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Cult of Silvanus and Nature

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Abstract

Silvanus is a relatively unknown deity in the Roman pantheon. Regardless, Silvanus is also one of the most popularly attested gods in the epigraphical material. His connection to forests seems to be self-evident, beginning from the name that refers to woods, but the actual cult of Silvanus was more complicated. Who was Silvanus and what was his role in the Roman religious life? Was he a *de facto* god of woods and forests, or did his cult have a more complicated function in Roman folk religion? In this paper I inspect the cult of Silvanus in relation to nature. Through comparing three different physical Silvanus cult environments with known written sources, it is possible to gather insights on the role of Silvanus in ancient Roman life. Silvanus is also well attested in provinces outside Italy, but those are left outside this paper.

[Keywords]: Silvanus, Folk religion, Epigraphy, Nature, Forest

1. Introduction

Inspecting the deity Silvanus offers a unique view to ancient Roman folk religion.[1] He is mentioned by various authors, but the passages are often vague or even contradictory, as will be shown in Chapter 2. When reviewing other sources – iconography, epigraphy, and other material evidence – they seem to be speaking about a completely different being. Some ancient writers, such as Virgil and Livy, seemed to believe that the cult of Silvanus was very old, perhaps even beyond the foundation of Rome itself,[2] but the cult is actually visible in archaeological material only beginning from the first century CE

[1] *Note the following abbreviations: AE = Année Epigraphique; CIL = Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum; PL = Patrologia Latina; RIC = Roman Imperial Coinage; RPC = Roman Provincial Coinage*.

[2] E.g. Verg. *Aen.* 8.601.

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onward.[3] Silvanus did not have an official state cult, but on the other hand he is one of the most prevalent deities in epigraphic material – depending on the region, only Jupiter is mentioned more often than Silvanus.[4] What kind of a deity Silvanus was, what was his cult like, and what was its relationship with the surrounding nature?

On the face of it, the case seems clear: beginning from the name, Silvanus seems to be the god of the forest, *silva* being the Latin word for forest or woods.[5] Connection with the other deities Pan and Faunus was considered self-evident both by some ancient authors and some scholars from the 19th and 20th centuries.[6] The reality, however, is more complicated. Almost all physical material related to Silvanus – especially the dedications and other inscriptions – have been found in urban areas.[7] Thus, the relationship with deep forests seems to be questionable. For instance, the relatively late attestation of Silvanus being the protector of agricultural boundary stones in Dolabella has not had any support from archaeology.[8] While it is probable that the cult of Silvanus existed also in rural areas, the challenges arise from the inherent biases in archaeological research – specifically, the emphasis on extensively studying urban locales, driven by rescue excavations and contemporary development. Compared to Pan and Faunus, Silvanus was a reserved and calm deity, whose depictions do not entail zoomorphic traits or wildness typical for the two aforementioned gods.

I will begin by inspecting the most important literary passages in the ancient literature mentioning Silvanus the god. A brief view into the iconographical traits present in sculpture and painting will also be presented. Through these examples a picture will begin to form about the kind of Silvanus that the upper-class Romans envisioned.[9] Comparing this picture with the one provided by epigraphical sources and archaeology will shed light to the question of the actual cult practices, and finally, the cult's relationship with nature. I will assess the inscriptions found inside the Aurelian walls and the implied locations of cult sites and present a plotted map of these locations. A single cult site

[3] Rives (1996), 1408; Bleckmann (2001), 562.
[4] Dorcey (1992), 1-2.
[5] Cf. Malaspina (2000), 31.
[6] E.g. Wissowa (1912), 208-209.
[7] Dorcey (1992), 138.
[8] Lachmann, Reimer, Rudorff (1848), 302-304.
[9] The term "class" is used here only as a rudimentary tool to portray the socio-economical hierarchies of the ancient Roman society, without any strong theoretical position or background, as per Clauss (1994), 381-387.

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identified in Ostia Antica will also be examined. Finally, in Monteleone, a site in Sabine territory, a plot of land used by a *familia* dedicated to Silvanus has been identified and will be compared to the material as well.

The theoretical discussion about the concepts and demarcations of nature and culture in the ancient world is both wide and deep.[10] Indeed, the term "nature" might be one of the most complex ones in the English language, and the Romans and Greeks had their own terminology, which does not always translate to any clear modern equivalents. The ancients realised that the dichotomy of nature versus culture was too simple, with the role of humans being deeply ambiguous and intertwined with them both.[11] In this paper the terms are mostly used to describe the physical contexts where Silvanus can be found, especially regarding the case studies in Chapter 4. In this sense, the untouched wilderness and dense dark forests can be seen to represent the extreme of nature, whereas constructed indoor spaces represent culture. However, many *loci,* such as gardens, cultivated lands and pasture, do not self-evidently belong to either category. These are also the places with which Silvanus seems to be connected with, as will be shown below.

The main contribution of this article lies in the integration of the fragmented and occasionally conflicting evidence from the ancient literary sources with a spatial dimension, primarily derived from the discovery sites of the epigraphical material and a few examples of known locations where the cult of Silvanus was practised. This approach illuminates the complex role of Silvanus and his cult in the ancient Roman society. It reveals a strong connection to both liminality and nature, challenging the simplistic characterization of Silvanus as merely a "god of the forest", a notion that might be assumed based on the name and superficial iconographical inspection.

I leave the wide and varying Silvanus-related material encountered in western provinces and the areas near the Danube River out of this study. In the east, Silvanus does not seem to have had any presence. Similarly, other beings and creatures related to Silvanus (such as *silvanae* or silvans) are out of the scope of this article.

2. Silvanus in textual sources

Silvanus was a profoundly Italic and Roman deity. Thus, the *interpretatio*

[10] For a good overview of recent theories, see. Martelli (2021), 36-44.
[11] Thommen (2009), 3-5. Cf. Plat. *leg.* 890d, 903c; Diog. Laert. 7.87ff; Sen. *epist.* 122.19.

