SHORTER NOTES

A BILINGUAL TORTOISE IN CLAUDIUS ETRUSCUS' BATH: STATIUS, *SILVAE* 1.5.11

ABSTRACT

This note draws attention to Statius' use of the Greek loanword chelys *in* Siluae *1.5. It suggests that Statius' use of* chelys *can be clarified through reference to the equivalent Latin word,* testudo*, indicating not just a musical instrument but also a component of the Roman bath system (Vitr.* De arch. *5.10.1). This contributes to a more nuanced appreciation of bilingual wordplay in Statius, in which the wider meanings of a Latin word can be applied to expand the semantic range of a Greek one, and of Statius' engagement with the material world of his patrons in the* Siluae.

Keywords: Statius; *Siluae*; bilingualism; Roman baths; Flavian poetry; *ekphrasis*

In the fifth poem of *Siluae* 1, Statius finds himself in the resplendent bathhouse of his patron, Claudius Etruscus.[1] The poet of the *Thebaid*, lounging poolside, is adamantly off-duty. He rejects any invocation of inspired, epic and specifically Greek poetry (*non Helicona graui pulsat chelys enthea plectro | nec lassata uoco totiens mihi numina, Musa*, 1.5.1–2), and instead settles in for a night of ribald fun and light verse with his friend (*dilecto uolo lasciuire sodali*, 1.5.9).[2] Statius then issues orders (1.5.10–11):

> iunge, puer, cyathos, sed ne numerare labora
> cunctantemque incende chelyn.
>
> Pour cup after cup, lad, but don't take pains to count them,
> and fire up the sluggish *chelys*.

The request to a slave-boy to bring wine is typical of a sympotic setting.[3] But Statius additionally requests music, and asks the *puer* to 'fire up the sluggish lyre', taking *chelys* (which appears earlier in line 1) as the standard spelling for the transliterated Greek χέλυς, which means 'tortoise' or 'lyre', on account of Hermes' invention of the lyre from a tortoiseshell (*Hom. Hymn* 4.39–54). Statius has already referenced the pun, commanding Mercury to silence the 'melodious beast' (*tu quoque muta ferae, uolucer Tegeaee, sonorae | terga premas*, 1.5.4–5). The paronomasia in line 11 is strengthened through *incende* ('stir up, inflame, provoke', *OLD* s.v. *incendo*), which applies both to

[1] Etruscus' baths are also the subject of Mart. *Ep.* 6.42. For topographical discussion of the *balneum*, see E.M. Steinby, *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae: Volume primo: A–C* (Rome, 1993), 1.118, which suggests an identification with the *Balneum Claudianum* on the Quirinal; cf. G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor, 1999), 361.

[2] For *grauis* as a marker of epic poetry, in contrast to its antonym *leuis*, see e.g. Ov. *Met.* 10.150–4; A.R. Marshall, 'Allusion and meaning in Statius: five notes on *Siluae* 1', *Mnemosyne* 61 (2008), 601–18, at 611 n. 15 for further examples.

[3] L. Watson and P.A. Watson, *Martial: Select Epigrams* (Cambridge, 2003), 335 suggest that *puer* refers to Etruscus himself, who is identified as *puer* in *macte, oro, nitenti | ingenio curaque puer!* (*Silu.* 1.5.63–4).

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:28:16, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838826101700

the anticipated beginning of a lyric performance and to the proverbial sluggishness (*cunctantem*) of the tortoise.[4] However, the text is far from firm, and *incende* itself is in doubt: *intende*—an anonymous Renaissance conjecture in the Matritensis (M) manuscript—has been adopted in several editions, on the basis that *intendere*, by analogy with ἐντείνω, would mean 'tune'.[5] Eden prefers *intende* to *incende*, on the grounds that 'inflaming the lyre' is what Statius 'is going to do himself as he accompanies his song (*canimus* 12)', and not the task he orders the boy to perform.[6]

The collocation of *cunctantemque … chelyn* and the reference to the *puer* also links Statius' invocation with Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo*, wherein the poet praises the chorus of young boys for accomplishing precisely what Statius now demands (*Hymn* 2.16):

> ἠγασάμην τοὺς παῖδας, ἐπεὶ χέλυς οὐκέτ' ἀεργός.
>
> well done, boys, for the tortoise-shell is no longer idle.

