

**Hestia and Hermes: The Greek Imagination of Motion and Space  
(2001)**

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*“You live among men’s and women’s beautiful dwelling places”*

On the foot of the big statue of Zeus in Olympia, Phydias represented the twelve Olympian gods. Between Helios, the sun and Selene, the moon, he arranged them in six couples: Zeus-Hera, Poseidon-Amphitrita, Hephaistos-Charis, Apollo-Artemis, Aphrodite-Eros and Hermes-Hestia.<sup>1</sup>

Hestia and Hermes are not husband and woman, nor brother and sister, nor mother and son either. They are neighbors, or better: friends. Where Hermes loiters is Hestia never far. Where Hestia stays, Hermes can appear at any moment.

In its polarity, the couple Hestia-Hermes expresses the tension which is proper to the archaic representation of space. Space needs a center, a fix point from which directions and orientations can be defined. But space is also the locus of motion, and that implies the possibility of transitions, of passage from any point to any other.

Hestia and Hermes belong to very archaic, pre-Hellenistic representations. Hestia is the hearth. In modern Greek, *istia* still means the hearth or the household. The name Hermes comes from *herma(x)*, *hermaion* or *hermaios lophos*, heap of stone. Before he became an Olympian god, Hermes was the personification of lithoboly, the gesture of throwing stones on tombs. He was the heap of stone or the wooden pole on a grave, but also the *phallos*. Hermes unites death and fertility in one figure.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Hestia—Hermès. Sur l’expression religieuse de l’espace et du mouvement chez les Grecs;”, in Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et Pensée chez les Grecs : Étude de Psychologie Historique*, 2 vol., Paris, 1974, pp. 155 - 201.

Hestia and Hermes, personifications of the hearth and of the protecting grave are the gods of the domestic domain. They are also the symbols of the gestures of women and men and of their interplay. Through that interplay, the house becomes a unique place in the world, a *topos* in a *cosmos*. Hestia and Hermes allow us a glance into Greek domesticity. In their interplay, we can understand something of the Greek household and its works and of hospitality. “You live both on the surface of the soil, in the beautiful dwelling places of men and women, and you are filled with mutual *philía*,”<sup>2</sup> said a Homeric hymn.

Hestia and Hermes are the *Epichthonian* gods, the gods of the dwelled soil. They are everywhere where people make fire, trace limits, build walls and a roof over their heads. Together, they are the gods of orientation and of the tracing of limits.

Hestia sits in the middle. She stands still, but she is ubiquitous. Hermes, the quick one, can never be caught, like Mercury. He never appears where he is expected and reigns over the space of travelers. Hestia embodies the gestures of settling down, of enclosing and of keeping. Hermes manifests the gestures of opening, trespassing, and speaks of mobility and of the encounter with the other. He is the god of transitions.<sup>3</sup> He keeps guard on doors and limits, the entrance of cities as well as crossways and has for this reason many heads: Hermes *trikephalos*, *tretrakephalos*. Since graves are doors to the underworld, he is in necropoles and cemeteries. He accompanies the souls of the dead to the Hades: Hermes *psychagogos*, *psychopompos*. He is the protector of thieves, but he also protects houses from thieves. He is the messenger between gods and humans: Hermes *angelos*.

All those different aspects of Hermes’s activity become only coherent in relation to Hestia’s. Hermes makes mobile, Hestia centers. Hestia’s place is the hearth, whose deeply rooted stone is a symbol of constancy. Hermes’s place is near the door, that he protects from his companions the

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage: Etude Systématique des Rites*. Paris: 1909.

thieves: Hermes *pyloros*.

Hermes's characteristics and activities are the asymmetrical complements of what Hestia is and does. Hestia personifies the *charis*, the force or the "spirit" of the gift. Since "gifts make friends" and facilitate the encounter with strangers, should not Hermes, instead of Hestia be the god of gifts?

Hestia reigns over the cycles of festive meals within the *oikos*. During these meals, the *oikos* was, so to speak, closed upon itself. The ones who sat at a common table were often called *homokapoi*, the ones that breathe the same smoke. Strangers had no access to it, and it was said that the food taken during these Hestian festivities was poisonous for them. But there is a verb which is formed after the name Hestia: *hestiain*, which means to receive a stranger into the closest circle of the house, there, where no stranger can be accepted. The guest had to squat before Hestia, the hearth, and through this act he ceased to be a stranger. He was taken into the hierarchy of the *oikos*.

Yet, there was another, "equalitarian" form of hospitality which was placed under the sign of Hermes. The Greek name that refers to it is *xenos*, which means the same as the Latin word *hostis*: the one with whom gifts and counter-gifts have been exchanged and who is therefore "equal." *Xenos* is the stranger who is not integrated into the domestic hierarchy, but received as an equal. Originally, it's an oriental, not a Greek concept, proper to a world of caravans and itinerant merchants.