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Graeca that connects him with Pan feels often forced, or at least non-specific.[12] Inspecting the Greek connection is nonetheless important since Roman authors were well-versed in Greek literature and often alluded to it. This is probably the reason why Silvanus is often likened to or compared with the deities Faunus or Pan. This includes even equating Silvanus with the Greek Aegipan ("goat-Pan").[13] It is possible that many authors did not have personal experiences in the cult of Silvanus, since it was especially popular among the lower socio-economical groups (as will be shown by epigraphic material in Chapter 4). Perhaps these authors filled vacuums in their knowledge with supposed forest deity parallels in Greek material.

A connection to the Etruscan god Selvans has been seen as self-evident by some scholars, mainly due to the obviously similar nomenclature.[14] However, Silvanus and Selvans do not otherwise resemble each other, and the latter is generally not well known, so any definite conclusions cannot be made.[15] The word *silva* refers unambiguously to forests, *silvester* to wilderness and rough wooded terrain, but the etymologies of these words are mostly unknown.[16]

The *Aeneid* is an important source regarding the idea of Silvanus being an ancient and pre-Roman deity. Virgil tells that the ancient Pelasgians recognized a dark wooded hill as having belonged to Silvanus, who was *arvorum pecorisque deus*, "the god of fields and cattle".[17] Here the Pelasgians are a guarantee of the cult's age – clearly the god was present even before the time of the Roman's ancestors. Interestingly, we see the dualism of cultivated nature – cattle and fields – and the wild and threatening dark woods. The Silvanus of The *Aeneid* may be seen as a liminal deity between these spheres, whereas Pan and Faunus represent more uncontrollable forces.[18] That Silvanus is more civilized and controlled is represented by his human-like and benign appearance (especially compared to the human-animal hybrids Pan and Faunus) and him often bearing paraphernalia that is related to hunting or shepherding, as will be shown in Chapter 3.

In the *Georgica*, Silvanus is presented as one among other woodland deities, but *dendrophoria* or carrying of a tree – a cypress in this case – is also

[12] Verg. *Georg.* 2.493-494; Ovid. *Met.* 14.638-639. Cf. Dorcey (1992), 40-41.
[13] Pseudo-Plutarch, *Par. Min.* 22.
[14] E.g. Vanni (2019); Trisoglio (1988), 853; von Deecke (1880), 54-59.
[15] Simon (2006), 51; Dorcey (1992), 10.
[16] De Vaan (2008), 564; cf. Jensen (1962), 11-13.
[17] Verg. *Aen.* 8.601.
[18] Lehmann (1989), 17.

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mentioned in passing.[19] This is a typical iconographic trait of Silvanus, present in many a sculpture and relief.[20] Servius, an important commentator of Virgil in the fourth century, expands this by combining Virgil's Silvanus with the myth of Cyparissus.[21] However, this version of the myth is not known from elsewhere and it might be just a case of an aetiological explanation for the cypress tree prevalent in Silvanus' iconography.[22] Also, in Virgil's *Eclogae,* Silvanus is only briefly mentioned: he can be found almost as a stock character in an idyllic nature scene among Pan and others.[23]

Another important source dealing with ancient encounters with Silvanus can be found in Livy. After the fight with the Etruscans in the Battle of Silva Arsia (traditionally dated to 509 BCE) had proved inconclusive, a strange voice was heard bellowing from the nearby forest. It was Silvanus, who told both armies that there had been one casualty more on the Etruscan side, and hence the Romans had taken the day.[24] The same story is represented also by Valerius Maximus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, but the latter implies that the voice was actually that of Faunus.[25] This confusion (or the whole story in general) might be an allusion to the similar passage by Herodotus: the Greeks heard Pan's voice during the battle of Marathon, which helped them win the Persians.[26]

The oldest reference (according to the time of writing) to Silvanus can be attributed to the playwright Plautus (254–184 BCE). In the comedy *Aulularia* ("The Pot of Gold"), a willow thicket (*salictum*) growing in a grove or a glade (*lucus*) of Silvanus is featured as a hiding place for the golden pot of Euclio.[27] Sadly, Plautus does not offer any further information regarding Silvanus or his cult, but at least the source confirms that the deity was already known during the Republican period. Forests and trees are connected to Silvanus here, but the willow mentioned by Plautus is only one of the many species related to the god. Furthermore, it remains inconclusive whether the *lucus* was the location

[19] Verg. *Georg.* 1.20; 2.494.
[20] E.g. British Museum Inv. No. 1865,0712.18; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden Inv. No. Hm 320; Matz (1881), Cat. No. 570; CIL VI 675.
[21] Serv. *Georg.* 1.20.
[22] Dorcey (1992), 15-16. For instance, Ovid's version of Cyparissus myth has no mentions of Silvanus (Ov. *Met.* 10.106ff).
[23] Verg. *Ecl.* 10.24-26
[24] Liv. 2 7.2.
[25] Val. Max. 1 8.5; Dion. Hal. *Ant.* 5.16.
[26] Hdt. 5.105; cf. Cic *div.* 1.101.
[27] Plaut. *Aul.* 4 6:8; 4 6:10. Since the grove is *extra murum* (beyond the walls of Rome) one could even speculate that the place is connected to the Arsian forest mentioned by Livy.

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of a cult, or whether it belonged to Silvanus in some more abstract manner.

