

# IS IT REALLY SILVANUS?<sup>1</sup>

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*In research on the cult of Silvanus, the Roman god of forests and flocks and natural or agricultural prosperity, the province of Dalmatia holds a special place. Within the province, the locality of Danilo, located to the northeast of Šibenik, is also a place that cannot be disregarded. One especially intriguing relief from Danilo, damaged and worn, represents a male figure in movement. The figure has horns on his head, long hair, a bearded face and hairy thighs, and it appears that the figure is either dancing or shown in some kind of movement to his left. In scholarly literature, the figure represented is always named Silvanus, as this was the way he was usually presented on the votive monuments*

*of Dalmatia. Still, contemporary theoretical contextualization of existing material (e.g. votive monuments, reliefs) is reliant on comprehensive revalorization of (the predominant) data. In this paper, I will offer a short overview of Silvanus's representations from Dalmatia. On the basis of that overview I will argue the real character of the figure portrayed, and why this representation might fit more appropriately into the pastoral scenes of Dionysiac mythology.*

**Key words:**

Roman religion, cult, Silvanus, Dalmatia, Danilo, Rider, Dionysos, satyr

In this paper I will offer a brief overview of the principal disputed and unresolved ideas and concepts about the cult of Silvanus and his representations from the Roman province of Dalmatia, with the focus on one specific monument from Danilo/Rider, near Šibenik, representing Silvanus, or so we have thought. Currently, the Croatian Science Foundation is funding the research project titled 'Among Gods and Men: The Cults and the Population of Roman Dalmatia According to the Votive Inscriptions', and the main goal of the research project is a thorough review and/or revision of the votive inscriptions and figural representations of the deities and their systematization, which will result in extensive insight into social aspects of religious beliefs, traditions and practices, and their combined impact on the evolution of cultural identities. As a result of that research, I would like to propose a different identity for the figure portrayed on the monument from Danilo.

The province of Dalmatia holds a special place within the research on the cult of Silvanus in the Roman Empire. The debate over whether Silvanus's cult is Italic or autochthonous, and which of his traits are of Italic and/or indigenous origin, is still very much alive.<sup>2</sup> Depending on which theory emerged first, the research can be divided into two phases: older and more recent. A short and somewhat generalized overview of disputed opinions follows. The so-called older phase has been covered by foreign authors, such as A. von Domaszewski,<sup>3</sup> and O. Hirschfeld and R. Schneider,<sup>4</sup> who considered that genuine *interpretatio* took place. Croatian scholars D. Rendić-Miočević<sup>5</sup> and N. Cambi<sup>6</sup> are of the same opinion that, when it comes to Dalmatia, a native cult syncretized with the closest Italic deity during the Roman period. More recent local authors, such as D. Maršić<sup>7</sup> and A. Rendić-Miočević,<sup>8</sup> as well as the author of this paper, continue to see Silvanus as an indigenous deity (with varied detailed opinions

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2 For a more detailed overview of the subject, see Perinić, 2016.

3 Domaszewski 1895, 1–123.

4 Schneider, Hirschfeld 1885.

5 Rendić-Miočević 1989, 461–507.

6 Cambi 1968, 131–141.

7 Maršić 1997.

8 Rendić-Miočević, Pedišić 2005, 415–425.

applying). Hirschfeld and Schneider<sup>9</sup> are the first scholars to systematically and analytically publish Silvanus's monuments from Dalmatia, with the assumption that local populations took the image of the god Pan from Greek colonists, as a suitable figure to represent Silvanus. Useful as this study was, and still is, in more recent works it was thought of as outdated, yet it has found new life in the proposition by Ante Rendić-Miočević. He further analysed this problem methodically and came to the conclusion that Silvanus was an indigenous divinity who, through *interpretatio Graeca*, assumed the visual appearance of Pan and then, through *interpretatio Romana*, received the name of the Italic divinity.<sup>10</sup> His approach has recently been shared by a few other scholars.<sup>11</sup> Cambi added to this line of argument, illustrating the development of the Delmataan Silvanus by combining the following factors: Greek Pan (Indo-European origin); Delmataan 'Pan' of unknown name (also of Indo-European origin and with unknown iconography); the influence of Greek iconography (theriomorphism); Italic Silvanus (the provider of the name for the Delmataan deity (*interpretatio Romana*), but not the iconography); the anthropomorphic Silvanus; the impact of Italian iconography.<sup>12</sup>