Statius' injunction bears a strong resemblance to that of Callimachus. But given the context of Callimachus' *Hymn*—a choral performance by young boys on behalf of the city's well-being in the presence of Apollo—Statius' allusion seems appropriately antagonistic, with the poet having already demanded the departure of the god (*et te, Phoebe, choris et te dimittimus, Euhan*, 1.5.3), and having positioned himself within a sympotic context. Public performance is rejected in favour of private *recitatio*, and the boy is not Callimachus' παῖς as holy chorister but a bathhouse slave.

chelys, however, warrants further attention. As commentators have noted, Statius is fond of *chelys* as the term for 'lyre', using it 27 times.[7] The use of *chelys* in extant Latin literature, however, is rare. Before Seneca, it is first attested in the *Epistula Sapphus*, attributed to Ovid, and only a handful of times thereafter.[8] The far more common Latin term is *testudo*, which, as a calque for *chelys*, can denote both tortoise and lyre.[9] Horace, for all his engagement with the diction and formulae of Greek lyric, opts for *testudo* over *chelys* (*Carm.* 1.32.14, 3.11.3). Indeed, when Politian's commentary on Statius' *Siluae*

[4] Sen. *Ben.* 7.9.2 *testudinem et foedissimorum pigerrimorumque animalium testas*. For *incendere* used of animals in this context, cf. Hirtius, *BGall.* 8.48 *incensum calcaribus equum*; Apul. *Met.* 9.36 [scil. *canes*] *incensi atque inflammati sunt.*

[5] See Marshall (n. 2), 613 for this conjecture, with references to Statius' use of *tendere* to indicate the tuning of lyres (*Theb.* 1.33, 8.374); F. Vollmer, *P. Papinii Statii Siluarum libri* (Leipzig, 1898); D.R. Shackleton Bailey, *Statius: Siluae* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2003); G. Liberman, *Stace. Silues. Édition et commentaire critiques* (Paris, 2010).

[6] P.T. Eden, 'Problems in Statius: *Siluae* (II)', *Mnemosyne* 46 (1993), 92–7, at 96. In the preface to *Siluae* 1, Statius associates his extemporaneous verse with heat: *an hos libellos, qui mihi subito calore … fluxerunt* (*praef.* 3).

[7] O.A.W. Dilke, *Statius: Achilleid* (Cambridge, 1953), on 1.186; H.-J. van Dam, *P. Papinius Statius. Silvae Book II. A Commentary* (Leiden, 1984), on 2.1.7. On Greek and Latin wordplay in Statius more broadly, see A. Alepidou, 'Thetis in identity crisis: inversions of the *Iliad* in Statius' *Achilleid*', *Mnemosyne* 74 (2021), 799–824, at 813–14 and C. McNelis, *Statius:* Achilleid (Oxford, 2024), 155–6.

[8] For an overview of the controversial attribution and dating of the *Epistula Sapphus*, and a defence of Ovidian authorship, see T.S. Thorsen, *Ovid's Early Poetry: From his Single* Heroides *to his* Remedia Amoris (Cambridge, 2014), 96–122. *chelys* is found also in Pompon. *trag.* 8; Calp. *Ecl.* 4.66; *Laus Pisonis* 166, 171, 242; Caesius Bassus in Keil, *Gramm. Lat.* 6.262; Sen. *Ag.* 326, *Med.* 382, *Oed.* 611–12, *Tro.* 321; and in Statius' contemporaries, Val. Fl. *Argon.* 1.139 and Sil. *Pun.* 11.408, 11.441, 11.451. See further G. Rosati, 'I tria corda di Stazio, poeta Greco, Romano e Napoletano', in A. Bonadeo, A. Canobbio and F. Gasti (edd.), *Filellenismo e identità Romana in età Flavia* (Pavia, 2011), 16 n. 8.

