



[Statius, Silvae I.6.85-102](#)

Poem describing the *Saturnalia*, probably in December 89 CE

Name of the author: Statius

Date: 89 CE

Date: 1st CE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Eulogy / Panegyric and Poetry

Title of work: Silvae

Reference: I.6.28-50

Circumstances: Poem written for the Saturnalia (December 89 CE?)

Commentary:

This text is the peroration of Statius's imperial praise celebrating the *Saturnalia* which occurred in Rome in December, probably in 89 CE. It is the last poem of Book I of the *Silvae*. After mentioning the spectacular and noisy shows in the arena, Statius describes how the festivities ended during the night. As with the description of the abundance of food provided by the emperor (see [Statius, Silvae I.6.28-50](#)), Statius uses a hyperbolic vocabulary so as to depict the extraordinary ending of the feast, whose central element was the appearance of a *flammeus orbis*, a flaming ball, in the middle of the arena (v. 86-87). The poet insists on the supernatural nature of this fire: it was much brighter than the Cretan Crown, that is the crown that Bacchus offered to Ariadne, and it even perturbed the night (v. 88-91). As in many passages of the *Silvae* (see [Statius, Silvae I.1.22-55](#); [Statius, Silvae I.1.91-107](#)), Statius implicitly alludes to the fact that Domitian's actions disrupted natural laws and even surpassed those of the gods. This passage echoes verses 35-37, which allude to the *orbs* where the knights were seated and create the impression that the crowd in the amphitheatre was a reduced model of the *populus romanus* and indirectly of all the peoples on Earth which were ruled by Jupiter's vice-regent, Domitian (Newlands, *Statius' Silvae*, p. 246-247; [Statius, Silvae I.6.28-50](#)). In both passages, Statius gives the impression that Domitian controlled everything and that visual effects contributed to show the supernatural powers of the emperor.

Statius uses for the first time a *recusatio*, saying that he is too drunk to write (v. 96-97), in order to free himself from the description of the *Saturnalia*'s ending. For Carole Newlands, this literary technique enabled him to get away from the imperial control over the *Saturnalia* and to put an end to his "extravagance in verse," contrary to the emperor who continued to liven up the feast (Newlands, *Statius' Silvae*, p. 255). Nevertheless, the poet could not end his poem in such a way. In the last verses (v. 98-102), Statius praises this day and claims that it will last throughout all the time. So as to confirm his words, he compares its longevity to that of some famous elements of Roman topography: the Latium's hills, the Tiber, "tua Roma" – that is the Rome partially rebuilt by Domitian – and the Capitol. It may seem contradictory that the ending of the *Saturnalia*, the poem, and of the whole first book of the *Silvae* is associated with this promise of permanence. In fact, these verses refer clearly to the same idea as that expressed at the end of the description of Domitian's equestrian statue: the permanence of Domitian's actions or images is due to their extraordinary character but also to the fact that Statius has immortalized them through his writing (see [Statius, Silvae I.1.91-107](#)). Many historians link these verses of Statius with the end of Horace's third book of *Odes* (Horace, *Odes* III.30.6-9) where Horace predicates that his writing will last as long as the Capitol exists (Gibson, "The *Silvae* and Epic," p. 167; Newlands, *Statius' Silvae*, p. 250). Statius's poem differs from Horace's on the description of the Capitol: "which you [Domitian] have restored to the world," *terris quod reddis Capitolium* (v. 102). With this last verse, the poem ends with a central image and theme of Domitian's ideology, namely Domitian as the restorer of the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus Capitolinus. This operation was probably one of the most important of Domitian's reign. It was praised in the whole *Silvae* (IV.2.20-21; IV.3.16), but also by various authors (Plutarch, *Publ.* XV.3-4; Silius Italicus, *Pun.* III, 623). Under the Flavian dynasty, the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus was destroyed twice: firstly in 69 CE during the civil war after Nero's assassination, and secondly in a fire in 80 CE. Due to the symbolic importance of this temple for the Flavian dynasty and the fact that Jupiter was Domitian's official protective god, its restoration was a political necessity. It was achieved in 82 CE and was presented in Domitian's imperial ideology as another piece of evidence for his powers and his capacity to found a new era dominated by the Flavians under the protection of Jupiter. Nevertheless, the reference to this temple inside the enumeration of the permanent elements of Roman topography, especially Latium's hills and the



Tiber, seems quite contradictory. Actually, the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus was also in 89 CE “an emblem of temporality and change” (Newlands, *Stattius’ Silvae*, p. 250) since it had been recently destroyed twice, including once during the civil war of 69 CE, during which the Flavians were endangered but finally reached imperial power. As is the case in other poems of the *Silvae*, Stattius praises in a hyperbolic way the actions of Domitian and associates him with the idea that he was founding a new era, but the symbols, comparisons or enumerations used give the impression that Stattius always warns against an over-confidence in the longevity of the Flavian dynasty and against a megalomaniac drift of imperial power.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Capitolium](#)
- [montes Latii](#)
- [Roma](#)
- [spectaculum](#)
- [terra](#)
- [Thybris](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [arena](#)
- [Capitoline Temple](#)
- [Domitian](#)
- [festival](#)
- [Jupiter](#)
- [permanence](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Saturnalia](#)
- [spectacles](#)
- [supernatural powers](#)

Bibliographical references: Geysen, John W. , [Imperial Panegyric in Stattius. A Literary Commentary on *Silvae* 1.1](#) (New York: Peter Lang, 1996)

Gibson, Bruce, [“The *Silvae* and Epic”](#), in Flavian poetry (ed. Ruurd R. Nauta, Harm-Jan Van Dam, Johannes J. L. Smolenaars; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 163-183

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