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Morgan E. Palmer

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Time and Eternity: The Vestal Virgins and the Crisis of the Third Century*

MORGAN E. PALMER

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

SUMMARY: References to time and eternity on third-century c.e. inscriptions commemorating the Vestal Virgins illustrate ways in which the priesthood was shaped by the structures of time and by expectations of persistent service. This traditional theme reflects contemporary emphasis on the continual performance of traditional religious rituals during an era when religious and political instability threatened eternal Rome. This paper discusses the heightened significance of the theme of time and eternity during the third century crisis focusing on the inscriptions honoring Flavia Publicia, who served in the mid-third century c.e., and Coelia Claudiana, who served in the late third century c.e.

KEYWORDS: Vestal Virgins, time, priesthood, Flavia Publicia, Coelia Claudiana, temple of Vesta

ALONG ROME'S *VIA SACRA*, NEAR THE FORUM, A COMPLEX KNOWN AS THE *atrium Vestae* housed the Vestal Virgins who guarded the eternal fire in the adjoining Temple of Vesta.¹ The central courtyard of the *atrium Vestae* featured statues and inscriptions that commemorated the service of individual Vestals while also reinforcing the collective image of an order of priestesses devoted

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¹ For a detailed discussion of the *atrium Vestae* and its excavation history see Lindner 2015: 39–61. For the topographical location of the *atrium Vestae* see Scott 1993: 138–42.

to their duties.² The extant inscribed statue bases, which date mostly to the third century C.E., celebrate the careers and exemplary virtues of individual priestesses.³ The archaeological record suggests a trend towards more elaborate inscriptions honoring the Vestals in the third century C.E., which may reflect the political and religious urgency of the times.⁴ During the crisis of the third century, when the ideal of “eternal Rome” was threatened by instability that could potentially destroy the empire, the Vestal Virgins are presented as performing their rituals diligently and persistently.⁵ During this period of crisis, the emperors Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian worked to promote continual adherence to traditional Roman religious rituals amidst conflicts with the Christians. The Vestals were thought to protect the wellbeing of the city through their vigilant service and dedication to their religious duties.

Inscriptions in the *atrium Vestae* dedicated by members of the priestesses’ circles, including family members, clients, soldiers, and fellow priests and priestesses, reflect the dissemination of imperial ideology and the traditional importance of religious scruples for the Vestal priesthood. Monuments commemorating the careers of chief Vestals would have served as examples to younger members of the order who could have read the inscribed descriptions of the more senior Vestals’ exemplary service. Additionally, the inscriptions would have reached a wider audience when visitors to the *atrium Vestae* viewed the display in the courtyard.⁶ The broad range of people who interacted with the Vestals is evident from the diverse array of dedicators specified on the inscriptions. The individualized monuments, displayed together in the *atrium Vestae*, commemorate specific members of the order while also creating the impression of uniform devotion to religious rituals within the community of Vestals. Recurring formulae, such as usage of superlative adjectives to describe the religious devotion, sanctity, and chastity of the Vestals, give the impression of universal adherence to the duties of the priesthood.⁷ This conformity was an essential aspect of the highly structured Vestal order, and it also reflected contemporary emphasis on religious conformity that was driven by third-century emperors. In a space that served as the headquarters for a traditional

² See Lindner 2015: 41–45 for Lanciani’s discoveries, and 2015: 71–73 for his pairing of third-century bases with second-century statues.

³ See Lindner 2015: 71–77 with Tab. 1.

⁴ The large size of the third-century C.E. inscribed statue bases, with ample space for elaborate inscriptions, made it impractical for them to be broken down for other uses, resulting in their survival over the years. See Lindner 2015: 74.

⁵ For discussion of the concept of eternal Rome and its history see Pratt 1965; Lusnia 2014: 54–57.

⁶ Lindner 2015: 63–64.

⁷ See Frei-Stolba 1998: 241–42; Caldelli 2015: 597; and earlier Nock 1972: 253.

Roman priesthood, the cluster of inscribed monuments reminded the priestesses and visitors that it was critical to perform traditional religious duties continuously over time.

This paper examines references to time and eternity on inscriptions commemorating the Vestal Virgins, a traditional theme that gained increased significance to the priestesses during the third century. After surveying evidence for the continuing centrality of time and eternity to the Vestal priesthood, I examine two case studies drawn from the third century C.E. that illustrate this theme. The first case study concerns inscriptions honoring Flavia Publicia, who served as chief Vestal in the mid-third century C.E.⁸ In the second case study, a series of inscriptions highlight the continuing service and lasting legacy of the Vestal Virgin Coelia Claudiana, who served in the late third century C.E.⁹ Additionally, a compilation of references to time and eternity on inscriptions honoring the Vestal Virgins is included as an appendix, illustrating the prevalence of this theme in the epigraphic record. The inscriptions in the *atrium Vestae* offered assurance that the Vestals were continuing to protect the city of Rome and traditional Roman religion during a century characterized by tumultuous changes. They also provide subjective insights into how the Vestal Virgins experienced the passage of time as they persisted in their service.

TIME AND THE VESTALS

The Vestals participated in rituals throughout the year, and their recurrent involvement in festivals was linked to their symbolic association with eternity as guardians of the fire. These rituals included a series of agricultural festivals that created links between different parts of the year, marking the continued prosperity of Rome along with the passage of time. On April 15th, the chief Vestal burned the ashes of a calf taken from a sacrificed pregnant cow in the fire of Vesta as part of the rituals for the *Fordicidia*.¹⁰ The ashes were mixed with the blood of the October horse, which the Vestals collected on October 15th, and used for the *Parilia*, an agricultural festival that marked the day of Rome's founding on April 21st.¹¹ Servius reports that the Vestal Virgins would

⁸ For the prosopography of Flavia Publicia see *PIR*² F 438; Saquete 2000: 139; Rüpke and Glock 2005: 2: 1652.

⁹ For the prosopography of Coelia Claudiana see *PIR*² C 1250; Saquete 2000: 139; Rüpke and Glock 2005: 2: 1281.

¹⁰ For a description of the *Fordicidia* see *Ov. Fast.* 4.629–40. See DiLuzio 2016: 201 for discussion of the Vestals' role in the *Fordicidia*.

¹¹ See Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 97 and *Festus Gloss. Lat.* 246 for the October horse; *Ov. Fast.* 4.721–83 for the *Parilia*. See DiLuzio 2016: 201–2 for the participation of the Vestals in the *Parilia*; 2016: 211 for the October horse.

harvest grain during a precise time frame in May: “from the day after the Nones of May to the day before the Ides of May, on alternate days” (*ex nonis Maiis ad pridie idus Maias alternis diebus*, Serv. *Ad Ecl.* 8.82).¹² They would then use it to prepare the *mola salsa* three times a year: during the Vestalia in June, the September *ludi Romani*, and the *Lupercalia* in February.¹³ On June 15th, the Vestal Virgins cleaned the temple of Vesta on a day that received a special notation on the Roman calendar: “When the waste has been carried out, it is lawful” (*Quando stercum delatum fas*, Varro *Ling.* 6.32).¹⁴ Additionally, the third-century C.E. author Tertullian writes that on August 21st “the *flamen Quirinalis* and virgins” (*flamen Quirinalis et virgines*) sacrificed at an altar for Consus under the circus.¹⁵ Although it is not possible to know for sure if *virgines* refers to the Vestals, this passage may attest to their involvement in a traditional festival during the third century.

