

# Commenting on the *Silvae*: Visuality, Versatility, Verisimilitude

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## 1 Introduction

This chapter addresses a seminal feature of the style of the *Silvae* that demands commentators' attention: the wealth of visual detail, and Statius' extreme economy and precision in conveying it, albeit often in arcane terms. 'Economy' is perhaps an odd word to use of these florid poems, many of them more than a hundred lines long, but amid all the baroque extravagance and excess, Statius deploys an extraordinary crispness in conveying the impact of the material surroundings and possessions of his patrons. Their material world reflects their wealth and status, and so one way for him to flatter them is to replicate this world in words. The distinction that Statius conveys is not only material: indeed, non-tangible assets such as pedigree are even more important than material possessions.<sup>1</sup> But the focus of this chapter is on materiality, to demonstrate Statius' capacity for shaping the verbal to capture the visual and convey its essence.<sup>2</sup>

The verbal evocation of a feature of a patron's surroundings is a form of ephrasis, a description, often extended, of an object or a work of art, frequently an artifact of the imagination. More than a hundred years ago, Thomas Shearer Duncan argued that, in the *Thebaid* and the surviving scrap of the *Achilleid*, Statius seems to be describing pictures or sculptures of objects or scenes rather than the objects or scenes themselves.<sup>3</sup> Duncan's main aim was to show that Statius expands epic motifs in a way that suggests pictorial influence, and he

1 Zeiner (2005).

2 The 'commentator' here is envisaged as a scholar applying the techniques traditionally employed in a commentary on a Greek or Latin text to respond to the 'material turn' or 'new materialism' in scholarship, rather than employing the theoretical approaches of 'Thing Theory' or 'Object-Oriented Ontology'. For an application of these theories to descriptions of arms and armour in Homer and Virgil, see Blake and Dyer (2021).

3 Duncan (1914). Compare Pittà in this volume (pp. 120–122), proposing an emendation at *Silv.* 3.4.43 on the basis that Statius is reproducing a standard detail in the depiction of Hylas from the iconographic register.

paid little attention to the *Silvae*. The ‘pictorial’ aspect of these occasional poems, however, must have posed an even greater compositional challenge to Statius than the task of bringing epic to life, since his patrons could compare his evocation of their treasures with the treasures themselves and should not find his treatment wanting. Even those among his contemporary readers who had never visited his patrons’ households must have been familiar with the sort of objects they possessed and could have appreciated Statius’ skill in conveying their character and quality. That material world, however, is lost to us, and we must rely on the commentator to recapture it for us.

Now, a century after Duncan’s book was published, a methodologically sophisticated study of visuality in Statius’ oeuvre has appeared, *Visualizing the Poetry of Statius: An Intertextual Approach*, by Christopher Chinn. Noting the frequency of allusions to sight and seeing throughout both the epics and the *Silvae*, Chinn traces ‘visual intertexts’ in Statius’ descriptive passages in order to show *inter alia* how their function in their new context may convey an entirely different message from the original, such that, for example, moral criticism of luxury possessions by Horace becomes in the *Silvae* a validation of a materialist lifestyle—a validation that requires the reader to recall the original ecphrasis and appreciate its new application. Chinn also deploys theories of vision, especially the pioneering work on the gaze in film by Linda Mulvey and the phenomenological account of vision by the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to suggest that some of Statius’ intertexts introduce an erotic element into the way in which his patrons’ estates and possessions are presented to the reader’s view.

In contrast to the methods deployed by Chinn, my study focuses on an approach that compares Statius’ wording with surviving artifacts and images. Our methods, although different, highlight some similar aspects of the visual in the *Silvae*, notably Statius’ appreciation of the craft that created his patrons’ treasures and his emphasis on illusion. Statius’ powers of observation and his capacity to capture the essential features of works of art with enhanced verisimilitude—including tessellated mosaic, fresco painting, ivory carving, sculpted relief, bronze statuary, and marble inlay—is one of the most captivating aspects of his poetry. In what follows, I have selected six instances in which a comparison with surviving images and artifacts can sharpen our appreciation of the way in which he uses language to convey the immanent quality of the fine décor and precious objects in which his patrons took pride or to replicate the experience of encountering them as a visitor. I shall start not with an ecphrasis, however, but with something closer to Duncan’s approach to scenes shared by the *Thebaid* and contemporary painting, namely a mythologizing treatment of an event in the life of one of Statius’ patrons, to show that the atmosphere that he evokes is conveyed also on the walls of contemporary houses. Such whim-



FIGURE 5.1 Herculaneum v 17/18, fresco of cupids playing with a tripod and a giant *cithara*.  
REPRODUCED BY COURTESY OF THE MINISTERO DELLA CULTURA—PARCO  
ARCHEOLOGICO DI ERCOLANO.

sical representations were employed by poets and artists alike to add grace and colour to everyday experience.

## 2 Tumbling Cupids

In a general way, both Statius' poetry and contemporary works of art respond to a taste for exuberant mythologizing representations, combined with a rhetoric of excess, whereby an artist—whether poet or painter—piles on details and does not indulge in one when a dozen, so to speak, will suffice. In the



FIGURE 5.2 Pompeii VI 15, 1, Casa dei Vettii, 'room of the Cupids', fresco of cupids garlanding a goat for sacrifice.

PHOTOGRAPH: SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY.



FIGURE 5.3 Pompeii VI 15, 1, Casa dei Vettii, 'room of the Cupids', fresco of cupids driving chariots drawn by deer.

PHOTOGRAPH: SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY.

wedding poem for the young senator Arruntius Stella and his bride Violentilla, Statius explains how Violentilla succumbs to Stella's suit. Venus' troop of Cupids are longing to shoot Violentilla with their infatuating arrows. Statius gives the chief Cupid a speech of supplication on Stella's behalf to address to Venus, but first he describes the tumbling Cupids pestering their mother with a barrage of questions. I have put in bold in both text and translation the volley of question-words, six in three lines:

fulcra torosque deae tenerum premit agmen Amorum:  
 signa petunt **qua** ferre faces, **quae** pectora figi  
 imperet, **an** terris saevire **an** malit in undis,  
**an** miscere deos **an** adhuc vexare Tonantem.

*Silv.* 1.2.54–57

A tender company of Erotes swarms over the goddess' couch and cushions. They seek her sign: **where** does she bid them carry their torches, **what** hearts are to be pierced? **would** she rather they rage on land **or** in the waves? **should** they confound the gods **or** go on tormenting the Thunderer?

trans. SHACKLETON BAILEY/PARROTT [2015], adapted

The repeated interrogative pronouns *quae ... qua* and the string of alternatives *an ... an ... an ... an* convey the high spirits, eagerness, and pestering nature of the Erotes. There is a certain whimsical realism about this evocation that is instantly recognizable in the visual register, as in a fresco from *insula* 5, 17–18 at Herculaneum that shows Erotes fooling around with garlands and thyrsuses, settling an enormous crater into place on a tripod, and using four hands to play a huge cithara (Fig. 1). The picture seethes with childlike energy just like Statius' language, with its insistent repetitions. One gets a similar sense of busy and boisterous Erotes from the frieze in the 'room of the Cupids' off the peristyle in the House of the Vettii at Pompeii (VI 15, 1), where among other activities some of them are preparing to garland a goat for a sacrifice (Fig. 2), while others are engaged in a whimsical and accident-prone chariot race with deer for steeds (Fig. 3). It is not necessary to assume that Statius had a particular painting in mind; the same humorous and imaginative empathy, a legacy of the Hellenistic world, evidently guided both poet and artists in conveying the behavior of divine children.<sup>4</sup>

4 Cf. the description of Eros, bribed with a ball by his mother, Aphrodite (A. R. *Arg.* 3.146–148, trans. Race [2008]): μείλια δ' ἔχβαλε πάντα, καὶ ἀμφοτέρῃσι χιτῶνος / νωλεμές ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα θεᾶς ἔχεν ἀμφιμεμαρπῶς / λίσσεται δ' αἴψα πορεῖν αὐτοσχεδόν ('He dropped all his playthings

### 3 The 'Unswept Floor'

One of the ways in which Statius compliments his patrons on their fine possessions is by conveying the experience of a visitor upon first encountering them. Manilius Vopiscus has a mosaic pavement that surpasses the fashionable ἀσάρωτος οἶκος, 'unswept floor' (literally: 'unswept room'): *varias ... picta per artes / gaudet humus superare novis asarota figuris*, 'the ground, variously decorated, is pleased to surpass the "Unswept" with its novel designs' (*Silv.* 1.3.55–56). Statius' *mot juste* for this design shows his mastery of technical detail.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously, his allusive *asarota* (presumably a neuter plural), instead of the regular term, ἀσάρωτος οἶκος, indicates how famous the original was.<sup>6</sup> It was designed by Sosus of Pergamum and much copied thereafter (Plin. *Nat.* 36.184):

celeberrimus fuit in hoc genere Sosus, qui Pergami stravit quem vocant asaroton oecon, quoniam purgamenta cenae in pavimentis quaeque everri solent velut relicta fecerat parvis e tessellis tinctisque in varios colores.