Cato the Elder writes about sacrificing to Mars Silvanus in the forest to ensure the health of the cattle.[28] It is worth noting that the sacrifice can be performed by a slave, but that women are not even allowed to see the ritual. Due to this passage several scholars have concluded that the cult of Silvanus was completely forbidden for women, or at least that it was primarily a male affair.[29] However, epigraphical sources show clearly that women were strongly involved in the cult, so the interpretation is not plausible.[30] Additionally, scholars have disagreed whether Mars Silvanus refers to both deities, or whether Silvanus is just an epithet for Mars. Cato's *De agri cultura* contains many other similar combinations that have been interpreted as a way to equate or liken two different deities.[31] Both Silvanus and Mars have been connected to agriculture relatively early.[32] For instance, one of the oldest – if not the oldest – inscriptions containing the name "Silvanus" was dedicated to Mars Silvanus.[33] Regardless, the passage supports the aforementioned passage in the *Aeneid* of Silvanus being a protector of cattle.

In general, Silvanus is featured in some poetry dealing with nature, but often likened to Pan and Faunus, acting just as a background character for creating a rural atmosphere, rather than in descriptions of actual cult practice.[34] Horace tells that *pater* (father) Silvanus was *tutor finium*, the protector of boundaries.[35] This passage is important since the liminal role of the cult seems to have been significant also in light of epigraphic and archaeological material, as will later be shown.

Martial mentions an altar of Silvanus (described as *Silvanus horridus*) that was built by the unlearned hands of the bailiff.[36] Just as with Cato, this passage also emphasizes Silvanus' cult as having been popular among slaves, workers and rural people. Silvanus can be seen as a protector of the cultivated land and a part of the cultural and human sphere of life, in contrast with the

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[28] Cato *agr.* 83.

[29] Wissowa (1912), 214; R. Palmer (1978), 222; von Domaszewski (1902), 1-25., 10-11; Schilling (1992), 146.

[30] E.g. *CIL* VI 581, 31003; *CIL* IX 1552; *CIL* V 706. About women in the cult of Silvanus, see Dorcey (1992), 124-134 and Dorcey (1989), 143-155.

[31] Dumezil (1970), 234-236.

[32] Cato *agr.* 141.

[33] *CIL* XI 7602. This inscription, found in Cerveteri, has been dated between the years 39 BCE and 39 CE.

[34] Calp. *Ecl.* 2.28-31; Grat. *Cyn*. 20; Ov. 14.639.

[35] Hor. *Epod*. 2.21-22.

[36] Mart. 10.92. *Semidocta vilici manu structas.*

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uncontrollable and chaotic nature.[37] The passage by Dolabella, mentioned already in the introduction, is interesting with regards to its theme – Silvanus as the protector of boundary stones – but also for the lack of mentions of another deity usually given this role, Terminus.[38] In general, it seems that Silvanus is never paired or connected with any explicit border deities, such as Terminus, Portunus or Janus.

After the early imperial period, Silvanus sinks from prominence in Roman literature.[39] Ammianus Marcellinus in the fourth century mentions a bath or pool of Silvanus, *Silvani lavacro*, but it remains unclear what is being referred to,[40] and there are no other known mentions of water in the cult. Silvanus appears in some early Christian sources as well. Pseudo-Ambrose (fourth century) has a detailed passage about some cultist of Silvanus attempting to force a passer-by to take part in their rites.[41]

Augustine in turn seems to confuse Silvanus with Pan or Faunus, or perhaps he combined them on purpose since his portrayal of Silvanus shows the god as a maleficent, wild and sexual being, which does not seem plausible according to other sources. The passage is an explicit citation of Varro, but it is unknown how reliable Augusine's rendition of it is.[42] Augustine also tells how pregnant women have to be protected from Silvanus.[43] Later, in the sixth or seventh centuries, Isidore of Sevilla claims that Silvanus and Pan (both of whom are called *deus rusticorum,* "god of the rustics" or "god of the farmers") are one and the same, so his passage can be seen as a *terminus ad quem* for Silvanus becoming a generic pagan forest spirit of Christian folklore among others.[44] Christian sources are problematic due to their negative attitudes towards non-Christian religious beliefs, but at least they attest the existence of Silvanus' cult in the late antiquity.

Ancient authors represent almost exclusively male and privileged worldviews, so it is no wonder that we cannot reach details about a cult of a deity like Silvanus. Textual sources imply that Silvanus was not part of the public cult, but more likely belonged to the domain of *domus, Lares and*

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[37] Warrior (2006), 29-30.

[38] Lachmann, Reimer, Rudorff (1848), 302-304. For Terminus, see e.g. Mueller 2012; de Sanctis (2015) or Beard, North, Price (1998), 3-4.

[39] Some mentions include Mart. Cap. 5.425 in early fifth century and Pseudo-Plutarkhos in *Parallelia minora* 22.

[40] Amm. 28 4.19.

[41] PL 17:823-824.

[42] Aug. *civ.* 6.9.

[43] Aug. *civ.* 15:23.

[44] Isid. *Orig*. 8, 11.81.

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Penates.[45] Material and pictorial sources offer some exceptions, but Silvanus is seldom in a central role, regardless.

3. Silvanus in sculpture and painting

Silvanus appears sporadically in sculpture and other art preserved to our day. He is sometimes difficult to recognize, being easily mixed with other bearded male characters carrying pieces of wood, such as Hercules. Typical iconographic features are the carrying of a tree branch or trunk,[46] a *falx* (a certain kind of sickle), a thick beard, a dog (perhaps due to a connection with herding, hunting or guarding) and a garland made of pinecones and branches. Partial or complete nudity is also common, but Silvanus can also be clothed in a cloak or tunic, especially in sources from Pannonia or Dacia.[47] Other local and syncretistic forms exist, but they will not be studied further here.[48]

As was mentioned earlier, Faunus and Pan are often mixed up with Silvanus in some literary authors' works. The visual representations stand as a compelling refutation of this conflation, emphasizing that the only tenuous link between these deities lies in their association with forests. Notably, distinguishing Silvanus from Pan or Faunus is typically straightforward: Silvanus never sports horns, lower body of a goat or any instruments such as a *syrinx*.[49]

Worship of Silvanus might have had something to do with hunting, which can be seen in the artwork of the period. In the Arch of Trajan in Benevento one can see Bacchus, Ceres, Diana and Silvanus, recognizable through a cypress branch in his hand and a pinecone wreath on his head. This is the earliest and one of the few portrayals of Silvanus in a public monument. All four of the deities depicted in the panel are related to the cult practised by the

[45] Beard, North, Price (1998), 48-49.

