CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Defining 'public' and 'private'

What does it mean to call a space or a building 'public' or 'private'? Books on space and architecture in the ancient world often use the word 'public' as a handy means of organising their material into subheadings: 'public architecture' versus 'domestic architecture', or 'public' as one of a larger group of categories including 'domestic', 'commercial', 'religious', 'recreational', and so on.[1] These divisions are useful and often harmless, but for some purposes they fall short. Is a shop public? It might be privately owned and even built into a private house, but it serves a public purpose. Textbooks might have separate chapters on 'temples' and 'public architecture': does this mean temples are not public? Some space within the Roman elite house is regularly considered public, even though one common definition of 'public space' is simply 'non-residential space'.[2]

Any discussion of the public and the private in the Roman world faces problems of definition. The Romans (and non-Romans) who created and used the spaces I examine did not consider them either 'public' or 'private', since they did not speak English. There is nothing to stop us looking at the Roman world with our own concepts and definitions in mind, but that would make for a short book: it is obvious that the English terms do not work perfectly when applied to Roman culture.[3] The vocabulary is different, and so are the cultural practices lying behind it.[4] An Englishman's

[1] See, e.g. Ward-Perkins (1981) 45; Sear (1982) 31. Anderson (1997) 241–2 and *passim* has substantial discussion of the question; he eventually divides his material into 'Public Architecture and Shared Space' and 'Domestic Architecture and Individual Space'.

[2] Wallace-Hadrill (1994) 3–37 is the seminal argument.

[3] The same is true for any other language; for some thoughts on *Öffentlichkeit*, see esp. Rüpke (1995b) 605–11; Winterling (2009) 58–76.

[4] For this reason, I have not devoted much time in this book to modern theories of the public and the private: they tend (correctly) to be defiantly situated in their own time and place, dependent on post-Enlightenment concepts of the individual or the economics of industrialism. On the implications for classical scholarship, see esp. Wagner (1998).

home is his castle; an elite Roman's domus was at least partly public. The disconnect is a useful result in itself: it helps us to see how complicated the relationship between ancient civilisations and our own can be, and more generally how concepts we think of as 'natural' and 'normal' vary between different cultures. To make further headway, however, we need to be prepared to abandon some of our own concepts and investigate the concepts Roman culture used to categorise space.

There were concepts in Roman culture which closely resemble our own 'public' and 'private', and for that reason (and to avoid unwieldy paraphrase) I have used the English terms throughout this book. They were not exactly the same as our 'public' and 'private', so we must be alert to unexpected nuances in the Roman concepts and places where the English terms become misleading. In the end, however, a fundamental similarity emerges. Both pairs are often used as if they are natural, exclusive, and exhaustive descriptions of some objective quality of the world around us. But both in modern and ancient culture these seemingly simple concepts conceal a morass of grey areas, change over time, and even deliberate manipulation which do not merely complicate the picture of the public/private divide but call into question its usefulness as an analytic framework, and perhaps even its very existence. English vocabulary cannot adequately describe the Roman domus, or the Atrium Vestae, or Pompey's theatre–portico–temple–garden–house complex on the Campus Martius – but neither could Latin. The Roman concepts are hard to pin down not just because they are different from our own, but because they were always unstable. Public space, both the overall concept and the specific places gathered under that heading, needed to be constantly defined and redefined.

An extreme example: the Atrium Vestae

A single example can demonstrate how hard it is to label space as either public or private. The Forum Romanum was one of Rome's most public places by any reckoning (and Chapters 3 and 4 treat it in detail). But the Forum was an open and unbounded space. As a unit, it had little architectural definition, and the buildings which traced out the rough shape of the square are each hard to categorise. None is harder than the Atrium Vestae, the precinct of the goddess Vesta. The Atrium Vestae was a sacred shrine, one of the most important locations in Roman religion. As well as the famous round temple, it included residential space, in the form of living quarters for the Vestals. These priestesses, who themselves stood between public and private as well as male and female in the Roman

imagination, were not cloistered nuns but prominent participants in Roman public life. They had roles to play in politics, performed in highly visible rituals, and circulated at the most elevated levels of society. They were also under constant public scrutiny in what might for lack of a better word be called their private life, since their chastity was vital to Rome's continued prosperity.[5]