Literary sources ranging in date from the republic to the early empire emphasize the continuity of the Vestals’ service and the eternity of the fire in the Temple of Vesta.¹⁶ Horace famously proclaimed that he would continue to receive praise for his poetry, “as long as the *pontifex* ascends the Capitolium with the silent virgin” (*dum Capitolium/ scandet cum tacita virgine pontifex*, *Carm.* 3.30.8–9). In the *Aeneid*, Virgil reports that Hector handed Aeneas the goddess Vesta “and the eternal fire” (*aeternumque ... ignem*, *Aen.* 2.296–97) which he transferred from Troy to Rome, ensuring its continued survival. Cicero, outlining laws about religion, foregrounds the Vestals’ guardianship of the flames, describing the fire as *sempiternum* and characterizing it as the public hearth of the city: *Virginesque Vestales in urbe custodiunt ignem foci publici sempiternum* (“The Vestal Virgins shall guard the everlasting fire of the public hearth in the city,” *Leg.* 2.20).¹⁷ The Romans traditionally believed that the survival of the city was contingent upon the eternal fire. If the fire went out, it portended the destruction of Rome.¹⁸

It is also important to consider how the structured version of time that defined the priesthood impacted the lifecycles of the women who served as

¹² Cf. Wildfang 2006: 16; DiLuzio 2016: 195–96. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹³ DiLuzio 2016: 196. Cf. Wildfang 2006: 29.

¹⁴ Cf. *Fest. Gloss. Lat.* 310. For the June 15th ritual, see Wildfang 2006: 23–24; Keegan 2008; DiLuzio 2016: 208–9.

¹⁵ Tert. *De spect.* 5. Tertullian’s Latin text is from Glover 1931. Cf. DiLuzio 2016: 60, 209–10.

¹⁶ As Wildfang 2006: 1–3 has observed, there are more sources for the Vestals in the late republic and the beginning of the empire than from other time periods.

¹⁷ For the fire of Vesta as Rome’s hearth see DiLuzio 2016: 189–90.

¹⁸ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.67.5.

Vestals. The Vestal Virgins were chosen between the ages of six and ten, at which point they were removed from the ordinary cycle of a woman's life.¹⁹ As they advanced through the ranks of the priesthood, they worked to mentor the next generation of Vestals, ensuring that the cycle would continue into the future. After thirty years of service, tending to the flames day and night and participating in festivals and rituals throughout the year, the Vestal Virgins had the option to leave the priesthood and marry.²⁰ Most, apparently, chose to remain in their service, as Plutarch suggests (*Vit. Num.* 10.2).²¹ Plutarch offers a gloomy portrayal of the Vestals who chose to end their work for the priesthood after thirty years. He emphasizes how most priestesses remained dedicated over the years, with the phrases "after this time" (μετὰ τὸν χρόνον τοῦτον) and "until old age and death" (μέχρι γήρωσ καὶ θανάτου) marking the passage of time over the course of the women's lives. The participle ἐγκαρτερούσας, which means "persevering" and "persisting," expresses the firm resolve of the priestesses to continue serving for as long as possible.²² Women who continued to serve throughout their lives upheld the ideal of perpetual devotion to the priesthood.²³

Literary and epigraphic sources celebrate Vestal Virgins who served for as long as possible, illustrating that this continued to be a central theme over the years. When characterizing the Vestal Virgin Fonteia as a guarantor of safety, Cicero references her service "for so many years" (*tot annos, Font.* 46).²⁴ Tacitus also reports that the Vestal Virgin Occia served for fifty-seven years (*Ann.* 2.86).²⁵ Similarly, a first-century C.E. inscription honoring the Vestal Virgin Iunia Torquata, a distinguished Vestal well attested in the epigraphic record, reports that she lived for sixty-four years (*CIL VI 2128 = ILS 4923 = EDCS-18100845 = EDR 126836*).²⁶ Iunia Torquata was presumably still a member of the Vestal order when the monument was commissioned at the end of her life.

¹⁹ Aul. Gell. *NA* 1.12.1. Cf. Staples 1998: 132; Takács 2008: 81; DiLuzio 2016: 121–23.

²⁰ Cf. Scheid 1992: 381. Lindner 2015: 34 notes that "no literary accounts of such marriages survive." Similarly, DiLuzio 2016: 119n1 remarks that "there is no secure evidence that a Vestal ever chose to leave the order after thirty years." Cf. Bätz 2012: 141–64.

²¹ Cf. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.67.2 for a similar account.

²² Cf. Liddell and Scott 1996, s.v. ἐγκαρτερέω.

²³ Cf. Lindner 2015: 34, noting that "abundant testimonies affirm the ideal scenario of the Vestal who dedicated her whole life to the cult, college, and state."

²⁴ Cf. DiLuzio 2016: 191. For a detailed discussion of Cicero's evocation of the Vestal in this speech see North 2000.

²⁵ Cf. Mekacher 2006: 115; Lindner 2015: 34; DiLuzio 2016: 216n201.

²⁶ Mekacher 2006: 200 suggests a date in the second or third quarter of the first century C.E. Iunia Torquata was honored with several inscriptions. See Lindner 2015: 65–66.

In contrast to Vestals who fulfilled the ideal of continuous service, some priestesses ceased performing their duties abruptly. A Vestal found guilty of unchastity (*incestum*) was removed from the priesthood immediately and buried alive, bringing a tragically premature end to her service while casting gloom upon the city.²⁷ The literary record preserves instances of Vestal Virgins sacrificed during tumultuous times when plagues and wars brought instability to Rome.²⁸ For example, Livy describes an atmosphere of general anxiety when the Vestal Oppia was tried for *incestum* in 483 B.C.E. during the wars with Veii and the Volsci (2.42.9–11).²⁹ Similarly, Livy reports that after the disastrous battle of Cannae in 216 B.C.E., the Vestal Virgins Flordia and Opimia were found guilty of unchastity (22.57.2). Such accusations were symptomatic of the instability of the times, suggesting that even Rome's eternally devoted priestesses had failed in their duties, causing disruptions to the *pax deorum*.³⁰

Whereas the *incestum* convictions described by Livy reflect the distress that plagued the city, the Vestals could also function as a stabilizing force, symbolizing religious continuity when times were difficult. During the crisis of the third century, the inscriptions in the *atrium Vestae* projected the image of an eternally dutiful priesthood while distancing the Vestals from the *incestum* associated with gloom and disaster.³¹ References to time and eternity on inscriptions commemorating the Vestals took on additional significance amidst imperial attempts to enforce religious continuity while projecting optimistic messages about Rome's uncertain future. The Vestals, who were portrayed as performing their traditional religious duties eternally, represented an ideal of persistence and power that was unconstrained by contemporary hardships.

²⁷ See Livy 8.15.7–8. Mustakallio 2007: 195 notes that “the guilty Vestal Virgin was immediately ordered to abstain from the sacred rites, *sacris abstinere*.” Cf. DiLuzio 2016: 147. Plutarch writes that when a Vestal Virgin is buried “There is no other more horrifying spectacle, nor does the city experience another day gloomier than this” (οὐδὲ ἐστὶν ἕτερον θέαμα φρικτότερον, οὐδ’ ἡμέραν ἢ πόλις ἄλλην ἄγει στυγνοτέραν ἐκείνης, *Vit. Num.* 10.6–7). For discussion of burial alive see Scheid 1992: 382; Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1: 51, 81, 137; Beard, North, and Price 1998: 2: 51; Wildfang 2006: 57–61; Schultz 2010: 530–31; Schultz 2012; DiLuzio 2016: 147–49.

