

Narrating Divine Property: The Case of Sacred Groves in Statian Poetry¹

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Abstract

The present article examines one type of *res sacrae* in Roman religion, namely sacred groves, thus contributing to the long-standing scholarly debate on these sacred spaces. Against the background of previous studies that have conflated the nouns *lucus*, *nemus* and *silva* or treated them as interchangeable in Latin literary productions, this paper aims to demonstrate that in Statian poetry, the three terms have semantic differences and specific roles in the narrative discourse. The different semantics and functions depend, of course, on the context, which Statius subjectively manipulates by placing the terms in contrast with each other, thus playing with the limits of the concepts.

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1 Introduction

Within the framework of this special issue, part of the ongoing colloquia series between the University of Tokyo and the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies (University of Erfurt), the present article draws on the research conducted in the SFB subproject “Divine Property: Solutions from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages” since 2021.² One of the underlying hypotheses of the project is that, in antiquity, the attribution of places, objects, holidays (*feriae*) or abstract concepts (e.g. *virtutes*) to the gods played a crucial role in religious activities and constituted an arena in which individuals experimented with ownership via a wide range of practices that differed in the way each individual envisioned divine property and presence. Through this lens, emphasis is placed on the subjective perception of property as a pivotal axis for a historically grounded lived religion, in which individuals from different social strata or communities pushed for the regulation and deregulation, or the institutionalisation and privatisation, of what “belonged to the gods”.

The sacred – in Latin *sacer* – is therefore intrinsic to such dynamics and tensions between individual perspectives and socially accepted habits, as they are central to the definition of which spaces, whether material or non-material, were adequate for the communication with the divine.³ This scenario draws a horizon

2 Subproject A01 of the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) TRR 294/1-424638267 “Structural Change of Property”, whose short outline is available at <https://sfb294-eigentum.de/en/subprojects/gottliches-eigentum/>.

3 In the context of communication with the divine, see the following important works: J. Rüpke, *Ritual als Resonanzerfahrung*, Religionswissenschaft heute (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2021); J. Rüpke, “Communicating with the Gods,” in *A Companion to the Roman Republic*, ed. N. Rosenstein and R. Morstein-Marx, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, 215–235).

in which subjects could convince institutions or communities about the rightful or unrightful attribution of a space or object to the divinity.⁴ The struggles behind the allocation of a sacred dimension, and what its limits were, reveal how the notions that divine property bore were open to interpretation. Thus, this is where the present contribution comes in.

In the proceedings of the International Conference on Sacred Groves held in Naples in 1989, John Scheid wrote:

Les bois sacrés appartiennent, en effet, à la catégorie des choses qui ne paraissent poser aucun problème. Mais pour peu qu'on y regarde de près, cette transparence se voile, et ces bois se révèlent obscurs, peu connus, voire méconnus, au point que l'on appelle toute forêt bois sacré et que, plus d'une fois, un arbre suffit pour faire une forêt.⁵

Sacred groves are indeed a problematic category of *res sacrae* – that is, those sacred properties that, if we follow the second-century CE jurist Gaius, were consecrated to the gods above (*di superi*) on the authority of the Roman *civitas* –⁶

4 See, for example, J. Rüpke, “Roman Gods and Private Property: The Invention of State Religion in Cicero’s Speech on His House,” *RRE* 5 (2020), 292–315.

5 J. Scheid, “*Lucus, nemus*. Qu’est-ce qu’un bois sacré?,” in *Les Bois Sacrés: Actes du Colloque International de Naples*, ed. O. de Cazanove and J. Scheid, Collection du Centre Jean Bérard 10 (Naples: Publications de Centre Jean Bérard, 1993, 13–20), 13.

6 Gai. *Inst.* 2.5–6, as opposed to the *res religiosae* (e.g. tombs and burial grounds), which were instead consecrated to the gods below, the *di Manes* (cf. Gai. *Inst.* 2.4). The legal status of the *res sacrae* and *religiosae* has long been debated, for which see C. Santi, *Alle radici del sacro: lessico e formule di Roma antica*, Itinerari di ricerca storico-religiosa 3 (Rome: Bulzoni, 2004); A. Ramon, *I beni degli dei: considerazioni sul regime giuridico delle ‘res sacrae’ e ‘religiosae’*, PhD Diss. (Milan, 2016/2017); D. Sabbatucci, “Sacer,” *SMSR* 23 (1951–1952, 91–101).

the understanding of which varies from source to source. Servius' oft-mentioned division of wooded spaces into *lucus* as *the* sacred grove, *nemus* as the grove harmoniously organised by human hand, and *silva* as the wild and uncultivated space is not only artificial,⁷ but also only partially corresponds to the conceptualisation of such natural places in imperial Latin poetry. Literary references to *lucus*, *nemus* and *silva* bring to the fore individual perspectives and applications of the terms that frame the sacred dimension of groves in such a way that they seemingly have no clear semantic boundaries. Specifically, this is the reality that already emerges from the poetry of Virgil and Ovid, as Ermanno Malaspina has argued, showing that the meaning and application of *lucus*, *nemus* and *silva* had already changed by the Augustan period: while *lucus* no longer simply referred to the sacred grove par excellence, since it acquired the same notion as *silva*, *silva* and *nemus* began to be used alongside the adjective *sacer*, suggesting that both natural spaces could be equated with a *lucus*.⁸ This development has led Malaspina to conclude that the

