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Causa recens melior est: Multiple Aetiologies and ‘Historical’ Layers in Ovid’s Fasti

In his *Fasti* entry for the *dies natalis* of the temple of Concordia (1.637–50), Ovid presents the historical reasons for the temple’s foundation and renovation in the language of aetiology. The first *causa* was the resolution of a secession the plebs under Furius Camillus; the second is introduced with the words, *causa recens melior*: in 7 BCE Tiberius vowed to renovate the temple using funds from his German campaigns. Though the second *aetion* is marked as the better, both are reported, true, and indeed necessary to understand the meanings and associations of Concordia in Julio-Claudian Rome. This passage begins my discussion of the interaction between history and aetiology in the *Fasti*. In particular, I consider how this passage’s model of historically layered *causae* can help readers theorize Ovid’s productive play with multiple aetiologies elsewhere in the poem.

Some recent readers have interpreted the *Fasti*’s often contradictory *causae* as a tool for deconstruction of the calendar’s national and Augustan ideology, with multiple explanations problematizing the ‘authorizing’ function of aetiology and destabilizing the authority of the poet, the internal narrator, and even the calendar itself (e.g. Newlands [1992], [1995]; Barchiesi [1991], [1997]); others are giving thought, however, to the productive possibilities of Ovid’s collections and inventions of variants. At times, a set of aetiologies provides a complex picture of a rite inaccessible through the lens of a single *aetion* (e.g. Porte [1985]; Harries [1989]; Miller [1991]; and, most extensively, Loehr [1996]). This paper contributes to the latter body of work by exploring the deployment of ‘history’ in the negotiation of these multiple aetiologies. Using the model of historical layering of *aetia* drawn from the Concordia passage above, I examine two more complex and controversial sets of aetiologies in the *Fasti*. In the first, the aetiological explorations of the festival of Anna Perenna proceed chronologically from the legendary to the Republican past, allowing the reader to understand each as a new ‘historical’ interpretation. Though the *aetia* may be spurious, the model of historical layering of meanings provides the reader with a framework to process them not as alternatives but as a productive set. The second passage, Ovid’s set of *causae* for the Parilia, is treated by Beard (1987) in her argument that the Roman ritual calendar and its exegesis “project Rome and Roman history, and . . . adapt the image projected” (11). My reading of this section (drawing also on Graf [1992] and Feeney [1998]), turns Beard’s observations back to the *Fasti*, considering how Ovid’s collection of *aetia* is organized and framed by the idea of historical layering of exegetical meanings.