²⁸ Cf. Cornell 1981: 27–29. For instances of burial alive see Fraschetti 1984; Takács 2008: 80.

²⁹ Cf. Takács 2008: 89.

³⁰ As Staples 1998: 135 has argued, “when the political stability of the state was under threat the possibility that a Vestal might have been unchaste provided a convenient mechanism for averting the threat.” For a Vestal's *incestum* as a disruption to the *pax deorum* see Fraschetti 1984: 115; DiLuzio 2016: 146.

³¹ Staples 1998: 137 writes, “If the state was peaceful and prosperous the Vestals were clearly chaste.”

THE VESTAL VIRGINS AND THE THIRD CENTURY

In the early third century C.E., during the reign of the emperor Septimius Severus, the Vestal Virgins participated in a ritual symbolizing Rome's continuity. An inscription attests that the senior Vestal Virgins Numisia Maximilla and Terentia Flavola were in attendance during the introductory prayer at the 204 C.E. *ludi saeculares*.³² The *ludi saeculares*, which from their inception during the age of Augustus had evoked the golden age, projected an optimistic message about Rome's future during the early years of Severus's rule.³³ As the Augustan *ludi saeculares* do not mention the Vestals, the participation of these priestesses was evidently a Severan innovation, and their presence at the ritual was politically expedient for the emperor.³⁴ Having come to power amidst tumultuous circumstances, Septimius Severus was invested in securing his legitimacy and creating the impression that Rome would continue to thrive under his rule.³⁵ In the early third century, the emperor featured Vestal Virgins in his program of rituals and building projects, sending a multilayered message of legitimacy and continuity while solidifying his claim to power.³⁶ Just three years before the *ludi saeculares*, the chief Vestal Virgin Numisia Maximilla was honored with an inscription in the newly renovated Severan *atrium Vestae*.³⁷ Septimius Severus accorded the Vestal Virgins a major role in his religious program seeking to establish his new regime within Rome's ancestral traditions.

The connection between Rome as *urbs aeterna* and the legitimacy of the emperor's power also gained additional poignancy as Rome celebrated a new millennium in 248 C.E.³⁸ The millenarian sentiment of the mid-third century was characterized by optimistic anticipation for Rome's future, but was also clouded by fears accompanying the chaos of the "crisis" that plagued

³² For the involvement of the Vestals see *CIL* VI 32328.35–36; 32329.10; Mekacher 2006: 67–68; Lindner 2015: 27; Rantala 2017: 63–64, 66–69, 102–3. For discussion of the inscription, which was placed in the Campus Martius to commemorate the *ludi* after they occurred, see Rantala 2017: 6–9.

³³ Rantala 2017: 3.

³⁴ For the Augustan *ludi saeculares* see *CIL* VI 32323.

³⁵ For the accession of Septimius Severus see Campbell 2008: 1–6; Potter 2013: 95–112.

³⁶ See Rantala 2017: 4. For the connections between the Severan building program and the *ludi saeculares* see Gorrie 2002.

³⁷ See *CIL* VI 2129; Lusnia 2014: 65.

³⁸ As Lusnia 2014: 55 has noted, "The Augustan promotion of Vesta and *urbs aeterna* related directly to the *aeternitas imperii*, or perpetuity of imperial command, and thus to the emperor himself. The emperor's eternity consisted of his power and the continuity of his succession."

the empire.³⁹ The 1000th anniversary of Rome fell during the reign of Philip, who arranged for millennial celebrations while facing internal and external pressures characteristic of the crisis.⁴⁰ Philip issued coins featuring the inscription *saeculares augg* in commemoration of his millennial celebrations.⁴¹ Like Philip, the usurper Pacatianus, who was declared emperor amidst a revolt in the Danube, attempted to capitalize upon the new millennium to promote his claim to power.⁴² A coin dating to the year 248 c.e. depicts Pacatianus on the obverse and a personification of Rome on the reverse, along with the words *Romae aetern(ae) an(no) mill(o) et primo*, “To eternal Rome, in the year 1001.”⁴³ Pacatianus was ultimately unsuccessful in his attempt to become emperor, but Philip continued to face opposition and died while fighting the usurper Decius.⁴⁴ Although Philip had proclaimed his son Caesar in hopes of ensuring a smooth line of succession, Decius became the next emperor.⁴⁵

Decius, facing severe military challenges that would eventually cost him his life, sought to rally the entire population of the empire in a show of religious unity and loyalty. In 249 c.e. he issued an edict commanding all who lived in the Roman empire to perform a traditional religious sacrifice to the gods, and officials issued documents (*libelli*) certifying compliance.⁴⁶ An Egyptian papyrus *libellus* dating to June 21, 250 c.e. includes the assertion: “We have always been constant in sacrificing to the gods, and now too, in your presence, in accordance with the regulations, I have poured libations and sacrificed and tasted the offerings, and I ask you to certify this for us below. May you continue to prosper.”⁴⁷ The *libellus* not only attests that the sacrifices have been made,

³⁹ Drinkwater 2008: 28 offers a useful description of the crisis: “The fifty years following the death of Severus Alexander were among the most disruptive ever experienced by the Roman empire. Historians conventionally refer to them as a period of ‘crisis’ ... The outstanding characteristic of this crisis was war, both civil and foreign.”

⁴⁰ Drinkwater 2008: 37. For Philip’s millennial celebrations cf. Pohlsander 1980: 465. As Potter 1990: 39 notes, riots in Alexandria accompanying a pogrom of the Christians and the threat of the usurper Ti. Claudius Marinus Pacatianus occurred during the millennial year. Cf. Frensdorf 2006: 513.

⁴¹ Brent 2010: 158 with 158n164, citing several examples in *RIC* IV.3.

⁴² For the revolt in the Danube see Drinkwater 2008: 37; Potter 2013: 236.

⁴³ See Brent 2010: 160 with 160n167, citing *RIC* IV.3, p. 105 no. 6.

⁴⁴ For the death of Philip see Potter 2013: 236–37; Drinkwater 2008: 38.

⁴⁵ For Decius’s accession see Rives 1999: 139. Potter 2013: 233 notes that by arranging for his son to be named Caesar, Philip made him “heir designate.” Potter 2013: 237 suggests, “Philip’s son may have perished with him.”

⁴⁶ Rives 1999: 137. Cf. Clarke 2008: 625. For the *libelli* see Potter 2013: 237–39.

