in the ritual activities of the Bacchic cult. Like the state-sanctioned cult of Vesta, the cult of Bacchus also included priestesses. However, the Bacchic cult was far less insular and included a variety of ritual positions that were not gender specific and even had six positions that were exclusively female (Hammer). The initiation scene is comprised of mostly mortal women which visually signals an agency or authority of action in regards to the passive, mythic men who also are present in the narrative but in marginal numbers. Throughout the entire narrative, there appears to be a sense of relatedness between the female figures and initiates. This interconnectedness seems to separate them from their mythic, male counterparts.

Conclusion

Religious and domestic life existed in a framework of gender ideals and distinctions that were not always indicative of larger social expectations. However, religion also allowed for the reversal of gender stereotypes as seen in both the cult of Vesta and the Bacchic mystery cult. The spectrum of religious activity and cult deification makes it difficult to suggest that these two specific experiences: the Cult of Vesta and the Cult of Bacchus, are somehow comprehensive or indicative of the typical religious experience of Roman women. However, the disparate ritual tenets of the two cults do provide a spectrum of analysis of the role of women to spiritual life and their relation to other members (specifically males) in their lives. The presence of a male authority in both cults illustrates the endemic patriarchal institutions of the time. In the case of the Vestals, it is the transference of patrimonial authority from a biological father to an ideological one. The act of transformation and attainment of agency is done so in the framework
of the state. It is quite different in the context of the Bacchic cult present at the Villa of the Mysteries. The transformative, religious experience is derived from a male archetype but it is mostly mortal women who guide the female initiate through the rites. The notion of sisterhood is present in both religious organizations but perhaps is more authentic in the latter. The matriarchal archetype is apparent in both experiences as well. In the case of the Vestals, it is the women who participated that under normal social circumstances would have been considered major matriarchs. In regards to the cult of Bacchus, the women who participated in the cult most likely had matriarchal responsibilities that afforded them the freedom to participate in these rites.

The Cult of Vesta and the Cult of Bacchus provide a spectrum of analysis that accounts for the authoritative role of the state, its patriarchal systems, and the means for Roman women to attain some semblance of agency regardless of oppressive ideals or moral expectations. The two religious experiences explored in this paper provided women with differing roles of agency yet both involve ritual activity in a domestic space. The *domus* provided a façade of normalcy that perpetuated specific spiritual tenets being projected either upon the feminine form or through ideological significance. Participation in religious activity not only allowed women to expand their experiences beyond the domestic sphere but to also engage with other women in a constructive manner. The Cult of Vesta ultimately was a sisterhood of women who worked to protect the Roman identity and perpetuate vitality through collective adherence to a code of ideals and ritual expectations. This notion of collective action is what allowed for their agency to be respected and attained, regardless of a patriarchal framework. The familiarity present in the Villa of the Mysteries Initiation scene is evoking the same objective: transformation (and agency) is possible through collective action and adherence, regardless of motivation.
Bibliography


**Image List**

*Vestal Imagery*

1. Vestal Virgin with Sex Crines and other Vestal Insignia
2. Fragmented torso of Vestal Virgin with *Suffibulum* (veil) and *Stophium* (girdle)

3. Vestal Virgin with *Infula* (ceremonial headband), *Suffibulum* (*veil*) and *Stola* (*robe*)
4. Vestal Virgin with *Stola* (robe)

5. Vestal Virgin with *Stola* (robe)
6. Sacra Vesta

7. Atrium Vestae
8. Coinage of Julia Domna with depiction of Temple of Vesta on reverse
9. Portrait Tondo of Severan Family (Septimius Severus, Julia Domna, Geta and Caracalla)

Villa of the Mysteries
10. Layout of Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii

11. Scene I

12. Scene II
13. Scene III

14. Scene IV
15. Scene V + Scene VI

16. Scene VII
17. Scene VIII

18. Scene IX
19. Scene X