The place where the Vestals lived and worked stood in the south-eastern corner of the Forum Romanum (Map 2). The building which can be seen today is imperial, but below it excavators have discovered remains of a complex going back to the archaic period.[6] In the second century BCE, it took the form of an open space bounded by a precinct wall. Inside, there were two main buildings: the round temple of Vesta itself, and a separate structure against the southern side. Though the second building is very fragmentary (the internal walls that survive mostly date from the very end of the Republic), the overall shape of the second-century phase is clear. A set of rooms opened off an inner courtyard: at least in the later period, there were six of them, and they have traditionally and reasonably been interpreted as the bedrooms of the six Vestals (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2).[7]

A large doorway, placed on the central axis of the precinct, led into the complex from the street. It is less easy to reconstruct the entrance to the Vestals' living area. Perhaps there was a doorway (now lost) in the inner courtyard wall.[8] One team of excavators, however, discovered a narrow stairway tucked behind the temple. They suggest that this was the main way into the residential area, leaving the internal courtyard entirely separate from the precinct proper; in a first-century BCE redevelopment of the area, restrictions on access were made concrete when a permanent cubicle suitable for a doorkeeper was installed at the top of the stairs (Fig. 1.3).[9] In any case, the space as a whole is divided by the courtyard wall, implying a difference in visibility and accessibility between the main precinct and the living quarters.

Next door to the Atrium Vestae was the Domus Publica, the official residence of the Pontifex Maximus.[10] This building was laid out, as far as archaeology can show, as a traditional atrium house.[11] It would have had a

[5] On the Vestals themselves, see Plut. *Vit. Num.* 9–10; Gell. *NA* 1.12. The modern bibliography on the Vestals is vast; most relevant are Beard (1980); Parker (2004).
[6] Archaeological evidence: Scott (2009); Arvanitis (2010).
[7] Scott (2009) 28; Arvanitis (2010) 51–3.
[8] So Arvanitis (2010) 50, fig 21.
[9] Scott (2009) 38–9.
[10] Suet. *Iul.* 46; Cass. Dio 54.27.3. Perhaps originally the Rex Sacrorum's residence: Serv. *ad Aen.* 8.363; Coarelli (1983b) 22–3, 70–2; *contra* Carandini (2004) 58–60.
[11] Archaeological material: Carettoni (1978–80) 346–55.