Alternatively, more recent or somewhat recent works by foreign authors reject the indigenous component, namely A. Mócsy<sup>13</sup> and P. F. Dorcey,<sup>14</sup> who consider that 'Dalmatian' Silvanus was an Italic deity and that indigenous elements cannot be recognized in his cult. Dorcey denies Dalmatian Silvanus any autochthonous elements, believing that the opinion of Silvanus as a native deity, as set by von Domaszewski, and later taken up by more recent authors, is inherently wrong. Maršić corrects Dorcey, stating that the author of this thesis was Schneider. Dorcey's opinion is followed by Á. M. Nagy,<sup>15</sup> but he accepts certain local specifics of Silvanus. Dorcey considers that the inability to recognize the Roman character of Silvanus is the only – and, at the same time, the biggest – obstacle to the understanding of his cult in Dalmatia. He believes that the idea of the cultural homogeneity of the Illyrian people is unsustainable. In support of his theory, or as evidence of it, he considers that the occurrence of votive monuments dedicated to Silvanus and a deity of local importance must have happened on at least one occasion; however, we (still) have no evidence for this. All Silvanus' epithets are Latin, and he is invoked mainly in the company of Roman gods (Diana and nymphs). Dorcey's opinion that the idea of the cultural homogeneity of the Illyrian people is unsustainable might be in contradiction with the war of the Batos or the three wars with the Romans that lasted, with breaks, for almost 160 years.

There would have been no rebellion, no wars, and no attempts to unify against the conquerors if some sense of togetherness did not exist.

The cult of Silvanus in Dalmatia is one of the best-documented of cults and one that has spurred very fruitful discussion. The most recent book with a more detailed review of theories mentioned above analysed in more detail, was published in 2016.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in the last 10 years, various aspects of the cult of Silvanus have been explored by both J. Lulić<sup>17</sup> and D. Džino.<sup>18</sup> To add to this, in one of the most recent papers on the topic, D. Periša questioned the dates of some of Silvanus's monuments, the attribution of one figurine supposedly representing Silvanus, and also some attributes Silvanus carries (namely, pedum/lagobolon).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, relatively recently I questioned the attribution of one cosmetic container as a vessel that represented Bes-Silvanus. In that paper it is proposed that the connection with Silvanus was made solely or mostly because of the place of the find of the receptacle, disregarding the narrow context of the grave in which the container was found, but relying on a wider context of Dalmatia and the Delmatae.<sup>20</sup>

But back to Dorcey's words, which are not to be so easily dismissed, especially where he says that the inability to recognize the Roman character of Silvanus is the only – and, at the same time, the biggest – obstacle to the understanding of his cult in Dalmatia. This opinion can be illustrated with a common misperception of Silvanus Messor (three such monuments have been found in Danilo), who, under this epithet, was considered to be an expression of local autochthonous culture,<sup>21</sup> when, in fact, the agricultural trait was a typical characteristic of Italic Silvanus,<sup>22</sup> especially if we remember a minor Italic deity that goes by the name of Messor, Ceres's helper (Serv. Aen. I.21). Furthermore, the relationship that the cult of Silvanus had with agriculture was already established in the Delmatae areas (upper Cetina, Rider), which, after all, have provided us with the epithet Messor (reaper).<sup>23</sup> The iconographic form of Roman Silvanus is rejected in Dalmatia: the shepherd's staff (pedum)<sup>24</sup> and panpipes (syrinx) are the two most characteristic symbols of Silvanus. They displaced the sickle (falx) and the pine branch. Under the guise of his Greek counterpart, Pan, Silvanus lost his human form and, in Dalmatia, he has acquired goat legs, ears and horns. Until just recently, the scholarly consensus was that, in Dalmatia, there were two iconographically distinctive cult images of Silvanus. It was considered that, in the coastal parts of Dalmatia, Silvanus was portrayed as

9 Schneider, Hirschfeld 1885.

10 Rendić-Miočević 1982, 121–140.

11 E.g. Matijašić, Tassaux 2000, 89.

12 Cambi 2013, 76–77; Cambi 2002, 122 and n. 62.

13 Mócsy 1974, 250–252.

14 Dorcey 1992.

15 Nagy 1994, 773.

16 Perinić 2016.

17 Lulić 2014, 37–51.

18 Džino 2012, 251–278.

19 Periša 2021, 67–81.

20 Perinić 2015, 79–89.

21 Rendić-Miočević 1989, 482, who also accepted the opinion of K. Patsch (1914), whereby the epithet 'Messor' suggests that the economy in their area largely relied on livestock and agricultural production.