[46] In addition to cypress and willow that were mentioned earlier, pine was very common. Seemingly all trees belonged to the domain of Silvanus and he did not have any single special species of plant dedicated to him, unlike many other deities.

[47] Trisoglio (1988), 853; Dorcey (1992), 17-18.

[48] A 'hammer god' Sucellus, who carries a large hammer or a mallet, is known from Gallia and often seen as an aspect of Silvanus, but details are scarce (Dorcey (1992), 47; *CIL* XII 1103).

[49] A peculiar exception is provided by an issue of coins minted during the 3rd century in the Roman colony of Cremna in Phrygia, where the reverse inscription clearly names Silvanus, but the depicted figure is that of a goat-legged and horned Pan (*RPC* VI, 5927; *RPC* IX 978; *RPC* X ID 63449).

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lower classes. Additionally, Silvanus is behind the others, so we cannot really talk about a significant role for Silvanus here, either. Possibly the whole scene is related to the conquest of Dacia that had happened recently since Silvanus and the other three deities were popular in the area.[50] Dorcey has suggested that during the second century, the public position of Silvanus was elevated through the popularity of hunting especially in the courts of Trajan and Hadrian, assuming that Silvanus had a role as a protector of the hunt, at least during that period.[51]

Another very visible depiction of Silvanus can be seen in the Arch of Constantine in Rome. The left *rotondo* on the southern side originates from a public building by Hadrian and seems to portray a sacrifice given to Silvanus after a hunt. The head of the prey – possibly a bear – has been hanged on a tree in the background.[52] A bearded god is standing on a pedestal, wearing only a cloak. Behind him a now-headless male is crowning the deity with a wreath. Important parallel to this portrayal is found in Hadrian's medallions that show a naked Silvanus advancing right towards an altar and a shrine, dragging a ram and holding what might be a *pedum.*[53]

Silvanus is also one of the characters portrayed by Antinous, the companion of Hadrian. In the famous Lanuvium relief,[54] Silvanus-Antinous is wearing a tunic, wielding a *falx,* and beside him stand an altar and a dog. Thus, the identification as Silvanus seems rather certain. At the same time, it proves that Silvanus was depicted in the art commissioned by the upper-class of Hadrian's time, which in turn supports the identification of the god in the Arch of Constantine.[55] The relief contains some grapes in addition to the typical attributes of Silvanus. They are not attested elsewhere with the god and are usually connected to Bacchus or Dionysus. This might be an indication of the superficial knowledge the upper-class had about the lower-class deity Silvanus.

The portrayal of Silvanus remains quite consistent through the imperial times and even after them, without taking into account the variations we can see in the provinces. Medieval and Renaissance art also feature wild men

[50] Dorcey (1992), 96-97. A similar composition can be found in a votive relief, today held in the Vatican Museums (MV.852.0.0), where Silvanus is depicted in a line with three other woodland or nature deities.
[51] Dorcey (1992), 102; Anderson (1985), 101–103; Plin. Paneg. 81.1-3.
[52] Dorcey (1992), 99.
[53] *RIC* II.3 2881-2883.
[54] Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Inv. No. 374071.
[55] Dorcey (1992), 99.

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resembling Silvanus.[56] These characters might reflect the almost universal interest in conceptualizing and demarcating the relationship between human and nature, but additionally it might retain some traits of the Silvanus tradition. Some scholars have also pondered local continuation of the cult in the many saints named Silvanus, Silvinus, Silvianus and Silvester, [57] but iconographically the only connection seems to be the beard. Silvanus was also a *cognomen* starting early from the pre-Christian era, so definite conclusions are difficult to make, even if the name had originally been adopted due to personal attachment to the deity.[58]

4. Case studies

No actual temples or cult buildings dedicated to Silvanus remain. Some are mentioned in ancient literature, but even then the mentions are vague.[59] No large cult statues are known, either.[60] Outside the Italian peninsula, some tentatively identified structures exist, but, for example, the structure found in Colchester Great Britain (identified as a temple to Silvanus based on a few inscriptions found there) was most likely related to the local syncretistic interpretation of the deity.[61] Silvanus is also practically unknown in the eastern provinces, where originally Roman deities were generally never popular.[62] Small and modest cultic locations have been located in the west and in Italy,[63] and based on them, something can be said about Silvanus' relation with nature.

[56] Husband (1980); R. Bernheimer (1952). Medieval terms include 'wild man of the woods', 'wodewose' or 'homme sauvage'.
[57] E.g. Jensen (1962), 24-37; Dorcey (1992), Appendix IV.
[58] Kajanto (1982), 54; Dorcey (1992), 139-140.
[59] For instance, Hist. Aug. *Tac.* 17, 1 mentions a temple of Silvanus being the site for the ascension of emperor Tacitus (275-276) but does not describe its location at all. Regardless, the choice of words is *templum*, which might refer just to a sanctified area or a *temenos*, not an actual building.
[60] Dorcey (1992), 92.
[61] Hull (1958), 238.
[62] Dorcey (1992), 67.
[63] Dorcey (1992), 190-191.