The most famous exponent of this craft [i.e., mosaic-making] was Sosos, who laid a pavement at Pergamum that is called the 'asarotos oikos', because from tiny *tesserae* dyed various colours he rendered the remains of a meal and other débris that is usually swept away, as though it had been left behind on the floor.

Several examples roughly contemporary with Vopiscus' floor survive, none of them identical with any other. The débris with which they are strewn includes fish heads, eggshells, lobster claws, scraps of fruit and vegetables, nuts, and much else, all the items astonishingly realistic in their rendering and the consistency of their relative scale. A version from Aquileia, dated to the second half of the first century CE, covered an entire floor measuring 2.49 × 2.33 m. (8 ft. 2 in. × 7 ft 8 in.), barring a square *emblema* in the middle; it is displayed at the Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Aquileia.<sup>7</sup> Five *emblemata* from the House of Salonus at Uthina (modern Oudna, in Tunisia), measuring 60 × 70 cm. (23.6

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and with both hands grabbed hold of the goddess' tunic on both sides and clung tightly. He begged her to hand it over right away, then and there').

5 Kreuz (2016) 486 n. 216.

6 For the form, see *TLL* 2.0.749.80–750.2 s.v. *asarotos* (F. Vollmer). An alternative adjectival formation is attested at Sid. *Carm.* 23.57–58 *aureas ... portas / exornas asaroticis lapillis* ('you decorate golden doors with scattered stones'); the context of golden doors suggests that the original meaning of 'unswept' now applies to a scattering of decorative motifs.

7 Parlasca (1963) 277 Abb. 13; Fathy (2017) 6 and Figs. 3–4.



FIGURE 5.4 Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano, 'Unswept Floor' mosaic, detail.

PHOTOGRAPH: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES.

× 27.6 in.) and dated to the late first or early second century, are on display in the Musée National du Bardo in Tunis.<sup>8</sup> The most famous version, from a villa of the Hadrianic period south of the Aventine, is now in the Museo Gregoriano Profano in the Musei Vaticani; measuring 4.05 × 4.05 m. (13 ft. 3 in. × 13 ft. 3 in.), it consists of a wide border surrounding a central area that is largely destroyed.<sup>9</sup> A still later example, from the Maison des Mois in El Djem in the early third century, comprised a narrow U-shaped frieze in a *triclinium*; it is on display at the Musée Archéologique de Sousse.<sup>10</sup>

The Romans' taste for artistic verisimilitude, so evident in their portraiture, is frequently endorsed by ancient authors, most notably Pliny the Elder, who amid other admiring references to deceptive images describes birds pecking at paintings of grapes (*Nat.* 35.65).<sup>11</sup> The urge to approach Roman images as direct representations of reality means that 'Unswept Floor' mosaics have been

8 Ennaïfer (1996) 72 Fig. 43; Fathy (2017) 6–7 and Fig. 5.

9 Fathy (2017) 6 and Figs. 1–2. For a discussion emphasizing the play between art and realism, see Andreae (2003) 47–51.

10 Fathy (2017) 7 and Fig. 6.

11 The importance of veracity in Pliny's canon of artistic achievement is not incompatible with aesthetic sensibility: see Isager (1991) 136–140, Perry (2000).

paired with literary evidence for messy eating at Roman meals.<sup>12</sup> But a mosaic is not a photograph. On the surviving examples, the débris is artificially arranged, with each item distinctly rendered separate from the rest, none of them overlapping, and there are no puddles of wine, which we know the Romans spilled copiously at dinner; this absence of realism plays up the fiction, while on the mosaic in the Vatican the three-dimensional effect of the shadow underneath each item plays it down, emphasizing instead verisimilitude, each shadow cast by a consistent light source.<sup>13</sup>

We cannot know whether Vopiscus' floor was as complex as the Vatican mosaic, but the play with perspective on that example may help us to appreciate Statius' description. The edge of a coffered ceiling, rendered as a frame around the outside of the border, and a scalloped edge, rendered around the inside, complicate the perspective, and on one of the four sides the scattering of débris is replaced altogether (albeit perhaps in a later intervention?) by a frieze of tragic masks with the signature of 'Heraklitus' in elegant Greek lettering underneath. Multiple viewpoints are being juggled simultaneously (Fig. 4).

Statius' compliment to Vopiscus employs the paradox of trampling wealth underfoot:

dum vagor aspectu visusque per omnia duco  
 calcabam necopinus opes. nam splendor ab alto  
 defluus et nitidum referentes aëra testae  
 lustravere (*Hall*: monstravere *M*) solum, varias ubi picta per artes  
 gaudet humus superare (*Markland*: superatque *M*) novis asarota figuris.  
 expavere gradus.

*Silv.* 1.3.52–57

While I lingered, absorbed in looking, and swept my gaze over it all, I was inadvertently treading on wealth. For brilliance pouring down from above and tesserae reflecting the dazzling air illuminated the floor, where the ground, variously decorated, is pleased to surpass the 'Unswep't with its novel designs. My steps were in shock.

trans. COLEMAN

12 Hagenow (1978).

13 The verisimilitude is further heightened if the entrance to the room cast shadows in the same direction as the shadows represented on the floor: see Thomas (2021) 193–194. The emphasis on light (*splendor*) and glitter (*nitidum*) is enhanced by *lustravere* (*Hall* 2021 ad loc.) in place of the epideictic verb *monstravere*.

Stattius' initial remark, *calcabam necopinus opes*, 'I was inadvertently treading on wealth', most obviously refers to the price tag attached to a mosaic floor, a labour-intensive installation and therefore a costly artifact;<sup>14</sup> furthermore, the rendering of leftovers from a lavish meal itself betokens wealth and overabundance.<sup>15</sup> Stattius' reaction, *expavere gradus*, cannot denote disapproval of Vopiscus' expenditure; as Bruce Gibson has demonstrated, even though traces of a negative stereotype of wealth occasionally surface in the *Silvae*, they are always turned into a positive evaluation of the attitudes and lifestyles of Stattius' patrons.<sup>16</sup> Nor would it be tactful for Stattius to express shock at the apparent mess on the floor, unless he were teasing Vopiscus; we know too little about their relationship to be able to judge the likelihood of that interpretation. Rather, the clue may lie in *gradus*, an unexpected location for a sensation of *pavor*. We do not know whether Vopiscus' floor combined the 'Unswep Floor' motif with other competing perspectives, such as the coffered ceiling and scalloped edging in the example in the Vatican, but Stattius' emphasis on the visual effect of the light streaming from above and reflected off the floor beneath seems to hint at the unsettling effect of this complex mosaic, and it is the representation on it, with *figurae* apparently even more daring than the original ἀσάρωτος οἶκος, that causes him almost to lose his balance: *expavere gradus*, 'my steps were in shock'.

The attribution of emotion to Stattius' steps, a type of transference akin to personification, is accompanied by the personification of the ground itself, which 'is pleased', *gaudet*, with the variety of its representation. These personifications compound the fantasy that is already present in the decoration on the floor, which simulates the detritus of a real meal. Stattius personifies his own physical and emotional response precisely in a context in which mosaic has brought a flat surface to life, a transformation likewise akin to personification. Commentators tell us what Stattius' *asarota* refers to, but a look at the mosaics themselves is necessary to appreciate how he conveys the instability engendered by the decoration underfoot.

14 Chinn (2022) 248, contrasting this passage with Horace's description of a mosaic floor as an example of urban luxury that tries to usurp natural beauty (*Epist.* 1.10.19), notes that Stattius' emphasis on human skill 'deemphasizes the distinction between the natural and the artificial'.

15 Meyer (1977) 108.

16 For *Silv.* 1.3 as an example of Stattius' use of this technique, see Gibson (2015) 129–131. The *paupertas* of Molorchus, traditionally held up as the epitome of humble hospitality, is explicitly contrasted by Stattius with the *divitiae* of Pollius Felix, whose construction of a lavish new shrine for Hercules he praises as a great improvement on the previous cramped premises, too small to accommodate the requisite fleets of acolytes (*Silv.* 3.1.28–33, 82–88): see Fabbrini (2005) 213–222.

