Statius, *Silvae* I.1.22-55

Description of Domitian's equestrian statue newly erected on the Roman Forum

**Name of the author:** Statius  
**Date:** 91 CE  
**Date:** 1st CE  
**Place:** Rome  
**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman  
**Literary genre:** Eulogy / Panegyric and Poetry

**Title of work:** Silvae  
**Reference:** I.1.22-55

**Circumstances:** Poem written for the dedication of Domitian’s equestrian statue (91 CE).

**Commentary:**  
The poem *Silvae* I.1 is the first imperial praise of the *Silvae*, a collection of praise poetry. It was written in 91 CE, just after the dedication of an equestrian statue to the emperor Domitian on the Roman Forum. This poem describes the only statue of Domitian known to us, since all the others were subjected to *abolitio memoriae* after Domitian’s assassination. This description mentions various themes or symbols which supplied the imperial imagery and ideology of Domitian (see Geyssen, *Imperial Panegyric*). Nevertheless, some scholars assume that Statius’s speech giving imperial praises in the *Silvae* is not an official one, but a personal, and even a critical one (see the definite opinion of Ahl, “The Rider and the Horse”; for a more nuanced view, Newlands, *Statius*’ Silvae and the Poetics of Empire).

The location of the statue is highly symbolic. It was erected in front of the Temple of Caesar (his right hand outstretched in the direction of the temple) and was surrounded by the basilica Julia and the basilica Aemilia (this is the generally accepted view about the location of the statue, however it has been recently contested by Michael Thomas who suggests that it might have been located further to the west, on the sight-line with the entrance to the Forum of Nerva, see Thomas, “(Re)locating”; Gallia, “Remaking Rome,” p. 158, and n. 1). The proximity of two buildings linked to the Julio-Claudian dynasty shows that Domitian wanted to associate the Flavian dynasty with the Julio-Claudian one, in order to legitimize his power and his capacity to ordain the deification of dead emperors. In addition, as Andrew Gallia rightly recalls, the fact that, beyond this statue, stood the Arch of Titus (set up by Domitian as an honour for *Divus* Titus), and Nero’s colossus of the Sun which, according to some viewers, felt a resemblance to Titus, may led to the conclusion that “the scale and orientation of the *Equus* thus suggest that Domitian was at least willing to place himself in a dialogue with his deified predecessors” (Gallia, “Remaking Rome,” p. 158).

Considering the praise of the horse rider, Domitian is presented as a dreadful war leader. Since his adoption of the name Germanicus in 83 CE, Domitian associated his image with a martial ideology. The erection of this equestrian statue in 90 CE fits in with this ideology since it was dedicated in honour of the victories of Domitian against the Dacians in 88 CE and against the Chatti in 83 and 89 CE (v. 27). Actually, Statius mentions that the horse trampled the head of the *captus Rhenus* (v. 51; see Sestertius depicting a bust and an equestrian statue of Domitian, 94-95 CE). The commemoration of Domitian’s victories over the Germans was the keystone of the imperial ideology of Domitian, who wanted to justify the legitimacy of the Flavian dynasty to rule through his military successes and his capacities to submit most of the peoples on Earth (*oikoumenê* – *orbis terrarum*). In this passage Domitian appears also an outstanding peacemaker. Comparing Domitian and Caesar, Statius comes to the conclusion that the *clementia* of Domitian is greater than that of Caesar (v. 27-28). The equestrian statue in itself reflected such a dual attitude. Even if Domitian was represented in a martial way, he appeared in the centre of the Roman Forum, stretching his right arm to put an end to conflict (v. 56).

In many aspects, Statius’s description is clearly hyperbolic. He wanted to show that Domitian surpassed all his predecessors, and even the laws of Nature. Statius insists on the exceptional dimensions of the statue. For instance, he writes that Domitian’s sword was as big as that which was used by Orion (v. 43-45). This comparison can be understood in two different ways: it can insist on the frightening and non-natural aspects of Domitian’s actions (Ahl, “The Rider and the Horse,” p. 94) or it can praise the boundless strength and powers of Domitian. Like Orion, he would frighten his enemies, namely the Germans (Geyssen, *Imperial Panegyric*, p. 94). Statius...
insists also on the extraordinary powers of Domitian’s horse (v. 52-55). The latter’s particularity of being ridden by only one man may echo the fact that Alexander the Great and Caesar had forbidden anybody to ride their horses (Pliny the Elder, Natural History VIII.154-155). John Gessey points out that the equestrian statue erected by Caesar on his forum was a former statue of Alexander the Great whose head had been removed. Through the description of the horse, Statius may have suggested that Domitian was following in the footsteps of his prestigious predecessors and was even surpassing them (Geyssen, Imperial Panegyric, p. 96). This poem gives the impression that Domitian wanted to be represented a ruling emperor who “approximated the divine” (Newlands, Statius’ Silvae and the Poetics of Empire, p. 52). For instance, Statius writes that Domitian’s arms were as good as those of Zeus for welcoming his tutelary goddess Minerva (v. 39-40). At the end of the passage, Domitian is equated with an astrum (v. 55), a term which was usually used for deified emperors since the episode of Caesar’s comet. Through the description of this equestrian statue, Statius was thus trying to emphasize the military strength of the emperor as well as to justify his legitimacy to rule, suggesting that his authority was supported by gods which were represented in Domitian’s ideology as his familiars, almost his peers.

Keywords in the original language:

- astrum
- captivus
- dominus
- Rhenus

Thematic keywords in English:

- clemency
- deification
- Domitian
- Germans
- peace
- Roman conquests
- Roman power
- statue
- victory
- warrior

Bibliographical references:  


Geyssen, John W., Imperial Panegyric in Statius. A Literary Commentary on Silvae 1.1 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996)

Newlands, Carole E., Statius’ Silvae and the poetics of Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)


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