7 As duly pointed out by J. Rüpke, *Religion of the Romans*, trans. R. Gordon (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 275, with reference to Servius, *ad Aen* 1.310, which reads: *Interest autem inter nemus et silvam et lucum; lucus enim ist arborum multitudo cum religione, nemus vero composita multitudo arborum, silva diffusa et inculta.* (my trans.: "There is a difference between *nemus*, *silva* and *lucus*; in fact, a *lucus* is a multitude of trees with religio, a *nemus* is an ordered multitude of trees, a *silva* is one which is extended and uncultivated."). For further criticism of Servius' compartmentalisation, see V. J. Rosivach, "The Landscape of Catullus 63," *Latomus* 71 (2012, 3–10), 5; E. J. Thomas, *Into the Woods: Art and Nature in the "Aeneid"*, PhD Diss. (Columbia, 2001), 26 n. 46.

8 E. Malaspina, "Prospettive di studio per l'immaginario del bosco nella letteratura latina," in *Incontri triestini di filologia classica* 3, ed. L. Cristante and A. Tessier (Trieste: University of Trieste, 2003–2004, 97–118), 107. Malaspina's work certainly stands out among the many studies that have been carried out so far on Roman sacred groves, such as: C. Maureen, "The sacred places of the immortal ones: ancient Greek and Roman sacred groves," in *A history of groves*, ed. J. Woudstra and C. Roth (London:

use of *lucus*, *nemus* and *silva* in Virgil, Ovid and in the works of poets who came after them, particularly Lucan, was both flexible and interchangeable.⁹

However, by focusing the discussion and textual analysis on selected examples from Statius' *Thebaid*, this article aims to show that such a conclusion can only be applied to a certain extent, because depending on the context and condition of a given grove, *lucus* can be called *nemus*, and *nemus* or *silva* can be used to deceive

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- Routledge, 2017, 13–33); H. Fugier, *Recherches sur l'expression du sacré dans la langue latine*, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg 146 (Strasbourg: Les Belles Lettres, 1963), 57–67, 81–82; F. Coarelli, "I *luci* del Lazio: la documentazione archeologica," in *Les Bois Sacrés: Actes du Colloque International de Naples*, ed. O. de Cazanove and J. Scheid, Collection du Centre Jean Bérard 10 (Naples: Publications de Centre Jean Bérard, 1993, 45–52); J. Bodel, "Graveyards and Groves: A Study of the *Lex Lucerina*," *AJAH* 11 (1986, 1–133); G. Stara-Tedde, "I boschi sacri dell'antica Roma," *Bull. Comm. Arch. Rom.* 33 (1905, 189–232); R. Thomas, "Tree Violation and Ambivalence in Virgil," *TAPA* 118 (1988, 261–273); B. van der Meer, "The Impact of Rome on *luci* (Sacred Glades, Clearings and Groves) in Italy," *BABESCH* 90 (2015, 99–107); A. Hunt, *Reviving Roman Religion: Sacred Trees in the Roman World*, Cambridge classical studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 121–151; A. Augoustakis, "Cutting Down the Grove in Lucan, Valerius Maximus and Dio Cassius," *CQ* 56 (2006, 634–638); P. Buongiorno, "Definire il 'bosco' nell'esperienza romana: fra letteratura antiquaria e giurisprudenza," in *I boschi e le foreste come frontiere del dialogo tra scienze giuridiche e scienze della vita: dalle radici storiche alle prospettive future*, ed. M. Brocca and M. Troisi (Naples: Editoriale scientifica, 2014, 3–11); A. Locchi, "Una definizione dello spazio silvestre tra natura e cultura: il caso dei *nemora* a Roma," in *Topografie della 'Santità': studi sulle simbolizzazioni religiose dei confini e sulla geografia politica delle tradizioni religiose*, ed. F. Squarcini (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2007, 83–91).
- 9 Malaspina, "Prospettive di studio," 113. *Contra* S. Bianchi Mancini, "Sacred Groves and Gods' Landed Property: Contributions from Roman Imperial Literature," in *Relating to Landed Property*, ed. S. Bianchi Mancini et al., Strukturwandel des Eigentums 4 (Frankfurt, New York: Campus, 2024, 19–41), 25–31; J. Brown, *Into the Woods: Narrative Studies in the Thebaid of Statius with Special Reference to Books IV–VI*, PhD Diss. (Cambridge, 1994), 12.

the reader into thinking that what appears to be a “profane” space is ultimately the sacred natural dwelling of a god or several gods. I argue therefore that in Statian poetry *lucus*, *nemus* and *silva* each involve a semantic arrangement that cannot be fully transferred from one term to another, thus providing an inner narrative logic. It is not then a matter of a free, recurrent interchangeability between the three flexible nouns, but rather of a rhetorical “game” in which the poet plays with the meaning of the terms for specific purposes.