4 *Missilia*

Wealth, combined with power, can defy expectations. Just as Vopiscus' floor tricks the eye of the beholder, so in a banquet hosted by Domitian in the Flavian amphitheatre food rains from above. The distribution of *missilia* is a practice widely attested at Roman spectacles, whereby small gifts were scattered at random among the spectators. In describing it, Statius is at his most allusive:

vix Aurora novos movebat ortus,  
iam bellaria linea pluebant:  
hunc rorem veniens profudit Eurus,  
quicquid nobile Ponticis **nucetis**  
fecundis **cadit** aut iugis **Idumes**  
quod ramis pia germinat Damascos  
et quod percoquit aestuosa<sup>17</sup> Caunos  
largis gratuitum **cadit** rapinis,  
molles gäoli **lucuntulique**  
et massis amerina non perustis  
et mustaceus et latente palma  
praegnantes **caryotides cadebant**.

*Silv.* 1.6.9–20

Scarce was Aurora moving another dawn and already dainties were raining from the line—such the dew that rising East Wind poured down; the best that **falls** in Pontic **nutteries** or **Idume's** fertile hills, what pious Damascus grows upon her boughs and what summery Caunos ripens—free of charge **falls** the lavish loot. Soft mannikins and **pastries**, Ameria's solidities unscorched, must cakes and pregnant **dates** from an invisible palm—down they **fell**.

trans. SHACKLETON BAILEY/PARROTT [2015]

A painting from Pompeii, of which the exact provenance is unknown, illustrates the mechanism employed in this distribution (Fig. 5).<sup>18</sup> Rings are strung on parallel cables that have been pulled taut, slack cables are looped through the rings, and the four corners and the sides of a piece of cloth resembling a

17 Adopting the emendation *aestuosa* (Imhof) for the unmetrical *Ēbosea*, which requires an artificially lengthened first syllable: see Kreuz (2016) 187.

18 Killeen (1959). A second painting at Pompeii is attested from the *tablinum* in the Casa della Caccia Antica, VII 4.48.



FIGURE 5.5 Pompeii, painting of *missilia*, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, inv. 9624. REPRODUCED BY COURTESY OF THE MINISTERO DELLA CULTURA, MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE DI NAPOLI, PHOTOGRAPH BY LUIGI SPINA.

pillowcase are attached to them. The slack cables have evidently been jerked to make the cloth bounce, dispensing various pastries, nuts, and dates. This is exactly the effect that Statius describes: goodies showering from above. He even specifies nuts, pastries, and two types of date, one from Idume in Palestine and the other, Caryotides, shaped like nuts. By his triple repetition of *cado* (and, perhaps, his interlaced word-order, although this is common in the *Silvae*) he is conveying the same tumbling effect that the painter achieves by overlapping one object with another, the opposite of the technique of isolated representation on the ‘Unswept Floor’.

## 5 An ivory couch

Craftsmen and artists have their jargon. Their patrons pride themselves on knowing the *mots justes* for the process of manufacturing their commissions.

The poets who celebrate these commissions know the jargon, too, as with Statius' description of the ivory couch on which he invites Hercules to recline in the new shrine that Pollius Felix has built for him on his estate at Surrentum:

hic tibi Sidonio celsum pulvinar acantho  
textitur et signis crescit torus asper eburnis.

*Silv.* 3.1.37–38

Here are cushions piled high for you, embroidered with Sidonian acanthus, and a couch moulded with ivory carved in high relief.

trans. SHACKLETON BAILEY/PARROTT [2015], adapted

Ivory was a luxurious material in the Roman world, its use in sanctuaries a fitting honour for the gods.<sup>19</sup> The key word in Statius' brief but vivid description is *asper*. Its primary meaning is 'rough to the touch', and it is translated as 'rough' in the revised Loeb edition: 'a couch rising rough with figures of ivory'.<sup>20</sup> But a rough couch would be uncomfortable, hence the adaptation 'a couch moulded with ivory carved in high relief'. Gabriel Laguna's note, 'con bajorrelieves' ('with bas-reliefs'), is both succinct and precise.<sup>21</sup> The texture of the word is enhanced by looking at comparanda in both diction and material culture.

The architectural term *asperitas* in Vitruvius' *De architectura* is relevant. Vitruvius is describing a pseudodipteral temple designed by the Greek architect Hermogenes, in which the distance between the *cella* and the edge of the stylobate is wide enough for a double row of columns, although only the outer row is present (Vitr. *Arch.* 3.3.9, trans. Granger [1931], adapted): *columnarum circum aedem dispositio idem est inventa, ut aspectus propter asperitatem intercolumniorum habeat auctoritatem* ('For the arrangement of the columns round the temple was so devised that the view of them was impressive, because of the high relief given to the intercolumniations'). Similarly, Vitruvius describes the *trompe l'oeil* effect of columns, statues, domes, pediments, and other features painted by the artist Apaturias of Alabander inside the ecclesiasterion at Tralles as deceiving the eye of the beholder *propter asperitatem* (*Arch.* 7.5.5).

*Asperitas* here has been defined as "high relief" engendered by the play of shadow and light.<sup>22</sup> 'High relief': that is the point of *asper*, which refers

19 For a succinct account of the provenance and working of ivory in Antiquity, see Lapatin (2015c) 171–179.

20 Shackleton Bailey/Parrott (2015).

21 Laguna Mariscal (1992) 142.

22 Gros (2008) 8. For a 3-D computer simulation of the pseudodipteral temple at Magne-



FIGURE 5.6

Herculaneum, Villa dei Papiri, seaside pavilion, ivory tripod leg, detail.

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to something ‘raised’. A rough texture has ‘raised’ elements; Pollius’ couch is ‘raised’, too, but not in a rough way. Fragments of an ivory tripod leg excavated in 2007 at the seaside pavilion belonging to the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum, although now discoloured, display intricate scenes carved in high relief, among which boisterous cupids are depicted performing various ritual activities, their busy concentration conveying the same energy as Statius’ Cupids promoting Violentilla’s courtship (see § 2, above); the intricate detail conveyed by the depth of relief is evident in the depiction of a psyche sacrificing at an altar before a statue of Dionysus, with a set of panpipes hanging above her head and a cupid on a rocky outcrop playing a double *aulos* behind her (Fig. 6).<sup>23</sup> In the Metropolitan Museum in New York, a wooden couch and matching footstool

sia designed by Hermogenes that illustrates the effect of *asperitas* in the rendering of the columns, see Haselberger and Holzman (2015).

23 Lapatin (2015c) 267 and Pl. 164.



FIGURE 5.7 Couch and footstool with bone carvings and glass inlays, restored from fragments possibly found in the villa of Lucius Verus on the Via Cassia outside Rome. 1st–2nd century CE. Couch: 105.4 × 76.2 × 214.6 cm. (41.5 × 30 × 84.5 in.). Footstool 23.5 × 44.5 × 64.8 cm. (9.25 × 17.5 × 25.5 in.).

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, INV. NO. 17.190.2076.  
GIFT OF J. PIERPONT MORGAN, 1917. WWW.METMUSEUM.ORG.

with bone carving and glass inlay have been reconstituted from fragments surviving from the villa of Lucius Verus on the Via Cassia outside Rome (Fig. 7); although the carving is bone, rather than ivory, it provides a close analogue to Pollius Felix' couch. Lions' heads are carved along the base, busts at the base of the head- and footrests, and birds, animals, and human figures at the top of the legs and on the corners of the footstool. *crescit torus asper* refers to the way in which the carving is not incised on a flat surface but raised proud of the background.

*Asper* is the *mot juste* in Latin for anything involving repoussé metalwork—cups, coins, or metal objects.<sup>24</sup> The fourth-century lexicographer Nonius Marcellus gives three definitions for this word: *insuave*, 'unpleasant'; *nocens*, 'noxious'; and *exasperatum, non leve*, 'worked in relief, not smooth' (*De compendiosa doctrina* 244 M). For the latter he quotes Virgil on silver cups with relief decoration (*A.* 9.26): *bina dabo argento perfecta atque aspera signis / pocula* ('I shall give two cups finished in silver and moulded in relief'). Claudian uses

24 *TLL* 2.0.806.81–816.31 s.v. *asper*, 821.18–823.20 s.v. *asperitas* (O. Hey).

the same verb as Nonius, *exasperare*, to describe one of the divine blacksmiths, Brontes, creating a shield decorated in relief (*III Cons. Hon.* 193): *Brontes innumeris exasperat aegida signis* ('Brontes moulds the shield in countless shapes'). The remarkable feature of the couch that Pollius Felix has commissioned for his new shrine of Hercules is not that it is rough to the touch, but that it is carved to imitate the raised decoration of repoussé metalwork, *crescit torus asper eburnis*, 'moulded with ivory carved in high relief'. Statius and, doubtless, Pollius know exactly the word to use.

