

# VESTALS

*Christina d'Arcy, SRC*

Colombes are girls and young women in the Rosicrucian Tradition, between ten and eighteen years of age, who serve in our Lodge and Chapter Temples. Women who serve when they are older are called Vestals.

The positions of Colombe and Vestal are based on the role that existed in ancient Rome in the Temples of Vesta. These girls and women were the caretakers of the hearth where the divine flame lived.

Vesta was a goddess in Roman mythology. She came from the Greek goddess, Hestia, who had a similar role. In the earliest times, Vesta wasn't shown as a woman. She was simply depicted as a flame. She was the flame. The vestals took care of the hearth – the gateway between worlds. This was the place where the divine and our world merged.

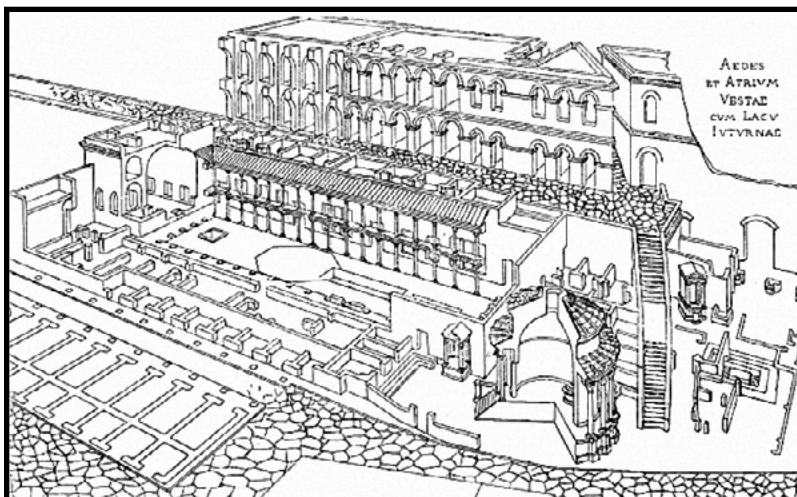
Vestals, who had an important role in Roman spiritual life for hundreds of years, served for thirty years. Once they committed, they had to serve the entire thirty years. The first ten years they participated in training. The next ten years they served in the temple. In the last ten years they trained others who succeeded them.

The vestals were the most revered women in ancient Rome. During this period women had very few rights. Women were legally the property of their husbands and before that, of their fathers. Women were much like slaves. However, the vestals had extraordinary rights, along with their duties.

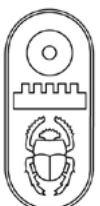
Only six vestals served at one time. As some were finishing up their thirty-year term, others were just beginning. Today, in the Forum in Rome, the Temple of Vesta has been partially reconstructed. It's circular, which is uncommon. Roman temples were usually rectangular. The circle is often associated with the Divine Feminine and eternal life.

Just above the Temple of Vesta in Rome was the House of the Vestals. This was a fifty-room building where the Vestals lived, along with those who assisted them.

These girls and women had an extraordinary opportunity, but, more than that, they had an extraordinary duty. It was believed that the existence of Rome depended on the eternal flame, which they tended, always burning. They were responsible for keeping the hearth, the eternal flame, alive.



*The House of the Vestals in the Roman Forum, above the Atrium of the Vestals and the Temple of Vesta (the circular building on the right).*





*A hearth in an AINU house.*

If we imagine the time when early nomadic people may have first settled in a cave or a hut, the hearth, having a fire within their home, would mean everything to them. They couldn't turn on a heater or a stove like we do today. It meant life to them. It brought light and warmth into their homes. This was the beginning of the hearth, of having a place of fire in the earliest homes, often when it was very challenging to start a fire.

This developed as communities grew. There would be a central hearth. If you joined that community, you would get the fire for your hearth from that central hearth and bring it to your home. This connected you with your community. Eventually this became a way to connect with your republic or empire. Again, Rome depended on this eternal flame to be ever-burning.

At the 2015 AMORC World Convention, Frater Atsushi Honjo, Page 38

Grand Master of the Japanese Grand Lodge, presented [a fascinating program on the AINU indigenous people of Japan](#). Their ancestors were originally part of the Cave Bear clan. In their traditional homes today, there is a big square hearth in the center, with an eternal flame. This is the place where the spirit beings enter our world. When someone in their family goes through transition, it's believed that their soul goes through this gateway to the other world, and they believe that they can communicate with their ancestors through this hearth.

The AINU goddess of the hearth was named Kamui Fuchi, which means Rising Fire Sparks Woman.

She is the goddess who is the caretaker of the sacred flame. She is the keeper of the world between humans and spiritual beings.

Often the hearth is associated with the threshold. Perhaps you've heard of

the tradition of a groom who picks up the bride and carries her across the threshold into their new home. Originally, this was to invoke the blessings of the divine fire that existed within the hearth or the threshold.

