



[Prudentius, Against Symmachus I.408-418, 427-432](#)

Rome's God-given superiority over the rest of the world, and why she should not debase herself

Name of the author: Prudentius, Against Symmachus I.408-418, 427-432 Prudentius

Date: 402 CE

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Apologetic, Poetry and Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: Against Symmachus

Reference:

I.408-418, 427-432

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Prudentius and the two books *Against Symmachus*, please see the commentary on [Against Symmachus Preface 80-89, I.1-8](#).

The present extract is taken from the first book of Prudentius's poem, and focuses on the steps taken by the emperor Theodosius I to eradicate pagan religious practice from the Roman empire. Prudentius emphasises the necessity of these actions, arguing that Rome's substantive power and supremacy is due to the Christian God alone, and as such, to cling onto the rites of Roman religion is debasing of Rome's glory. This passage marks the opening of the section of book one which deals specifically with Theodosius's period of sole rule (between September 394 and January 395, see below). The fact that the emperor is not named has suggested to scholars such as Alan Cameron and Jill Harries that he was alive when Prudentius wrote, which would mean a dating for the text prior to the beginning of 395 (Cameron, *The Last Pagans*, p. 343-344; Harries, "Prudentius and Theodosius," p. 75; Harries also notes that of the many achievements of Theodosius listed by Prudentius, his fathering of Arcadius and Honorius, who reigned in 402 CE is not mentioned, which would be strange if the text was composed during their reign). However, the tone and tense of our passage suggests the past, with Theodosius's military victories and his plea for Rome to abandon paganism seemingly looked back upon. Theodosius's suppression of paganism is dealt with elsewhere in the poem as well, such as the Preface 80-89, and I.1-8, where the Roman people (referred to as the "race of Romulus," *gens Romulei* are described as in need of salvation from the sully of their ancestors. The third major section of book one (lines 415-505) is incorporated into our extract here, and sees a speech placed on Theodosius's lips urging Roman senators to give up Roman religion (later on, lines 551-565 list some successful conversions of aristocrats, indicating that one of Prudentius's purposes in writing was to acknowledge Theodosius's role in the conversion of the Roman aristocracy to Christianity (A. Baldini, "Il Contra Symmachum," p. 115, suggests that our passage, which describes Theodosius making an imagined trip to Rome, reflects an *oratio principis* sent by the emperor to the senate).

For our purposes, what is most important about this passage is the connection drawn by Prudentius between Theodosius's military victory, Rome's supremacy, the divine will of the Christian God, and the need for the eradication of paganism. The acknowledging of the emperor's suppression of paganism, particularly among Rome's elite, alongside the recognition of his triumph over tyrants serves to link his success with God, and provide support for his argument that Roman religion has no function. Before moving to discuss this further, we will briefly note the historical context. The "two usurpers/tyrants" referred to in the passage are Magnus Maximus and Flavius Eugenius (see below), Prudentius emphasising here the despotic nature of the two defeated rulers, portraying them in a villainous light in order to emphasise the positive effect of Theodosius's actions ("tyrants" is preferred by Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans*, p. 344, for instance). Three years before his death in 383 CE, the emperor Gratian had sent the Frankish general Arbogast, who held the rank of *magister equitum* (master of the cavalry), to assist Theodosius, who was at that point the emperor in the East of the empire, against the Goths in Thrace. After Gratian died, killed by Magnus Maximus, Theodosius turned his attentions to the West to assist his ally, Valentinian II, where the usurper Magnus Maximus had taken the majority of the provinces, with the exception of Italy. Due to an insufficient military force, Theodosius was not able to seriously challenge Maximus until 387 CE, when the latter invaded Italy, and Theodosius's hand was forced. Utilising barbarians in the army, Theodosius went to battle,



finally defeating Maximus in 388 CE at the Battle of the Save. Still in Theodosius's service, Arbogast proceeded to take back Gaul for Valentinian II in this same year, which was held by the defeated usurper Maximus's son, Flavius Victor. By 391 CE Arbogast enjoyed power in Gaul as *comes* (count) and regent, but clashed with Valentinian, who sought to relieve him of his position. When Valentinian died in Vienne in the Spring of 392 CE (somewhat suspiciously), Arbogast proclaimed a professor of rhetoric, Flavius Eugenius, as the emperor in the West. Eugenius was the more logical choice for emperor than Arbogast taking this position himself, as Eugenius was a Roman, and therefore much more suitable and likely to win the favour of the senate than a Frank. However, in 393 CE, Theodosius proclaimed his son Honorius Augustus in the West, naming Eugenius as illegitimate. Theodosius mustered an army, incorporating Goths and other barbarian soldiers, and marched against Eugenius, defeating him in the September of 394 CE at the Battle of Frigidus. Arbogast killed himself, and Eugenius was captured and executed, allowing Theodosius to become the sole emperor (see Gerard Friell and Stephen Williams, *Theodosius: The Empire at Bay*, p. 51-53, and 112-129. There were, however, several members of the Roman senatorial aristocracy who followed Eugenius, such as Nicomachus Flavianus Senior. Theodosius had been relatively lenient towards these individuals, although some were required to pay significant fines; see Symmachus, *Epistles* 4.19.1).