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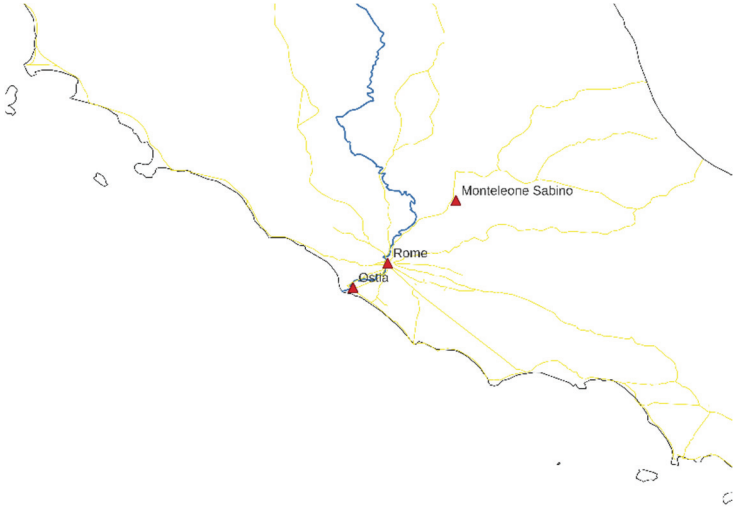


Figure 1: Locations of Monteleone Sabino, Rome and Ostia.

Some cult areas have been identified based on inscriptions. Thus, epigraphical material plays a key role when attempting to paint a picture on the cult's relationship with natural elements. Interestingly there is no material related to Silvanus from Pompeii – otherwise the place-to-go for details about day-to-day life in early Imperial Rome.[64] From this a possible *terminus post quem* could be deduced for widespread cultic activity.[65]

Many other details related to Silvanus can be concluded from epigraphy. Many different epithets for Silvanus and deities related to him are featured. There are over 80 known epithets, of which the most common five are *domesticus, silvester, deus, sanctus* and *augustus* ("of the home", "wooded, of the forest", "god", "holy" or "sanctified" and "exalted", respectively). In addition to *silvester*, epithets related to nature are not really common. *Campester, erbarius, incultus* and *praeses venationis* ("of the field", "of the plants", "untilled" and "protector/leader of hunting") are found only few times.[66] *Dendrophorus* ("tree-bearer" or "wood-carrier") can be found in

[64] Dorcey (1992), 80.
[65] On the other hand, it is possible that Silvanus was not popular at Pompeii for one reason or another.
[66] Dorcey (1992), 30.

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inscriptions from Rome and Ostia, but always in relation to Kybele and Attis. This will be expanded in the next part.

Both Peter Dorcey and Manfred Clauss have done onomastic research with the material consisting of some 1200 known Silvanus-related inscriptions. The material contains very few senatorial, equestrian or other upper-class names, whereas slaves, freedmen and soldiers are common.[67] According to Clauss, there are even more common soldiers (*milites*) represented in these dedications to Silvanus than in those related to Mithra, which is interesting, considering Mithra is often depicted as especially common among the military.[68] In any case, this evidence regarding the socioeconomic status of Silvanus worshippers seems to fit well with the possible sites identified in Rome that will be presented next.

1) Rome

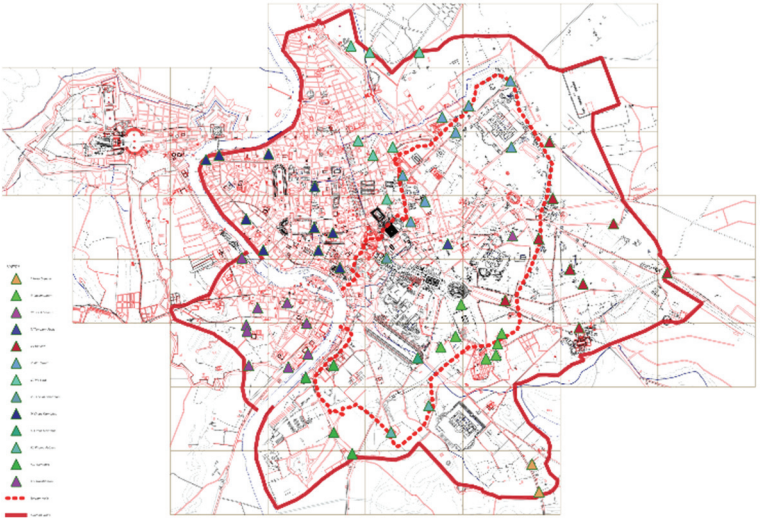


Figure 2: The map of Rome featuring the plotted approximate locations of the inscriptions featuring Silvanus, based on *Topographicum Urbis Romae*.

[67] Clauss, (1994), 381-387; Dorcey (1992), 113-115.
[68] Clauss (1994), 385.

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Actual structures or areas related to the cult of Silvanus have not been recovered in Rome, so their architecture or material culture cannot be examined. It is possible that they never existed. However, over 200 inscriptions with dedications, possibly indicating a cultic location, have been found inside the Aurelian walls.[69] Provenances and accurate find locations of all these specific inscriptions are arduous to research, but an approximate map can be plotted based on data available in *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae*.[70] Following divisions are structured based on 14 administrative regions of Augustan Rome which, while at least partially arbitrary, give nevertheless some tools to further inquire the division and locus of Silvanus' cult locations.

When the approximate find locations are plotted on a plan of ancient Rome, one can instantly see several areas being featured more prominently than others (Figure 2). The Palatium area does not have a single Silvanus inscription, which is not surprising – Silvanus remained separate from the so-called official cult and was not generally popular among emperors. One sanctuary might have resided in the Forum Romanum area: two inscriptions found near the Arch of Septimius Severus are dedicated to Silvanus and dated roughly around the second century CE.[71] This fits well with Pliny's mention of a fig tree that stood near the temple of Saturn which had to be transported elsewhere due to its roots causing damage to a nearby statue of Silvanus.[72] Nothing is known about the later fate of this statue, but if one stood in the Forum Romanum still after Pliny's time, it could have been one of the most prominent and public places related to the cult of Silvanus. Obviously, the Forum was filled with countless small pieces of sculpture, altars and monuments, so it is difficult to conclude anything final about Silvanus' position only based on this. Some trees and water elements are known to have been in the Forum Romanum, but no source indicates that anything reminding about Silvanus' association with forests and trees was dedicated to him per se.

