

Stuck in the Middle with You: Vediovis, God of Transitions and In-between Places

The Roman deity Vediovis has been baffling scholars for a century. He is clearly an old Italic god, deserving of the title *Pater*—but a god of what? By the 1st century CE even ancient authors were uncertain of Vediovis' functions and origins. Ovid and Festus saw in Vediovis a young Jupiter, but this etymology of the god's name is dismissed by modern scholars (*Fasti* 3.437-448; Paulus, p. 379). Gellius suggested that he was an anti-Jupiter, who harms rather than helps (*N.A.* 5.12). Martianus Capella, probably drawing on Etruscan sources, mentioned that in the divinatory partition of the sky Vediovis presides over the fifteenth part, an inauspicious area in close association with the *di manes*, Nocturnus, and Saturn (*I*, 15). Gellius also recorded that Vediovis received a goat as sacrificial animal, which was killed *ritu humano*, which may have had funerary associations. Macrobius described an evocation formula which invoked Vediovis alongside Dis Pater and the *di manes* (*III* 9,10). Modern scholars have tended to focus on Vediovis' underworld associations. Frothingham proposed that the “ve-“ in Vediovis' name be understood as “the idea of unbridled violence, of undisciplined force,” and that Vediovis was an old volcanic god associated with subterranean lightning and the underworld (Frothingham 1917).

This reconstruction does not, however, explain why Vediovis received two temples in Rome. The first was located *inter duos lucos*, between the peaks of the Capitoline Hill, presiding over the Asylum established by Romulus. The temple's foundation may have been attributed to Romulus, but the oldest structural remains date to the early 2nd century BCE. The second was vowed by Lucius Furius Purpureo at the Battle of Cremona, and was built on Tiber Island, which was located *inter duos pontes* (*Livy XXXI*.21.12). Holland, focusing on the presence of Vediovis on Tiber Island, downplayed his underworld associations and argued that Vediovis was instead

an old road god (Holland 1961). Yet this explanation also omits key evidence for Vediovis' character.

In addition, the Capitoline temple of Vediovis was excavated in 1939, and the marble cult statue found; though missing its attributes, the statue has more parallels with Apollo than Jupiter. Vediovis has also been identified on several coins of the 1st century BCE. He wears a laurel crown, or sometimes the winged headband of Hermes/Mercury; he wields lightning bolts; and he is associated with the Dioscuri and the Lares. These attributes complicate the interpretation of Vediovis.

I offer here no new linguistic interpretations, but instead suggest that there is profit in taking a closer look at the symbols and places with which Vediovis was associated. Vediovis' two temples in Rome were located *inter duos lucos* and *inter duos pontes*. This cannot be coincidence. He must have been seen as a god of transitions and transitional places. One of the transitions that he was associated with—perhaps his main area of expertise—was the transition from life to death. This would explain his links with the underworld, the strange rite of sacrifice, the wings of Mercury, and the caps of the Dioscuri—who themselves traveled back and forth between the underworld and Mt. Olympus. Nor should we forget that Lucius Furius Purpureo vowed the Tiber temple to Vediovis during a battle, linking Vediovis also with death in war. Tiber Island was itself a transitional place, in-between the streams of the Tiber, located on the early border between Rome and Veii, associated with the unsettling rural deity Faunus. On the Capitoline, however, Vediovis was connected by proximity and legend to Romulus' asylum, and there perhaps his function was to watch over the transition from “outsider” to “community member”. The men who were drawn to the Asylum of Romulus were accepted without regard for their past; in a sense, they were beginning a new life as a member of the Roman community. On

Tiber Island, the temple of Vediovis was located just across the street from that of Asclepius, and both temples were dedicated on January 1st (of different years). Again, this connection must have been deliberate. Sickness is, especially if it is serious enough, a state between life and death; and we should not forget the myths of Asclepius raising people from the dead, reversing the transition. Surely there were also people who came to the sanctuary of Asclepius for healing and died, so it would make sense to have a deity associated with the passage of souls nearby. Thus I propose that Vediovis be redefined as a god of transitions, especially—but not exclusively—the transition from life to death.

Bibliography

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- Holland, L.A. 1961. *Janus and the Bridge*. Roma: American Academy in Rome.