VESTA AND VESTIBULUM: AN OVIDIAN ETYMOLOGY

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Abstract. Ovid’s definition of Vesta from vestibulum at Fasti 6.303 and his statement that the goddess was addressed in the praefatio of prayers (304), though Cicero says she was addressed last, are examined in the light of Augustus’ establishment of a shrine of Vesta in his Palatine property (12 BC). If the shrine was sited in the vestibulum, the etymological connection between Vesta and vestibulum would have made sense to Romans.

Ovid discusses the meaning of the name of Vesta, goddess of the hearth:

stat vi terra sua; vi stando Vesta vocatur,
causaque par Grai nominis esse potest.

at focus a flammis et quod fovet omnia dictus;
qui tamen in primis aedibus ante fuit.

hinc quoque vestibulum dici reor; inde precando
praefamur Vestam, quae loca prima tenet.

(Fasti. 6.299-304)

Earth stands by its own force; Vesta is named from standing by force. The reason for her Greek name may be the same. But the hearth is named from the flames, and because it warms everything; formerly, however, it was at the front of the house. From this too I think the vestibulum is named; as a result, in praying we first address Vesta, who occupies the first place.

There are two problems with this passage: vestibulum (303) and praefamur (304).

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Ovid claims the suggested etymology of vestibulum as his own idea. The only other place in the poem where he uses reor (‘I think’) in this way relates to his suggestion that carpenta (‘carriages’) are named after Carmentis, the mother of Arcadian Evander: haec quoque ab Evandri dicta parente reor (‘I think these too took their name from Evander’s mother’, Fast. 1.620). That derivation has been described as ‘far-fetched and unparalleled’; the same phrase might

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2 S. J. Green, Ovid, Fasti I: A Commentary (Leiden 2004) 283.
equally be applied to the explanation of *vestibulum* from Vesta. What sort of house has its hearth in the forecourt?

The nearest parallel to Ovid’s idea is the rejected definition of *vestibula* in Nonius Marcellus’ book on the proper use of words:


(De Prop. Serm. 75)

Some think that *vestibula* are distinguished under this particular meaning that *Vestae*—that is, altars and hearths—are normally kept in the outer entrances and areas of houses. But whether or not they should be understood in this sense, it is inconsistent with the proper use of the word. One finds in early authorities that *vestibula* are so called because of this meaning, that in these places those who had come to pay their respects to the masters of the houses were accustomed to stand until they were given permission to enter, and from this standing and (as it were) ‘stabling’ the outer entrances of houses were named *vestibula*.

The emphasis on outer entrances (*primi ingressus*) makes it likely that by *spatia domorum* Nonius was referring to the forecourt area immediately outside the door, as described by a learned author of late republican or Augustan date:


*C. Aelius Gallus, in libro de significacione verborum quae ad ius civile pertinent secundo, vestibulum esse dicit non in ipsis aedibus neque partem aedium, sed locum ante ianuam domus vacuum, per quem a via aditus accessusque ad aedem est, cum dextra sinistraque ianuam tecta saepiunt viae iuncta atque ipsa ianua procul a via est, area vacanti intersita.*

(Gell. N4 16.5.3)

Gaius Aelius Gallus, in the second book of his work on the meaning of words relating to civil law, says that the *vestibulum* is not in the house itself, nor is it part of the house, but is an open space before the door of the house, through which there is an approach and access to the house from the street, while on the right and left the door is hemmed in by buildings extended to the street and the door itself is at a distance from the street, separated from it by this vacant space.

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3 W. M. Lindsay (ed.), *Nonius Marcellus: De Compendiosa Doctrina Libri 1-XX 1-3* (Leipzig 1903).