2 The sacrality of the *lucus*

Let us begin with a question: what is a *lucus*? Etymologically, the noun poses no problems; it derives from **loukos*, which in turn bears the root **leuk-* (lit. “to be bright”), and denotes a clearing within a grove (*nemus*) or forest (*silva*).¹⁰ If we follow the etymology, *lucus* does not refer to a (sacred) grove, but simply to a clearing. The latter seems to have even been its original meaning, as Cato’s ancient prayer for the pruning of a grove illustrates.¹¹ Although Cato does not give

10 C. Otto, “Lat. *lūcus*, *nemus* «bois sacré» et les deux formes de sacralité chez les Latins,” *Latomus* 59 (2000, 3–7), 3–4; M. de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the other Italic Languages*, Leiden Indo-European etymological dictionary series 7 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), s.v. *lucus*; Coarelli, “I *luci* del Lazio,” 47; E. Malaspina, “*Nemus sacrum?* Il ruolo di *nemus* nel campo semantico del bosco sino a Virgilio: osservazioni di lessico e di etimologia,” *Quad. Dip. Filol. Tor.* 4 (1995, 75–97), 89.

11 Cato, *Agr.* 139–140: [139] *Lucum conlucare Romano more sic oportet. Porco piaculo facito, sic verba concipito: “Si deus, si dea es, quoium illud sacrum est, uti tibi ius est porco piaculo facere illiusce sacri coercendi ergo harumque rerum ergo, sive ego sive quis iussu meo fecerit, uti id recte factum siet, eius rei ergo te hoc porco piaculo inmollando bonas preces precor, uti sies volens propitius mihi domo familiaeque meae liberisque meis; harumce rerum ergo macte hoc porco piaculo inmollando esto.”* [140] *Si fodere voles, altero piaculo eodem modo facito, hoc amplius dicito: “operis faciundi causa.”* [...] (my trans.: [139] “To thin a grove according to Roman custom, the follow-

the reason behind the thinning of a grove (apart from the words *operis faciundi causa*), Filippo Coarelli has suggested that the act was done with the intention of creating a *lucus*, or rather a clearing.¹² On the basis of this suggestion, Coarelli has made an additional proposal which advocates for “la creazione di un *lucus* come un’operazione artificiale, un intervento umano all’interno di una situazione naturale intatta”.¹³ While the well-known Catonian fragment *Lucum Dianium in nemore Aricino Egerius Baebius Tusculanus dedicavit dictator Latinus* and the few epigraphic sources describing the *lucus* with walls and demarcations support Coarelli’s postulation,¹⁴ they point against one of Scheid’s theories, which sees the *lucus* as a space with an intrinsic sacred character that does not depend on any human intervention.¹⁵

ing is to be observed. Sacrifice a piacular pig and utter the following words: ‘whether you are a god or goddess to whom this grove is sacred, as it is right to sacrifice to you a piacular pig for the thinning of this sacred grove, and to this purpose, whether I or someone else who does it at my request, may it be properly done. To this end, by immolating this piacular pig to you, I beseech you with good prayers that you will be kind and well-disposed to me, my house, my household and my children. To this end, be honoured by the immolation of this piacular pig.’ [140] If you wish to till the site, make a second piacular sacrifice in the same way, adding this: ‘for the sake of doing this work.’ [...]). For the original meaning of *lucus* as clearing, see also *OLD s.v. lucus*; Malaspina, “*Nemus sacrum?*,” 87–88; E. Malaspina, “Le champ sémantique du «bois sacré» et l’espace religieux à Rome,” in *Le bois sacré: histoire d’un paysage entre imaginaire culturel et tradition culturelle*, ed. C. Imbert, Collection des Littératures: Série Le Centaure (Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2021, 21–36), 30–31.

12 Coarelli, “I *luci* del Lazio,” 47.

13 Coarelli, “I *luci* del Lazio,” 47.

14 Cato, *Orig.* 58 Peter (my trans.: “Egerius Baebius the Tusculan, the Latin dictator, dedicated the *lucus* of Diana in the grove at Aricia”). For the inscriptions, see *CIL* V, 8970a; VI, 610; X, 292.

15 As reported by Coarelli, “I *luci* del Lazio,” 46, without reference to where Scheid suggested this interpretation.

Statius' poetry, however, forces us on the one hand to choose a middle ground between Coarelli's and Scheid's theories, and on the other hand to introduce a further element. Specifically, I refer to the sacred character of the Statian *luci*, which is either enhanced by a transcendental religious act, ritual or not, that frames spaces that would otherwise be invisible and indistinguishable from others,¹⁶ or is revealed to humans after their interference. Statian *luci* are never described with walls and hardly with other types of boundaries; what generally distinguishes them from the wider natural space, be it a *nemus* or a *silva*, is precisely the religious implications of human intervention.