[9] e.g. Pacuvius, *trag.* fr. 4 Ribbeck; Verg. *G.* 4.464; Hor. *Carm.* 1.32.14, 3.11.3, 4.3.17; Prop. 2.34.79, 4.6.32; Hyg. *Poet. astr.* 3.6.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:28:16, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838826101700

remarks upon Mercury's *fera sonora* in line 4, *testudo*, not *chelys*, is the word that he uses as a gloss.[10]

Statius' unusual preference for the Greek *chelys* over the Latin *testudo* might thus reinforce the Hellenic identity that the Neapolitan native, son of a Greek *grammaticus* and poet, persistently highlights.[11] This in turn adheres to a general pattern that emerges in the opening lines of 1.5, which provide an array of Grecisms precisely when Statius gestures towards the dismissal of all Greek forms of inspiration and modes of poetry.[12]

Whatever the poet's attraction to the word, Statius seems to be laying it on rather thick, presenting us with no less than three references to the *chelys* in the opening eleven lines. The context of the bathhouse of Claudius Etruscus, however, gives us good reason to exonerate him of redundancy. Statius' deliberate and unusual preference for the Greek loanword over the more common Latin *testudo* also prompts the reader to consider the broader semantic range of the latter—including, specifically, the name for the structural device which covered basins above the furnace within a Roman bath system. The *testudo*, as this device is denoted, maintained the temperature of the water in the *alueus*, a convex receptacle with a flat bottom, apparently resembling the shape of a tortoise-shell; one end opened into the bath, and the flat base of the *testudo* was placed above the *alueus*.[13] Vitruvius provides a description (*De arch.* 5.10.1):

> aenea supra hypocausim tria sunt componenda, unum caldarium, alterum tepidarium, tertium frigidarium, et ita conlocanda, uti, ex tepidario in caldarium quantum aquae caldae exierit, influat de frigidario in tepidarium ad eundem modum testudinesque alueolorum ex communi hypocausi calfaciantur.
>
> Three bronze tanks are to be placed above the furnace: one for the hot bath, a second for the tepid bath, a third for the cold bath. They are to be so arranged that the hot water which flows from the tepid bath into the hot bath may be replaced by an equal amount of water flowing down from the cold to the tepid bath: the *testudines* of the basins are to be heated from the common furnace.

The case for *incende* is thus considerably strengthened if read as a prosaic instruction to the *puer* to attend to the *testudo*, or to quite literally 'heat the bath' (*incende chelyn*), giving an already droll appropriation of the lofty Callimachean *Hymn* an extra, materialist quality. It is linguistically clever too, since, if the immediate unfamiliarity of a calque like *testudo* is typically clarified through the imported meaning of the original

[10] *testudinem intelligit, quam 'feram sonoram' uocat, quoniam ex ea citharam Mercurius construxit*; L. Cesarini Martinelli (ed.), *Angelo Poliziano. Commento inedito alle Selve di Stazio* (Florence, 1978), 332.

[11] L. Holford-Strevens, 'In search of Poplios Papinios Statios', *Hermathena* 168 (2000), 39–54, at 52–3 attractively suggests that we should understand Statius 'as the Πόπλιος Παπίνιος Στάτιος who made himself into P. Papinius Statius', and 'implicitly presents himself as a perfect bilingual'. On Statius' father's Greek curriculum, *Silu*. 5.3.146–61; see also C. McNelis, 'Greek grammarians and Roman society during the Early Empire: Statius' father and his contemporaries', *CA* 21 (2002), 67–94. The relative rarity of *chelys* before Statius perhaps suggests a code-switch rather than a loanword: on the distinction between code-switching and borrowing, see J.N. Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (Cambridge, 2003), 25–9.