4 J. C. Rolfe (ed. and tr.), *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius* 1-3 (London 1927-1928); the passage is Ael. Gall. fr. 7 in H. Funaioli (ed.), *Grammaticae Romanae Fragmenta* (Stuttgart 1969) 547; it is also quoted by Macrobr. Sat. 6.8.16.
According to Vitruvius, magnificent forecourts were not appropriate to *qui communi sunt fortuna* (‘those persons of common fortune’, *De Arch.* 6.5.1); for nobles and magistrates, however, who needed to be consulted by the citizens, the architect must provide forecourts that were *vestibula regalia alta* (‘regal and lofty’, 6.5.1). Such a *vestibulum* might contain portrait statues and have military trophies hung on the walls. But it is hard to see why it should feature a hearth.

The hearth is symbolic of the household’s privacy, as the formulaic phrase *foci penetrales* (‘innermost hearths’, *Cic.* *Har.* *Resp.* 57.13; *Catull.* 68.102; *Verg.* *Aen.* 5.660) is enough to show. Of course it must be inside the house. In the old days it had been in the *atrium*, where the family cooked and ate together (Cato *Orig.* fr. 7.12; Serv. *ad Aen.* 1.726); the classic case was Manius Curius *ad focum sedens* (‘sitting at the hearth’, *Cic.* *Rep.* 3.40; *Sen.* 56). That may be what Ovid refers to (6.302), since the *atrium* of a simple old-fashioned house would be the first room you entered. No doubt Frazer in the Loeb edition had that in mind when he overtranslated *in primis aedibus* as ‘in the first room of the house’; Bömer’s ‘vorne im Haus’ is more accurate.

Some people in Aulus Gellius’ time evidently believed that the term *vestibulum* could refer to the *atrium* (*NA* 16.5.2; *Macrob.* *Sat.* 6.18.15), but he easily refuted them by referring to the Aelius Gallus passage quoted above. Indeed, his learned friend Sulpicius Apollinaris provided the same derivation that Nonius found in his ‘early authorities’: *consistione et quasi quadam stabulatione* (‘from standing and [as it were] stabling’, *Gell.* *NA* 16.5.10). In any case, it is no help for our passage. In Ovid’s time it was self-evident that the *vestibulum* was in front of the house: you went in from the *vestibulum* and you came out into the *vestibulum* (e.g., *Plaut.* *Mostell.* 817; *Varro*, *Ling.* 7.81; *Cic.* *Caecin.* 35; *Vitr.* *De Arch.* 6.7.5; Livy 1.40.5). So why should it be associated with Vesta?

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5 R. J. Littlewood, *A Commentary on Ovid’s Fasti, Book 6* (Oxford 2006) 96 is surely mistaken in defining *vestibulum* as ‘a narrow passage leading to the street’.

6 Statues: Juv. 7.125f.; e.g., the houses of Tarquin (*Plin.* *HN* 34.26); Caesar (*Cass. Dio* 44.18.2); C. Silius (*Tac. Ann.* 11.35.1); Nero (*Suet. Ner.* 31.1). Statues and spolia: *Plin.* *HN* 35.7; e.g., the palace of Latinus (*Verg.* *Aen.* 7.177-86). Rams of warships: *Cic.* *Phil.* 2.68 (house of Pompey).

7 See F. Vollmer, in S. Clavadetscher et al. (edd.), *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (Munich 1900-) 6.1 cols 988.1-989.80 s.v. ‘focus’ for its use as the *intima et sacra pars domi* (‘the private and sacred part of the house’), the home of the Lares.

8 M. Chassignet (ed. and tr.), *Caton: Les Origines (Fragments)* (Paris 1986).

Praefamur (304) is Heinsius’ conjecture for quae famur in the manuscripts.\(^{10}\) Ovid’s train of thought from primis aedibus to loca prima makes Heinsius’ reading praefamur practically inevitable, and it is accepted by Frazer; Bömer; Alton, Wormell and Courtney; and Goold.\(^{11}\) Schilling, however, reads affamur (‘we speak to’).\(^{12}\)

If praefamur is correct, it seems to involve Ovid in a self-contradiction. In the first book of the Fasti (1.171f.), he asks why sacrifice, which necessarily involves prayer, is offered first to Janus. There is ample confirmation of Janus’ priority in prayer and sacrifice: Cic. Nat. D. 2.67; Mart. 8.8.3, 10.28.2; Arn. Adv. Nat. 3.29; August. De Civ. D. 7.9; Serv. Dan. Aen. 7.610; Macrobr. Sat. 1.9.3 and Or. Gent. Rom. 3.7. The earliest of our authorities, Cicero, links sacrifice with the name of the divinity who came last—none other than Vesta herself:

> vis autem eius ad aras et focos pertinet, itaque in ea dea, quod est rerum custos intumarum, omnis et precatio et sacrificatio extrema est.  

