

# SILVANUS IN EX VISO INSCRIPTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

Silvanus was the Roman god of forests and the wilderness. He ruled the boundaries between civilization and the uncultivated, and was viewed as a guardian deity, with pastoral and agricultural benefits. While rarely mentioned in ancient mythology, he was popular in Italy, with a copious number of votive inscriptions to his name.



Silvanus and his followers, bearing sacrifices. The god holds a pine branch and a small knife. A dog, symbolic of Silvanus, sits in the bottom left. CIL 06, 00637.

Curiously, despite no known connection to dreams, Silvanus is the most frequent recipient of *ex viso* inscriptions—Latin dedications meaning “from a vision” or dream—surpassing even traditionally prominent deities like Jupiter. This type of votive inscription, primarily dating from the first and second centuries CE, was often written on marble altars or accompanied by carved depictions of the subject

## ABSTRACT

This study explores 95 Latin inscriptions from Italy which include the phrases *ex viso* or *ex visu*, typically referring to visions or dreams of a religious variety. Within the corpus, Silvanus and Jupiter are most frequently invoked, with Silvanus depicted in eighteen instances, twice that of Jupiter. Analysis found that these inscriptions were written by a diverse cast of worshippers, with no straightforward pattern of deity preference linked to these identities. This study considers the reason behind Silvanus's prominence in *ex viso* inscriptions, as well as broader religious practices in the early Roman empire and the material culture associated with Roman epiphanic experiences.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

Why does Silvanus appear more frequently than other, more traditionally prominent deities in *ex viso* inscriptions, and what does this suggest about Roman religious practices and epiphanic experiences?

## THESIS



CIL 06, 36827

CIL 06, 00706

AE 1937, 0061

AE 1971, 0031

Silvanus's prominence in *ex viso* inscriptions suggests a distinctive role in Roman religious experiences, possibly linked to perceptions of his accessibility, his associations with the common people, and the broader tradition of agricultural and rustic deities inspiring divine encounters. His frequent depiction in epigraphic evidence, despite a lack of literary emphasis, indicates that visionary experiences were a significant component of his cult.

## FINDINGS

I

Silvanus was the most frequently mentioned deity in *ex viso* inscriptions, with 18 inscriptions, surpassing Jupiter (10) and Isis (4).

II

Silvanus was depicted more often than other deities in these inscriptions, reinforcing his association with visions.

III

A high proportion of dedicators were freedmen, slaves, or soldiers, but also included women, suggesting that Silvanus had a strong following among non-elite Romans.

IV

There is no clear textual connection between *ex viso* inscriptions and agricultural practices, challenging the idea that Silvanus's cult was primarily agrarian.

V

The findings support the idea that certain deities, particularly those associated with health or protection, were more likely to be perceived as appearing in visions, reinforcing broader patterns of Roman religious belief.

VI

Future research should examine *ex viso* inscriptions outside of Italy and analyze linguistic patterns in inscriptions to better understand dedicatory motivations.

## REFERENCES

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