## 6 A shield portrait

Just as a single term could convey the surface of Pollius' couch, so one emotive word can convey the angle at which a portrait was displayed. Some thirty years after Lucan's death, his widow commissioned a *genethliacon* from Statius to commemorate her late husband's birthday. After an agonized lament for Lucan by the muse Calliope, the poem ends with a comforting vision for his widow:

nec solacia vana subministrat  
vultus, qui simili notatus auro  
stratis praenitet incubatque somno  
securae.

*Silv.* 2.7.128–131

Nor idle the solace afforded by the face expressed in resembling gold that shines above her couch and watches over her peaceful slumber.

trans. SHACKLETON BAILEY/PARROTT [2015], adapted

The commentators tell us that Polla had a portrait of Lucan over her bed, but they do not explain what kind. Friedrich Vollmer says 'wohl ein clupeus gemeint', without further elaboration.<sup>25</sup> Carole Newlands adds the pertinent observation that '*incubare* ... here ... suggests benevolent protection'.<sup>26</sup> Harm-Jan van Dam, while emphasizing that *incubare* has generally negative associations, concedes that here the ramifications are positive; but, under the influence of the controversy among scholars who take the negative (*nec*) at the beginning of the sentence to mean that either 'Polla does not have an image of

25 Vollmer (1898) 382.

26 Newlands (2011) 254.



FIGURE 5.8 Testamentum Relief. Early 2nd century CE. Rome, Musei Capitolini, Palazzo Nuovo, Archivio Fotografico dei Musei Capitolini, Galleria inv. no. 308.  
© ROMA, SOVRINTENDENZA CAPITOLINA DI BENI CULTURALI.

Lucan, because those images give only vain comfort' or 'Polla has got an image, but ... this is not very important to her', he remarks in a note on *securae* that 'Polla is untroubled, though it is not the portrait which effects this'.<sup>27</sup> When we consider what sort of portrait this was, however, Statius' diction acquires extra resonance. As Vollmer so laconically said, it must have been a shield-portrait, an *imago clipeata*, like the portrait set into the so-called Testamentum Relief in the Musei Capitolini (Fig. 8). The youthful figure on the couch is presumably the deceased; the woman at the right, his mother; the small figure on the left, a servant; and the portrait in the shield, the father, who evidently predeceased his son. Such *imagines clipeatae* are sometimes depicted hanging where the physical objects would have been displayed, as in a painting from Oplontis, where *imagines*—made of gold, like Lucan's—are suspended below the ceiling (Fig. 9).<sup>28</sup>

27 Van Dam (1984) 504.

28 To my knowledge, no *imagines clipeatae* in gold survive, although portraits of some of the emperors do, made of gold and hollow, that were possibly intended to be displayed aloft in military contexts: see de Pury-Gysel (2017).



FIGURE 5.9 Oplontis, villa of Poppaea, room 15 (23), east wall, painting of *imagines clipeatae* displayed below ceiling.

PHOTOGRAPH: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES.

There are two noteworthy features about these shield portraits. The first is that the figures are not like most modern portraits, which are painted onto a flat canvas. Nor are they static busts. They are figures in relief, rising out of their frame towards the viewer, almost as though they are in motion. The second noteworthy feature is the position and angle at which they were displayed. A depiction from the Casa del Bell' Impluvio at Pompeii illustrates both these features: the relief is pronounced, and the shields are tilted downwards (Fig. 10). That is what Statius must mean when he says *incubat somno / securae*, the portrait 'watches over her peaceful slumber'.<sup>29</sup> The protective

<sup>29</sup> 'Watches over' has been substituted for 'hovers' (Shackleton Bailey/Parrott [2015]) to convey the prepositional compound and protective resonance of *incubat*.

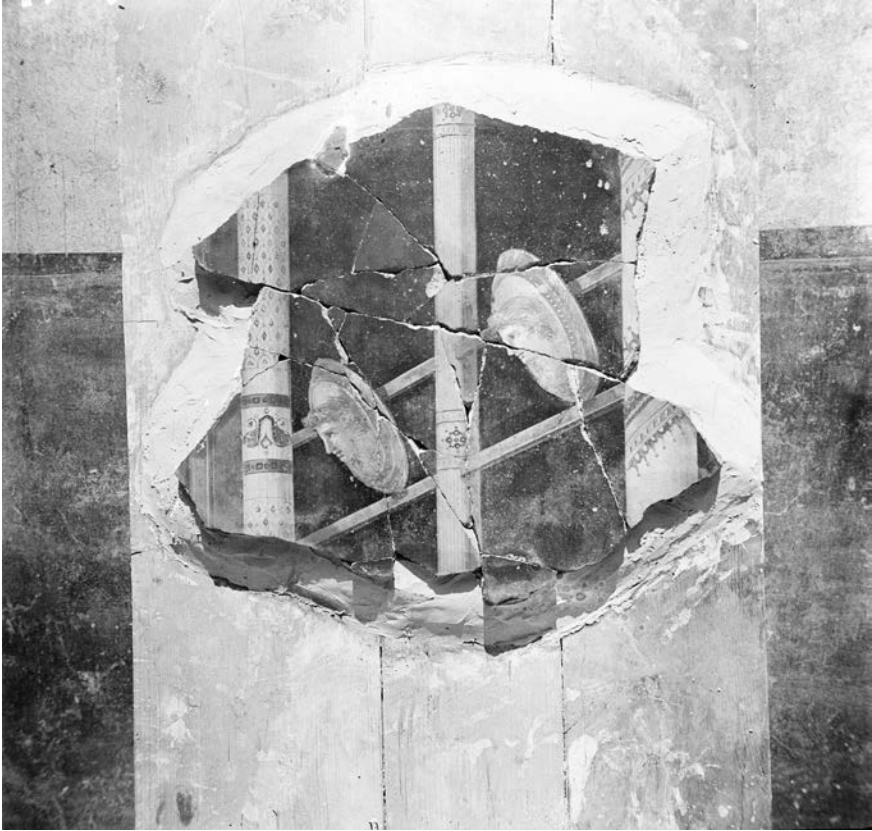


FIGURE 5.10 Pompeii I 9, 1, Casa del Bell' Impluvio, painting of *imagines clipeatae* tilted downwards.

REPRODUCED BY COURTESY OF THE MINISTERO DELLA CULTURA—  
PARCO ARCHEOLOGICO DI POMPEI.

function of these portraits seems to be reinforced by their shield-shape.<sup>30</sup> *Incubare* is the word for 'keeping watch', as with the guard from Seneca's *Thyestes* (*Thy.* 570–571, trans. Fitch [2004]): *pavidus ... pinnis / anxiae noctis vigil incubabat* ('Guards crouched in dread on the battlements, to watch the anxious night').<sup>31</sup> Fitch's word 'crouched' for *incubabat* in Seneca conveys exactly the forward-tilting angle implied by *in-* that Statius' *incubat* also conveys, a vivid detail that would be destroyed by Markland's conjecture *excubat*.<sup>32</sup> The way in

30 Koortbojian (2005) 292.

31 *TLL* 7.1.1061.22–1063.73 s.v. *incubo*, at 1063.34–38 (B. Rehm).

32 Defended by Liberman (2010) ad loc.

which Lucan's portrait, rising from its frame, hangs tilted towards Polla's sleeping form (*incubat*) delivers the 'benevolent protection' noted by Newlands. As with his reference to the *asperitas* of Pollius' ivory couch, Statius is sensitive to three-dimensional effects and succinct in conveying their verisimilitude.

## 7 The Hercules Epitrapezios

Statius devotes an entire poem to the Hercules Epitrapezios statuette that was the prized possession of the art connoisseur Novius Vindex and is alleged to have been previously owned by Alexander the Great, Hannibal, and Sulla.<sup>33</sup> This pedigree is claimed for the statuette by both Statius (*Silv.* 4.6.37) and Martial (9.43.6, 9.44.6), and so it must have emanated from Vindex himself, rather than being the invention of one of these poets. Alexander is at least plausible, since Lysippus, to whom Statius and Martial attribute this piece, was Alexander's favourite sculptor.

