HOLY WOMEN

in the Roman Society
Vestals
As soon as a Vestal Virgin is taken and brought to the atrium of Vesta and handed over to the pontifices, from that moment she leaves her father's power without being emancipated and without diminution of her rights and gains the right to make a will.
Moreover, in Labeo’s Commentaries on the Twelve Tables, he wrote: ‘A Vestal Virgin is neither heir to an intestate person nor is anyone her heir if she dies intestate, but her estate passes to the public treasury. It is not certain what the law meant.’
Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum VI 1752
To the gods of the dead. Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, augur, priest of Vesta, priest of the Sun, quindecemvir, curialis of Hercules, initiate of Liber and the Eleusinian [mysteries], hierophant, neocorus, tauroboliatus, father of fathers. In public office imperial quaestor, praetor of Rome, governor of Tuscia and Umbria, governor of Lusitania, proconsul of Achaia, praefect of Rome, senatorial legate on seven missions, prefect of the praetorian guard twice in Italy and Illyrica, consul ordinarius elect, and Aconia Fabia Paulina, initiate of Ceres and the Eleusinian [mysteries], initiate of Hecate at Aegina, tauroboliata, hierophant. They lived together for 40 years.
The Trench of the Blood was used for blood-baptism and the sacrifice of the bull. It was made in the Porta Laurentina, in the extreme east corner of the Campus of the Magna Mater. Two treads between brick piers lead to a floor of opus spicatum. From there a narrow staircase with travertine treads leads to a small underground room, with a vault in the back. Holes indicate that this room was covered with a grate. In each of the side walls is a rectangular niche, in the back wall a semicircular one.
Vettius Agorius Praetextatus to his wife Paulina. (In verse) Paulina, conscious of truth and chastity, devoted to the temples and friend of the divinities, who put her husband before herself, and Rome before her husband, proper, faithful, pure in mind and body, kindly to all, helpful to her family gods ...
Vettius Agorius Praetextatus to his wife Paulina. (In verse) Paulina, the partnership of our heart is the origin of your propriety; it is the bond of chastity and pure love and fidelity born in heaven. To this partnership I entrusted the hidden secrets of my mind; it was a gift of the gods, who bind our marriage couch with loving and chaste bonds. With a mother's devotion, with a wife's charm, with a sister's bond, with a daughter's modesty; with the great trust by which we are united with our friends, from the experience of our life together, by the alliance of our marriage, in pure, faithful, simple concord; you helped your husband, loved him, honoured him, cared for him.
My parents' distinction did nothing greater for me than that I even then seemed worthy of my husband. But all glory and honour is my husband's name, Agorius. You, descended from noble seed, have at the same time glorified your country, senate, and wife with your mind's judgment, your character and your industry, with which you have reached the highest pinnacle of excellence. For whatever has been produced in either language by the skill of the sages to whom the gate of heaven is open, whether songs that poets composed or writings in prose, these you make better than when you took them up to read. But these are small matters; you as pious initiate conceal in the secrecy of your mind what was revealed in the sacred mysteries, and you with knowledge worship the manifold divinity of the gods; you kindly include as colleague in the rites your wife, who is respectful of men and gods and is faithful to you. Why should I speak of your honours and powers and the joys sought in men's prayers?
These you always judge transitory and insignificant, since your title to eminence depends on the insignia of your priesthood. My husband, by the gift of your learning you keep me pure and chaste from the fate of death; you take me into the temples and devote me as the servant of the gods. With you as my witness I am introduced to all the mysteries; you, my pious consort, honour me as priestess of Dindymene and Attis with sacrificial rites of the taurobolium; you instruct me as minister of Hecate in the triple secret and you make me worthy of the rites of Greek Ceres. On account of you everyone praises me as pious and blessed, because you yourself have proclaimed me as good through the whole world; though unknown I am known to all. For with you as husband how could I not be pleasing? Roman mothers seek an example from me, and think their offspring handsome if they are like yours. Now men, now women want and approve the insignia that you as teacher have given me. Now that all these have been taken away I your wife waste away in sorrow; I would have been happy, if the gods had given me a husband who had survived me, but still I am happy because I am yours and have been yours and will now be yours after my death.
Another inscription

