



## [Symmachus, Relatio III.8](#)

Symmachus's recollection of the fact that *Genii* are divided between peoples

**Name of the author:** Symmachus

**Date:** 384 CE

**Place:** Rome

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** Letter

**Title of work:** *Relationes*

**Reference:** III.8

**Commentary:**

For a presentation of Symmachus's life, see: [Symmachus, Speeches II.12-14](#).

This text is part of the corpus of the *Relationes* which gathers 49 letters that Symmachus addressed to the emperors when he was prefect of the city of Rome in 384 CE. Concerning the political context in which Symmachus fulfilled this prefecture, it is important to remember that in August 383 CE the emperor Gratian had been murdered by the men of the usurper Maximus, who had been proclaimed Augustus by his troops in Britain. During the spring of 383 CE he invaded Gaul. One direct consequence of Maximus taking control of Gaul and killing Gratian was that many barbarian groups threatened various provinces anew. The Huns and Alani went into Pannonia, and the Juthungi into Rhetia – Pannonia and Rhetia being provinces that were under the authority of the young half-brother of Gratian, Valentinian II, who was then 8 years old and lived in Milan. Maximus then established his residence in Trier and asked Valentinian II to join him there. The opposition between the two parties was strengthened by the fact that Maximus was a Nicean and that Valentinian was under the influence of his mother Justina, who was an Arian and had constituted around him a whole Arian court. The bishop of Milan, Ambrose, a leading figure of the Nicean faith in the West, thus tried to play the role of mediator between Maximus, Valentinian II and Theodosius (on these controversies, see Ambrose of Milan, *Letter XXI.1*, 9, 10). After the sending of legates, Theodosius recognised Maximus as emperor in August 384 CE with the condition that he did not attack Valentinian's territories, namely Italy, Illyricum and Africa. Maximus was then entrusted with Britain, Gaul, and Spain. However, from the point of view of the court in Milan, this situation looked more like a kind of "armed peace." In that context Justina and the entourage of Valentinian II at Milan wanted to gain support. For this reason they pushed for granting the prefecture of Italy-Illyricum-Africa and the Urban Prefecture of Rome to two upholders of the traditional Roman religion, namely Vettius Agorius Praetextatus and Symmachus (on this point see Callu, *Symmaque*, p. xxxix-xl). By choosing these two men, Valentinian II's entourage tried to enrol a large part of the Roman aristocratic milieu who, in previous years, had been disappointed by Gratian and especially by his anti-pagan measures (Vera, *Commento*, p. xlvi-xlix, 18-19).

The corpus of the *Relationes* consists of 49 letters, some of which were independent and self-sufficient documents, and some that were a sort of memoranda that went with technical files (on this point, see Callu, *Symmaque*, p. liv). According to Domenico Vera, most of the letters of the collection remained first in Symmachus's private archives, and it is probably not before the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE that the prefectural letters of Symmachus were gathered as a collection (Vera, *Commento*, p. xc-xcv). In this third *Relatio*, enacted between July and September 384 CE, Symmachus speaks for the second time in the name of the Roman Senate to the emperor Valentinian II during an imperial audience, in order to ask for the reinstatement of the status of the Roman religious cults that had been altered by the anti-pagan measures taken under Gratian. This text appears thus less as a letter, and more as a published speech (Callu, *Symmaque*, p. lii). The fact that Symmachus speaks in the name of the whole Senate cannot be interpreted as evidence for the fact that all the senators supported the urban prefect. In fact, during his urban prefecture Symmachus was sometimes not supported by many senators, be they part of the Christian or pagan groups of the Roman curia. So, when in the *Relatio III* Symmachus defends the restoration of the Altar of Victory, he defends what only some of the senators considered to be a just cause; and even among the senators who supported Rome's traditional religion Symmachus did not enjoy unanimous support (on that point, see Vera, *Commento*, p. xliv-xlvi).

