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SILVANUS *VILICUS*?

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Silvanus *Vilicus*?¹

A number of Latin inscriptions from Italy and Dalmatia have been thought to refer to the god Silvanus as *vilicus*, that is, as a servile bailiff who managed his master's country estate. Such a title might be plausible for the humble Silvanus, guardian of hunters and farmers, since he was particularly popular among slaves and freedmen.² However, it is not clear in epigraphic contexts that Silvanus indeed bears this epithet. Consider the following evidence:

(1) The most probable instance of the use of *vilicus* to describe Silvanus occurs on an inscription from Rome which addresses a divinity whose name is obliterated, but who bears the epithet [s]anctus and perhaps d[eus] (*CIL* VI 664). In the city of Rome *sanctus* is Silvanus' most common title, appearing on more than one-third of his over 250 inscriptions there. Of course, many other deities are called *sanctus*, but Silvanus is a possible candidate for the [s]anctus d[eus] *vilicus* named in the inscription.³

(2) An Italian dedication to Silvanus from Aquae Cutiliae mentions a *vilicus*. It refers either to the occupation of the devotee, a certain Cinura, or to the deity.⁴

(3) Some scholars interpret *vilicus* as an epithet for Silvanus on offerings, abbreviated *S(ilvano) V(ilico?) S(acrum)*, from Vrlika Stražine, a small village in Dalmatia near the ancient city of Promona.⁵ *Viator* (traveller), an uncommon title for Silvanus in Pannonia, has also been considered a possibility.⁶ But why should unattested or unusual epithets be sought

¹ Note the following abbreviations: *GZMS*=*Glasnik Zemaljskog Muzeja u Sarajevu*; *ILJ*=A. and J. Šašel, *Inscriptiones Latinae quae in Jugoslavia inter annos MCMLX et MCMLXX Repertae et Editae Sunt* (Ljubljana 1978-86).

² Senators, equestrians and decurions dedicated less than three percent of Silvanus' over eleven hundred inscriptions. For the cult of Silvanus see: P. Dorsey, *The Cult of Silvanus in the Roman World*, (Ph.D. diss. Columbia University, 1987); A. von Domaszewski, *Philologus* 61 (1902) 1-25; J.F. Toutain, *Les cultes païens dans l'empire romaine* I (Rome 1905) 260-73; and S. Jensen, *ARID* 2 (1962) 11-42.

³ See H. Delehaye, *AB* 25 (1906) 158-62 and 28 (1909) 145-200. *Sanctus* is also widely used in describing husbands and wives on tombstones and may mean "chaste" rather than "holy."

⁴ *CIL* IX 4664 is edited as follows: *Cinura / Vilico / Silvano / V.S.L.M.* (not extant).

⁵ *CIL* III 13202-13205 and 13207. A. Klotz, "Silvanus," *RE* III A, 1 (1927) 122; and F. Coarelli, *Studies in Honor of Peter von Blanckenhagen* (Locust Valley, N.J., 1979) 262, read *vilicus*. The *CIL* compiler ventures no interpretation.

The initial *S* on these inscriptions clearly indicates the god Silvanus, whose name was so familiar it often appears in abbreviated form, particularly in Dalmatia. *S(ilvano) S(ancto) S(acrum)*: *CIL* III 10846, 11176, 11308, 13985, 14970; XI 6945; *AE* 1939 176; *GZMS* 39 (1927) 258; *GZMS* n.s. 6 (1951) 53, 302; *ILJ* 760, 788-789. *S(ilvano) A(ugusto) S(acrum)*: *CIL* III 8305, 8685, 9791-9793, 9813a-b, 14613, 14678; V 706 828, 831-833, 2383; *Archeografo Triestino* n.s. 13 (1887) 171; *Vjesnik za arheologiju i historiju Dalmatinsku* 47-48 (1924-25) 62; *ILJ* 2055.

⁶ E. Tóth, *Alba Regia* 18 (1980) 96, reads: *S(ilvano) V(iatori) S(acrum)*. For inscriptions to Silvanus *Viator* see: *AE* 1977 626; *AE* 1979 481; *AE* 1980 709; Tóth, *art. cit.* 92, no. 6. For

out when we can read: *S(ilvano) V(otum) S(oluit)*, a familiar epigraphic formula indicating fulfillment of a vow to Silvanus.