To Fabia Aconia Paulina, daughter of Aco Catullinus formerly prefect and consul, wife of Vettius Praetextatus prefect and consul elect, initiate at Eleusis to the god Iacchus, Ceres and Cora, initiate at Lerna to the god Liber and Ceres and Cora,[11] initiate at Aegina' to the two goddesses, tauroboliata, priestess of Isis, hierophant of the goddess Hecate, and initiate in the rites of the Greek Ceres.[12] Inscription on a statue base

In honour of Coelia Concordia, chief Vestal Virgin, Fabia Paulina arranged that a statue be made and set up first on account of her distinguished chastity and celebrated holiness concerning the divine cult, and chiefly because [Coelia Concordia] first had set up a statue to [Paulina's] husband Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, who was a man in all ways exceptional and deserving of honour even by virgins and by priestesses of this [high] rank.
A PAGAN MARTYR

Hypatia
Socrates Scholasticus, from his Ecclesiastical History

THERE WAS a woman at Alexandria named Hypatia, daughter of the philosopher Theon, who made such attainments in literature and science, as to far surpass all the philosophers of her own time. Having succeeded to the school of Plato and Plotinus, she explained the principles of philosophy to her auditors, many of whom came from a distance to receive her instructions. On account of the self-possession and ease of manner, which she had acquired in consequence of the cultivation of her mind, she not unfrequently appeared in public in presence of the magistrates. Neither did she feel abashed in going to an assembly of men. For all men on account of her extraordinary dignity and virtue admired her the more. Yet even she fell victim to the political jealousy which at that time prevailed. For as she had frequent interviews with Orestes, it was calumniously reported among the Christian populace, that it was she who prevented Orestes from being reconciled to the bishop. Some of them, therefore, hurried away by a fierce and bigoted zeal, whose ringleader was a reader named Peter, waylaid her returning home, and dragging her from her carriage, they took her to the church called Caesareum, where they completely stripped her, and then murdered her with tiles.* After tearing her body in pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called Cinaron, and there burnt them. This affair brought not the least opprobrium, not only upon Cyril, but also upon the whole Alexandrian church. And surely nothing can be farther from the spirit of Christianity than the allowance of massacres, fights, and transactions of that sort. This happened in the month of March during Lent, in the fourth year of Cyril's episcopate, under the tenth consulate of Honorius, and the sixth of Theodosius.
Hypatia was born, reared, and educated in Alexandria. Since she had greater genius than her father, she was not satisfied with his instruction in mathematical subjects; she also devoted herself diligently to all of philosophy. The woman used to put on her philosopher's cloak and walk through the middle of town and publicly interpret Plato, Aristotle, or the works of any other philosopher to those who wished to hear her. In addition to her expertise in teaching she rose to the pinnacle of civic virtue. She was both just and chaste and remained always a virgin. She was so beautiful and shapely that one of her students fell in love with her and was unable to control himself and openly showed her a sign of his infatuation. Uninformed reports had Hypatia curing him of his affliction with the help of music. The truth is that the story about music is corrupt. Actually, she gathered rags that had been stained during her period and showed them to him as a sign of her unclean descent and said, "This is what you love, young man, and it isn't beautiful!" He was so affected by shame and amazement at the ugly sight that he experienced a change of heart and went away a better man.
Such was Hypatia, as articulate and eloquent in speaking as she was prudent and civil in her deeds. The whole city rightly loved her and worshipped her in a remarkable way, but the rulers of the city from the first envied her, something that often happened at Athens too. For even if philosophy itself had perished, nevertheless, its name still seems magnificent and venerable to the men who exercise leadership in the state. Thus it happened one day that Cyril, bishop of the opposition sect [i.e. Christianity] was passing by Hypatia's house, and he saw a great crowd of people and horses in front of her door. Some were arriving, some departing, and others standing around. When he asked why there was a crowd there and what all the fuss was about, he was told by her followers that it was the house of Hypatia the philosopher and she was about to greet them. When Cyril learned this he was so struck with envy that he immediately began plotting her murder and the most heinous form of murder at that. For when Hypatia emerged from her house, in her accustomed manner, a throng of merciless and ferocious men who feared neither divine punishment nor human revenge attacked and cut her down, thus committing an outrageous and disgraceful deed against their fatherland. The Emperor was angry, and he would have avenged her had not Aedesius been bribed. Thus the Emperor remitted the punishment onto his own head and family for his descendant paid the price. The memory of these events is still vivid among the Alexandrians.