The main theme of *Relatio III* is announced in paragraph 3 when Symmachus writes under his name and that of the senators: "As a consequence, we are asking for the reinstatement of the status of the religious cults which had



been useful to the Republic for a long time.” Among the specific requests exposed in this speech there is the question of the restoration of the Altar of Victory to the Senate House. Indeed, having been established in the Curia with a statue of Victory by Augustus, this altar was an essential element for the holding of the sessions of the Senate. Before each session the senators used to offer incense and libations on it, and each year senators used to pronounce vows in favour of the emperor and the *res publica* (this point is recalled in § 5). The altar had actually been removed from the Curia under Constantius II, reinstalled by Julian, and finally removed again under Gratian in 382 CE. This last decision fitted in with a succession of anti-pagan measures that had been taken by distant emperor and bureaucrats who, in 382 CE, spent their last months at Trier, before the definitive transfer of the imperial court from Trier to Northern Italy (Brown, *Through the Eye*, p. 104). He ordered the suppression of the stipends granted to the Vestals, removed public subsidies from the pagan ceremonies, authorised the confiscation of the lands of the temples and of the sacerdotal *collegia* in favour of the *res privata*, and he also refused to receive the pontifical robe from a delegation of senators (see Vera, *Commento*, p. 16-17). All these decisions increased the break between Gratian and many of the upholders of traditional Roman religion. In *Relatio III*, Symmachus argues that the anti-pagan measures taken by Gratian – among them the removal of the Altar – had been the main cause of the emergence of the famine that affected *Italia annonaria* (the northern diocese of Italy), Africa, and the islands of Sardinia and Sicily in 383 CE, and that only its restoration could solve the problem (see *Relatio III.15*; about this famine, see Cracco Ruggini, “*Fame laborasse Italian*”). More generally, he also defends the idea that beliefs and rituals of the traditional religion should be tolerated by the Christian emperors.

*Relatio III* is organised in three main parts. Having first recalled the conditions in which a first embassy had been sent to defend the cause of religious tolerance towards Roman traditional cults, Symmachus mentions the case of Victory and of its altar (III.4-8). The second part is a transitional one. It contains a prosopopoeia of Rome in which Rome speaks to the Roman emperors and mentions *exempla* from the Republican times to prove that her greatness has always been based upon the performance of sacred rites (*Relatio III.9-10*). In the third part (III.11-17), Symmachus deals with the questions of the suppression of the subsidies to the Vestals and of the famine that affected Rome and Italy in 383 CE (see *Relatio III.15*). The text presented here appears in § 8, just after a passage in which Symmachus praises Constantius II for being a champion of religious tolerance and having allowed that the rites and gods of traditional Roman religion could continue to be respected and worshiped. This text is particularly interesting because Symmachus defends the idea that the religious diversity that had existed for centuries in the various cities of the Empire is a constitutive element of Rome's history, implying thus that this diversity could not be suppressed. In this framework he alludes to the *Genii* through a comparison: as souls are divided between new-borns, *Genii* are divided between peoples.

Interestingly Symmachus says that these *Genii* have been assigned to the earthly entities (peoples or cities) that they had to protect by a divine spirit (*mens divina*). Thus, Symmachus's conception of the role and nature of the *Genii* as being intermediary deities located between a supreme divine entity, probably identified with the Sun, and humans seems to be clearly influenced by Neo-platonic ideas (see Callu, *Genio populi Romani*, p. 107-108). When Symmachus asserts that each people has a *Genius*, he must think about the *Genius* of the Roman people. This thus raises the question of the continuity of the cult or honours paid to this *Genius* during the fourth century, especially from Constantine's conversion to Christian faith. Indeed, the years 316-317 CE marked the end of the production of coins – essentially of bronze – bearing the legend GENIO POPULI ROMANI; production that had started with Diocletian's reform and that had been minted in impressive quantity in nearly all the mints of the Empire (coins produced in 316-317 CE at London, RIC VII, London, n° 36-42, 50, 64, 85-87, p. 100-102; at Trier in 316 CE, RIC VII, Trier, n° 119-123, p. 178; at Arles in 316 CE, RIC VII, Arles, n° 78, p. 240; more generally on this type see [Bronze depicting Diocletian and the Genius of the Roman people \(mint of Antioch, 294 CE\)](#)). During the rest of the fourth century CE, references to the *Genius* of the Roman people are pretty rare. The latest attestation of the *Genius* of the Roman people on coins appears on a silver coin, struck at Rome for Constantine's visit in July 326 CE, on the occasion of his *vicennalia* celebrations (see Alföldi, “On the Foundation,” p. 13; Alföldi, *Die constantinische*, p. 99; RIC VII, Rome, n° 276, p. 327). On the obverse of this coin there is a portrayal of Constantine with the legend CONSTANTINUS-AUG, and on its reverse, a representation of the *Genius* with a *modius* (a cylindrical bushel made of wood staves that served as a grain measure) on his head, standing, with a chlamys across his shoulder, a globe in his right hand and a cornucopia in his left; behind the scene can be read the legend GENI-UM-P-R. The fact that on the reverse, the *Genius* is represented without any *patera*, but with a globe instead, is symptomatic of the fact that this representation of the *Genius* of the Roman people was totally deprived of any religious connotation, but was rather a vector of ideological and political messages (on this coin see [Silver coin of Constantine representing the Genius of the Roman people \(326 CE\)](#)).