In some instances, we find that it is the ritual act that empowers the sacrality of the *lucus*, which transforms it into a ritual reference point. Consider ll. 520–524 and 536–548 of Book 4 of the *Thebaid*, where Statius writes respectively:¹⁷

*panditur Elysium chaos, et telluris opertae
dissilit umbra capax, silvaeque et nigra patescunt
flumina: liventes Acheron eiectat harenas,
fumidus atra vadis Phlegethon incendia volvit,
et Styx discretis interflua manibus obstat.
[...]
'immo,' ait, 'o nostrae regimen viresque senectae,
ne vulgata mihi. quis enim remeabile saxum
fallentesque lacus Tityonque alimenta volucrum
et caligantem longis Ixiona gyris*

16 I am partly indebted here to the concept of “sacralisation” as expounded by J. Rüpke, *Ritual als Resonanzverfahren*, 75–78. See also J. Rüpke in this thematic issue.

17 For all of Statian passages, I follow the translation provided by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Statius: Thebaid, Volume I: Books 1–7*, Loeb Classical Library 207 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), but with either minor or major personal adjustments.

*nesciat? ipse etiam, melior cum sanguis, opertas
inspexi sedes, Hecate ducente, priusquam
obruit ora deus totamque in pectora lucem
detulit. Argolicas magis huc appelle precando
Thebanasque animas; alias avertere gressus
lacte quater sparsas **maestoque excedere luco,**
nata, iube; tum qui vultus habitusque, quis ardor
sanguinis affusi, gens utra superbior adsit,
dic agedum nostramque mone per singula noctem.’*

“The Elysian Underworld becomes visible and the capacious darkness of the hidden earth bursts apart. **Woods** and black rivers are revealed: the Acheron casts out bluish sands, smoky Phlegethon rolls black fires in its waters, and the Styx, flowing in between, bars separated ghosts.” [...] “‘Indeed,’ he said, ‘O guide and strength of my old age, do not tell me well-known things. For who would not know of the ever-returning rock and the deceptive pools and Tityos, food of birds, and Ixion, dizzy from the long circuits? Indeed, I myself, when my blood was better, examined the hidden dwellings, with Hecate as my guide, before the god overwhelmed my face and transferred all the light into my mind. Rather bring the Argive and Theban ghosts here by imploring them. Order the other ghosts, daughter, after sprinkling them four times with milk, to turn their steps away and depart the **gloomy sacred grove**. Then come, tell me the countenance and bearing, what ardour for the split blood, which of the two peoples attends more proudly, advise my darkness point by point.’”

These extracts, part of a longer passage that runs from l. 345 to l. 645, narrate the performance of a necromantic ritual. Its enactment takes place in Thebes, at the edge of Diana’s grove, which is portrayed as a sacred wooded area standing

between the Upperworld and the Underworld. The location is certainly ambivalent, blurring the boundaries between two worlds,¹⁸ but what is important is Statius' use of the terms *silva* and *lucus*. The former offers a natural description of groves and forests, which, regardless of their context, are part of the same geographical representation as other landmarks, such as the *nigra flumina* at ll. 521–522. These natural references precede the necromantic invocation of the Argive and Theban souls, in which the *lucus* acts as the ritual reference point and is thus used semantically to describe a sacred grove in a specific religious state. The *lucus* is surely in direct opposition to the *silvae*, for it figures as the sacred land of the ritual, located beyond the human milieu and, at least in this case, with boundaries that are not even trespassed by the souls who stand within it.¹⁹

A similar use of *lucus* is found in the episode of Polyxo, whom we see in ll. 152–158 of Book 5 exhorting a group of women to swear an oath:

*tunc viridi lucus (lucus iuga celsa Minervae
propter opacat humum niger ipse, sed insuper ingens
mons premit et gemina pereunt caligine soles),
hic sanxere fidem. tu Martia testis Enyo
atque inferna Ceres, Stygiaeque Acheronte recluso
ante preces venere deae; sed fallit ubique*

18 R. Parkes, *Statius, Thebaid 4: Edited with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, Oxford classical monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 222, 254–255. The blurring of boundaries between the Upperworld and the Underworld is a feature of the *Thebaid*, denoting how landscape in Statian poetry is “vulnerable to collapse and depredation”, as stated by C. Newlands, “Statius and Ovid: Transforming the Landscape,” *TAPA* 134 (2004, 133–155), 138.

19 It should be noted that the *lucus* in question is called *maestus*. According to *TLL* 1752.81–1753.3 s.v. *lucus*, the adjective frequently denotes a *lucus* that is found in the Underworld. On this point, see also Parkes, *Statius, Thebaid 4*, 254–255.

mixta Venus, Venus arma tenet, Venus admovet iras.

“Then in a green **sacred grove** (a **sacred grove** that shades the ground close to Minerva’s lofty summit, dark itself, but upon it a mighty mountain presses down and the suns perish because of the double darkness), here they pledged their faith. You, Martian Enyo, were witness and infernal Ceres, and the Stygian goddesses came before the prayer, Acheron opened; but everywhere Venus deceives mingling among them, Venus holds the weapons, Venus brings the wrath.”