AND IN THOSE DAYS there appeared in Alexandria a female philosopher, a pagan named Hypatia, and she was devoted at all times to magic, astrolabes and instruments of music, and she beguiled many people through (her) Satanic wiles. And the governor of the city honored her exceedingly; for she had beguiled him through her magic. And he ceased attending church as had been his custom. But he went once under circumstances of danger. [...] And as for the Jewish assassins they expelled them from the city, and pillaged all their possessions and drove them forth wholly despoiled, and Orestes the prefect was unable to render them any help. And thereafter a multitude of believers in God arose under the guidance of Peter the magistrate -- now this Peter was a perfect believer in all respects in Jesus Christ -- and they proceeded to seek for the pagan woman who had beguiled the people of the city and the prefect through her enchantments. And when they learnt the place where she was, they proceeded to her and found her seated on a (lofty) chair; and having made her descend they dragged her along till they brought her to the great church, named Caesarion. Now this was in the days of the fast. And they tore off her clothing and dragged her [till they brought her] through the streets of the city till she died. And they carried her to a place named Cinaron, and they burned her body with fire. And all the people surrounded the patriarch Cyril and named him "the new Theophilus"; for he had destroyed the last remains of idolatry in the city.
PERPETUA
AND
FELICITAS
Then he told me: 'Do not be afraid. I am here, struggling with you.' Then he left. I looked at the enormous crowd who watched in astonishment. I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me; for I knew that I was condemned to die by the beasts. Then out came an Egyptian against me, of vicious appearance, together with his seconds, to fight with me. There also came up to me some handsome young men to be my seconds and assistants. My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man. My seconds began to rub me down with oil (as they are wont to do before a contest). Then I saw the Egyptian on the other side rolling in the dust. Next there came forth a man of marvelous stature, such that he rose above the top of the amphitheatre. He was clad in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes (one on either side) running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that were wondrously made of gold and silver, and he carried a wand like an athletic trainer and a green branch on which there were golden apples. And he asked for silence and said: 'If this Egyptian defeats her he will slay her with the sword. But if she defeats him, she will receive this branch.' Then he withdrew.
OTHER HOLY WOMEN
THE HOLY PROSTITUTE:
ST. MARY OF EGYPT
18. “My homeland, dear brother, was Egypt. When my parents were still alive and I was twelve years old, I rejected my love for them and went to Alexandria. I am ashamed to think about how I first destroyed my own virginity, and how I then threw myself entirely and insatiably into the lust of sexual intercourse. But now I feel it is more decent for me to speak openly what I shall briefly describe, so that you may become aware of my lust and love of pleasure. For more than seventeen years — please forgive me — I was a public temptation to licentiousness, not for payment, I swear, since I did not accept anything although men often wished to pay me. I simply contrived this so that I could seduce many more men, thus turning my lust into a free gift. You should not think that I did not accept payment because I was rich, for I lived by begging [col. 3712] and often by spinning coarse flax fibers. The truth is that I had an insatiable passion and uncontrollable lust to wallow in filth. This was and was considered to be my life, to insult nature with my lust.
19. “So, while I was living in this way, one summer day I saw a huge crowd of Libyan and Egyptian men running toward the sea. I asked someone who happened to be next to me, ‘Where are these men running?,’ and he answered, ‘Everybody is going to Jerusalem for the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, which as usual takes place in a few days.’ Then I said to him, ‘Would they take me with them, if I wanted to go along?’ He replied, ‘If you have the money for your passage and expenses, no one will prevent you.’ Then I said to him, ‘In fact, my brother, I have no money for passage or expenses. But I shall go and get on one of the boats they have hired, and they shall feed me whether they wish it or not, for they will accept my body in lieu of the passage money.’ I wanted to go away with them for this reason—forgive me, my father—so that I could have many lovers, ready to satisfy my lust. I warned you, Father Zosimas, do not force me to describe to you my disgrace.
THE IDEAL HOLY LIFE: ST. THOMAIS OF LESBOS
Transvestite Nuns:
St Mary/Marinos
St Matrona of Perge
Euphrosyne/Smaragdos
Patrikia/Anasthasios
SANTA EUGENIA
Vanne pentita a piangere,
e ammorza nelle lagrime
il tuo impudico ardor.
Tenti invan la mia costanza
Ch’altra speme non t’avanza
Che l’eterno mio rigor

Antonio Caldara, *Il trionfo dell’Innocenza* (Rome, 1711)
SANTA EUGENIA
Vanne pentita a piangere,
e ammorza nelle lagrime
il tuo impudico ardor.
Tenti invan la mia costanza
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