22 Perinić 2016, 48.

23 Perinić 2016, 19.

24 For a different opinion, see the abovementioned paper by D. Periša (2021), where he considers that certain shepherd's staffs (*pedum*) and sickles (*falx*) were lagobolon.



FIGURE 1. Silvanus(?), Danilo (photo by T. Brajković, Muzej grada Šibenika).



FIGURE 2. Representation of Silvanus walking, Salona (photo by Lj. Perinić).

old, bearded and horned, or – to put it simply – as Pan, while the hinterland, the areas behind the Dinara mountains, were dominated by the figure of a young, beardless Silvanus, sometimes with goat legs and sometimes with human feet. But this division was proven to be untenable.<sup>25</sup>

Within the province of Dalmatia, the locality of Danilo/Rider, located to the north-east of Šibenik, is also a place that cannot be disregarded when it comes to research into the cult of Silvanus. Roman Rider acquired the status of *municipium* at the latest during the reign of Emperor Vespasian, when the Roman legions withdrew from Dalmatia, that is, from the military camps in Burnum and Tilurium. At the time, Rider was most certainly organized as a ‘dual’ settlement – with an agglomeration in the plain, the remnants of which are today discernible in the present-day Danilo field, and in the still functional settlement of the Illyrian Reditae on the hill of Gradina. The ‘duality’ of the settlement is additionally supported by the recorded dual titles of its officials – that of decurial order and/or *principes* – which enables a hypothesis that it had a specific legal position in the part of Roman Dalmatia between the rivers Krka and Cetina. There are 14 different inscriptions which mention Rider, or settlements’ notables of decurial order and/or those holding the title of tribal leader (princeps).<sup>26</sup>

Based on the epigraphic and votive material known to date, the conclusion that the local (Delmatean) population of Danilo most often turned to Silvanus presents itself as obvious. Worshippers of Silvanus rarely recorded their professions or social status on votive inscriptions. Those who considered it necessary to record it were soldiers and a few members of the upper classes (e.g. augurs or decurions). Judging from the inscriptions, it is clear that Silvanus was not usually worshipped by those of higher social status.<sup>27</sup> So far, 11 inscriptions dedicated to Silvanus have been found in the Ridite area, plus five relief monuments, one of which also bears an inscription.<sup>28</sup>

Among these reliefs is one that is especially intriguing. There are no verifiable data as to the fragment’s origin, but it is generally considered and accepted that it was found in Danilo (Fig. 1). It is damaged on all sides and extensively worn, representing a male figure in movement. The figure has horns on his head (as far as can be discerned), long hair, a bearded face and hairy thighs, and it appears that the figure is either dancing or shown in some kind of vigorous movement to his left. In scholarly literature, the figure represented is consistently identified as Silvanus, as this was how he was usually presented on the votive monuments from Dalmatia as a figure, but not so much in such a movement.

25 Perinić 2016, 20.

26 Zeman 2017, 425–427, fn. 1.

27 Perinić 2016, 11.

28 Rendić-Miočević 1984, 120.



**FIGURE 3.** Sarcophagus, Dionysos and Ariadne, 110-130 AD, Public Domain, Altes Museum - Relief einer Verschlussplatte, Dionysos und Ariadne, 110-130 AD ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Altes\\_Museum\\_-\\_Relief\\_einer\\_Verschlussplatte,\\_Dionysos\\_und\\_Ariadne.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Altes_Museum_-_Relief_einer_Verschlussplatte,_Dionysos_und_Ariadne.jpg), 1 November 2022).

Or not at all. In the first publication of this monument by Ante Rendić-Miočević, the author himself was not sure whether this figure actually does represent Silvanus.<sup>29</sup>

In this case, the case of the relief, there is a possibility that we as a scholarly community relied not only on the possible narrow context of the find, on Danilo/Rider and its 'favouritism' of Silvanus, but also on the broader context, which is Dalmatia and the Delmatae themselves, with their undoubtedly proven reverence for Silvanus. Consequently, the figure on the relief from Danilo (Fig. 1) has been identified as Silvanus, and he appears as such in all subsequent publications.<sup>30</sup>

It is a fact that Silvanus in Dalmatia is indeed often represented walking, but in that case his upper body is *en face*, and the lower body is shown as in motion with legs crossed, as, e.g., on this monument from Salona (Fig. 2). Evidently, the figure on the Danilo monument (Fig. 1) is presented in a movement yet to be seen in Silvanus' iconography; and, furthermore, the figure represented appears to be almost touching the drapery of someone standing to his left.<sup>31</sup>

However, if it is not Silvanus, who else could it be? This would also not be the first time that Silvanus has mistakenly been connected with mystery religions, either the cult of Dionysos or that of Magna Mater. Cult rituals relating to Silvanus's epithet 'Den-

drophoros', which he often adopted in Italy, reflected a similarity with the cult of Magna Mater in the ceremonial celebration of the deities.<sup>32</sup> Representations of Silvanus from Dalmatia could, on some occasions, easily be mistaken with those of satyrs, silens and Pan. While differences between them exist, they are not insurmountable, and they do not diminish the possibility of interpretation in terms of similarity.