The *lucus*, near the hill of Minerva, momentarily becomes the sacred site of the oath and a numinous land shared by a multitude of deities who must witness the swearing ritual. The sacredness of the ground is of paramount importance, for it enables Statius to call the area *lucus* when highlighting its main characteristic. A parallel example can be found outside the confines of Statian poetry, specifically in Book 7 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where Jason speaks to Medea and swears an oath on one of the faces of Diana Trivia that inhabits the grove.²⁰ As in the Polyxo episode, the oath confers sacredness on the environment, which becomes a ritual space or an area deputed to the performance of a ritual, and the divine presence reinforces the overall sacred character of the *lucus*. A proper ritual of consecration is not needed; rather, any religious action or ritual can enhance the place,

20 Ov. *Met.* 7.92–97: ‘*quid faciam, video: nec me ignorantia veri / decipiet, sed amor, servabere munere nostro, / servatus promissa dato!*’ *per sacra triformis / ille deae lucoque foret quod numen in illo perque / patrem soceri cernentem cuncta futuri eventusque / suos et tanta pericula iurat*: (my trans.: “I see what I am doing: nor will the ignorance of the truth deceive me but love itself. You will be saved by my service; but when you have been saved, give what you have promised!”) He swears by the sacred rites of the threefold goddess, by whatever **divinity** might be in that **sacred grove**, by the all-seeing father of his future father-in-law, by his own successes and mighty perils:”).

consequently creating an invisible barrier, temporal or permanent, that separates the *lucus* from its wider natural environment.

3 The progression *silva* > *nemus* > *lucus*

The gradual progression *silva* > *nemus* > *lucus* is another strategy that Statius adopts to play with the representation of the sacred status of a *lucus*. Consider again Diana's grove in Book 4, but ll. 419–430:

*silva capax aevi validaque incurva senecta,
aeternum intonsae frondis, stat pervia nullis
solibus; haud illam brumae minuere, Notusve
ius habet aut Getica Boreas impactus ab Ursa.
subter operta quies, vacuusque silentia servat
horror et exclusae pallet male lucis imago.
nec caret umbra deo: **nemori Latonia cultrix
additur**; hanc piceae cedrique et robore in omni
effictam sanctis occultat **silva tenebris.**
huius inaspectae **lucis** stridere sagittae
nocturnique canum gemitus, ubi limina patru
effugit inque novae melior redit ora Dianae;*

“There stands a **forest**, enduring of time and bent by robust old age, with foliage forever unshorn, penetrable by no suns. Winters did not damage it, nor does Notus have power over it nor Getic Boreas hurled down from the northern Bear. Beneath is the hidden quiet, an empty awe protects the silence and the semblance of shut out light makes a faint pallor. Nor does the shade lack a deity; **Latonia is added to the grove as its inhabitant.** In sacred darkness the **forest** hides her, carved in every pine, cedar, and

oak. Her arrows whistle unseen in the **sacred grove** and her dogs howl at night when she escapes her uncle's threshold and returns in a better state to the countenance of a new Diana;".

The noun *silva* functions as a geographical descriptor, while being employed as a reference to a wooded land that can be potentially holy. The narrative is a decisive factor, for as it progresses, the reader comes to understand that the *silva* is transformed into a *nemus*, where the goddess Latonia is introduced (*additur*) and her image is carved into the trees. The shift from *silva* to *nemus* – that is, from the general to the more specific – has its religious logic: it denotes the *nemus* as a malleable and accessible place shared by mortals and gods. These characteristics are typical of the Statian *nemora*, which are repeatedly portrayed as ambivalent numinous places, accessible to mortal beings, but permanently touched by the divine.²¹ Trees therefore can be carved, and individuals can introduce the goddess into a space that functions as a conceptual intermediate state of a grove that is in the process of becoming sacred (*lucus*). This progression may be misleading, since in two instances *silva* seems to overlap with *nemus* or *lucus*,²² as if it were not only the encompassing term for a (sacred) grove and forest, but also an allusion to how deities could extend their influence beyond the (sacred) woods.

I suggest, however, that it is this potential coincidence, based on the broader meaning of *silva*, that enacts Statius' lexical arrangement to describe the progression *silva* > *nemus* > *lucus*. Explicative is the following passage:²³

tandem inter silvas (sic Euhius ipse pararat)
errantes subitam pulchro in maerore tuentur
Hypsipylen; illi dependet et ad ubera Opheltes

21 See, for example, Stat. *Theb.* 2.521–532; 3.106–113; 9.575–611.

22 Stat. *Theb.* 4.832–833; 7.40.

23 Stat. *Theb.* 4.746–756, 770–771.

*non suus, Inachii proles infausta Lycurgi.
quamvis et neglecta comam nec dives amictu,
regales tamen ore notae, nec mersus acerbis
exstat honos. tunc haec adeo stupefactus Adrastus:
'diva potens **nemorum** (nam te vultusque pudorque
mortali de stirpe negant), quae laeta sub isto
igne poli non quaeris aquas, succurre propinquis
gentibus; [...]
[...]
Dircaeos tibi, diva, greges numerumque rependam
sanguinis et magna **lucus** signabitur **ara**.'*

“At last, wandering in the **forest** (so Euhios himself had arranged), they suddenly see Hypsipyle, beautiful in her sadness. Opheltes, not hers but the unfortunate offspring of Inachian Lycurgus, hangs at her breast. Her hair is neglected, her clothing is poor; yet her honour shows royal signs on the face, not sunk in misfortune. Then Adrastus, stunned, addresses her: ‘Powerful **goddess of the groves** (your face and modesty deny in fact that you are of mortal stock), glad that under this fire of the sky you do not seek for water, help neighbouring people;’ [...] [...] “I shall repay you, Goddess, with Dircaean flocks and quantity of blood, and a great **altar** will mark the **sacred grove**.’”

