

The Vestal Bend

The disciples of Vesta (Roman Goddess of the hearth) are, like Roman brides, often depicted with a sash tied in a Hercules (reef) knot as a symbol of virtue (and/or fertility in the case of brides).

It is commonly held that other knots were not illustrated in ancient times, through superstitions about unwanted powers. Cyrus Day wrote in 1950 that the reef knot was the only knot he had ever seen faithfully represented in Greek and Roman art. Later he challenged illustrations of other ancient knots as likely errors by the modern copier.

However, one of the statues in the Roman *Atrium Vestae* clearly has a sash tied by an unusual bight-slipped sheet bend. This can be seen in the drawing of the then-recently-excavated statues by [Jordan](#) (1886) and in more recent [photographs](#) of the statue. Slip knots were generally regarded more favourably in superstition, because they are more readily released (Day, 1950).

A key visible feature distinguishing the sheet bend is the single part of the sash entering from the left side of the statue (right side of the photographs) through the collar of the knot on that side. In a reef knot, at least one of the tails (or the loop of a slip knot) must pass through this same collar.

The difference can also be seen by comparing the sash knots shown at right, from sculptures of the Vestal and Fortuna. It is easier to see the half hitch / nipping turn of a sheet bend if the knot is flipped, as in the second knot photo below.

According to van Deman (1908), statues of this form date to the 4th Century BCE, and the one in the *Atrium Vestae* is probably a replica of a Greek statue, later copied as the Roman Goddess Fortuna. There are strong similarities, but the sash of Fortuna is normally depicted with a slip reef knot. Though the evidence is inconclusive on whether this was a Vestal portrait, it was sculpted in the Roman period (2nd to 3rd Century CE), and held in the Vestal precinct.

It is not particularly easy to tie a sheet bend in this bight-slipped form, and the knot does not release completely when the slipped line is pulled, so it seems less than ideal for the purpose. Vestal Virgins presumably had time to arrange their raiment carefully, especially before posing. Of the other sculptures restored in the *Atrium Vestae*, all with visible sash knots have either a reef knot or a slip form of a reef knot. Thus the 'sheet-bend virgin' is exceptional. We can not know what the virtuous maiden or the sculptor was thinking, as they died about 1700 years ago. But sculptors (even copyists) are skilled workers in three dimensions, and this sculptor must have been aware that something different from the Hercules knot was being depicted.

References cited (other URLs are given as hyperlinks in the text)

Day CL (1950) Knots and knot lore. *Western Folklore* **9**, 229-256.

Jordan H (1886) *Der Tempel der Vesta und das Haus der Vestalinnen*. Weidmannsche, Berlin.

van Deman EB (1908) The value of the Vestal statues as originals. *Amer. J. Archaeol.* **12**, 324-342.



Drawing of the 'sheet-bend virgin' by Jordan (1886)



Sash knots of the 'sheet-bend virgin' (left: from a photo by [Carole Raddato on Wikimedia](#)) and Fortuna (right: from a photo by [Rabax63 on Wikimedia](#)).



Bight-slipped sheet bend as depicted on the 'sheet-bend virgin' (top); and rear view of the same knot flipped to show the sheet-bend structure more clearly.