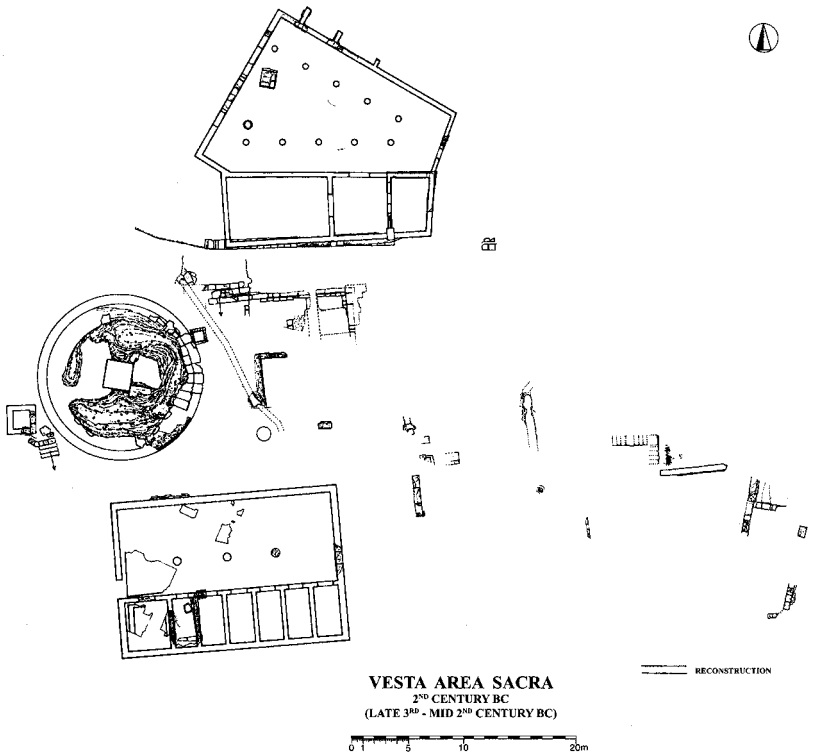

Fig. 1.1 The Atrium Vestae and environs in the late third to mid-second century BCE. From top: Regia, the round temple of Vesta, sleeping quarters of the Vestals. Scott (2009) 19, fig. D1; drawing by Paul Henderson, reproduced with the permission of the artist.

vestibule and atrium for receiving visitors alongside living spaces for the Pontifex Maximus and his household.

Both the Atrium Vestae and the Domus Publica were sacred spaces, not owned by the people who lived there or even by the community, but by the gods. But both also contained other kinds of space. The fact that they were sacred does not mean that they were not also treated and experienced as public or private. Spaces used for functions from sleeping to display are found in these buildings, just as they are in privately owned houses. As the example of the Vestals' living quarters shows, even within an entirely sacred space marked as a unity by the precinct wall there were still some areas which were more 'public' in the sense of 'accessible', and others which were more private and hidden from view.

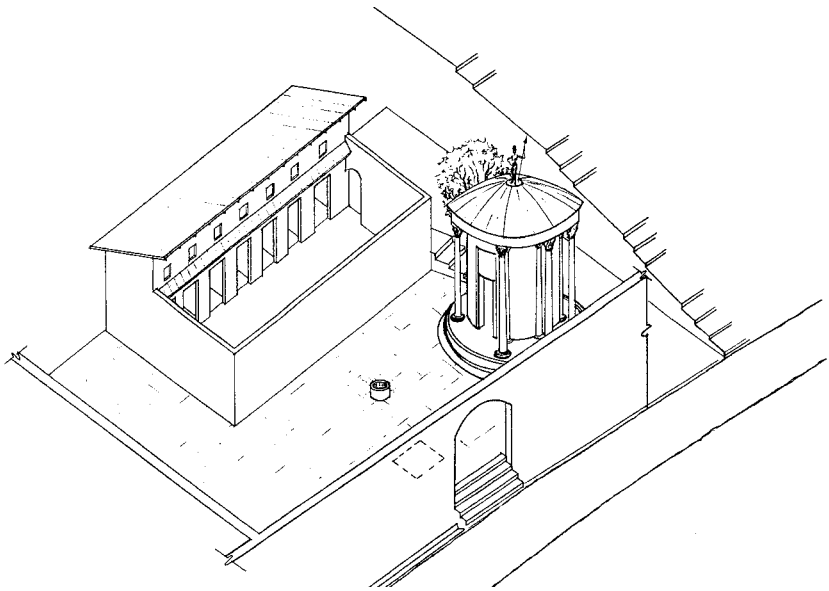

Fig. 1.2 The Atrium Vestae in the late third to mid-second century BCE: reconstruction. Scott (2009) 34, fig. D24; drawing by Paul Henderson, reproduced with the permission of the artist.

In the Republican period both the Atrium Vestae and the Domus Publica had a roughly north–south orientation, connecting them visually and spatially with one wing of the nearby Regia which shared the same alignment. All the very earliest buildings in the Forum seem to have faced the cardinal points, but over the centuries most were gradually brought into alignment with the natural relief of the valley, which runs from north-west to south-east. In contrast, the cardinal orientation of the Atrium Vestae, Domus Publica, and Regia persisted until well into the imperial period. Until Caesar's time, the precinct wall and the southern wall of the Regia defined a street running due east between them, at an awkward angle to the Forum beyond (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2).[12] To visitors wandering past, the shift of alignment between the Forum to the west and the Atrium Vestae and its surrounding buildings to the east marked a transition from one type of space to another. Passers-by could see the change in alignment easily enough, and they also had to move their bodies in a different way, changing

[12] For the wall's realignment (as in Fig. 1.3), probably under Caesar, see Scott (2009) 43.