(Nat. D. 2.67\(^{13}\))

Her power relates to altars and hearths, and so, because this goddess is the guardian of the inmost things, all prayer and sacrifice ends with her.

What Ovid says is quite incompatible with that.

If we accept Heinsius’ emendation, as I think we must, then Ovid places Vesta in the praefatio of Roman prayers. But we have very good early evidence that the gods normally addressed in the praefatio were Janus and Jupiter, whose respective responsibilities were what comes first and what matters most: Cato Agr. Orig. 141.2; Fab. Max. Serv. fr. 4P ap. Macrobr. Sat. 1.16.25; Varro Antiquitates Divinae fr. 23b:\(^{14}\) penes Ianum sunt prima, penes Iovem summa. How has Ovid’s Vesta found herself in that company?

It is true that, in fifth- and fourth-century Athens, prayers and sacrifices began with Hestia (Ar. Vesp. 846; Pl. Cra. 401b1), and that Ovid in this very passage takes for granted the equivalence of Hestia and Vesta. But since the Athenian custom must have been as well known in Cicero’s time as it was in

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\(^{10}\) D. Heinsius (ed.), *Pub. Ovidii Nasonis Opera* 1-3 (Leiden 1629-1630).


\(^{13}\) H. Rackham (ed. and tr.), *Cicero: De Natura Deorum; Academica* (London 1933).

Ovid’s, that in itself is not enough to explain their mutually incompatible accounts of the Roman situation. It seems that between (say) 45 BC and AD 5, something must have happened to alter the Romans’ perception of Vesta and her worship.

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Ovid himself provides the startling evidence, in his item on 28 April. That was the first day of the *Ludi Florales*. But since the games extended into May, he puts Flora off to the next book:

\[
\text{tunc repetam, nunc me grandius urget opus.}
\]
\[
\text{aufer, Vesta, diem. cognati Vesta recepta est}
\]
\[
\text{limine: sic iusti constituere patres.}
\]

*(Fast. 4.948-50)*

That’s when I’ll resume; now a greater work is pressing on me. Claim the day, Vesta! Vesta has been received at her kinsman’s threshold. So the just Fathers have decreed.

The retiring goddess ‘of the inmost things’ has now become assertive. What Ovid refers to is reported more prosaically in the Augustan calendars:

fer. q. e. d. sig. Vest. in domo p. dedic.\(^{15}\)

*(Fasti Caeretani)*

Holiday because on that day the image of Vesta was dedicated in the . . . house.

feriae ex s. c. quod eo di[e signu]m et [aedis] Vestae in domu imp. Caesaris Augu[sti po]ntif. ma[x.] dedicatast Quirinio et Valgio cos.\(^{16}\)

*(Fasti Praenestini)*

Holiday by decree of the Senate, because on that day in the consulship of Quirinius and Valgius [12 BC] the image and shrine(?) of Vesta was dedicated in the house of Imperator Caesar Augustus, *pontifex maximus*.

Vesta was now ‘in the house of Augustus’ in the same sense that Apollo was.\(^{17}\)

\(^{15}\) T. Mommsen, in H. Dessau *et al.* (edd.), *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (Berlin 1863-) 12 1.213 expands *domo p. as domo pontificio*; A. Degrassi (ed.), *Inscriptiones Italiae* 13.2 (Rome 1963) 66 as *domo Palatino*. Perhaps it should be *domo publico*: see Cass. Dio 54.27.3, 55.12a.5 for Augustus’ house as partly public property in 12 BC and wholly so in AD 3.