The king of Argos, Adrastus, and his companions enter a forest (*silva*) in Nemea, where they meet Hypsipyle, who is eventually invoked as the “goddess of the groves”, being mistaken for Diana. The words *diva nemorum* mark her relationship with the land and a gradual sacralisation of the wooded space (*silva* > *nemus*) that ends when Hypsipyle is promised the construction of an altar in exchange for her help in the war against Thebes (ll. 770–771). The *ara* is the final step in

the progression *silva* > *nemus* > *lucus*, signalling how the *nemus* is ultimately transformed into a sacred space (*lucus*) with a structure that will mark (*signabitur*) the land consecrated to Hypsipyle.

4 The *lucus* in a “tainted” condition and the regression *lucus* > *nemus* > *silva*

Just as the progression *silva* > *nemus* > *lucus* follows a narrative and semantic logic, so too do the instances in which a *lucus* is defiled by human hand or, in the most extreme cases, undergoes a regression that terminates with its return to the primary, natural condition of *silva*, passing through the intermediate state of *nemus*. The former can already be seen in the grove that Adrastus and his companions entered, which was an already consecrated space, as we learn in Book 5. For Statius writes:²⁴

*Interea campis, nemoris sacer horror Achaei,
terrigena exoritur serpens tractuque soluto
immanem sese vehit ac post terga relinquit.
livida fax oculis, tumidi stat in ore veneni
spuma virens, ter lingua vibrat, terna agmina adunci
dentis, et auratae crudelis gloria frontis
prominet. Inachio sanctum dixere Tonanti
agricolae, cui cura loci et silvestribus aris
pauper honos; [...]*

“Meanwhile, an earthborn serpent rises in the open plain, **sacred** horror of the Achaean **grove**, and drags his immense self in a loose slide and leaves

24 Stat. *Theb.* 5.505–513.

behind his back. A livid fire is in his eyes, a green foam of venom in its mouth. Three times his tongue flickers, three are the rows of hooked teeth, and the cruel glory juts out from his gilded brow. The farmers called him **sacred** to the **Inachian Thunderer**, who took care of the place and a poor offering on **woodland altars**; [...].”

According to the passage, it is Jupiter, the Inachian Thunderer, who “owns” the Nemean grove where Adrastus and his companions met Hypsipyle. The sacred snake acts as its guardian, watching over the god’s “woodland altars” (*silvestribus aris*) that, according to the adjective *sacer*, should not be trespassed upon.²⁵ There are then two narrative levels between Books 4 and 5, which Statius uses to create a deliberate mismatch: one relating to the progression *silva > nemus > lucus* (Book 4), and one relating instead to the entry of Adrastus and his companions into an already sacred place (Book 5). The mistake they make is unintentional (or so it seems), as the Nemean grove lacks clear boundaries that would have allowed Adrastus and his companions to distinguish it from a profane area. The mechanism at work in this second narrative level bears a striking resemblance to what we find in the following Ovidian episode:²⁶

*Vallis erat piceis et acuta densa cupressu,
nomine Gargaphie succinctae sacra Dianae,
cuius in extremo est antrum nemorale recessu
arte laboratum nulla: [...]
[...]
ecce nepos Cadmi dilata parte laborum*

25 The adjective *silvestribus* implies the geographical and natural context of the altars as they are inside a forest, together with the sacred place.

26 Ov. *Met.* 3.155–158, 174–181. The translation that follows is mine.

*per nemus ignotum non certis passibus errans
pervenit in lucum: sic illum fata ferebant.
qui simul intravit rorantia fontibus antra,
sicut erant, nudae viso sua pectora nymphae
percussere viro subitisque ululatibus omne
inplevere nemus circumfusaeque Dianam
corporibus texere suis;*

“There was a valley thick with pine and barbed cypress, Gargaphie by name, the **sacred haunt** of girded Diana, which in its furthest recess is a **woody grotto**, produced by no art: [...]” [...] “Enter Cadmus’ grandson, a part of his toil postponed, and wandering through the **unfamiliar grove** with unsure footsteps, arrives in the **sacred grove**; fate carried him that way. As soon as he entered the grotto dripped with water, the Nymphs, naked as they were, beat their chests at the sight of the man and filled the whole **grove** with sudden cries. Then they crowded around Diana to cover her with their bodies;”.