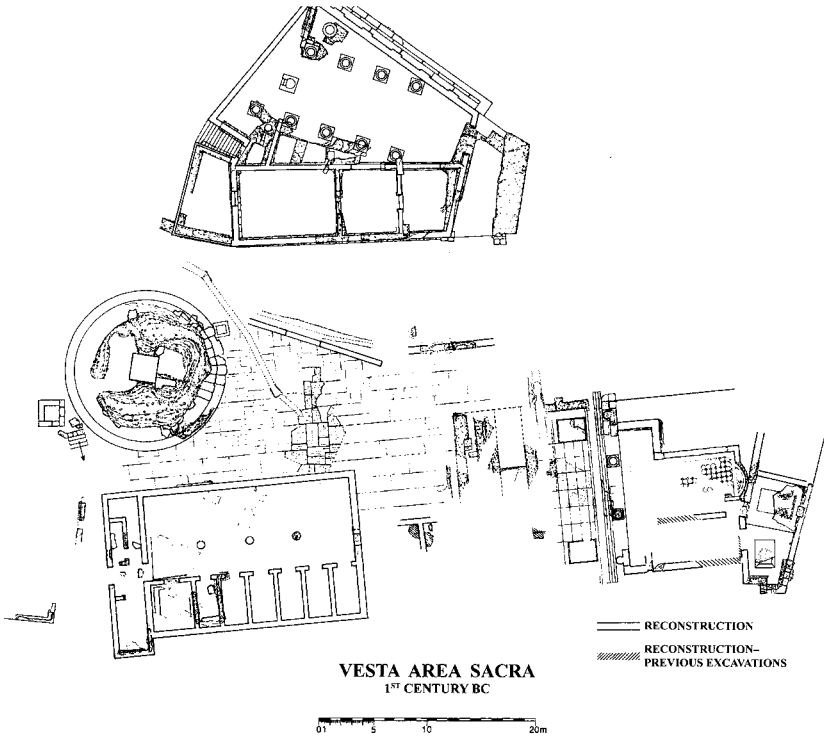

Fig. 1.3 The Atrium Vestae and environs in the first century BCE. Scott (2009) 36, fig. E1; drawing by Paul Henderson, reproduced with the permission of the artist.

direction as they walked. The preservation of the area's ancient orientation emphasised the three structures' unity and distinguished them from the space beyond.

The Atrium Vestae, Regia, and Domus Publica shared a particular relationship to Rome's most ancient cults and to the kings. The area's layout took shape during the city's earliest monumentalisation, when in the seventh century BCE the Regia to the east and a building in the area of the Curia to the west provided the Forum area with its first stone structures.[13] The use of the Regia area for some of Rome's most important cults and the Comitium area for political meetings goes back as far as our sources do and probably further, perhaps marking 'cultic' versus 'political' zones at

[13] Synthetic overviews include Tagliamonte (1995); Gros/Torelli (2007) 102–3.

opposite ends of the Forum.[14] More obviously, however, the Regia and its surrounding structures were strongly associated with the kings. Romans thought the Regia was originally Numa's house, and tradition held that other kings had lived nearby. The name implies a regal link, and the word *rex* was even found inscribed on an archaic pottery shard found there. The state cults of the Lares and Penates, which presumably originated as the king's own household gods, are also associated with the area.[15]

The fledgling Republic, so the narrative runs, did not abolish cults linked to the kings. Instead, they divided the king's powers between different authorities. The consuls received his executive power but left religious affairs in the hands of the Rex Sacrorum: even his title preserved the memory of the cults' regal origins.[16] The space originally given over to the kings was similarly divided, with Atrium Vestae, Regia, and Domus Publica all emerging from what might originally have been a unified palace complex.[17] Contemporary ideological preoccupations and the temptations of narrative have clouded the picture of archaic Rome, but it is not necessary to pin down the exact seventh- or sixth-century details; whatever the true history of Rome's regal period, a Roman of the third or second century BCE would have been aware of the ancient royal associations of the eastern end of the Forum. In the middle and late Republic, the Atrium Vesta, Regia, and Domus Publica were architecturally separate buildings, but their unique and different orientation still marked them as a unit, and as a unit they were inescapably connected with royalty.