⁴⁷ P.Mich. inv. 263. Trans. Potter 2013: Figure 14. Rives 1999: 135–36: forty-four *libelli* are known. See Knipfing 1923 for a detailed study of the *libelli*.

but also that the family whose compliance is certified has always performed the traditional rites.⁴⁸ The edict does not appear to have named specific deities to be honored with sacrifice, allowing for local variations, and did not target Christians specifically. However, Christians were affected by it directly, since many refused to comply and suffered imprisonment or even death.⁴⁹

The emphasis of Decius's edict was on universal compliance to a traditional rite and assertion that tradition had been followed over time, in the hope that a universal performance of religious ritual would restore the *pax deorum*.⁵⁰ After becoming emperor in 249 c.e., Decius faced civil war with the Gauls followed by a war with the Goths, and his persecution of the Christians coincided with these escalating conflicts.⁵¹ The Christian apologist Tertullian, writing early in the third century, comments on how Christians who would not recognize the Roman gods were viewed as committing "a crime chiefly of having slighted Roman religion" (*crimen laesae maxime Romanae religionis*, Tert. *Apol.* 24.1).⁵² Prior to Decius's edict, persecutions of Christians arose locally, often in reaction to some disaster or social upheaval. As Tertullian ruefully notes: "If the Tiber rises onto the walls, if the Nile does not rise into the fields, if the sky has stood still, if the earth has moved, if there is hunger, if there is a plague, it is shouted 'Christians to the lion!' So many to one?" (*Si Tiberis ascendit in moenia, si Nilus non ascendit in arva, si caelum stetit, si terra movit, si fames, si lues, statim Christianos ad leonem! adclamatur. Tantos ad unum?* Tert. *Apol.* 40.2). Decius's edict, to preserve the *pax deorum* during a turbulent time, predictably resulted in conflicts, as those who did not perform traditional religious rituals were blamed for disrupting it.⁵³ Similarly, the aforementioned examples of Vestal Virgins accused of *incestum* during periods of warfare occurred in response to perceived disruptions of the *pax deorum*. In contrast, the performance of traditional duties by the Vestal Virgins reinforced the Decian emphasis on adherence to traditional religious rituals.

⁴⁸ Rives 1999: 137n13.

⁴⁹ Scholars agree that the edict was not aimed directly at the Christians, but that Decius may have anticipated the Christian reaction: Potter 2013: 239; Clarke 2008: 626; Hall 2006: 470; Rives 1999: 141. Rives 1999: 135 argues that Decius's decree set a precedent for imperial persecution of Christians. Cf. Selinger 2002: 11.

⁵⁰ Philips 1986: 2749; Baynes 1989: 656; Rives 1999: 142.

⁵¹ Alföldi 1989: 166.

⁵² Cf. Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1: 239–40.

⁵³ Brent 2010: 196 has argued that Decius was "exercising the traditional sacerdotal role performed by the emperor in seeking the *pax deorum* in the specific context of a world at the point of cosmic decline into the age of iron, as part of the cyclic process of world renewal."

As the third century progressed, emperors issued additional mandates enforcing traditional Roman religion while conflicts with the Christians escalated. In 257 C.E., as he struggled to manage military campaigns against the Goths and Persians, the emperor Valerian issued the first of two edicts calling for adherence to traditional religious rituals while targeting Christians more directly.⁵⁴ Prominent Christian leaders, including Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, were confronted and asked to perform sacrifices, and those who did not comply were exiled.⁵⁵ If they continued to resist they faced the prospect of execution in accordance with the second edict issued in 258 C.E.⁵⁶ Valerian also placed limitations on the Christians' ability to gather, and to use their cemeteries, along with severe penalties, including the loss of status and property for upper-class Christians.⁵⁷ Although Gallienus rescinded Valerian's edict after becoming sole emperor in 260 C.E., in the late third century, conflicts with the Christians arose sporadically.⁵⁸ In 298 C.E. when soothsayers were unable to locate entrails in victims sacrificed after the Roman victory over the Persians, the Christians were once again blamed for threatening the *pax deorum*.⁵⁹ Diocletian ordered all soldiers and workers at the imperial residence to perform sacrifices, and stipulated that all who refused be removed from their positions. In 302 C.E., apparently in response to prodding by his co-emperor Galerius, Diocletian issued an edict calling for persecution of the Christians, with three additional edicts following the next year.⁶⁰ The third edict called for the release of captured Christians who agreed to perform sacrifices, and the fourth mandated that everyone perform a sacrifice, echoing Decius's earlier requirement.⁶¹ Rives notes parallels between Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian,

⁵⁴ *Acta Procons. Cypr.* 1. Cf. Musurillo 1972: 11; Schwarte 1989: 111–16; Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1: 241; Clarke 2008: 637–41; Potter 2013: 626n174. For Valerian's persecution of the Christians and his military struggles see Alföldi 1989: 171, 205.

⁵⁵ See Brent 2010: 2–22 for an overview of the life and death of Cyprian.

⁵⁶ For execution as a punishment stipulated by the second edict see Frend 2006: 516.

⁵⁷ Potter 2013: 255.

⁵⁸ Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 7.13. As Clarke 2008: 646 notes, "some forty years of relative peace follow from this significant move." Cf. Frend 2006: 516–17; Rives 2007: 199.

⁵⁹ Lactant. *De mort. pers.* 10; Frend 2006: 519.

⁶⁰ For the edicts see Frend 2006: 519–20. For Diocletian's persecution of Christians cf. Fox 1986: 595; Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1: 242; Bowman 2008: 86; Clarke 2008: 650–52; Potter 2013: 329–32.

⁶¹ Frend 2006: 520. Rives 1999: 141–42 notes the similarity between Decius's edict and Diocletian's fourth edict, while also observing that Diocletian's edicts differed in that they targeted Christians more directly.

arguing for “a sea change in ideas about religion and its role in the Empire.”⁶² The ideal of the Vestal Virgins, eternally devoted to their traditional duties, supported imperial messages of conformity and continuity during this “sea change” in an attempt to maintain the *pax deorum*.

The theme of time and eternity, which figures prominently on inscriptions commemorating the Vestals, also appears in literary evidence from the third century, reflecting a shared concern for Rome’s future. The writings of Cyprian, a victim of Valerian’s persecutions, reflect a “cyclical” view of history based on the idea that a golden age would return to remedy the corruption of the times.⁶³ In his letter to Demetrian, Cyprian describes how Christians may resist the corruption of the current *saeculum* through continuous faith and prayer (*Ad Demetrianum* 20.380–404).⁶⁴ Cyprian’s emphasis on steadfast Christian devotion parallels epigraphic portrayals of Vestals performing their duties continuously. Whereas Cyprian juxtaposes Christian notions of eternity with corruption, emperors who blamed the Christians for disrupting the *pax deorum* sought to defend eternal Rome by enforcing the performance of traditional religious rituals. Amidst the tumultuous political situation and the evolving religious landscape, the Vestals’ continual work gained additional urgency as emperors sought to promote religious conformity while safeguarding the ideal of eternal Rome. As the third century progressed, the Vestals lived their lives according to a sequence of time structured by religious duties. Those who persisted in their service were seeking eternal success that was not limited by the constraints of the time period in which they lived. In addition to providing subjective insights into how women experienced time differently within the Vestal priesthood, the inscriptions commemorate the tenacity and persistence of the Vestal Virgins during a tempestuous period.

TIME AND ETERNITY ON THIRD-CENTURY INSCRIPTIONS COMMEMORATING THE VESTALS

Two case studies will illustrate how inscriptions commemorating the Vestal Virgins emphasized this traditional theme of time and eternity. To begin, the Vestal Virgin Flavia Publicia, who served during the mid-third century C.E., was honored with several elaborate inscribed statue bases in the *atrium*

⁶² Rives 1999: 153. See Rives 2007: 199 for a succinct summary of the persecutions of Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian.

⁶³ See Brent 2010: 80.

⁶⁴ For this passage see Brent 2010: 99–100.