It is generally thought that 'Epitrapezios' does not describe a dining pose 'at table', which would imply the *accubatio* position, whereas Vindex' Hercules is seated; hence it should mean 'for a table', a centrepiece.<sup>34</sup> The pose that Statius describes is like that of twenty-one extant miniatures, one of which is a plaster cast of an original that was probably ancient.<sup>35</sup> All of them except one are either badly damaged or heavily restored. The only intact example, found in the peristyle of a Roman villa near the R. Sarno in 1902, comprises a bronze statuette seated on a limestone base.<sup>36</sup> The entire ensemble is 75 cm. high (29.5 in.). The base is over 67 cm. wide (26.4 in.) and nearly 54 cm. deep (21.25 in.). This would be a cumbersome object to display on the table in a Roman *triclinium*—a conversation killer, one would think, for the guests reclining round three sides, rather than the spur to sophisticated conversation that Statius evokes. Vindex' statuette was smaller, less than a foot tall (*intra ... pedem, Silv.* 4.6.38–39).<sup>37</sup>

33 A monograph devoted to this poem does not contain any illustrations, but the introduction includes a long discussion, 'Il bronzetto dell'*Hercules Epitrapezios*: problemi di iconografia e di *Kopienkritik*', which concludes that the poem plays on a shift between objective and textual 'reality' ('tra un realtà oggettiva e una realtà "testuale"): Bonadeo (2010) 24–42.

34 Coleman (1988) 174; Bartman (1992) 151.

35 See the catalogue at Bartman (1992) 171–186.

36 Bartman (1992) 182, catalogue no. 16; Lapatin (2015*b*). The *skyphos* in the figure's right hand, visible in early photographs, is now lost.

37 The smallest extant Hercules Epitrapezios in bronze, displayed in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, is only 5 cm. tall (2 in.): Bartman (1992) 177, catalogue no. 10 (inventory number unknown).

Two damaged specimens are possible analogues: one, found at a Roman villa southwest of Jagsthausen in Baden-Württemberg, was probably 20 cm. high (almost 8 in.), and the other, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, is 17 cm. high (6.7 in.).<sup>38</sup>

The damaged state of the surviving examples, however, means that by limiting our attention to exact analogues for the Epitrapezios pose, we risk focusing exclusively on size, which is only part of what Statius emphasizes about Vindex' statuette. He was also captivated by the transcendent impression of divinity that it conveyed:

... deus ille, deus! seseque videndum  
 indulisit, Lysippe, tibi parvusque videri  
 sentirique ingens! et cum mirabilis intra  
 stet mensura pedem, tamen exclamare libebit,  
 si visus per membra ferēs: 'hoc pectore pressus  
 vastator Nemees; haec exitiale ferebant  
 robur et Argoos frangebant brachia remos'.  
 †ac† spatium \* \* \*  
 \* \* \* tam magna brevi mendacia formae!  
*Silv.* 4.6.36–43

A god he is, a god, and he granted you the privilege of gazing upon him, Lysippus, small in appearance and mighty in impression, and although his measure stands miraculously within a foot, nevertheless when you carry your gaze over his limbs you will want to exclaim: 'By this stout breast the scourge of Nemea was crushed, these arms wielded the destructive wood and smashed Argo's oars' ... So great is the deception of that tiny form.

trans. COLEMAN [1988]

The revelation of the godhead to the artist is a widely attested *topos* in Antiquity, discussed in detail in the modern commentary on *Silvae* 4.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the same commentary (mine!) does not examine how extant bronze miniatures convey the aura of divinity that so impressed Statius. Precisely thirty-five years later, I will attempt to fill that *lacuna*, taking as my starting point a Hellenistic

38 Stuttgart, Württembergisches Landesmuseum inv. R 89.61 = Bartman (1992) 185, catalogue no. 20. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum inv. VI 342 = Bartman (1992) 185–186, catalogue no. 21.

39 Coleman (1988) on *Silv.* 4.6.36–38.

statuette (c. 150–130 BCE) in the Antikensammlung in Munich, known as the ‘Loeb Poseidon’ after its donor, the American philanthropist James Loeb. In its current state, this statuette is 29.5 cm. tall (11.6 in.), but originally, when its feet and base were intact, it must have been slightly taller (Fig. 11). The god’s pose, relaxed but erect; the trident that he grasps (a modern substitute for the lost original); his sleek body and powerful muscles; his hair and beard, luxuriant and unruly: all these features transcend human stature. As the Director of the Antikensammlung has recently put it, ‘Like virtually no other work, this bronze statuette shows Poseidon in his divine perfection and at the same time symbolizes the essence of the god of the sea.’<sup>40</sup>

Vindex’ statue type seems likely to have been one of the so-called ‘Corinthian bronzes’ that were fashionable in the Flavian and Trajanic periods. Pliny the Younger devotes an entire letter to his recent purchase of a lifelike *Corinthium signum* of an old man and to his plans to have a base created for it, inscribed with a dedication to Jupiter, so that he could dedicate it in the temple of Jupiter at Comum (*Epist.* 3.6). ‘Corinthian bronzes’ have recently been identified by Christopher Hallett with a group of small bronze statuettes that had previously prompted wildly differing interpretations.<sup>41</sup> They are usually 30–45 cm. in height (roughly 12–18 in.), partly hollow-cast in pieces, showing fine detail in their surface modelling, and often inlaid with jewels or precious metal to highlight such features as the eyes, nostrils, or lips. The scale and evident quality of the Loeb Poseidon suggest that it may be just such a statuette.

One of this extant group of bronze statuettes is a Hercules, complete with lionskin and club, although standing rather than, like Vindex’ treasure, seated; it was found in 1959 in the sanctuary of Hercules Curinus at Sulmona in the Abruzzi (Fig. 12). Its base does not record the name of the artist, as Martial says that Vindex’ did (9.44.5–6): *inscripta est basis indicatque nomen.* / Λυσίππου *lego, Phidiae putavi* (‘The base is inscribed and gives the name. I read “by Lysippos”, but I thought it was by Phidias’). Instead, like Pliny’s projected base, it records the dedication of the object by the owner, in this case a certain M. Attius Peticus Marsus. The statuette, including the base, is only 39 cm. high (15 in.).

40 Knauss (2017) 254 (‘Wie kaum ein anderes Werk zeigt diese Bronzestatue Poseidon in seiner göttlichen Vollkommenheit und versinnbildlicht gleichzeitig das Wesen des Meer-gottes’).

41 See the discussion of the ‘Spes Castellani’ in the British Museum at Hallett (2012) 71–74, demonstrating (n. 13) that, like several other bronze statuettes of this type, the ‘Spes Castellani’ had been thought too good to be true and accordingly declared a modern forgery in neo-classical style.



FIGURE 5.11 Bronze statuette, 'Loeb Poseidon'. 150–130 BCE. H 29.5 cm. (11.6 in.). State Collection of Antiquities and Glyptothek Munich, inv. 15. PHOTOGRAPH BY RENATE KÜHLING.



FIGURE 5.12 Bronze statuette of Hercules on bronze base. Found in sanctuary of Hercules Curinus at Sulmona in 1959. Third century BCE or first century CE. H 35.9 cm. (14 in.); H with base 39 cm. (15 in.); W 17.5 cm. (7 in.); D 14 cm. (5.5 in.). MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE D'ABRUZZO, VILLA FRIGERJ, INV. NO. 4340, AUTHORIZED BY THE MINISTERO DELLA CULTURA—DIREZIONE REGIONALE MUSEI ABRUZZO. THE IMAGE PUBLISHED MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED OR DUPLICATED BY ANY METHOD.

Its maximum width is 17.5 cm. (7 in.), its maximum depth 14 cm. (5.5 in.). These dimensions would fit a Roman dining table without hindering communication between the guests.

The detail on the body of Marsus' bronze Hercules is exquisite, especially the bone structure and the muscles. Just as with the power conveyed by the Loeb Poseidon, it is reminiscent of the way in which Statius' description revolves around the antithesis between the tiny compass of the statuette and the mighty labours of the hero that it represents. The open hand behind the hero's back would have held golden apples, and he evidently wore a wreath on his head, perhaps also of gold, and would have had jewels inset in the depressions for the pupils of his eyes. These statuettes seem to be late Hellenistic miniatures, modeled—whether directly or indirectly—upon a life-size original. Just like Vindex' statuette, this one is based upon an original by Lysippus. It might even be a replica of a miniature from the workshop of Lysippus himself, an interpretation encouraged by the identification of the base as a separate piece made of a different bronze alloy.<sup>42</sup> Alternatively, Hallett suggests that these statuettes may have been created for the Roman market, where they became especially fashionable in the period immediately following the dictatorship of Sulla.<sup>43</sup> This Hercules probably dates from the first century BCE or CE, which would make it a close parallel to Vindex' statuette, except for the pose.