There are other traditions that tell the story of a goddess of the hearth or fire itself, such as the myth of Demeter and her daughter, Persephone, in ancient Greece. The ancient Greeks believed that when humans died, they did not have a complete soul. The deities lived forever but humans were more like phantoms in the underworld. One version of the myth says that Persephone was abducted to the underworld by Hades, the god of the underworld, against her will. Another version says that Persephone went to the underworld on her own, out of compassion, like a bodhisattva, to help the people there, so they wouldn't be so afraid.

When Persephone disappeared into the underworld, her mother, Demeter, didn't know where she was. Demeter searched all over Earth, but she couldn't find her beloved daughter. In despair she went to Eleusis, twelve miles from Athens, disguised as an old woman, not like the goddess that she was. The three daughters of the king of Eleusis saw Demeter and felt compassion for her and invited her into their home. They convinced their mother, the queen of Eleusis, that it would be a good idea for this woman to take care of their little brother.

Unbeknownst to them, in gratitude, every night Demeter covered this boy with ambrosia, the food of the deities and placed him in a fire, in order to make him immortal. She was protecting him with the ambrosia as she put him in contact with the divine flame.

One night the queen saw the baby in the fire and screamed. Demeter took the baby out of the fire and handed him to the queen, saying, "Witless are you mortals. You don't know the difference between good and bad!" The boy remained mortal.

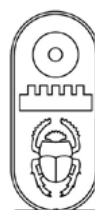
Something similar happened to Achilles. A goddess covered him with ambrosia, but the process was interrupted and she missed one part of his body that remained vulnerable forever – his heel. He would have been immortal forever, but the process wasn't completed.

The ancient Egyptian goddess, Isis, did something similar. She covered a child with nectar (the ancient Egyptians' version of ambrosia) to make this human immortal and she placed the child in the sacred flame. Humans can't stand the sacred flame directly – the ambrosia or the nectar protects us so that we can experience the divine energy directly.

Alchemy uses fire in a similar way as a primary agent of transformation. In alchemy, the sacred flame burns away the dross and reveals the hidden essences.



*An ancient statue of a Vestal in the Roman Forum. Photo from the Rosicrucian archives.*







*A Shakti statue.*

In Hinduism, the most powerful goddess of all is Shakti. She is radiance – the light of creation, the Hindu mother goddess. The word that perfectly describes Shakti is POWER. She is the power of creation, beyond the physical, and the universal source of energy and creativity.

In Kabbalah, the esoteric teachings of Judaism, the word shekinah means “dwell” and refers to the divine presence dwelling in our midst. We often refer to the altar that is in the center of a Rosicrucian Lodge or Chapter temple as the shekinah, however it is actually not the altar or the three candles on it. It is the receptive space just above the candles. The Jewish tradition has many different names for the Divine. Most of them are masculine. Shekinah is a feminine name for the Divine and it is this receptive holding place just above the candles. It is where the divine dwells, where the sacred flame exists among us.

People in the Zoroastrian tradition pray towards a flame. They believe that fire represents the light of the Divine. They also believe that there is a spiritual flame within us which is fed through our pure acts and good thoughts.

This is similar to the training for our Colombes, our vestals, – How do you

prepare to be the caretaker of the hearth where the sacred flame lives? How do you approach that place?

The Doric stand in our Lodge and Chapter temples is our hearth. It is a flame in the East of the Temple. The Colombe sits next to it during our rituals and tends it.

At the beginning of every convocation, the Colombe takes the light from this hearth and lights the three candles on the shekinah in the center of the temple. This activates the shekinah – that Divine Feminine energy in our midst. Again, the word shekinah means “dwell” and it is this divine presence dwelling in our midst.

Some Colombes prepare for their important role by prescribing a character for themselves before they approach the hearth, when they enter the temple. They enter in reverence. They are very particular about what thoughts they allow into their minds and are very careful with their words and actions.

In one of our initiations we learn that the Colombe represents our conscience. This reminds us of how we can act when we are in the presence of a divine flame, which, of course, is ever-burning within us.

Now let's practice a meditation together.

Please sit comfortably. Take three deep breaths, becoming more relaxed with each exhalation.

Imagine that you are in a Rosicrucian temple.

See the Colombe rise from her seat and light her candle from the flame on the Doric stand, which is next to her.

Visualize her walking reverently toward the altar in the center of the temple.

She lights the three candles on the altar, activating the energy of the Shekinah, just above them.

The Divine Presence dwells in our midst.

Just as the shekinah is at the heart of the temple, attune the energy of your heart with the shekinah. Connect your heart with the light in this temple.

Feel your heart center vibrating with this energy—see a yellow radiance extending from your heart center throughout your entire being.

Your heart, your being, is gently enfolded in hands above the candles on the altar.

You exist in the shekinah.

You exist in this place where the Divine Feminine dwells.

Now let us intone the vowel sound EH seven times, feeling this heart center growing stronger, more radiant, and extending throughout your entire being.

The flame dwells within your heart.

So Mote It Be!

May we ever be aware of the sacred flame with which we are entrusted.



*Shekinah in the Grand Temple at Rosicrucian Park.*