There is no doubt that Silvanus was popular among *vilici* and, more generally, with the servile class from which they came.⁷ But there is no reason to assume a god even as modest as Silvanus was imagined in the lowly position of bailiff.⁸ Many titles of Silvanus show that he was not thought of as a minor spirit, but as a powerful, omnipotent deity of wide and even celestial scope.⁹ *Vilicus* would certainly be one of the least empowering, not to mention one of the rarest, of Silvanus' over eighty epithets.

Inscriptions to Silvanus from such rural spots like Vrlika are relatively rare, a reflection to some degree of the low incidence of discovery and preservation of archaeological evidence in the countryside. They reflect Silvanus' rural worship, even if they do not clearly show that he possessed the title *vilicus*. On the other hand, the inscriptions from Rome and Aquae Cutiliae are products of an urban society which probably would not have called Silvanus *vilicus*.

In the first three centuries A.D., the period in which the bulk of the epigraphic evidence falls, Silvanus is far better known in cities than in the countryside, especially in Rome, home to perhaps over a million souls, where the god ranks in epigraphic popularity only after Jupiter. The cult probably originated in the country and was brought into town at an earlier period, but it had long lost touch with its country roots in the cities of the Roman Empire by the second century A.D., the date of the earliest of the inscriptions in question. The god may well have been venerated extensively in the countryside – where lack of inscriptions is absolutely no indication of his unimportance there – but information about a rustic counterpart to the cult is meager. For the vast majority of his known devotees, Silvanus rarely fulfilled real agricultural or other rural needs, but had become a general protector of the home, family and personal property.¹⁰ He seems to have been adapted to completely urban needs by

this title see F. Heichelheim, "Viator," *RE* VIII A, 2 (1958) 1928-40; R. Hošek, *AArchSlov* 28 (1977) 425-27.

⁷ Votives to Silvanus from *Vilici*: *CIL* VI 586, 615, 619, 623 (*hortorum*), 666, 31010, 36786 (*horreorum*), 36823; *CIL* XI 6947. Cato (*De Agricultura* 83) describes a ritual to Mars and Silvanus which was apparently performed by the servile *vilicus*, not the owner of the farm. Cato, however, writes almost one hundred fifty years before the date of the earliest Silvanus inscriptions; by the second century the *vilicus* did not necessarily manage a farm. The majority of the *vilici* who worshipped Silvanus were members of the *familia Caesaris* living in Rome. They administered the emperor's gardens, warehouses and other urban departments.

⁸ F. Bömer, *Untersuchungen über die Religion der Sklaven in Griechenland und Rom* I (Mainz 1957) 459, views Silvanus' iconography – the god wears a simple cloak and hunting boots, and holds a *falx* and pine tree – as the creation and reflection of impoverished slaves. But the iconography of the cult was no doubt fostered and perpetuated by individuals of some wealth, either free or slave, who could afford to commission expensive statues and reliefs.

⁹ E.g.: *aeternus* (*AE* 1903 68); *consacranus* (*AE* 1922 67); *divus* (*CIL* XI 1139); *caelestis* (*CIL* VI 638); *invictus* (*CIL* VI 329; VII 451; XI 699); *magnus* (*CIL* III 13460; XIV 2894; IX 3375; *AE* 1913 136; *AE* 1937 208; *AE* 1980 709); *pantheus* (*CIL* III 10394; VI 695; VII 1038); *potens* (*CIL* IX 3375); *pollens* (*CIL* VI 647).

¹⁰ Agricultural, woodland and pastoral epithets of Silvanus are few in number. *Sator*: *AE* 1922 67 (Moesia). *Messor*: *CIL* III 9867, 14970; *GZMS* n.s. 6 (1951) 51 (Dalmatia). *Agre-*

his simple adherents who – although seeking in him an escape from the problems of city – had long forgotten life on the farm.

In this light we should not be so quick to accept a Silvanus *Vilicus*. Not only is such a reading uncertain, but it is incompatible with the god's character which is hardly as rustic and humble in the imperial period as we might at first suspect.

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stis: CIL VI 646 (i.e. Lar *Agrestis*). *Campester*: AE 1967 405 (Dacia). *Erbarius*: CIL III 3498 (Pannonia). *Pater falcitens*: CIL VIII 27764 (Africa Proconsularis).