The paradox of conveying god-like stature in a tiny compass was the challenge facing both sculptor and poet. The artist who created Vindex' Hercules Epitrapezios took up a commission—and his chisel—to convey divine power in miniature form; Statius faced the challenge of conveying the sculptor's achievement with only words and metre as his tools, capturing the visual through language. When a commentator on *Silvae* 4.6 looks in detail at extant statuettes that fulfil the criteria of 'Corinthian bronzes', the divine perfection realized in their exquisite modeling of the human form brings home the force of Statius' climactic *sententia*, *tam magna brevi mendacia formae*: the viewer is deceived into thinking that in that tiny sculpture divinity is truly emanant.

42 Lapatin (2015a) 219.

43 Hallett (forthcoming).

## 8 Marble inlay

Not all pictorial decoration is representational; some is abstract. Abstract décor poses a particular challenge to verbal description, because it excludes representational equivalents. Statius has to replicate the opulent effects of ‘marble’ without the help of narrative elements.<sup>44</sup> This decoration, fashionable and expensive, plays a prominent role in his description of four separate buildings: Violentilla’s house in Rome (*Silv.* 1.2.148–151); the baths of Claudius Etruscus, also in Rome (*Silv.* 1.5.34–41); Pollius Felix’ villa at Surrentum (*Silv.* 2.2.85–94); and Domitian’s palace on the Palatine (*Silv.* 4.2.26–29). Statius mentions varieties that his patrons display and some that they do not. His allusive references make identification difficult, but a tentative catalogue follows on the next page; exclusions are enclosed in square brackets.<sup>45</sup>

The most sumptuous buildings, such as the baths of Caracalla, might boast columns and furnishings—basins, seats, latrines, etc.—among their marble installations.<sup>46</sup> Statius mentions columns in his description of Domitian’s palace; otherwise, no furnishings or architectural features are specified. Instead, the rapid juxtaposition of brief phrases designating different types of marble, sometimes combined with a swift succession of deictic adverbs, matches the effect of *opus sectile*, slabs of marble cut into geometric shapes and fitted together.<sup>47</sup> *Opus sectile* is a more expensive medium than mosaic, since it requires larger pieces of marble, and in major complexes it was reserved for the most important rooms. In the Baths of Caracalla, for example, it decorated the floors on the main axis (*caldarium*, *tepidarium*, *frigidarium*, and *natatio*), where it reflected the marble revetments on the walls, whereas the rooms on the transverse axis were paved with tessellated mosaic.<sup>48</sup> Describing such sumptuous décor is not the moment for calling a spade a spade: Statius’ high-flown geographical and mythological allusions to his patrons’ varieties of marble aptly convey their rarity and expense.

44 Not all the stones that Statius mentions are calcite based, as true marbles are.

45 The catalogue entries in Borghini (1989) are accompanied by photographs of examples from the churches and monuments of Rome illustrating the remarkable range of colour, stripes, and mottling in the different varieties. Pensabene (2013) supplies detailed discussion of the types, region by region. Gnoli (1971) is still useful for his attention to the allusions to marble in the ancient authors.

46 Gensheimer (2018) 159–160.

47 Van Dam (1984) and Coleman (1988) do not speculate about the type of marble decoration employed. Newlands (2011) on *Silv.* 2.2.85–94 presumably envisages *opus sectile* when she says, ‘probably displayed as flooring and as veneer on the walls’.

48 Gensheimer (2018) 154.

TABLE 5.1 The Distribution of Marble in the Ecphrases of the *Silvae*

Colour	Variety keyed to catalogue in Borghini (1989)	House of Violentilla 1.2.148–151	Baths of Etruscus 1.5.34–41	Villa of Pollius Felix 2.2.85–94	Palace of Domitian 4.2.26–29
White	<i>marmor Lunense</i> (Carrara) no. 95 <i>marmor Thasium</i> no. 100 <i>alabastrum</i> (alabaster) no. 2	149 <i>flexus ... onyx</i>	[34 <i>Thasos</i> ] [35 <i>onyx</i> ]	92 <i>Thasos</i>	29 <i>Luna</i>
Green	<i>marmor Carystium</i> ( <i>cipollino</i> ) no. 56  <i>lapis Lacedaemonius</i> (green porphyry from Greece, serpentine) <sup>49</sup> no. 121	149–150 <i>concolor alto vena mari</i>  148–149 <i>dura Laconum saxa</i>	[34 <i>undosa Carystos</i> ] [35 <i>ophites</i> ]	93 <i>gaudens fluctus aequare Carystos</i> 90 <i>Amyclaei caesum de monte Lycurgi</i> <sup>50</sup>	28 <i>glaucæ certantia Doridi saxa</i>
Yellow	<i>marmor Numidicum</i> ( <i>giallo antico</i> ) no. 65	148 <i>Libycus ... silex</i>	36 <i>flavis Nomadum decisa metallis</i>	92 <i>Nomadum ... flaventia saxa</i>	27 <i>mons Libys</i>
Pink	<i>marmor Chium</i> ( <i>portasanta</i> ) no. 125 <i>marmor Phrygium</i> ( <i>pavonazzetto</i> ) no. 109	148 <i>Phrygius ... silex</i>	37 <i>cavo Phrygiae ... Synnados anatro</i>	93 <i>Chios</i> 87 <i>Synnade quod maesta Phrygiae fodere secures</i>	28 <i>Chios</i> 27 <i>Iliacus</i> <sup>51</sup>
Red	<i>Syenite</i> (Aswan granite) no. 74				27 <i>Syene</i>
Purple	<i>porphyrites</i> ( <i>pyrro-poecilus</i> , porphyry) no. 116	150–151 <i>rupes ... nitent quis purpura saepe Oebalis et Tyrîi moderator livet aëni</i>	39, 37 <i>quoi ... Tyrî livens fleat et Sidonia, rupes, purpura</i>		

49 *Lapis Lacedaemonius* and serpentine are the same stone: see Borghini (1989) no. 49, Pensabene (2013) 295–297. The flecks in the porphyry reminded the Roman masons of snakeskin, hence *ophites* (from ὄφις, ‘snake’): cf. Plin. *Nat.* 36.11 *ophites serpentium maculis similis, unde et nomen accepit* (‘snakestone is like the markings on snakes, hence the name’), *TLL* 9.2.702.37–48 s.v. *ophites* (P. Flury). It is not clear whether Statius distinguishes serpentine (*ophites*, 1.5.35) from *lapis Lacedaemonius* (*dura Laconum saxa*, ‘hard Laconian rock’, 1.2.148–149; *Amyclaei caesum de monte Lycurgi*, ‘marble quarried from Amyclaeon Lycurgus’ mountain, 2.2.90). Martial (6.42) mentions both *lapis Lacedaemonius* (*Taygeti ... metalla*, 11) and serpentine (*ophitae*, 15) in his description of Claudius Etruscus’ baths, evidently not realizing that they are identical, whereas Statius simply mentions *ophites*, and then only to signal its absence.

50 Classified as green porphyry, which he calls *verde antico*, by van Dam (1984) 249 and as serpentine by Newlands (2011) 144.

51 This identification is not 100% secure: see Gnoli (1971) 127 n. 2.

### 8.1 *Violentilla's house*

The striking polychromatic complexity of *opus sectile* is widely attested in the villas and bath buildings of the Roman world. Statius' evocation of Violentilla's marble achieves a comparable effect in words:

**hic** Libycus Phrygiusque silex, **hic** dura Laconum  
 saxa virent, **hic** flexus onyx et concolor alto  
 vena mari, rupesque nitent quis purpura saepe  
 Oebalis et Tyrii moderator livet aëni

*Silv.* 1.2.148–151

**Here** are Libyan and Phrygian flint, **here** hard Laconian rock shows green, **here** are versatile alabaster and the vein that matches the deep sea, here shines marble that is often envied by Oebalian purple and the blender of the Tyrian cauldron.

trans. SHACKLETON BAILEY/PARROTT [2015], adapted

The triple iteration of the deictic adverb *hic* performs two functions: it gives a sense of the original moment of spontaneous delivery, with Statius gesticulating at what he is describing, and it also conveys the notion of juxtaposition with considerable verbal economy. There are no clumsy adverbial phrases, 'at right angles to this one', 'diagonally opposite that one', and so on; simply 'here', 'here', and 'here'.