This last monetary attestation of the *Genius* of the Roman people does not correspond to the end of the presence of this *Genius* in Rome's public life. First, according to Domenico Palombi, the temple of the *Genius* of the Roman people mentioned by Cassius Dio and which may have been located on the north-western side of the forum, may



have still been visible during the fourth century (on this temple, see [Livy, History of Rome XXI.62](#)). Domenico Palombi actually quotes the *Regionary Catalogue*, a list of the monuments and of the various types of residential buildings that existed in the fourteen districts of the city of Rome during the fourth century CE, that actually mentions, in Regio VIII, the *Genius populi Romani* located between the *Rostra III* and the *Senatus* (see Palombi, “Genius Publicus,” p. 366-367). It is thus possible that this temple remained visible during that century.

Second, it is interesting to note that on some calendars of the fourth or fifth century CE, the 11<sup>th</sup> and/or 12<sup>th</sup> of February are sometimes associated with *Genialia*, and/or with games (*ludi* or *circenses*) (this point is mentioned in Callu, *Genio Populi Romani*, p. 106; Vera, *Commento*, p. 38; Palombi, “Genius Publicus,” p. 367). The first interesting source is the so-called “Calendar of Filocalus,” or the “Filocalian calendar,” which corresponds to the sixth part of the *Chronograph* of 354, a compilation assembled at the end of 353 or the beginning of 354 CE by a Roman and Christian senator, Valentinus, who employed a calligrapher named Furius Dionysius Filocalus to copy the text of his manuscript and probably to add illustrations. The *Chronograph* of 354 is a deluxe *codex*, a compilation of a dozen diverse texts and lists primarily related to chronology (on this source see Salzman, *On Roman Time*; and more recently Burgess, “The Chronograph of 354”). In the sixth part appears an illustrated calendar of the year 354 CE listing the most important events celebrated in Rome during that year, and corresponding thus to the official public calendar of Rome for the year 354 CE (for editions of this calendar, see CIL I<sup>2</sup>, 1, p. 256-278; and that of Degraasi in *Inscriptiones Italiae* XIII, 2, p. 237-262). Interestingly, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February we read: *Genialici. C(ircenses) m(issus) XXIII, “Genialia. 23 circus races”*; and on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February: *Ludi Genialici, “Games of the Genialia”* (*Inscriptiones Italiae* XIII, 2, p. 241). This calendar thus proves that in 354 CE games were still given in the city of Rome in honour of the *Genii* in general, including probably the *Genii* of various individuals, but also the *Genius* of the city of Rome or that of the Roman people. Moreover, in the calendar that the Christian writer Polemius Silvius collected and inserted into the chronographical composition entitled *Laterculus* (List) and finished in 448-449 CE, a calendar that he may have composed having the calendar of the *Chronograph* of 354 in front of him, there is no further reference to the *Genialia* on the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> of February (for editions of this calendar, see CIL I<sup>2</sup>, 1, p. 257-279; and that of Degraasi in *Inscriptiones Italiae* XIII, 2, p. 263-276). The only mentions are of “circus games” (*circenses*) and “games” (*ludi*); the pagan origin of the celebrations that used to be performed during these days is thus suppressed (*Inscriptiones Italiae* XIII, 2, p. 265; about this calendar, which is a good example of inclusion of traditional pagan holidays or festivals – perhaps still celebrated in Rome and in Gaul – into the Christian calendar, see Salzman, *On Roman Time*, p. 240-246; about the suppression of the reference to the *Genialia*, Vera, *Commento*, p. 38). Another essential document of this kind that attests the permanence of festivals dedicated to the *Genii* during the fourth century CE is the *Feriale Campanum*, corresponding to a marble slab found in the amphitheatre at Capua (CIL X, 3792 = ILS 4918 = *Inscriptiones Italiae* XIII, 2, p. 282-283). From the text we learn that a certain Felix published this “calendar of the emperors,” *feriale dominorum*, by order of the emperors themselves, on the 22<sup>th</sup> of November 387 CE, that is only three years