A significant concentration of Silvanus inscriptions is found on the Caelian hill. This phenomenon is most likely connected to the sanctuary of Cybele and Attis, and especially to the headquarters of their *dendrophoroi* in the *Basilica*

[69] Chioffi (1999), 312.
[70] Chioffi (1999).
[71] *CIL* VI 661: 31027.
[72] Plin. *nat.* 15, 77-78. Considering the cult of Silvanus and its relationship to the concept of nature, it is interesting that here a tree (supposedly important to the cult) was explicitly removed due to damage to cultural structures and their opposition to natural processes.

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Hilariana.[73] It seems that Silvanus was somehow related to the carrying of sacred trees present in the rituals of cult of Attis – *dendrophoria* relating only to Silvanus is not attested anywhere.[74] On the one hand, von Domaszewski has suggested that the cult of Silvanus could have been some kind of a prototype for these carriers of the holy pine tree of Cybele.[75] On the other hand, no earlier collegium of Silvanus' *dendrophoroi* is known and it could be that the actual tree-carriers of Magna Mater had just appropriated Silvanus due to his already existent epithet.

Archaeological excavations have uncovered several military barracks on the Caelian hill, and their vicinity might also explain the amount of Silvanus inscriptions (and possibly sanctuaries) there. One of the camps was the *Castra Peregrina* which housed the visiting soldiers from other provinces, so perhaps legionnaires from northern and north-eastern provinces brought their tendency for Silvanus worship with them.

The inscriptions found in the north-eastern regions might also be explained by the many barracks that were located there. For instance, none of the inscriptions found around the Esquilinus show signs of being in any way related to the many private gardens found there. Instead, the multiple barracks and dwellings of the lower classes in the ridges and valleys of the area are more likely to explain the popularity of Silvanus in the area.[76] Apparently due to *Castra Praetoria* there is a large batch of inscriptions from the middle of the third century mentioning Silvanus, where the dedicators were praetorians.[77]

The *Campus Martius* and *Circus Flaminius* have also yielded relatively many Silvanus-themed inscriptions. In *Largo di Torre Argentina,* between the temples B and C, a short inscription saying "Silvano / T(itus) Trillien[ius" from the second century CE does not give us any hints about the role of Silvanus in the area,[78] but, on the other hand, the identification of these Republican-era temples is generally uncertain. *CIL* VI 595, found near the theatre of Marcellinus, has Silvanus and his dog in a relief, but similarly its function is difficult to ascertain. Generally speaking, at least 16 Silvanus inscriptions from 11 different locations are known from these regions, which means it was the

[73] Connection between the *dendrophoroi* of Attis and Cybele and Silvanus has been recognized also in the Cybele cult site in Ostia Antica (Meiggs (1973), 360).

[74] Of the inscriptions recovered in the area, *CIL* VI 641 is the most obvious, since it mentions both *Magna Mater* and *Silvanus dendrophorus*.

[75] von Domaszewski (1902), 15.

[76] von Domaszewski (1902), 15.

[77] *CIL* VI 2827-2830.

[78] *AE* (1981): 45.

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most popular area when it comes to Silvanus. Archaeological details of the area are not completely known, but the area certainly was not known to have been notably wooded, especially after the early second century, when Silvanus' popularity according to the epigraphic evidence seems to bloom.

All in all, the Roman epigraphic material already allows for some conclusions. Firstly, the cult of Silvanus was, based on epigraphic evidence, concentrated nearby the city walls, or perhaps even followed the imperial *pomerium*. During the second century it would have included also Aventinus and the southern parts of Campus Martius.[79] the Forum, Palatium and similar areas did not have such concentrations, which could be explained by the small or non-existent role of Silvanus in the public cults, but also by them being safely inside the *pomerium* during the second century. The inscriptions in *Transtiberim* cannot be explained by the *pomerium* though, but regardless, they are near the later city wall, so some kind of liminal role is likely. Otherwise the inscriptions (and the possible sanctuaries or other places of worship they imply) can be explained by the barracks, dwelling areas of the lower classes and the headquarters of the *dendrophoroi* on the Caelian hill.

2) Ostia

One indoor sanctuary of Silvanus is known from the room I,III,2 in Ostia. Additionally, we know of one altar or pedestal found in II,VII,3 that includes a votive inscription for Silvanus. Furthermore, a mosaic containing Silvanus has been found in the so-called Palazzo Imperiale, but it most likely had a mere decorative purpose since there are no signs of religious practice or dedication. All of the three locations are very urban: of the three mentioned places, the first two do not seem to involve any elements of the nature – instead they are in the middle of built environment and devoid of any contact with greenery.

Caseggiato dei Molini (I,III,1) from Hadrian's period is located in the north-eastern section of regio I. The majority of the building served as one of Ostia's many bakeries. It also housed a carpenter's workshop in a later phase before the whole complex was destroyed in a fire in the late third century CE. From its backroom – formed by closing the alley between Caseggiato di Molini and Caseggiato di Diana (I,III,4) – a small *sacellum* from the early second century CE was found.[80] The room was excavated already in 1870 but without proper

[79] Marked by *cippus* stones, *pomerium* was the sacred border zone of the city, crossing of which was regulated by certain provisions. At least Claudius and Vespasian expanded it (Richmond, North, Lintott (1996), 1177-1178).

[80] Bakker (1994), 135.