[12] Specifically, the Greek accusative *Helicona*, followed by the three Grecisms *chelys*, *enthea* and *plectro* (1); Greek forms for Apollo (*Phoebe*, 3), Bacchus (*Euhan*, 3) and Mercury (*Tegeaee*, 4). Statius' rejection of Greek traditions of inspiration bears strong similarities with Persius' *recusatio* at *Prog.* 1–3.

[13] E. Brödner, *Die römischen Thermen und das antike Badewasen* (Darmstadt, 1983), 20: 'ein Gefäß aus Kupfer oder Bronze für das zu erhitzende Wasser eingebaut, wohl wegen seiner Form *testudo* (Schildkröte) gennant'; I. Nielsen, *Thermae et Balnea: The Architecture and Cultural History of Roman Public Baths* (Aarhus, 1990), 16.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:28:16, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838826101700

language, then here the Greek loanword *chelys* is instead defamiliarized, and granted the wider semantic range that the Latin *testudo* enjoys. In keeping with the opening *recusatio*, Statius implicitly rejects the Greek poetic *chelys*, and asks the bath-attendant to fire up the Roman *testudo* instead. More importantly, the joke is clarified through the material context which Statius' poem sets out to evoke, drawing attention to the architectural space that he is about to praise through the *Siluae*'s innovative form of ekphrastic encomium; the associations with the bath and heat recur at lines 6–7 (*regemque corusci | ignis adhuc fessum Siculaque incude rubentem*) and 31–3 (*ipsa manus tenuit Cytherea mariti | monstrauitque artes, neu uilis flamma caminos | ureret, ipsa faces uolucrum succendit Amorum*), where references to Vulcan and Venus mythologize the space that Statius describes.

The playful ambiguities surrounding this bilingual tortoise illuminate key aspects of the *Siluae*. Statius demands of his readership a sensitivity to the possibilities of bilingual play that works in both directions: in contrast with the conventional logic of the lamentable *egestas linguae* of Latin (Lucr. 1.139), which expects Greek words to make good deficiencies in the Latin language, Statius, the native-speaking Greek, draws on the wider meanings of a Latin word to expand the semantic range of a Greek one.[14] The passage also reinforces the tendency of the *Siluae* to recontextualize traditional literary gestures and markers within the material environs of his cultural context, marking a complex negotiation between different forms of cultural prestige—the poem and the artefact—which has tended to leave scholarship hamstrung between traditional poetic formalism and cultural materialism.[15] If we expect that Statius' reference to the *chelys* is exclusively a poetic marker, we are invited to think more carefully about the material context of the poem. We are dealing with a wordplay that flits not only between languages but also between media. The material world of imperial Rome becomes a vehicle for Statius' poetics, as Martelli and Hinds have argued, but also a means of articulating the culturally bilingual world of the poet, where the Greek encounters the imperial Roman at every crossroad.[16]

The Department for Continuing Education, Oxford University

NICOLAS LINEY
nicolas.liney@balliol.ox.ac.uk
doi:10.1017/S0009838826101700

[14] On the *paupertas* of the Latin language as discussed by Lucretius and other authors, see J. Farrell, *Latin Language and Latin Culture from Ancient to Modern Times* (Cambridge, 2001), 28–52; B. Taylor, *Lucretius and the Language of Nature* (Oxford, 2020), 1–14.

[15] For a critique of the reluctance in scholarship to integrate the poetic and socio-cultural dimensions of the *Siluae*, see F. Martelli, 'Plumbing Helicon: poetic property and the material world of Statius' *Siluae*', *MD* 62 (2009), 145–77.

[16] Martelli (n. 15); S. Hinds, 'Cinna, Statius, and "immanent literary history" in the cultural economy', in E.A. Schmidt (ed.), *L'Histoire littéraire immanente dans la poésie latine* (Vandœuvres, 2001), 221–65.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 18 Nov 2026 at 07:28:16, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009838826101700