after Symmachus’s Urban prefecture. By contrast with the calendars (*fasti*), *ferialia* do not enumerate every day of a year, but only the days during which there was a specific ritual. In addition, by contrast with some *fasti* or even of the *Feriale Duranum*, the *Feriale Campanum* is first of all a list of seven annually celebrated rituals (*feriae*). A majority of them (5 out of 7) are related to the local life and history of Capua or its region (see Trout, “*Lex and Iussio*,” p. 163). The festivals listed are clearly non-Christian ones, but scholars have been divided on the question of how to interpret the contrast between the religious program described in the *Feriale Campanum* and the anti-pagan scope of many measures taken in the last years of Gratian’s reign. The fact that there is no explicit reference to sacrifices or temples in the *Feriale* has been interpreted by some scholars, who followed a tradition initiated by Theodor Mommsen, as showing that the holidays and festivals described were first of all social, civic, and political events and not religious ones. The emperors thus tried to maintain a kind of neutral ground in order that every citizen, whatever his religious belief, could continue to take part in official state festivals (Mommsen, *Gesammelte Schriften* VIII, p. 21-24). In the continuity of this tradition, Jörg Rüpke has highlighted the fact that in the *Feriale Campanum* just “some cult acts” (such as *lustratio* or *profectio*) are mentioned, “with no clear polytheistic reference” (Rüpke, *The Roman Calendar*, p. 103). In a different perspective Dennis E. Trout has tried to show that the *Feriale Campanum* was “provocatively non-Christian” (Trout, “*Lex and Iussio*,” p. 168). According to him, “The implications of this text are significant not simply because it further documents the persistence of traditional ceremonies under Christian emperors, but especially because it credits those emperors with the validation of its holidays” (Trout, “*Lex and Iussio*,” p. 163). Having these different interpretations in mind, it is particularly relevant for our purpose to note that the 11<sup>th</sup> of February of the *Feriale* is noted as a day during which *Genialia* were celebrated. The *Genialia* of the 11<sup>th</sup> of February as the *vota* pronounced for the well-being of the emperor are part of the two festivals that were not specifically connected to Capua’s local life, but that were also performed on the same days at Rome (Trout, “*Lex and Iussio*,” p. 167). However, placing this imperial decision – enacted in 387 CE – in the broader context of the evolution of imperial legislation during the 380s and of the Altar affair, Denis Trout has tried to show that the *Feriale Duranum* should be interpreted as being nothing more than an imperial concession granted by a “beleaguered Milanese court” to pagan aristocratic groups who remained very



influential in Italy and especially in one of their regions of predilection, Campania. In favour of such a reading, this scholar recalls the context of the year 387 CE. In 387 CE Magnus Maximus had invaded Italy, occupied Milan, and Valentinian II was obliged to fly in the East to join Theodosius. However, various elements taken from the **Feriale Duranum** show that the emperors (*domini*) mentioned were not Maximus and his son, but rather Valentinian II, Theodosius and Arcadius (one argument is that the *Feriale* was dedicated at Capua exactly on the birthday of Valentinian's accession to power). Dennis E. Trout thus concludes that the imperial order that went with the establishment of the calendar could be located slightly before or after Valentinian's flight to the East – probably before his flight. If this reading were correct, it would prove that in 387 CE, Valentinian II and Theodosius had been obliged to compromise with the demands of the pagan aristocratic milieu in Campania up to the point that they produced a *iussio* making explicit the fact that the imperial power again supported Rome's traditional cults (see Trout, "Lex and *Iussio*," p. 174). This stance of Valentinian II was thus totally different from the one he had opted for after Symmachus's official request in 384 CE, known thanks to the third *Relatio*, as Valentinian II and the Milanese court rejected Symmachus's request that the imperial power had to support again the traditional cults at Rome.