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archaeological documentation. After removing the finds, the sanctuary was covered with soil. The earth was removed once again during the World War I, when everything was finally documented and published. Thus, the history of the *sacellum* is mainly known from its structural remains.[81]

Room 25 was the actual sanctuary. The clearest piece of evidence for its use is the wall painting that was situated on its western wall where the altar was located. In the painting Silvanus was depicted with his typical attributes, whereas the altar was plain. Additionally, a *graffito* scratched into the painting mentions the consular year that corresponds to 215 CE, giving a *terminus ante quem* for the painting itself.[82] The next room, room 24, functioned as an entrance in an earlier phase, but was closed later on, probably when room 25 was converted into a sanctuary. The location of room 25 is revealing considering Silvanus' relationship with nature. Firstly, in terms of accessibility it is one of the rooms furthest into the building – to reach it one has to go through the whole insula. At the same time, it is beyond sight, both from the street, but also from the other spaces in the building, except for the room 26 that has its entrance. The sanctuary was without windows and covered by a roof, so there could have been no direct sensory contact to living nature. Archaeological finds do not give us any further hints regarding a possibility of reverence of trees or other plants. The floor was covered by an aniconic mosaic and the themes of the wall paintings had nothing to do with flora, so the appearance of the room must have been very urban.

There is another Silvanus-related find in Ostia, but its relationship with its find place is questionable. An altar was found in the so-called Sacello dell'Ara dei Gemelli (II,VII,3), one of the rooms in the Piazzale delle Corporazioni, just behind the theatre. The altar depicts myths related to the founding of Rome and also contains several natural iconographical elements, such as trees and flowers. Silvanus, however, is not visible in these elements, and the only evidence of his cult is a votive inscription in the upper part of the altar block. Inscriptions from several periods are visible, thus making the picture even more confusing. The original was found already in the late 19th century and can be seen in Palazzo Massimo in Rome.

The purpose of the Piazzale complex is not entirely clear.[83] Hence, we cannot say anything certain about the use of the altar either. It is likely that it is not in its original place: the altar has been decorated from every side, but the crammed little room it was found in does not allow for seeing the backside at

[81] Calza (1915), 242-258; Bakker (1994), 134-135; Heres (1988), 37.
[82] Bakker (1994), 145.
[83] Terpstra (2013), 100-101.

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all. Currently, large pine trees grow inside the Piazzale delle Corporazioni, but we know nothing about the possible plantation during its use. In addition to the Silvanus-dedication, the altar holds some connection to the *genius* of the guild of the weight makers (*sacomarius*).[84] Since the altar's original location is unknown and its actual purpose being elusive, it can only be said that at least the supposed sanctuary in Sacello dell'Ara dei Gemelli did not have any apparent connection with the elements of the nature.

Slightly removed from the rest of the excavated area lies the so-called Palazzo Imperiale (regio I). From there some Silvanus-related finds were also recovered.[85] Polychrome mosaic with Silvanus as the main subject was excavated in room 78 already in the 19th century. The room is commonly interpreted as a vestibule for the Mithraeum in room 75 and is dated to the period of Commodus.[86] The mosaic, however, is likely to be just a decorative element, since nothing else hints towards religious use of the space.[87] Regardless, if it were related to a sanctuary, it would be visually and auditorily connected to the nearby garden elements of the courtyard 83. Thus, here a picture of Silvanus was connected to actual living green elements of nature, but this cannot be said to be special – different gods and other mythological themes have been used widely in decoration of parks and gardens in antiquity. Additionally, a Silvanus-themed terracotta relief is also mentioned in the Palazzo, but it has since been lost and has not been properly described.[88]

3) Monteleone Sabino

A physical site of an ancient *collegio* of Silvanus can be found in the municipality of Monteleone Sabino, located circa 45 kilometres north-east of Rome, along the old Via Salaria. A long and detailed inscription *Lex familiae Silvani* (or "The Law of the Familia of Silvanus") has been dated to the year 60 CE, and as such, is the oldest known regulation for any religious college.[89] No actual temple building can be seen, but it seems that here, unlike in the Caseggiato dei Molini in Ostia, the *collegio* practiced the cult under the sky and in the nature.

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[84] *CIL* XIV: 51. We know of another inscription connecting the *sacomarii* with Silvanus from Ostia (*CIL* XIV: 309). Cf. Meiggs (1973), 383-384.
[85] Identification as a palace has been questioned, for example by Spurza (2002), 126-130.
[86] Bakker (1994), 33; Meiggs (1973), 452.
[87] M. Lipka, 'Notes on Pompeian Domestic Cults.' *Numen* 53, 3 (2006), 327.
[88] Visconti (1871), 54-55.
[89] Dorcey (1992), 84-85; Evans (1939), 63; *AE* (1929): 161.

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Lex familiae Silvani is written on a large slab of travertine, containing several parts and listing the members of the *familia* and its rules. The rules describe conditions for membership, terms of economic matters, rules regarding fines for causing disturbance, and so forth. The largest area – 13 rows of text – is reserved for guides pertaining to the burial of the members. This is not surprising, since usually the main function of these *collegiae* or *familiae* was to take care of the afterlives of their members.[90] Nowhere is Silvanus depicted as a psychopomp or having anything else to do with death *per se,* so probably this was just a generic way of functioning for these kinds of *familiae* – whichever god was chosen, it was the most affordable and practical way to handle the burial.[91]

The material evidence from the Monteleone Sabino site is scarce but revealing. The site is located next to a small stream, next to which the sanctuary was delineated with a brick wall. Near the find location of the *Lex familiae* was also recovered a statue pedestal covered in red *stucco*, on which a cult statue probably stood. The cultural soil layer contained ash, burnt bone and fragments of vessels and clay lamps, which indicate that some sort of banquets might have been held at the site. *Lex familiae* also mentions a dedication of food given by a certain Marcus Manilius Vopiscus.[92] Some other inscriptions mentioning Silvanus were also found in the area, ensuring that the site was definitely dedicated to Silvanus and no other deities.[93]

Monteleone Sabino offers us a Silvanus sanctuary that resided in a close relation with nature. The place was demarcated by a fence, stood under the sky and was far from settlement and possibly even surrounded by trees.[94] It is tempting to envisage the *familia* gathered in a dimly lit forest clearing and performing rites (perhaps similar to the sacrifice described by Cato the Elder), with a statue of Silvanus watching over them. However, the inscription does not mention woods or trees or any other details about how the sanctuary was supposed to look like, so all thoughts about its definite relation with natural elements remain speculative. Compared to Rome or Ostia it still provides a colorful glimpse of the kind of cult that was practised in the countryside, far from the urban religious culture.