The Atrium Vestae stood in a prominent location next to the Forum Romanum itself. The rituals performed there were public, part of the functions of the Roman state. The Vestals themselves were separated from family ties so that they could better perform their role on behalf of the community as a whole. All this meant that this space had a strong connection to the entire Roman People, and it would be hard to deny that it was experienced as public in these terms. On the other hand, the residential architecture and restricted access meant that in terms of spatial experience some parts of the Atrium Vestae had more in common with a private house.

The regal associations of the Atrium Vestae go a long way towards explaining its ambiguous status. A king is a permanent public figure,

[14] The two were never fully separated, of course: the Comitium had plenty of cultic importance in its own right.

[15] Numa and the Regia: e.g. Ov. *Fast.* 6.264; Plut. *Vit. Num.* 14.1; Serv. *ad Aen.* 8.363. Other kings: Solin. 1.21–6, who follows and expands Varro *ap.* Non. 852 Lindsay. Vesta and the Penates: e.g. Tac. *Ann.* 15.41.

[16] See, e.g. Livy 2.2.1; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 5.1.4.

[17] So Coarelli (1983b) 56–79.

meaning that his private property crosses into the public domain; moreover, all public space in a monarchy shares characteristics of the private, since eventually authority and ownership revert to him. The king's personal or household cults also stood between public and private, and even after they were taken over by a new form of government they could not be squeezed into one category or the other. The state cults of the Lares and Penates and the sacred hearth of Vesta were all reflections of household religious practice on a larger scale. They provided a constant reminder, physically located at the centre of Roman public life, of the importance of the private and domestic. They broke down barriers between individual private spaces by emphasising what each Roman house had in common, while at the same time they also acted as a single centre for a metaphorical macrocosmic household encompassing all Romans. None of these functions could take place either in public or in private space: they required space which fell into neither category.

The Atrium Vestae is an extreme example of a space which cannot easily be labelled as either public or private. In the chapters which follow, it will emerge that hardly any space in Rome fitted comfortably into either category. Other spaces too gestured towards and partook of many different kinds of space, often implying substantial overlap, grey areas, and room for manoeuvre between them. The Atrium Vestae was a unique space in any number of ways, but the fact that it straddled the public/private divide was not one of them.

'Public' and 'private' as contested concepts

The goal of finding Roman concepts even roughly analogous to English 'public' and 'private' is an ambitious one, and risks circularity. But there is evidence that such concepts did exist and were applied to space. Support for the existence of a strict public/private divide in Roman categorisations of architecture and space comes, for example, in the moralising of authors such as Cicero, Sallust, and Pliny who attack the use of luxurious materials, plundered art, and the like in private houses, while condoning it in public space.[18] Cicero speaks most clearly: *odit populus Romanus privatam luxuriam, publicam magnificentiam diligit* (*Mur.* 76) – 'The people of Rome hate private luxury, but they love public magnificence.' The moral value of

[18] E.g. Cic. *Verr.* 2.1.57, *Flacc.* 28, *Mur.* 76; Sall. *Cat.* 9.2; Plin. *H.N.* 36.5–6 (but see the next page); for further exploration of the trope, La Penna (1989); Edwards (1993) 137–72; Romano (1994); Zaccaria Ruggiu (1995) 27.

extravagant materials or objects, he claims, depends on where they are displayed: in private they are hated *luxuria*, while in public they become praiseworthy *magnificentia*. On the face of it, Cicero's division is not too far from our own, and can be passably expressed using the English terms 'public' and 'private'.