The diction is intricate: it is a combination of geographical definitions (*Libycus* and *Phrygius* refer, respectively, to yellow marble, *giallo antico*, from north Africa and grey-pink *pavonazzetto* quarried at Docimium in Phrygia), mythological allusions (*purpura Oebalis*, which envies Violentilla's porphyry, describes the famous *rosso antico* of Sparta by means of an allusion to the Spartan king, Oebalus), and nouns, adjectives, and verbs conveying colour (*purpura*, *concolor*, *virent*); the actual terms for types of stone are used sparingly (here only *silex* and *onyx*). The effect is exotic both spatially (marble from all those far-off places) and temporally (marble evoking the ancient myths); it incorporates extreme polychromy (virtually the entire colour spectrum is replicated in Violentilla's house alone); and the overall effect is that the person who has commissioned such decoration and this versatile poetic evocation of it must be extremely wealthy, discriminating, and sophisticated.

## 8.2 *The baths of Claudius Etruscus*

The other examples, Claudius Etruscus' baths, Pollius Felix' villa, and Domitian's palace, work similarly, although with Etruscus' baths Statius uses a *praeteritio*, the only time he applies this device to marble:

**non huc** admissae Thasos aut undosa Carystos;  
 maeret onyx longe queriturque exclusus ophites:  
**sola** nitet flavis Nomadum decisa metallis  
 quoique Tyri livens fleat et Sidonia, rupes,  
 purpura, **sola** cavo Phrygiae quam Synnados antro  
 ipse cruentavit maculis lucentibus Attis.  
**vix** locus Eurotae, viridis cum regula longo  
 Synnada distinctu variat.

*Silv.* 1.5.34–41

**Not** admitted **here** are Thasos or wavy Carystos; alabaster sulks afar, serpentine grumbles in exclusion: **only** stone hewn from Numidia's yellow quarries shines, and the one at which Tyre's and Sidon's purple would weep for envy, **only** what Attis himself bloodied with gleaming flecks in Phrygian Synnas' hollow cave. There is **scarcely** space for Eurotas, whose long green streak picks out Synnas.

trans. SHACKLETON BAILEY/PARROTT [2015], adapted

Statius says that Etruscus' baths explicitly do *not* display marbles that are grey-green (from Carystos, i.e., *cipollino*), green (serpentine), white (from Thasos), or translucent (alabaster), but exclusively yellow (Numidia's *giallo antico*), purple (porphyry), and greyish pink (*pavonazzetto*). His mention of marbles that are not there has puzzled scholars. Friedrich Vollmer suggests that Etruscus chose marbles that complemented the skin tones of the bathers.<sup>52</sup> Carole Newlands, quoting the Elder Pliny for evidence that white marble was popular before coloured marbles came to Rome, suggests that Thasian may have been too plain and common for Etruscus; Carystian marble came in many varieties (Newlands suggests it was therefore not sufficiently singular for Etruscus' baths); and alabaster and serpentine were suitable for small objects (she suggests that it would therefore not have suited a poem of high style celebrating a work of monumental architecture; but *opus sectile* is comprised precisely of small slices of stone cut into geometric shapes, so the correlation of these varieties of marble and small objects is not relevant here).<sup>53</sup>

52 Vollmer (1898) 298.

53 Newlands (2002) 210, citing Plin. *Nat.* 36.5.44 (Thasian), 7.48 (Carystian), 11.55–56

The point, however, is surely that Etruscus flouts convention: grey, green, white, and translucent are the colours of water, a thoroughly predictable combination for a bath: Statius applies the adjective *undosa*, 'wavy', to the grey-green Carystian marble that Etruscus does not have, and his description of Pollius Felix' marble décor ends with a reference to Carystian *cipollino* 'rejoicing to match the waves', *gaudens fluctus aequare* (*Silv.* 2.2.93), an entirely appropriate image for the décor in a villa perched on a cliff overlooking the sea. But Etruscus' baths do not have water-coloured marbles. Instead, they display the unexpected: they appear decked out in yellow, purple, and pink. It is tempting to conclude that Etruscus, the son of a freedman, lacked taste. This would match the judgement of Erling Holtsmark, who concludes from Statius' emphasis on the enormous size of the bath that it was 'a thing of gross misproportion ... monumentally lacking taste'.<sup>54</sup> Holtsmark accordingly interprets the poem as an *anti-laudatio*, gentle mockery of the sort of extravagance against which Seneca rails in the letters to Lucilius.<sup>55</sup> But mockery, however gentle, is antithetical to Statius' role as cheerleader for his patrons' wealth and lifestyle. Faced with Etruscus' bizarre colour scheme, the tactful response is to praise him as *avant-garde*: by including a list of marbles that are *not* found in his baths, Statius implies that Etruscus has kicked over the traces of traditional ornament deemed suitable for a bath and chosen a boldly innovative effect.

Statius' evocation of Etruscus' baths, achieved by describing what both is and is not there, is in marked contrast to Martial's epigram attempting (unsuccessfully) to persuade his friend Oppianus to visit these same baths. Martial's catalogue of Etruscus' marbles mentions *pavonazzetto* and *giallo antico*, as Statius' does, but he omits the purple porphyry that Statius mentions, specifically *includes* the serpentine and alabaster that Statius *excludes*, and adds *lapis Lacedaemonius*, as though it were different from serpentine:

illic Taygeti virent metalla  
 et certant vario decore saxa  
 quae Phryx et Libys altius cecidit,  
 siccos pinguis onyx anhelat aestus  
 et flamma tenui calent ophitae.

Mart. 6.42.11–15

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(serpentine), 12.59–61 (alabaster). Chinn (2022) 276–277 does not comment on the oddity of Statius' mention of what is not there, but interprets *queritur ... exclusus ophites* as evoking an 'elegiac background' for his ecphrasis.

54 Holtsmark (1973) 219.

55 E.g., Sen. *Ep.* 86.6, 90.9, 115.8.

There the quarries of Taygetus are green and stones which the Phrygian and the Libyan have deeply hewn contend in varied beauty. Sleek alabaster breathes arid heat and snakestones are warm with slender flame.

trans. SHACKLETON BAILEY [1993]

The competing claims of Statius and Martial for the decoration of Etruscus' baths are easily compared in a table:

TABLE 5.2 Types of Marble Included/Excluded in the Baths of Claudius Etruscus

	<i>Sib.</i> 1.5.34–41	<i>Mart.</i> 6.42.11–15
<i>marmor Thasium</i>	Excluded	
alabaster	Excluded	Included: 14 <i>onyx</i>
<i>cipollino</i>	Excluded	
<i>lapis Lacedaemonius</i> /serpentine	Excluded	Included: 11 <i>Taygeti ... metalla</i> , 15 <i>flamma tenui calent ophitae</i> <sup>56</sup>
<i>giallo antico</i>	Included	Included: 13 <i>Libys</i>
<i>pavonazzetto</i>	Included	Included: 13 <i>Phryx</i>
<i>porphyrites</i>	Included	

Statius has been interpreted as correcting the list of marbles furnished by Martial, whose epigram is therefore assumed to have been published first.<sup>57</sup> Certainly, Statius is flaunting his own first-hand observation, and his concern for verisimilitude. Martial's error is extraordinary; at the very least, it suggests that he populated his poem with fashionable types of marble without seeing the baths themselves. But it is even more extraordinary that he left his poem uncorrected when the book was circulated, since he evidently missed the point of Etruscus' unconventional colour palette, which deliberately eschewed the predictable and flaunted a palette that was bold—if, to us, garish.

### 8.3 *The villa of Pollius Felix*

The concept of 'competition' that Martial deploys in his description of Etruscus' marbles (6.42.11, *certant*) is only implicit in Statius via the specificity of

56 Martial's duplicate mention suggests that he thinks that green porphyry and serpentine are two different stones: cf. n. 49, above.

57 Vollmer (1898) 298; Grewing (1997) 295, 300. Contrast Bradley (2006) 5, who suggests that Martial's epigram is 'perhaps in parody of the *Silvae*'.

what is included or excluded. It is missing altogether from his description of the marbled room in Pollius Felix' villa, where the emphasis is primarily upon provenance and colour, conveyed via recondite geographical and mythological-historical allusions:

**hic** Grais penitus desecta metallis  
 saxa: **quod** Eoae respergit vena Syenes,  
 Synnade **quod** maesta Phrygiae fodere secures  
 per Cybeles lugentis agros, ubi marmore picto  
 candida purpureo distinguitur area gyro;  
**hic** et Amyclaei caesum de monte Lycurgi  
 quod viret et molles imitatur rupibus herbas;  
**hic** Nomadum lucent flaventia saxa Thasosque  
 et Chios et gaudens fluctus aequare Carystos.