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[90] Evans (1939), 62-64.
[91] Evans (1939), 63.
[92] *...familiae Silvani crustulum mulsum ab se dedit (AE (1929): 161).*
[93] *AE* (1929): 163. *Silvano / consacrar(unt) / familia / hunc locum* ("The *familia* dedicated this place for Silvanus").
[94] Evans (1939), 65.

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5. Conclusions

Surprisingly, it seems that instead of forests and trees themselves, it was liminality that was the recurring feature in the placement of locations related to Silvanus. Borders had a special role in ancient Roman religion: the dividing line between nature and culture was an important theme in many myths, along with the lines between life and death, war and peace or sacred and profane. Along with the god of boundary markers Terminus, two-faced Janus and the pyschopomp Mercurius it seems that Silvanus might also have been such a god of boundaries. No connection with other liminal deities is known – Janus, Mercurius, Priapus, Cardea or other similar deities are not typically present with Silvanus in iconography or epigraphy.

Even though Silvanus was familiar to Romans quite early on, it seems that his cult became truly popular only during the Imperial period. However, this could be only a mirage since the Imperial period also saw an increased migration to Rome from the countryside.[95] Rustic people representing their own social classes brought their own religion with them into the city, where their cults and habits would also be visible in the archaeological record. Thus, even if the rural cult of Silvanus was practised since the mythical ancient times in the forests, fields and wilderness, no material remains of this folk religion have survived. Instead, we have to do with its later urbanized version. Instead of being forgotten as archaic and useless, Silvanus' attributes – especially the role of guardian of boundaries – were morphed to fit in the new milieu and situation.

An important reason – related to urbanization – for the change in the cult could have been the loss of thick virgin forests all around Italy and especially Rome, starting already in 200 BCE.[96] As our sources begin during a time when there were no proper old forests near Rome, and when the average city-dwelling Roman did not have much sensory experience about woods, it is possible that Silvanus, while originally a god of the forest, had to adapt and overcome these challenges due to urbanization.

Søren Jensen has mentioned a possibility of Silvanus having been a god whom you had to ask a permission before entering a forest or letting your cattle graze there.[97] This would fit well with the liminal role as *tutor finium* or keeper of the boundaries: since Silvanus was a god of boundaries, it would be easy to

[95] Crawford (1996), 1187.
[96] Thommen (2009), 86-87.
[97] Jensen (1962), 19.

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transfer him to guard new kinds of boundaries in the city – especially those of a *domus*. When it comes to Silvanus' later popularity in the north, it would be natural to turn to a god of boundaries and forests for the legionaries stationed in the border zones of Germania and the provinces in the north-east. Popularity among soldiers could also be seen in Rome, especially with the inscriptions found around the Caelian hill.

Why did Silvanus never find popularity among the upper classes and the public cult (without taking into account the small cameo in few second-century public buildings) remains a mystery. Based on the epigraphic evidence, Silvanus was extremely popular among the masses for hundreds of years, whereas mystery cults from the east could get an official status very rapidly. Socio-economical context explains this partially: a cult that was popular among slaves, freedmen and ordinary people was too ordinary compared to the exoticism and status value of mystery cults. Maybe it was simply not interesting to the upper classes. Rather, it belonged to the same category as *Lares, genii* and other phenomena pertaining to folk religion.

Cult places of Silvanus in Rome do not seem to have any special relation to nature. Mental images of altars or sacred trees situated in secluded groves are not represented in the evidence. The *rotondo* in the Arch of Constantine could portray an altar of Silvanus in front of a tree, but on the other hand the sanctuary found in Ostia is completely urban. The *dendrophoroi* of Attis and Cybele are somehow related to Silvanus, but it remains unclear how deep this connection was.

The sanctuary in Monteleone Sabino gives us a glimpse of the kind of locations Silvanus could have been worshipped in the countryside. Archaeological material and *Lex familiae Silvani* do not refer to any special trees or other elements. The spring siding the area can be interpreted as a border, possibly relating to Silvanus' liminal role. However, we know too little of the place to see anything special compared to other deities' extra-urban sanctuaries.

It seems that Silvanus was probably originally a god of forests and agricultural land, as mentioned by Virgil and other writers of the Augustan age. Georges Dumézil has proposed that Silvanus might have remained a protector of certain areas, even when they were converted from forests to fields, and thus the cult would have changed its meaning as land was being cleared.[98] If nothing else, at least the cult was malleable. Silvanus would have been originally a protector of woodlands, then a protector of the fields and finally the protector of the *domus* or even the *pomerium*. It is noteworthy that never is

[98] Dumézil (1970), 346.

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Silvanus depicted as a god of vegetation, growth or fertility – those tasks were reserved for other deities.[99]

Just as it is today, it was difficult for ancient people to find a clear line between culture and nature. Similarly, the cult of Silvanus can be seen as a confusing phenomenon between culture and nature. The fact that Silvanus is so difficult to categorize is also due to the differences between modern concepts and those of the ancient Romans. Post-humanist thought and the ecological catastrophes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries paint the demarcation between humanity and nature muddled and unclear. We do not completely understand how the people of the past might have seen these divisions, but clearly it was not self-evident to them, either.

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[99] Cf. Jensen (1962), 20.

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