Diana and the Nymphs inhabit a grove that Ovid first describes as a “woody grotto” (*antrum nemorale*). Its appearance is important, as it leads Cadmus’ grandson Actaeon to think that he can walk through an area that seems to be profane. But there is a twist: the same space is in truth *ignotum* (l. 175) and is ultimately said to harbour a *lucus* (l. 176). In the absence of a physical difference and familiarity with the place, Actaeon fails to see that the *nemus* constitutes the threshold of the sacred *lucus* and, unaware of the shift – that the reader is able to perceive through the progression *nemus* > *lucus* – makes the mistake of entering the restricted area.²⁷

27 Cf. Malaspina, “Prospettive di studio,” 110. See also C. P. Segal, *Landscape in Ovid’s Metamorphoses: A Study in the Transformations of a Literary Symbol*, Hermes Einzel-

Like Ovid, Statius plays with the seemingly profane character of the grove by calling it *nemus*, even though we are warned about its sacred condition through the adjective *sacer* and the sanctity of the snake. Indeed, the grove is eventually called *lucus*, but not until sixty lines later, when Adrastus' companion Capaneus addresses the guardian snake before killing it.²⁸ We may therefore wonder why Statius chose to call it *nemus* and subsequently *lucus*. Perhaps, the most obvious explanation would be that, in the case of the Nemean grove, the terms are both flexible and interchangeable, if we agree here with Malaspina's hypothesis. Alternatively, we can explain Statius' choice in terms of *nemus* as an ambivalent substitute noun that can represent the Nemean *lucus* in its degraded and tainted condition after the trespass of not only Actaeon and his companions, but also of the infant Opheltes, who was brought into the grove by his nurse Hypsipyle before the Argive soldiers arrived.

This may seem far-fetched, but there is evidence to support it. The first is the Actaeon episode in Ovid, where at l. 180 Diana's grove is no longer called a *lucus*; after Actaeon has entered it, it is simply a *nemus*. So, we move from a scenario in which there is a succession *nemus* > *lucus* to one in which the shift is

schriften 23 (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1969), 44, who argues that Actaeon's trespass has implications for Diana's chastity.

28 Stat. *Theb.* 5.565–570: [...] '*at non mea vulnera, clamat / et trabe fraxinea Capaneus subit obuius, umquam / effugies, seu tu pavidus ferus incola luci, / sive deis, utinamque deis, concessa voluptas, / non, si consertum super haec mihi membra Giganta / subveheres.*' [...] (trans.: "[...] 'But not my wounds,' cries Capaneus, and comes up to assault him with ashen spear, 'You shall never escape, whether you be the savage inhabitant of the terrified **sacred grove** or the delight granted to the gods (and to the gods let it be!), no, not even if you brought a Giant against me joined above your limbs.' [...]").

lucus > *nemus*.²⁹ In Book 5, the shift is certainly less noticeable, since the sacred character of the *lucus* is hidden in the plot and is only revealed and emphasised once it has been entered. However, as mentioned above, the adjective *sacer* and the sanctity of the snake already warn us that we are approaching a sacred space, precisely as we can see in another passage from Book 5. At ll. 186–188 and 248–251 respectively we read:

iam domibus fusi et nemorum per opaca sacrorum
ditibus indulgent epulis vacuantque profundo
aurum inmane mero, [...]
[...]
[...] *ferimur per devia vastae*
urbis et ingentem nocturnae caedis aceruum
passim, ut quosque sacris crudelis vespera lucis
straverat, occulta speculamur nube latentes.

“Now stretched out in the homes and in the shade of the **sacred groves** they indulge in sumptuous banquets and empty huge golden goblets of unmixed wine, [...]” [...] “[...] We move through byways of the deserted city, hiding in secret darkness, watching everywhere a huge pile of the night’s massacre, as the cruel evening had laid them low in the **sacred groves**.”

The “profane” sacred groves (*nemorum sacrorum*) are the site of sumptuous feasts

29 See also Ov. *Met.* 8.741–744: *ille etiam Cereale nemus violasse securi / dicitur et lucos ferro temerasse vetustos. / stabat in his ingens annoso robore quercus, / una nemus; [...]* (my trans.: “It is told that he even **violated the grove of Ceres with an axe and defiled the ancient sacred grove with iron**. There stood a mighty oak with aged strength, itself a **grove**; [...]).

that a group of sailors indulge in. More than sixty lines later, the same wooded areas are called *sacri luci* and are revealed to be the place where the sailors eventually died overnight. It is no coincidence that the reverse situation does not occur in Statius, namely that the term *lucus* is used to conceal a *nemus*. Although in this passage the adjective *sacer* works for both *nemus* and *lucus*, in Statian poetry only the latter can be trespassed, and once entered, it can become the space of untimely death.³⁰ Like the sailors, Opheltes is killed (albeit unintentionally) by the snake while playing and crawling on the sacred ground,³¹ but so is Actaeon in Ovid.

The Nemean grove provides an additional element, or rather another narrative twist, as it will be destroyed for the creation of Opheltes' funeral pyre. Its destruction is told as follows:³²

[...] *stat sacra senectae*
numine, nec solos hominum transgressa veterno
fertur avos, Nymphas etiam mutasse superstes
*Faunorumque greges. aderat miserabile **luc**o*
excidium: fugere ferae, nidosque tepentes
absiliunt (metus urguet) aves; cadit ardua fagus
*Chaoniumque **nemus** brumaeque inlaesa cupressus,*
procumbunt piceae, flammis alimenta supremis,
ornique iliceaeque trabes metuendaque suco
taxus et infandos belli potura cruores
fraxinus atque situ non expugnabile robur.