Satyrs or silens or Silenus, who also inhabited forest areas, were followers and companions of Dionysos, and the elements of goat in their representations may mirror a later association with Pan. They often appear as licentious wine-loving men of nature. Early depictions of satyrs show them as men with a horse's tail and ears, while later versions are half man and half goat, sometimes with entire goat legs or just hoofed feet.<sup>33</sup> Although Silvanus, as well as Pan, Silenus's father, have features that are, considering their cults generally, similar or the same, in most cases Silvanus and Pan differ. Silvanus and Pan appear in the literary sources together; but, always and without exception, it is clear that they are two separate deities. They share several common characteristics: the forest as their domain, nudity, the company of nymphs and shepherds, and the pine tree. Exactly that which distinguishes Faunus, as the Roman counterpart for Pan, and Silvanus, also separates Pan from Silvanus: sexual aggression, familiarity with satyrs and Sileni, the goat shape, a lack of interest in agriculture, musical talent and a tendency to create panic.<sup>34</sup> These differ-

29 Rendić-Miočević 1984, 124-125.

30 E.g. Podrug, Brajković, Krnčević 2008, 204-205; Perinić 2016, III/29.

31 Perinić 2016, III/9, photo by Ljubica Perinić, other reliefs with Silvanus's legs crossed, e.g. III/1 from Salona; III/15 from Salona; III/41 from Halapić, Glamoč; III/42 from Gradina-Kamen, Glamoč, etc.

32 Dorcey 1992, 82.

33 Volokhine 2010, 250-253.

34 Dorcey 1992, 16, 40; Boardman 1997.

ences are visible not only in ancient literature, but also in actual cult practices, as two different iconographic types of deity are represented. This would be true for almost any other province, generally, but not for Dalmatia, as we have already established that in Dalmatia Silvanus was represented as Pan, or Silvanus Aegipan. He is the god of the forests, but not of forests in their entirety. Silvanus is partially 'civilized' and partially wild, and as such he reflected the experiences of early settlers in Italy, whose descendants then took him to the frontiers of the Empire. Not only did he reflect the experiences of the early inhabitants of Italy, but also aspects of religious assembly, or natural human response to the tamed and the untamed, the wild and the civilized.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Silvanus, satyrs are frequently depicted typically causing devastation and attacking women. Curiously enough, it was these satyrs' character traits that Augustine attributed to Silvanus when he described the casting out of Silvanus from the house during childbirth (De Civ. Dei VI-9). But, by the 5<sup>th</sup> century, when Augustine wrote his *magnum opus*, Silvanus was an old and lesser-known Roman god, whose popularity had peaked two centuries before. Satyrs are often dancing and generally causing a disturbance in scenes showing *thiasos* of Dionysos and other gods, at weddings and similar community celebrations. It is on such representations that we see Pan (Fig. 3) or satyrs in such energetic movement as we observe on the Danilo monument. Pan or satyrs moving to their left, as if dancing in a procession, over their left hand the drapery of a maenad or some other person in front of them.<sup>36</sup>

However, satyrs were also employed by their master in the process of wine-making. Consequently, by producing wine, the satyrs in effect transformed nature, that which is wild, into a product intended for human consumption. This is precisely the area where Silvanus and the satyrs overlap, the transformation of the wild into the tame. If we remember that Silvanus was partially civilized and partially wild, he still presided over cultivated land. He was of the forests, he originated in forests, but his absence from the forest caused panic. According to Dolabella, Silvanus is *primum in Terra lapidem finale posuit* (Script. rom. veteres, 302, 13–19), that is, he was the first to set up a boundary stone in the countryside. By the time of Cato (2<sup>nd</sup>–1<sup>st</sup> century BC) Silvanus was already worshipped in silva – in the woods (De agri. 83), and for centuries afterwards he was still closely linked to wooded areas.