The contrast between the language used to describe Rome still clinging to her ancient rites, and that used to describe her power in connection with the Christian God is notable in this extract. Roman religion is portrayed as a dark, polluting force, which defiled the imperial power. The picture of the city of Rome which Prudentius paints is one that is black and smoggy with the smoke from burnt sacrificial offerings. This bleak picture immediately after the image of Theodosius surveying his victory grounds makes clear that his great military triumphs are dulled by the lingering cloud of paganism, which obscures the bright sky over Rome's iconic Seven Hills. Theodosius's heartfelt plea for the "faithful mother" (i.e. the city of Rome) to rid herself of this darkness appeals to her regal and splendid nature, which pagan religion is not worthy of. The maternal metaphor for Rome began to be used much more frequently from the third century CE onwards. The present passage utilises the same dual image of Rome as both a dominating queen and a mother that we find in praises of Rome written by pagan authors (see, for instance, [Amianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XIV.6.3-6](#), [Rutilius Namatianus, *On His Return* I.47-92](#); [Claudian *On the Consulship of Stilicho* III.130-16](#); see also Myles Lavan, *Slaves to Rome*, p. 91-93).

The image of a wealthy, luxury-laden state contrasts sharply with the gloominess of the first part of the passage. Like God himself in heaven, Rome as a queen looks down upon her subjects from loftier heights, as the divinely-ordained ruler of the mortal world. Her dominion is purely thanks to God's will, however, and in this sense we see the contrast between the way Rome's rulership is perceived from a Christian perspective and the way that pagan authors understand it. For instance, Rutilius Namatianus, *On His Return* I.49, asserts that Rome is the "mother of the gods" (*genetrix deorum*), and argues that Rome has divine origins, presenting Venus and Mars as her parents (I.67-70). For this author, then, Rome is not merely subject to a higher divine power as she is for Prudentius, but rather she can claim divine identity herself. Returning to Prudentius's opinion in the present passage, Rome ought not to become entangled in that which represents the basest parts of creation—i.e. the rites of Roman religion which have no divine basis and are entirely man-made. In order to fully embrace its lordship and dominion, which God himself has granted to Rome, she must leave behind her former ways, and understand that the same God who granted victory to Theodosius supports Rome's greater role as the dominant world power.

Keywords in the original language:

- [aurum](#)
- [calco](#)
- [constituo](#)
- [dominor](#)
- [humilis](#)
- [imperito](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [insignis](#)
- [maiestas](#)
- [orbis](#)
- [origo](#)
- [parens](#)



- [princeps](#)
- [regia](#)
- [regina](#)
- [sacrum](#)
- [spolium](#)
- [subiaceo](#)
- [summitto](#)
- [superbus](#)
- [supersto](#)
- [triumphalis](#)
- [tyrannus](#)
- [urbs](#)
- [victor](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [ancestral rite](#)
- [divine will](#)
- [lordship](#)
- [maternal care](#)
- [mother](#)
- [queen](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman lordship](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Roman religion](#)
- [Roman supremacy](#)
- [Roman tradition](#)
- [Roman victory](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Seven Hills of Rome](#)
- [submission](#)
- [triumph](#)
- [usurper](#)
- [wealth](#)

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Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XIV.6.3-6](#)

Praise of Rome and reflection about the old age of the Roman people.

- [Read more about Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XIV.6.3-6](#)

Text

[Rutilius Namatianus, *On His Return* I.43-92](#)

Praise of Rome's capacity to rule a universal empire

- [Read more about Rutilius Namatianus, *On His Return* I.43-92](#)

Text

[Claudian, *On the Consulship of Stilicho* III.130-161](#)

Praise of Rome

- [Read more about Claudian, *On the Consulship of Stilicho* III.130-161](#)

Text

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