Vestae.⁶⁵ One inscription honoring Flavia Publicia commemorates her care for the eternal fire of Vesta in the context of the progression of her years of service (*CIL* VI 32416 = *ILS* 4931 = *EDCS*-29100165 = *EDR* 148851)⁶⁶:

Fl(aviae) Publiciae v(irgini) V(estali) max(imae) / sanctissimae ac religiosi-
simae quae per omnes gradus / sacerdotii aput (!) divina altaria / omnium
deorum et ad aeternos ignes / diebus noctibusque pia mente rite / deserviens
merito ad hunc / locum cum aetate pervenit / Bareius Zoticus cum Flavia /
Verecunda sua ob eximiam eius / erga se benivolentiam (!) praestantiamq(ue) //
dedicata pr(idie) Kal(endas) Oct(obres) / dd(ominis) nn(ostris) Valeriano
Aug(usto) IIII et / Gallieno Aug(usto) III co(n)ss(ulibus)

To Flavia Publicia, chief Vestal Virgin, most sacred and most scrupulous in her devotion to religion who through all of the ranks of the priesthood at the divine altars of all the gods and at the eternal fires days and nights, with a pious mind, with the proper rites, serving diligently, deservedly arrived at this station with her age. Bareius Zoticus with his Flavia Verecunda (gave it) on account of her extraordinary kindness and excellence towards him. // Dedicated on the day before the Kalends of October in the consulship of our lords Valerian Augustus for the fourth time and Gallienus Augustus for the third time.

The inscription commemorates the time that Flavia Publicia spent monitoring the fire day and night along with her sanctity and continual devotion to her religious duties over the years. The superlative adjectives *sanctissimae* and *religiosissimae* are well attested on inscriptions commemorating the Vestals, appearing elsewhere both in combination with each other and with other conventional superlative adjectives.⁶⁷ The repetition of these conventions creates the impression that individual priestesses modelled ideal qualities that shaped the image of the collective priesthood. Although the prevalence of conventional

⁶⁵ In addition to the inscriptions discussed in this paper, Flavia Publicia is mentioned on *CIL* VI 2147 = *CIL* XV 7126, *CIL* VI 32414, *CIL* VI 32417, and *CIL* VI 32418. For a detailed treatment of the inscriptions honoring Flavia Publicia see Frei-Stolba 1998. Cf. Lindner 2015: 74–75.

⁶⁶ The consular reference indicates that the inscription dates to 257 C.E. My readings of the Latin epigraphic texts are informed by the *CIL*, *EDCS*, *EDR*, *ILS* (where available), and the catalogue in Mekacher 2006: 199–213. For this inscription cf. Mekacher 2006: 205. The *EDR* entries have extensive bibliography on this and other inscriptions discussed in this paper.

⁶⁷ For *sanctissima* and *religiosissima* cf. *CIL* VI 2137. For variations see for example *sanctissima* and *piissima* (*CIL* VI 2136, *CIL* VI 2135, *CIL* VI 324140), *religiosissima* and *benignissima* (*CIL* VI 2138), and *sanctissima* and *religiosissima* with *pientissima* (*CIL* VI 32421).

words and themes provides a sense of uniformity, the monuments are also individualized. On this inscription, variation on the formulaic conventions occurs with the detailed description of the passing time of the priestess' life and her devotion to her rituals. The phrase *ad hunc locum cum aetate pervenit* ("arrived at this station with her age") does not appear on other extant Vestal inscriptions. This expression highlights the passing time of Flavia Publicia's life, during which she advanced to the rank of *Vestal virgo maxima*.⁶⁸ The inscription emphasizes the cycle of her life along with the continual devotion to the duties that shaped it, the foremost of which was maintaining the fire in the temple of Vesta.⁶⁹ The detail that Flavia Publicia guarded the fire "days and nights" (*diebus noctibusque*) adds an additional temporal dimension to the portrayal of the Vestal's service, juxtaposing the passing of the years with a task that consumed her days and nights. The temporal references on the inscription, which commemorate both the collective passing of the years and the individual days and nights spent in service to the priesthood, complement the formulaic references to highlight the Vestal's adherence to the sacred rituals. The inscription identifies Bareius Zoticus, whose name suggests that he was likely of servile origin, and his wife Flavia Verecunda as the dedicators of this monument.⁷⁰ Their participation reflects the diversity of those who promoted these disseminated ideologies and emphasis on religious continuity.

The duty of guarding the fire was the shared responsibility of the more junior members of the order and the chief Vestals who trained them.⁷¹ A Vestal's failure to maintain the eternal flames was a serious offense, as indicated by Valerius Maximus's account of a Vestal Virgin who was flogged by the *pontifex maximus* for doing so (Val. Max. 1.1.6).⁷² Valerius Maximus contrasts the story of the Vestal Virgin who received a beating from the *pontifex maximus* with the positive example of the chief Vestal Virgin Aemilia who was able to ensure that the fire continued to burn after her "pupil" (*discipula*) allowed it

⁶⁸ DiLuzio 2016: 216 cites this as an example of how "epigraphic evidence from later periods tends to confirm the existence of a formal progression from novice to senior Vestal." Mustakallio 2007: 188–89 highlights the hierarchical nature of the priesthood.

⁶⁹ See Lindner 2015: 40.

⁷⁰ For the association between Greek names and the possibility of "servile origin" on inscriptions see Bruun 2013: 22–25.

⁷¹ For the possibility that the Vestals divided their responsibilities see Wildfang 2001: 253–54; DiLuzio 2016: 190.

⁷² Cf. Livy 28.11.6–7.

to go out.⁷³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus also recounts this story, emphasizing that in her appeal to the goddess Vesta, Aemilia called attention to how she had served the goddess day and night for thirty years (*Ant. Rom.* 2.68.4).⁷⁴ Fortunately, the goddess Vesta heeded Aemilia's plea and the fire was restored.

Similarly, an inscription dedicated by two centurions commemorates how Flavia Publicia's disciplined service impacted the Roman state (*CIL VI 32415 = ILS 4932 = EDCS-29100164 = EDR 148832*)⁷⁵:

Flaviae L(uci) f(iliae) Publiciae / religiosae / sanctitatis v(irgini) V(estali) max(imae) / cuius egregiam morum / disciplinam et / in sacris peritissimam / operationem merito / res publica in dies / feliciter sentit / Ulpius Verus et Aurel(ius) / Titus ((centuriones)) deputati / ob eximiam eius erga se / benivolentiam / g(ratis?) p(osuerunt)

To Flavia Publicia daughter of Lucius, chief Vestal Virgin, of sanctity characterized by scrupulous devotion to religion, whose outstanding discipline in the customs and most skilled operation in the religious rites the state happily experiences day by day. Ulpius Verus and Aurelius Titus the deputy centurions, on account of her extraordinary benevolence towards them, put it in place for free.

On this inscription, the centurions praise the kindness of Flavia Publicia and describe how the state experiences her diligent performance of the rites "day by day" (*in dies*). Amidst the urgent military situation of the third century, these soldiers highlight the positive impact of Flavia Publicia's service upon Rome. The discipline of the Vestals was considered crucial and the centurions emphasize the benefits of this continual service to the *res publica*.