Cicero's concepts are not transparent, and he has his own agenda. When he attacks Verres in the courtroom for installing art from the public sphere in his private house (e.g. *Verr.* 2.1.57), we must remember that the works involved were not only public and luxurious, but also stolen – often from temples. Nevertheless, a firm distinction between public and private is one of the foundations of his argument. In the *De officiis* (1.138–40), however, Cicero allows that some luxury may be appropriate in the house of a powerful man *in quam et hospites multi recipiendi et admittenda hominum cuiusque modi multitudo* – 'in which both many guests need to be received and a crowd of men of all kinds must be admitted' (1.139). He goes on to recommend moderation, not for its own sake but to avoid the danger of having a house too lavish for one's station. Here, Cicero implies something like a sliding scale of public and private, depending on the social role of the space and its owner. Some private spaces are more private than others: a house which plays host to the entire community counts as public enough to warrant some *publica magnificentia*. Cicero's sliding scale fits well with other evidence for domestic space in Republican Rome. In the house of a man who was himself a public figure, a luxurious atrium was, as we shall see, regarded at least in part as public space. Cicero's more detailed exploration of the rhetoric of *luxuria* as it applies to the houses of elite men makes it clear that in practice concepts of public and private were not completely polarised opposites, but it still assumes that such concepts exist.

Cicero's praise of *publica magnificentia* and attacks on *privata luxuria* are part of a discourse shared with his contemporaries and later authors. Many of these authors, too, assume or even stipulate a neat divide between public and private while also citing examples which blur the boundaries. Critiques of private extravagance tend to blend seamlessly into moralising on luxury in general, including in public.[19] One of the elder Pliny's favourite examples of the perils of *luxuria* is the theatre of Scaurus, aedile in 58 BCE. Not only was the theatre itself monstrously extravagant, but its marble columns were later reused in Scaurus' own house. Pliny (*HN* 36.5) uses this example to argue explicitly that the line between public and private is too easily

[19] E.g. Sen. *Epist.* 86.4–13, with constant switching between public and private baths; Plin. *HN* 36.109–20, moving again from luxurious houses to luxurious theatres.

blurred: tolerating luxuries in public is the thin end of the wedge, and the end result will be that they appear in private space. The only realm in which luxurious marble should be allowed, accordingly, is that of the sacred. But even luxury in the service of the gods can be suspect. When Velleius Paterculus calls Metellus Macedonicus *huius vel magnificentiae vel luxuriae princeps* – 'the originator of this kind of magnificence – or perhaps luxury' (1.11.5), using the same morally loaded terms as Cicero above, he is not talking about Metellus' house, but his temple of Jupiter Stator.[20]

We could turn around Cicero's distinction between *publica magnificentia* and *privata luxuria* to derive one possible way of defining and identifying public and private space: a space is public insofar as extravagance is permitted there. In the end, though, all the authors I have cited are more interested in making moral judgments than parsing public and private space, and as their judgments grow more sweeping the definition quickly breaks down. What is key, however, is that these passages would make no sense without basic concepts of public and private. Roman authors were not afraid to challenge them or point out their ambiguities, but they needed a broadly agreed baseline from which to begin. Examples like these writings on *luxuria*, in which well-developed Roman discourses of public and private emerge from ancient sources, demonstrate that it is possible to investigate public and private space in the Roman world without merely misapplying modern concepts. More than that, however, they demonstrate that to investigate these concepts we must stop looking for static definitions and instead explore a world of argument and constant redefinition. Ambiguities which surface are not necessarily caused by the mismatch between modern and ancient culture, but were already part of Roman life.

These ambiguities should not surprise us. The English terms 'public' and 'private' do not refer to natural phenomena to which we have given names, but to hazy and ever-changing groups of concepts and ideas which emerge from our own cultural context. The two major problems I have identified – the flexibility of the terms in our own language and the fact that they vary from one society to the next – have generally been pursued separately in modern scholarship. Scholars across disciplines, notably those influenced by feminist theory, have studied the definition of public and private spheres in space and beyond, and investigated and challenged the operation or the very existence of the public/private divide in modern

[20] *Contra* Romano (1994) 63. I discuss this passage further at p. 98. Cf. also Sen. *Epist.* 90.25 on the use of marble in temples and houses.