This passage of the third *Relatio* in which Symmachus alludes to the fact that each people had a *Genius*, is among the latest attestations – even if it is an implicit one – to the *Genius* of the Roman people. The fact that the *Genitalia* are attested as being celebrated on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February both on the official calendar of Rome contained in the *Chronograph* of 354 CE and on the *Festiale* of Capua of 387 CE shows that this old festival, probably initially instituted during the first century CE, was still celebrated during the fourth century CE. Although Valentinian II and Theodosius may have been obliged to comply with Italian pagan aristocrats in 387 CE by allowing them to perform Roman traditional ceremonies in Capua, the years of the 390s were marked by a clear intensification of the anti-pagan legislation. On the 24<sup>th</sup> February 391 a constitution of Valentinian II, Theodosius, and Arcadius was promulgated at Milan that banned every sacrifice – private or public –, and prohibited everyone from going into temples, or going from one temple to another, and from worshiping statues (CTh XVI.10.10). On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 392 CE, another constitution of the same emperors was given to Constantinople and sent to the praetorian prefect of the East, Rufinus. It stated that nobody, whatever his rank or origin, was allowed to perform public or private sacrifices, nor to worship a *Genius* by making wine offerings (*mero*) (see [Codex Theodosianus XVI.10.12 \(8th November 392 CE\)](#)). We do not have a similar law promulgated in the West that would enable us to trace the evolution of the attitude of the imperial power towards this question of the private or public cults paid to the various *Genii* in this part of the Empire. However, some years later, in the second book of his work *Against Symmachus* dated from 402 CE in which he refutes most of the arguments used by Symmachus in his famous speech in favour of the restoration of the altar of Victory, Prudentius tries to propose a Christian response to Symmachus's comparison between the *Genii* assigned to each of the peoples and the souls assigned to each new-born, but also to the fatalist conception of Rome's destiny (see Prudentius, *Against Symmachus* II.69-74 and II 370-487). This a *posteriori* response of Prudentius to Symmachus's arguments has been variously interpreted. For some scholars, Prudentius reacted to the fact that due to the rather neutral religious policy led by the regent Stilicho, there existed some kind of resurgence of paganism at the very beginning of the fifth century, or even that Stilicho might have reinstated the altar of Victory and/or the statue of Victory inside the senate house (about pagan resurgence under Stilicho see Pietri, *Roma Christiana*, p. 441-442; about the reinstatement of the altar or statue of Victory under Stilicho see Callu, *Genio*, p. 107). For Alan Cameron, these interpretations are debatable. Cameron has defended the idea that there must have been no particular pagan resurgence in 402 CE under Stilicho, that there is no evidence of the fact that he restored the altar of Victory or the statue of Victory (the statue that could never be removed from the senate house), nor of the fact that Symmachus would have asked for this restoration another time in 402 CE. Prudentius's response in 402 CE to Symmachus's plea in favour of the restoration of the altar, formulated in 384 CE, should thus rather be interpreted as having been motivated by Stilicho's recent crucial victory over the Goths at Pollentia in 402 CE. That victory proved that the Christians could still achieve Victory without an altar, and it could be used as the perfect counter-argument to Symmachus's saying exposed in 384 CE that the removal of the altar of the Victory in the Senate would prevent Rome from remaining successful as she had been for centuries (Cameron, *The Last Pagans*, p. 337-342). If Alan Cameron's reading is correct, Prudentius's response to Symmachus's development about the *Genii* should not be interpreted as a Christian reaction to a continuous, nor to any alleged renewed fondness for the cult of the *Genii* at the beginning of the fifth century.

Keywords in the original language:

- [cultus](#)





- [deus](#)
- [genius](#)
- [mens divina](#)
- [mos](#)
- [populus](#)
- [religio](#)
- [ritus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Genius](#)
- [Genius of the Roman people](#)
- [people](#)
- [religious rite](#)
- [Roman cults](#)

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Text

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Prohibition of any rituals of pagan cult

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Text

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Text

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