Another inscription honoring Flavia Publicia offers a similar portrayal of her indefatigable devotion to the rites while also incorporating praise for another Vestal Virgin, Terentia Rufilla (*CIL VI 2135 = CIL VI 32404 = ILS 4934 = EDCS-18100852 = EDR 115790*)⁷⁶:

⁷³ Val. Max. 1.1.7. For the uncertain prosopography of Aemilia see *MRR II*: 486; Saquete 2000: 137; Rüpke and Glock 2005: 2: 490 arguing that she became a Vestal in 205 B.C.E. and served as chief Vestal Virgin in 178 B.C.E. Nock 1972: 253 has also discussed the story of Aemilia in the context of inscriptions from the *atrium Vestae*.

⁷⁴ Prop. 4.11.54–55 also references Aemilia. Cf. Livy *Per.* 41 and *Obseq.* 8 which attest that the fire in the temple of Vesta was extinguished in 178 B.C.E. and may refer to this episode.

⁷⁵ Cf. Mekacher 2006: 205. The exact dedication date is unknown, but it must be contemporary with other inscriptions honoring Flavia Publicia. Nock 1972: 253 has also noted "the blessings which the state feels day by day, thanks to the same Vestal's excellence."

⁷⁶ *PLRE I*: 773 notes that this inscription dates to 254, 255, or 257 C.E. ("the iteration numbers are lost from the consular date"). For the date cf. Nock 1972: 268; Mekacher

Fl(aviae) Publiciae v(irgini) V(estali) max(imae) / merito sanctissimae ac piissi/
mae quae rite et pervigili adminis/tratione omnes gradus laude / cumulata sacra
sua venerata vi/vit ut saeculari aetate ministerio / adsit et in futuro (!) perseveret /
Q(uintus) Terentius Rufus et Caenia / Verissima parentes / Terentiae Rufillae
v(irgini) V(estali) / cuius multi temporis bonitatem / et humanitatem eius circa
se / in brevi senserunt // Dedic(a)ta [-c.3-] / dd(ominis) nn(ostris) Vale[riano]
[-c.3-] / Gallien[o] [-c.3-] [co(n)s(ulibus)]

To Flavia Publicia, chief Vestal Virgin, deservedly, most sacred and most dutiful who with correct religious procedure and with ever-vigilant administration, having amassed all of the ranks with praise, having venerated her sacred rites, she lives in order that she may be present for the ministry in the secular age and may persist in the future. Quintus Terentius Rufus and Caenia Verissima, her parents (made it for) Terentia Rufilla the Vestal Virgin, in whom they perceived her goodness and kindness toward them in a short time. // Dedicated in the consulship of our lords Valerian and Gallienus.

The monument highlights Flavia Publicia's continued devotion to the rites with "ever-vigilant administration" (*pervigili administratione*) while also honoring her protégé Terentia Rufilla. Additionally, the inscription expresses a desire for continuing service, connecting the image of the eternal Vestal to the dawn of a new *saeculum*. The inscription alludes to the millenarian ideology that was disseminated by third-century emperors as discussed previously. The placement of the reference to the secular age on the monument honoring Flavia Publicia and her protégé, moreover, alludes to the continuity fostered by the structured years of the priesthood. The detail about service extending into the future divides the inscription, standing between the introductory section about Flavia Publicia and the section that follows about Terentia Rufilla, and is applicable to both the chief Vestal and the more junior priestess who will continue to serve in the future. The commemoration of the distinguished career of Flavia Publicia together with the perceived potential of Terentia Rufilla offers a perspective on the difference that twenty or thirty years made within the structured version of time that defined the priesthood. Flavia Publicia has a level of distinction and clout comparable to that of the Aemilia of old, who could sway the opinion of Vesta herself. It is the hope of the parents that Terentia Rufilla will achieve a similar level of distinction as the years pass and

2006: 201. Later inscriptions record Terentia Rufilla's service in 300 c.e. (*CIL* VI 2141=*CIL* VI 32406) and 301 c.e. (*CIL* VI 2143). For the dates of her service see *PLRE* I: 773; Wildfang 2006: 143; Mustakallio 2007: 194. For the prosopography of Terentia Rufilla see *PIR*¹ T 83; Saquete 2000: 142; Rüpke and Glock 2005: 2: 3220.

she herself advances within the priesthood.⁷⁷ They anticipate a long career for her as a Vestal, having perceived her “goodness and kindness” during the brief time that they were able to spend with her.

Additionally, this inscription gives a rare insight into the emotional world of the families of Vestal Virgins, as the words of the parents may have a more wistful undertone, reflecting the sentiment that their time with their daughter was altogether too short. Although the Vestal priesthood brought families increased prestige, it also limited the amount of time that parents could spend with their daughters and the extent to which they could involve themselves in their upbringing. Aulus Gellius explains how the *pontifex maximus* removed new Vestals from their parents in the *captio* ritual, likening them to captives taken in war.⁷⁸ A priestess’ time under the care of her natal family was brief, while her time as a Vestal was meant to be eternal. The parents of Terentia Rufilla, no longer able to protect their daughter directly, dedicated an inscription designed to appeal to the chief Vestal Virgin in charge of supervising her. They celebrated Flavia Publicia’s long record of service, hoping that their daughter would benefit from her powerful influence while advancing through the ranks of the priesthood.

The second case study focuses on a series of inscriptions highlighting the continual service and lasting legacy of a Vestal Virgin named Coelia Claudiana who served during the late third century C.E. Together the inscriptions offer a characterization of a priestess who distinguished herself not only through her record of service, but also through her work to ensure the continuity of the Vestal priesthood. The same concerns for religious continuity surrounding Flavia Publicia’s service persisted into the late third century. For example, Coelia Claudiana’s client, Aurelius Fructosus, wishes her ten more years of happy service (*CIL VI 32420 = ILS 4937 = EDCS-21600013 = EDR 151319*)⁷⁹:

Coeliae Claudianae v(irgini) V(estali) / max(imae) sanctissimae religi/osissimae ac super om/nes piissimae cuius ope/ra sacrorum gubernan/te Vesta

⁷⁷ As Gallia 2015: 88 has noted, this inscription was dedicated by “parents who managed to insinuate their own connection to a more junior member of the college into their praise of Flavia Publicia.”

⁷⁸ Aul. Gell. *NA* 1.12.13–14. For the *captio* ritual see Guizzi 1968: 31–66; Beard 1980: 13–14; Wildfang 2006: 37–50; Kroppenberg 2010: 422–24; Bätz 2012: 63–117; DiLuzio 2016: 133–35.

⁷⁹ The exact dedication date is not specified, but this and other inscriptions honoring Coelia Claudiana must be roughly contemporary with *CIL VI 2136 = CIL VI 32405* (discussed below), which dates to 286 C.E. See Mekacher 2006: 206–7. In addition to the examples discussed in this paper, Coelia Claudiana is mentioned on *CIL VI 2137*, *CIL VI 2140*, and *CIL VI 32421*.

matre Maxi/matus sui XX complebit / Aurelius Fructosus cli/ens et candidatus
(!) benignitat{a}e eius probatus / sic XX sic XXX feliciter

To Coelia Claudiana, chief Vestal Virgin, most sacred, most scrupulous in her devotion to religion, and above all most dutiful. With mother Vesta guiding her she will complete the twentieth year of her works for the sacred rites as chief. Aurelius Fructosus, a client and approved candidate by her kindness—as the twentieth year, so the thirtieth year happily.