\(^{16}\) For the restoration of the text, see M. Guarducci, ‘Enea e Vesta’, *MDAI(R)* 78 (1971) 89-118, taf. 63.3.

\(^{17}\) For the parallelism, see Ovid *Fast. 4.951f.*, *Met. 15.864f.*
The Apollo temple was not of course inside a house, and we know from Dio and Velleius that the site on which it was built had been one of the houses that Octavian’s agents bought to extend his property in the 30s BC (Cass. Dio 49.15.5; Vell. Pat. 2.81.3). But since Suetonius describes the temple as in ea parte Palatinae domus . . . quam fulmine ictam (‘in that part of the Palatine house which had been struck by lightning’, Aug. 29.3), it is clear that the phrase in domu could signify ‘within the Augustan complex’. Augustus did not have a palace, but owned several neighbouring houses with streets and alleys between them. The Apollo temple and the new shrine of Vesta were public buildings within this (originally) private property.

Vesta’s new situation no doubt explains why Ovid refers to the pontifex maximus as Vesta’s priest (Fast. 3.427, 3.699, 5.573; Met. 15.778), and to the goddess herself as Trojan (‘Ilian’ Vesta, Fast. 3.29, 3.142, 3.417f., 6.227, 6.365, 6.456), and thus related to the princeps. These were clearly innovations appropriate to the goddess in her more conspicuous Augustan manifestation. So too, perhaps, was the use of Vesta’s name in the praefatio of public prayers. If so, then the problem of praefamur (304) is solved: something had indeed happened to change things since Cicero’s time.

As for the problem of vestibulum (303), it may help to look at the so-called ‘Sorrento base’ (figure 1), which certainly illustrates features of the Augustan Palatine on three of its sides: the door with the corona civica, Apollo with the Sibyl, and Magna Mater. On the fourth side was a sacrifice to Vesta, with the goddess’s round temple in the background. Some scholars still identify it as

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the temple in the Forum, but given Ovid’s evidence for Vesta at the house of Augustus, that is neither necessary nor (I think) likely: the fourth side of the base should also represent a Palatine site, and Guarducci’s arguments to that effect have not been refuted.

Because the side of the base showing Vesta and the side showing the door with the corona civica both have an Ionic colonnade in the background, it has been suggested that they form a single scene. If that is right, then the formal entrance to Augustus’ house and the Palatine shrine of Vesta were enclosed in the same portico, ‘perhaps in the form of a vestibulum’.

When Ovid says that Vesta has been received cognati . . . limine (‘at her kinsman’s threshold’, Fast. 4.949f.), he may mean no more than in domo Augusti. But limen is a term very close to vestibulum; for instance, the place where the clients waited for the morning salutatio is referred to in the sources by both terms, and when Pliny describes the sort of triumphal spoils that we know decorated Augustus’ vestibulum, he uses the phrase circa limina (‘around the threshold’). So it is at least possible that Ovid was using the word precisely.

If it is indeed the case that Vesta’s Palatine shrine was conspicuously sited in the most celebrated vestibulum in Rome, that may provide a solution to the problem of Fasti 6.303: after 12 BC, a suggested etymological connection between Vesta and vestibulum would have made sense to any contemporary Roman.

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25 T. P. Wiseman (tr.), Flavius Josephus. Death of an Emperor: Translated with an Introduction and Commentary (Exeter 1991) 107-09, fig. 3 (reproduced here as fig. 1).
27 See, e.g., Cic. Caecin. 35; Mil. 75; Verg. Aen. 2.469 (with Serv. Dan. ad Verg. Aen. 2.469), 6.575; Livy 30.12.11.
28 Limen: see L. C. Meijer, in TLL 7.2 cols 1405.21-40 s.v. ‘limen’. Vestibulum: e.g., Cic. Att. 4.2.5; De Or. 1.200; Vitr. De Arch. 6.5.1f.; Sen. Ep. 84.12; Cons. Marc. 10.1; Stat. Silv. 4.4.42.
29 Plin. HN 35.7; cf. Ov. Tr. 3.1.33f. for Augustus’ house.