*Silv.* 2.2.85–93

**Here** are marbles hewn from the depth of Grecian quarries: **here** vein-splashed product of eastern Syene, **here** what Phrygian axes hewed in mournful Synnas amid the fields of wailing Cybele, where on painted stone the white space is picked out with purple circles. **Here** too is marble quarried from Amyclaeon Lycurgus' mountain—it is green, mimicking soft grass with its rocks—**here** glisten the yellow stones of Numidia and Thasos and Chios and Carystos rejoicing to match the waves.

trans. SHACKLETON BAILEY/PARROTT [2015], adapted

As in the description of Claudius Etruscus' baths (*Silv.* 1.5.37–38), here, too, the 'red-on-white' effect of grey-pink *pavonazzetto* is likened to the flawless skin of Cybele's devotee, Attis, now blood-spattered, whose self-mutilation is located in the mythological tradition at Synnas in Phrygia, where the marble comes from; and green porphyry imitates the colour of verdant grass, simultaneously evoking the philosophical tradition via the association of Laconia with the Spartan law-giver Lycurgus.<sup>58</sup> Statius' patrons, and his wider readership, need to know their mythology, as well as their marbles.

The patron in this case, Pollius Felix, had the advantage of knowing the context; he could see which way the room faced, towards the city of Naples, whose Greek character remained its defining feature throughout the Roman period.<sup>59</sup> For the readers who cannot see the view themselves, Statius specifies it at

58 Krüger (1998) 118–120.

59 For a map tracing the unimpeded views of locations on the north side of the Bay of Naples

the beginning of his description, alluding to Naples as ‘Parthenope’ after the Siren associated with the site (*Silv.* 2.2.83–85): *una tamen cunctis procul eminet una diaetis, / quae tibi Parthenopen directo limite ponti / ingerit* (‘Yet above all the rest one room stands out, bringing Parthenope to you straight across the sea’). The enjambement, suggesting the all-encompassing nature of the view (and evoking the image of the Siren making a beeline for Pollius), precipitates the declaration that the interior décor of the room is Greek (2.2.85–86): *hic Grais penitus desecta metallis / saxa* (‘Here are marbles hewn from the depth of Grecian quarries’). Next comes Statius’ description of the individual marbles, stressing in each case their Greek associations. As Bettina Bergmann has pointed out in plotting Statius’ poem onto the remains of the Roman villa at Capo di Sorrento, ‘the Greek world is brought into view ... Both views and marbles embellish Pollius’ villa like the *spolia* of captured places’.<sup>60</sup> The modern commentator needs to take Statius’ hint that the provenance of the marbles in the room at the top of Pollius’ villa matches the atmosphere evoked by the Greek city across the bay.<sup>61</sup>

#### 8.4 *Domitian’s palace*

The element of competition, absent from Statius’ description of the marbles in Pollius’ villa, is prominent in his evocation of Domitian’s palace, where the different stones rival one another in catching the emperor’s eye:

... **aemulus illic**

mons Libys Iliacusque nitet, simul atra (multa *M*) Syene  
et Chios et glaucae certantia Doridi saxa,  
Lunaque portandis tantum suffecta columnis.

*Silv.* 4.2.26–29

The mountains of Libya and Troy glitter **there in rivalry**, with dark Syene and Chios and **the rocks that vie** with the grey-green sea, and Luna deputed to carry the columns.

trans. COLEMAN [1988], adapted

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from the villa at Capo di Sorrento, see Kreuz (2016) 451 Abb. 4. For the Greek character of Roman Naples, see Taylor (2021) 291–346, a chapter entitled ‘Haven of Hellenism: Greek Culture in Roman Naples’.

60 Bergmann (1991) 62–63.

61 The connection between Pollius’ Neapolitan view and his Greek marbles is absent from a detailed discussion of the *prospectus* from his villa by Kreuz (2016) 447–462.



FIGURE 5.13 Ostia I 14, 5, House of Eros and Psyche, Tablinum D, *opus sectile*, detail. 7.5 × 7.5 m. (24 ft. 7 in. × 24 ft. 7 in.). Late 3rd/early 4th century CE. Museo Ostiense. PHOTOGRAPH: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES.

*Aemulus* is the first word that Statius uses in his description, translated here by the phrase ‘in rivalry’, and the notion of competition is reinforced by the phrase *certantia ... saxa*, literally ‘vying rocks’. With this diction, he is not only employing a conventional *topos* of encomium, a suitable evocation of his subjects’ struggle for the emperor’s attention; he is also conveying a specific visual effect evoked by the contrasting colours.<sup>62</sup> A viewer looking at one of these *opus sectile* floors can see what lies behind this choice of words: a floor like that from the *tablinum* (room D) on the north side of the House of Eros and Psyche at Ostia (I 14, 5)—admittedly some two centuries after Statius’ time, but I think not anachronistic in its design—blends quite well at a distance.<sup>63</sup> But close up, one gets the definite impression of a struggle for dominance: every colour leaps out in turn, as the viewer focuses on different shapes in the design, a little like a *trompe l’oeil* perspective panel, where some shapes recede while others project and then the sequence seems to go into reverse and what formerly projects now recedes and *vice versa* (Fig. 13).

62 Coleman (1988) on *Silv.* 4.2.26 *aemulus*.

63 For a description of the floor of the *tablinum*, with a plan of the house and a detailed drawing of the floor designs in mosaic and *opus sectile*, see Becatti (1961) 28–29 (no. 49), with Fig. 12 and Pl. CCXXI.



FIGURE 5.14 Palace of Domitian on the Palatine, banquet hall, *opus sectile* floor. WILLIAM L. MACDONALD COLLECTION, DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

The same effect is evident in the remains of Domitian's palace, although the floors are not preserved in their entirety and the revetments on the walls scarcely at all. The varieties of stone listed by Statius comprise *giallo antico* from Libya, *pavonazetto* from Phrygia, Aswan granite from Syene (the text is corrupt, but the word *Syene* seems secure), *portasanta* from Chios, *cipollino* from Carystos, and gleaming white Luna marble for the columns. Some of those marbles are combined with others in the shallow apse of the banquet hall where Statius dined in Domitian's presence; these may date from a renovation by one of the late antique emperors, but the effect is a striking evocation of Statius' description (Fig. 14).<sup>64</sup>

Colour contrast and patterning are difficult concepts to convey in words, but with his combination of geographical epithets, mythological allusions, and colour terms, Statius manages to convey something of the opulence and variety of the marble decoration flaunted by his patrons. A commentator's close observation of the colour schemes and effects of floors and revetments in *opus sectile*

64 For the remains of Domitian's magnificent banquet hall, built on top of two dining halls of Nero, one pre- and the other post-dating the Great Fire of 64, see the text and plans at Claridge (2010) 149–152.

can reveal the subtlety and variety in Statius' treatment of the different ways in which his patrons deploy this luxury material. The range of visual effects demands a versatile wordsmith.

## 9 Conclusion

This paper has argued that, by paying attention to *comparanda* from art and material culture, commentators can enrich our appreciation of Statius' poetics in replicating and enhancing the material surroundings of his patrons in the *Silvae*. First, they can point to ways in which art and poetry apply similar interpretations to similar circumstances, as with the cupids tumbling with enthusiasm to further Stella's courtship of Violentilla. Second, they can demonstrate with what precision Statius conveys special features of his patrons' luxury possessions, recreating through words their visual qualities: the relief on the couch in the shrine for Hercules on Pollius' estate; the immanent divinity of Vindex' statuette; the brashly unconventional colour scheme of the marble decoration in Etruscus' baths; the dialogue between Pollius' 'Greek'-clad retreat and the view it affords of a Greek city. And, third, they can convey the experience of an onlooker encountering these objects in three dimensions: the instability of Vopiscus' 'Unswept Floor' mosaic; the shower of *missilia* at Domitian's banquet in the Flavian amphitheatre; the protective tilt of Lucan's shield-portrait above Polla's bed. These examples could be multiplied many times over.

In this selective discussion I hope to have shown that the *Silvae* are remarkably visual; that Statius is a poet so versatile as to be able to convey the effects of multiple artistic media with signal economy and precision; and that he deploys a range of techniques, from the single *mot juste* to mythological allusion to convey the verisimilitude with which he renders the material culture of his leisured contemporaries. A closer look at this feature of his style in the *Silvae* has the capacity to reinforce and augment a traditional philological and literary commentary.

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