The inscription highlights the expectation that Coelia Claudiana will pass this milestone, successfully and happily (*feliciter*) completing her next decade of service with Vesta as her guide. Similarly, an inscription dedicated by Coelia Claudiana's sister alludes to her eternal legacy with a wish that she would continue serving “through so many ages” (*CIL* VI 2139 = *ILS* 4935 = *EDCS*-18100856 = *EDR* 152626)⁸⁰:

Coeliae Claudianae / v(irgini) V(estali) maximae / a diis electa merito / sibi talem
antistitem / numen Vestae reservare / voluit / Coelia Nerviana soror una / cum
Pierio coniuge ac liberis / suis orantes ut per tot saecula / facere dii permittant

Coelia Claudiana, chief Vestal Virgin, chosen deservedly by the gods, the divine spirit of Vesta wished to reserve such a high priestess for herself. Coelia Nerviana the sister together with her husband Pierus and their children [dedicated it] praying that through so many ages the gods would allow her to serve.

The expression “through so many ages” (*per tot saecula*) is comparable to the reference to the secular age on the joint monument to Flavia Publicia and Terentia Rufilla, and calls for a limitless period of continuing service.⁸¹ Additionally, on the inscription the possibility of continuing service is framed in the context of divine selection and approval.⁸² Nock has discussed the formula *a diis electa* on third-century C.E. inscriptions honoring the Vestals.⁸³ He argues that it reflects the selection process in which candidates were chosen by lot with implicit divine approval, as well as “a rise of religious sentiment towards the cult of Vesta” and “monarchic sentiment” in the third century C.E., noting the analogous idea of the divinely selected emperor.⁸⁴ Brent argues for

⁸⁰ Cf. Mekacher 2006: 202. The exact date is unknown.

⁸¹ In the *EDCS* and *EDR*, *tot* is expanded to *tot(a)*, which would make the phrase “through all the ages.” The *ILS* and *CIL* have *tot*.

⁸² Nock 1972: 259–66 discusses this phrase in the context of the Vestals' service to a variety of deities. Cf. Koch 1958: 1736–37.

⁸³ Nock 1972.

⁸⁴ See Nock 1972: 254–55 for divine selection; 1972: 266 for Vesta, monarchic sentiment, and the selection of the emperor. For the selection of Vestal candidates by lot see Aul. Gell. *NA* 1.12.11–12.

the continuing relevance of “the original, Augustan, project of the *princeps a diis electus* as the sign and seal of the *saeculum aureum*” in the third century c.e.⁸⁵ The phrase *a diis electa* emphasizes the legitimacy of a divinely chosen candidate at a time when emperors were working to bolster their claims to power.⁸⁶

The linking of a Vestal Virgin with a protégé is a central theme in inscriptions from the *atrium Vestae*, as it evokes the continuing succession in the eternal work of the Vestals. We see this theme in an inscription commemorating the eternal praise that Coelia Claudiana received along with her influence upon her protégé, Octavia Honorata, illustrating the smooth line of succession within the priesthood (*CIL VI 2138 = EDCS-18100855 = EDR 151254*)⁸⁷:

Coeliae Claudianae / v(irgini) V(estali) maximae / religiosissimae benignissimaeque / cuius pius ritus ac plenam sacro/rum erga deos administrationem / urbis aeterna laude b(e) (!) s(enatus) s(ententia) comproba[vit] / Octavia Honorata v(irgo) V(estalis) divinis / eius admonitionibus semper provecta

To Coelia Claudiana, chief Vestal Virgin, most scrupulous in her devotion to religion and most kind, whose pious rites and full administration of rites with regard to the gods, with eternal praise of the city by decree of the senate Octavia Honorata a virgin of divine Vesta always having been advanced by her recommendations [dedicated it].

This inscription commemorates the lasting impact Coelia Claudiana had upon the priesthood by mentoring a younger Vestal. It is comparable to the joint monument honoring Flavia Publicia and Terentia Rufilla. The eternity of the Vestal priesthood was contingent upon the successful transition from novice to senior priestess within the structured thirty years of service. While the inscription honoring Flavia Publicia together with Terentia Rufilla expresses parents’ hopes that their daughter will advance under the mentorship of a distinguished chief Vestal, here a protégé attests that she herself has benefitted from the guidance of Coelia Claudiana. The detail that Octavia Honorata has “always” (*semper*) been advanced through the influence of Coelia Claudiana reflects the chief Vestal’s continual devotion to her role as a mentor, complementing the description of how she performed religious rites dutifully during her years of service.

Finally, an inscription dating to 286 c.e. commemorates the praise that Coelia Claudiana received from Vesta herself (*CIL VI 2136 = CIL VI 32405 = EDCS-18100853 = EDR 151252*)⁸⁸:

⁸⁵ Brent 2010: 162.

⁸⁶ Cf. Fears 1977 for the emperor *a diis electus*.

⁸⁷ The exact dedication date is unknown. See Mekacher 2006: 202.

⁸⁸ Cf. Mekacher 2006: 202 for the date.

Dedicata V Kal(endas) Mart(ias) / M(arco) Iunio Maximo II et / Vettio Aquilino
co(n)ss(ulibus) / curante / Fl(avio) Marciano v(iro) e(gregio) fictore v(irginum)
V(estalium) // Coeliae Claudianae / v(irgini) V(estali) maximae / sanctissimae
piissimaeque / cuius egregiam sanctitatem / et in deorum infatigabilem / sacro-
rum operationem meritis / suis laudem aeternam adhibita / gravitate numen
quoque Vestae / comprobavit / sacerdotes sacrae urbis

Dedicated five days before the Kalends of March, in the consulship of Marcus Iunius Maximus II and Vettius Aquilinus, under the care of Flavius Marcianus, an equestrian, a *fictor* of the Vestal Virgins. // To Coelia Claudiana, chief Vestal Virgin, most sacred and most pious, and whose outstanding sanctity and indefatigable service to the sacred gods, even the divine spirit of Vesta applying her *gravitas*, approved eternal praise for her merits. The priests of the sacred city (dedicated this).

The inscription portrays Coelia Claudiana as a devout follower of traditional Roman religion who has received eternal praise approved by Vesta's authority. The approval of the collective priests expressed on this inscription dating to 286 C.E. evokes unity, security, and continuity in a year marked by the designation of Maximian as *Augustus* with authority in the western empire while Diocletian ruled in the east, each assisted by an appointed Caesar.⁸⁹ Although the inscription honoring Coelia Claudiana predates Diocletian's edicts calling for persecution of Christians, the details about Vesta's authority and the approval of the city's priests should be contextualized with the emperor's earlier emphasis on discipline and conformity.⁹⁰ During the crisis of the third century, inscriptions commemorated Vestal Virgins, who supported eternal Rome and traditional Roman religion, offsetting the instability of the times through their tenacious service. Amidst external and internal challenges that threatened eternal Rome, the Vestal Virgins worked to safeguard its future, guarding the fire day and night, and mentoring new priestesses who would continue their work. The achievements of successful Vestals were considered to be eternal, unlimited by the constraints and challenges of their times.

⁸⁹ Potter 2013: 277–78. As Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1: 242 have argued, “there seems to have been particular stress on (allegedly) ancestral Roman virtues . . . This is partly, no doubt, to be connected with the emperor's aim of consolidating central authority after the chaos and disorder of the previous fifty years.”