These unsolved problem(s) of the origin of specific character traits are the constructive elements of *interpretatio Romana* that fundamentally lies within the concept of the notion of a deity itself, the breach of traditional Roman cults, and the ways in which indigenous communities accepted them. The above-

mentioned debate over whether the cult of Silvanus is Italic or autochthonous, and which of his traits are of Italic and/or indigenous origin, would require a solution to these structural issues. From the vague initial situation, it is difficult to reach conclusions on the questions that arose later, in particular the extent to which Silvanus was a local/native deity. Specifically, it is hard to discern which were indigenous ideas/traits, and which were Roman ones in relation to Silvanus or his cult; and not only in terms of the forms and ways that the cult expressed itself, whether in inscriptions or depictions, since his iconography was mostly Greek in appearance, but his name was Latin. The fact that most of the epigraphic monuments were written using entirely standardized formulas does not substantially help in understanding the basic dimensions of the cult, but still supports the most obvious fact that the natives accepted at least one notion of the Roman religious system. Finally, with regard to the written here, and through comparative analysis of the iconographic display of Silvanus, satyrs, Pan or Silenus, together with their rudimentary mythological and religious characteristics, neither the vessel depicting Bes from Oklaj nor the Silenus figurine from the collection of Mirko Golan was associated with Silvanus, nor was this relief from Danilo. The satyr's freedom of movement, which we are used to seeing on representations and in ancient literature, certainly is in line with his perceived mythological character, and this is something that we have not witnessed in Silvanus's reliefs so far. On the reliefs from Dalmatia, Silvanus does not dance, nor does he perform comic scenes – a favourite pastime of Pan or satyrs.

The conquest and Roman domination over the population of Dalmatia can be measured in military and political terms, but hardly in the context of religious life, and certainly not by applying the same parameters. Contemporary theoretical contextualization of existing material, in this case votive monuments and/or reliefs, is reliant on comprehensive revalorization of the predominant data. Instead of fitting the find into the current theoretical, and oftentimes predominant, frame (whichever approach might be considered: sensory, cognitive or 'traditional'), it is sometimes necessary to shift the focus to find a different narrative into which such pieces might fit better. Such Dionysiac scenes were a popular theme in the decoration of (late) Roman dining rooms, and on sarcophagi. Hopefully, this paper offers enough evidence to raise doubt, or even to question the attribution of the Danilo monument to Silvanus, since, by the evidence we have so far, this representation might fit more appropriately into the pastoral scenes of Dionysiac mythology.

35 Perinić 2016, 1; Milićević Bradač 2008, 359–366.

36 Parrish 1995, 307–332; McCann 1977, 123–136; a few online sources for similar representations: see, e.g. Sculpture / Catalogue of Greek Sculpture in the British Museum, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIB835>, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G\\_1805-0703-130](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1805-0703-130); Sarcophagus / Catalogue of Roman Sarcophagi in the British Museum, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIB834>; The Walters Museum

online collection <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/23618/sarcophagus-with-dionysus-and-ariadne/>; <https://commons.mtholyoke.edu/arth310ankiewicz/wp-content/uploads/sites/116/2015/12/Musical-Intruments.jpg>, referring to "Pair of centaurs pull drunk Dionysus among celebration, circa 160-70 AD", in Living with Myths: The Imagery of Roman Sarcophagi, by P. Zanker and B. Ewald, Illustration 119. Oxford University Press, 2012.

## SAŽETAK

### RADI LI SE O SILVANU?

U istraživanju kulta Silvana, rimskog boga šuma i stada te prirodnog ili poljoprivrednog blagostanja, provincija Dalmacija zauzima posebno mjesto. Unutar provincije nezaobilazno je mjesto i lokalitet Danilo, smješten sjeveroistočno od Šibenika. Jedan posebno intrigantan reljef iz Danila, oštećen i istrošen, predstavlja mušku figuru u pokretu. Figura ima rogove na glavi, dugu kosu, bradato lice i dlakava bedra, a čini se da figura ili pleše ili je prikazana u nekom pokretu nalijevo. U znanstvenoj literaturi prikazani se lik uvijek naziva Silvanom, jer se tako obično prikazivao na zavjetnim spomenicima iz Dalmacije. Ipak, suvremena teorijska kontekstualizacija postojeće građe (npr. zavjetnih spomenika, reljefa) oslanja se na sveobuhvatnu revalorizaciju (dominantnih) podataka. U ovom radu dat će kratak pregled Silvanovih prikaza iz Dalmacije. Na temelju tog pregleda raspravljat će o stvarnom karakteru prikazanog lika i zašto bi se ovaj prikaz mogao prikladnije uklopiti u pastoralne prizore dionizijske mitologije.

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