30 Cf. Newlands, "Statius and Ovid," 142.

31 Stat. *Theb.* 5.534–549. Statius already alludes to the killing of Opheltes in the passage from Book 4 quoted above, when he depicts Hypsipyle *in maerore*. Indeed, the same representation of Hypsipyle returns in l. 552. The unintentionality of the killing is well perceived in Stat. *Theb.* 5.539.

32 Stat. *Theb.* 6.93–113. However, the episode begins at l. 84 and ends at l. 117.

*hinc audax abies et odoro vulnere pinus
scinditur, adclinant intonsa cacumina terrae
alnus amica fretis nec inhospita vitibus ulmus.
dat gemitum tellus: non sic eversa feruntur
Ismara cum fracto Boreas caput extulit antro,
non grassante Noto citius nocturna peregit
flamma **nemus**. linqunt flentes dilecta locorum
otia cana Pales Silvanusque arbiter umbrae
semideumque pecus, migrantibus aggemit illis
silva, nec amplexae dimittunt robora Nymphae.*

“[...] it stood sacred in the majesty of old age, said not only to surpass men’s ancestors in age but to have witnessed the passing of generations of Nymphs and Fauns. Miserable destruction was near for the **sacred grove**. The beasts flee and the birds are flown away from the warm nests (fear drives). The towering beech falls and the Chaonian **grove** and the cypress that winter left unhurt, spruces fall, aliment for funeral flames, and ash-trees, and trunks of ilex, and yew-tree of dangerous sap, and ash that will drink the unspeakable blood of the war, and age-proof oak. Then the daring fir and the pine with aromatic wound is split, and the alder, friend to seas and the vine-welcoming elm lean uncut tops on the ground. The earth groans. Not so is Ismara overturned and carried off when Boreas lifts the head from the broken cavern nor does nocturnal fire more quickly destroy a **grove** under the South Wind’s assault. Pales and Silvanus, lord of shade, and the demigod herd abandon the places they love, haunts of ancient amusements, and as they go away the **forest** groans in sympathy, while the Nymphs do not let go of the oaks from the embrace.”

The cutting down of the grove disrupts an ideal cosmic order, as the Argives

destroy the woodland homes of birds and other animals, and drive away rural deities such as Pales and Silvanus.³³ The destruction of the *lucus* is gradual, with a degradation that starts as soon as Statius begins to recount the sorrow of the once sacred grove (*aderat miserabile luco / excidium*). The isolated mention of *lucus* emphasises the first step in the degradation of the wooded space, which is later implicitly depicted as a *nemus*. Once the fire has been lit, a further and final step towards the desacralisation of what was once a sacred area takes place: all that remains now is a *silva*. What we have at play here is therefore a reversal of the phenomenon observed above; instead of the progression *silva* > *nemus* > *lucus*, we have the regression *lucus* > *nemus* > *silva*.

5 Conclusion

In Statius, there is evidence for a differentiation between *lucus*, *nemus* and *silva*, and their application follows several patterns that suggest an inner narrative (and religious) logic. Despite the potential synonymy, not all uses are interchangeable, for a sacred hierarchy can be discerned behind the employment of the terms. While the *lucus* functions as a sacred space proper or as a ritual reference point, the *nemus* and *silva* are presented as similar spaces that, although potentially inhabited by gods, have a less sacred dimension than a *lucus*. These differences are religious rather than physical, allowing Statius to exploit the visual confusion between the three spaces in an interplay between material perception and the conceptual level. Thus, the poet portrays the *lucus* as *the* sacred space of religious performance,

33 Newlands, “Statius and Ovid,” 144. The deforestation of the *lucus* in Statius has often been compared to Caesar’s cutting down of the Massilian grove in Lucan’s *Pharsalia* (3.399–452), for which see, for example, A. Augoustakis, “The Death and Funeral Rites of Opheltes in the Thebaid,” *Ritual and Religion in Flavic Epic*, ed. A. Augoustakis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 249–266), 260–262.

which can be inhabited by multiple divinities or in constant danger of losing its sacrality. In contrast, the *nemus* is presented as an ambivalent numinous space that mortals can reach, even though it has an enduring connection with the divine.

The seemingly interchangeable use of the terms can therefore be better understood as a rhetorical device employed by Statius to achieve specific purposes. This mechanism serves to advance the narrative and creates a dramatic effect for the reader, as can be seen in the sequences *silva* > *nemus* > *lucus* and *lucus* > *nemus* > *silva*. The semantic differences are important for the coherent development of the narrative, and the story progresses from the confusion of the characters to revelation and divine punishment, or to the degradation of a *lucus*, which ultimately ends in a defiled state. As a result of this semantic engagement, when Statius uses progressive or regressive sequences, or when he needs to emphasise the distinctions between *lucus*, *nemus* and *silva*, the geographical representations of *lucus* as a smaller or more specific area than *nemus*, and of *silva* as a term that can broadly refer to these other two natural spaces, become less significant in favour of the sacred dimension of the three spaces.

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