⁹⁰ Fox 1986: 594 notes, “At Damascus in May 295, Diocletian referred in an edict to the ‘discipline of our times.’” See *Mos. et. Rom. Leg. Collatio* 6.4. Rives 1999: 153 notes on Diocletian: “Well before he launched his persecution of the Church, he issued an order that everyone who served in the palace or in the army had to sacrifice.”

TIME, ETERNITY, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE VESTALS

Inscriptions from the *atrium Vestae* provide valuable insights into how the Vestal Virgins, removed from the ordinary cycle of a woman's life, experienced time differently while persisting in their duties. The inscription commemorating how Flavia Publicia guarded the fire "days and nights" highlights the constant responsibility of tending the eternal flames (*CIL* VI 32416 = *ILS* 4931 = *EDCS*-29100165 = *EDR* 148851). Monuments describing how Vestals served over the years, advancing through the ranks while contributing to a reciprocal mentoring network, commemorate the progression of a lifecycle that was unique to the priesthood. The *captio* ceremony, in which a Vestal was removed from her natal family, marked the disruption of the young woman's previous life and the beginning of a new experience of time structured around religious duties. The anthropologist Rebecca J. Lester has discussed how new Catholic nuns also experience an altered version of time that is marked by continuity and discontinuity.⁹¹ She writes, "new nuns learn to construct an understanding of their selves as continuous across different temporal spheres, alongside (and perhaps *in spite of*) certain experiences of discontinuity that are purposefully imposed by the nunnery such as separating from one's family and wearing the convent uniform instead of street clothes."⁹² In this "new narrative of the self" the nuns have an eternal identity as "Brides of Christ from the beginning of creation to the end of time."⁹³ Upon leaving their families and assuming the Vestal costume, which combined aspects of the clothing of brides and matrons, the Vestal Virgins began a new narrative of life as eternal priestesses, and this narrative was not structured around milestones that were experienced by other women.⁹⁴ The Vestals did not get married while serving in the priesthood, and consequently, they did not participate in the transitional rituals accompanying marriage, which included symbolically dedicating childhood toys to the household gods (*lares familiares*) and then greeting the household gods of a new husband.⁹⁵ Instead, the *pontifex maximus* took them to their new home, the *atrium Vestae*, in a ceremony that has been compared

⁹¹ Beard 1980: 26 has also discussed nuns in comparison with the Vestal Virgins.

⁹² Lester 2003: 202.

⁹³ Lester 2003: 218.

⁹⁴ For the Vestal costume see Gallia 2014; DiLuzio 2016: 154–84.

⁹⁵ For discussion of these rituals and how they marked transition in a woman's life see Flower 2017: 78–79.

to a marriage.⁹⁶ Although the *captio* was similarly a transitional ritual, it was different from a marriage and set a new tone for the course of the young woman's life. The Vestals did not become wives and mothers while serving in the priesthood, but they did play a crucial role in mentoring younger women as they grew into their roles as priestesses.⁹⁷ For the Vestals the daily and yearly progression of life was structured around religious duties, including guarding the fire, participating in recurring annual religious festivals, and mentoring more junior priestesses.⁹⁸

Although the Vestals experienced the discontinuity of leaving their natal families and embarking upon a lifecycle different from that of ordinary women, foregoing rituals like marriage, they reached different milestones within the priesthood. The new sequence of life as a Vestal presented opportunities to achieve success and recognition while advancing through the priesthood, ultimately attaining the rank of chief Vestal, and earning the esteem of colleagues, the community, and even Vesta herself. The inscription stating that Coelia Claudiana received "eternal praise" from Vesta illustrates how a Vestal sought the lasting favor of a powerful goddess through dutiful service (*CIL* VI 2136 = *CIL* VI 32405 = *EDCS*-18100853 = *EDR* 151252). Similarly, the inscription dedicated by Octavia Honorata commemorates not only Coelia Claudiana's achievements as a mentor, but also how she earned the "eternal praise of the city," illustrating that there was a civic dimension to the eternal recognition that the Vestals received (*CIL* VI 2138 = *EDCS*-18100855 = *EDR* 151254). Additionally, Coelia Nerviana's inscription, which prays for Coelia Cladiana's continual service, suggests an understanding of her natal sister's participation in a different narrative of life in which persistence within the Vestal priesthood leads to eternal divine praise (*CIL* VI 2139 = *ILS* 4935 = *EDCS*-18100856 = *EDR* 152626). The inscription, with details about Coelia Nerviana's husband and children alongside this show of support for Coelia Claudiana's work as a Vestal, illustrates how two women from the same family experienced different lifecycles.

This recognition of how the Vestals lived according to an altered narrative of time coincided with imperial attempts to present a carefully controlled vision

⁹⁶ Aul. Gell. *NA* 1.12.13–14. Cf. n78 for the *captio*. For analysis of the parallels between the *captio* and a Roman wedding, as well as the differences between these rituals, see DiLuzio 2016: 134–35.

⁹⁷ Lester 2003: 204 has noted the importance of mentoring within Catholic nunneries.

⁹⁸ Catholic nuns experience an analogous version of time structured by religious rituals. Lester 2003: 206 has argued that "The rhythm of convent life" is structured around events in the Liturgical calendar.

of the future of Rome. The Vestals who adhered to their duties were symbolic of success that was not limited by time or by the external pressures of warfare or political upheaval. They were ideal representatives of the continual power of eternal Rome during Septimius Severus's *ludi saeculares* and in the tumultuous years that followed. In addition to providing insight into how the Vestals experienced time within the priesthood, the inscriptions from the *atrium Vestae* reflect imperial attempts to ensure the eternity of traditional Roman religion when the religious landscape was changing. Perhaps most significantly, as both Plutarch (*Vit. Num.* 10.2) and the inscriptions suggest, the Vestal Virgins were recognized for choosing to persist in their service throughout their lives. The inscriptions in the *atrium Vestae*, with details about how the Vestals performed their rituals day and night, advancing through the ranks of the priesthood, mentoring the next generation, and earning Vesta's praise, commemorate the reassuring persistence of the Vestals during a time of crisis.

APPENDIX: TIME AND ETERNITY ON INSCRIPTIONS COMMEMORATING THE VESTAL VIRGINS

References to time/ eternity	CIL Numbers	Vestal Virgin(s)
<i>cum aetate</i>	CIL VI 32416	Flavia Publicia
<i>aeternus, -a, -um</i>	CIL VI 2132; CIL VI 2136; CIL VI 2138; CIL VI 32416	Campia Severina; Coelia Claudiana; Coelia Claudiana/ Octavia Honorata; Flavia Publicia
<i>diebus noctibusque</i>	CIL VI 32416	Flavia Publicia
<i>in dies</i>	CIL VI 32415	Flavia Publicia
<i>in futuro</i>	CIL VI 2135 = CIL VI 32404	Flavia Publicia/ Terentia Rufilla
<i>pervigil, pervigilis</i>	CIL VI 2133; CIL VI 2135 = CIL VI 32404	Flavia Mamilia; Flavia Publicia/ Terentia Rufilla
<i>saeculari aetate</i>	CIL VI 2135 = CIL VI 32404	Flavia Publicia/ Terentia Rufilla
<i>saecula</i>	CIL VI 2139	Coelia Claudiana
<i>sic XX sic XXX feliciter</i>	CIL VI 32420	Coelia Claudiana
<i>temporis</i>	CIL VI 2135 = CIL VI 32404	Flavia Publicia/ Terentia Rufilla
age of Vestal	CIL VI 2128	Iunia Torquata

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