### **Asymmetrical Complementarity**

At every step of our analysis, we have acknowledged a polarity, or better an asymmetrical complementarity between constancy and change, center and periphery, the closed and the open, the

interior and the exterior. That complementarity shapes all places, as well as the condition of their occupants. We are introduced into a world where by telling me which place you occupy and how, you tell me who you are. Neither term of the polarity can be understood alone, but always only in complement to the other.

The tension between these two poles mirrors itself even in the definition of everyone of the terms: there is a Hestia in Hermes, a Hermes in Hestia. As we have already seen with the paradox of hospitality. Hermes's activities can always be interpreted in a Hestian light, and vice-versa. In this Hestian light, activities like bartering, buying and selling, which are Hermes's prerogatives, can be seen as extensions of the logic of the gift, over which Hestia reigns.

Inversely, Hestia reigns over keeping activities in the house. In Hermes's light, these activities look like an accumulation, an interpretation that became widespread in classical times, where the granaries of the *polis*, managed by men, were called the Hestia *Koinê*. So Xenophon compared Hestia with the bee queen, "that stays in the middle of the beehive and sees that honey be well kept." He gives the cells of the beehive the same name that was given to the chambers in which precious goods were kept: *thalamoi*. As Hestia *Koinê*, Hestia becomes the symbol of the accumulation of power of the city and of the union of their inhabitants around their granaries.

### **Hestia and Hermes in Greek Philosophy**

Plato gives us a striking example of the absorption of Hermes by Hestia. Hermes is, you remember, the stone heap, the wooden pole on graves. As such, he personifies the central pole of a house, the stem of the big tree in the house patio or the *phallos*. Hestia is the stone of the hearth, that roots the house into the soil, but also the column of smoke that relates the underworld with the sky. Plato lets the two figures merge into one. Hestia is for him the axis of the world. He plays

with—etymologically not quite founded—homonimities, allowing himself to compare Hestia with the pillar (*histiê*), the mast of a ship (*istós*), the woman at the loom, whom he called *histia*. In the *Republic*, he compares Hestia with the spinning Goddess Anankê, who sits at the center of the universe and whose spindle's motion regulates the revolution of the heavenly spheres. Anankê also means necessity, or the erected phallus. Plato even invents two poetic etymologies for Hestia: *ousia*, the essence, and *hosia*, motion.

Hestia, who is originally the principle of stability, becomes here the principle impetus of all motions, as if she would give birth to Hermes himself. Hestia's philosophical priority reminds us that the peculiar place which the house can only be brought forth by the woman, because she is it, who gives birth to the living body. Since myths are much older than philosophical ideas, this predominance can be a reminder of a time which gave women a kind of prominence.

For the Greek, space and motion were not the neutral concepts that they are today. They were loaded with the asymmetrical complementarity between female and male domains: they were gendered.

### **The Historical Interpretation of a Myth**

Now we can go to ancient Greece, and try to interpret dwelling relations in terms of the asymmetrical complementarity that we saw at work in a fundamental myth, rather than in the light of the neutral space of modern planning. But before this, we must reflect on the use of myths in the interpretation of social realities. Beate Wagner-Hasel, a German historian, writes in this respect: "...the analysis of myths never 'allows to draw conclusions on effective relations' but only to interpret the leading symbols of a society."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Beate Wagner-Hasel, "Das Privat wird politisch. Die Perspektive 'Geschlecht' in der Altertumswissenschaft," in Ursula Becher u. a. (Hrsg.), *Weiblichkeit in geschichtlicher Perspektive*, Frankfurt a. M., 1989, pp. 11 - 50.

Yet, this interpretation of symbols can prevent us from colonizing the past with our certainties. We must avoid, B. Wagner-Hasel writes, to co-opt the past as the model or the origin of the present. On the contrary, we must meet it in its otherness and be ready for the almost unimaginable.

The unimaginable is a society shaped by gender, a category that Ivan Illich choose as the title of a book (...) and by which he means an articulation of social spaces following gendered categories, without stipulating *a priori* hierarchies and relations of submission.<sup>5</sup>

When one looks at society through the prism of gender, he is led to speak of the relations between men and women in a way that does not reduce them to a discourse about their position but rather considers “the gendered occupation of spaces.”<sup>6</sup>

*Relations of domination* can arise, but they must be studied on the background of gendered spaces. They must be considered different from the *power relations* which characterize modern disgendered space. The moments in which relations of domination are instituted or transformed must again be matched with changes in the gendered occupancy of spaces and of its symbolic meaning. Such moments are for instance the introduction of the alphabet or, close to us, of motorized transportation, which is the foundation of modern forms of power.

This understanding opens, following B. Wagner-Hasel, to a new conception of old history, namely to “a conception of society which is not organized following the categories of law, economy, politics, the religious and the social, private vs public.”<sup>7</sup>

In another essay, we will check this by contrasting the homeric house with the house of the classical *polis* in the 5th century. In the mean time, the meaning of alphabetic writing underwent a fundamental change.

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<sup>5</sup> Beate Wagner-Hasel, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The myth of Hestia and Hermes allows us to look at modern space as it were from the other end of the glass. We begin to glimpse by means of which go and fro between the present and the past, 'to-day' can be a matter of historical inquiry.

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