



[Symmachus, Relatio III.9-10](#)

Worship of gods and performance of sacred rites ensured Rome's protection and greatness for centuries

Name of the author: Symmachus

Date: 384 CE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: *Relationes*

Reference: III.9-10

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 6th 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 symbolised the link between the imperial regime and Roman traditional religion (see Vera, *Commento*, p. 13). It was also 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 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 a distant emperor and bureaucrats as, in 382 CE, they were spending their last months at Trier, before the definitive transfer of the imperial court from Trier to Northern Italy (Brown, *Through the Eye*, p. 104). Gratian had also ordered the suppression of the stipends and of the privileges 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. As rightly recalled by Peter Brown, Symmachus's *Relatio* III should not be understood as being the work of a “die-hard pagan”. Through this speech he simply expressed the fact that he expected the emperor, even if he was Christian, to leave the cults of Rome to continue to function as usual, because he sincerely believed that the gods had made Rome's greatness and continued to ensure the safety and prosperity of the Empire (Brown, *Through the Eye*, p. 105).

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, and defends the idea that the religious diversity that 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 (III.4-8; see [Relatio III.8](#)). The second part is a transitional one (it corresponds to the passage presented here). 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. 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 corresponds to § 9 and 10. It is particularly interesting as Symmachus argues that the power leading the Roman *res publica* has to ensure that all religions continue to be respected in the Empire, the personified Roma presenting this religious tolerance as being necessary to maintain the greatness and the protection of the Roman *res publica*. Moreover, Symmachus goes further than repeating the relatively common argument that the proper worship of the gods is the main reason for Rome's prosperity and security. Actually, in the second part of the passage presented here he develops a broader theological-philosophical reflexion, deeply influenced by Neo-platonic ideas, on the notions of cult diversity and unity of the divine, but also on the notion of truth (on the debate as to whether Symmachus himself followed Neo-platonic ideas or was here simply speaking on behalf of some pagan senators who followed these ideas, see Vera, *Commento*, p. 41). However, in the following sentence Symmachus recalls that it is not the time to deal with these philosophical questions, and that unlike those enjoying *otium* who could discuss these issues, he is in charge of a concrete mission (*negotium*): to ask for the restoration of public subsidies for pagan cults and ceremonies.

To defend the common argument that the proper worship of the gods is necessary to maintain the greatness and the protection of the *res publica*, Symmachus uses a common rhetorical device, the prosopopoeia of the city of Rome (for another example of a prosopopoeia see that of the *patria* (“country”) in [Lucan, The Civil War I.190-192](#)). Interestingly, Symmachus voluntarily depicts this personified Rome as an old woman (*longaeva*, “my old age”; *senectutis*, “old age”); an idea that also appears in *Relatio* IX.7 when Symmachus assimilates Rome to the *Urbs cana*, “the city with white hairs” (note that also in Lucan's prosopopoeia of the *patria*, the latter is also depicted with white hair). At approximately the same time Symmachus was fulfilling his urban prefecture Ammianus Marcellinus composed the fourteen book of his *Res Gestae*, and in one passage of this book in which there is a praise of Rome he offers a reflection about the four ages of the Roman people (see [Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XIV.6.4](#)). Ammianus was in fact following the model already employed by Florus in the preface of his work, when he explained the history of Rome through a biological scheme (see [Florus, Epitome of the Roman History of Titus Livius, Preface](#)). Ammianus, like Florus, associates the fourth age or *senectus/senium* of the Roman people, that is, a decline in vitality, with the beginning of the principate. However, Ammianus does not present this fourth age negatively, nor implies that it will end. He limits himself to the presentation of a respectable ageing Roman people who entrusted Rome's wealth and power to the emperors and who remained in a peaceful retreat. From Symmachus's perspective, this image of the old Rome was useful because her old age implied the soundness and utility of the performance of Roman traditional rites. Any attempt against these rites thus appeared as an attempt against Rome herself.



When Rome asks the emperors: “Let me use the ancestral ceremonies, for I do not repent of them. Let me live after my own fashion, for I am free,” it may be interpreted as a reaction to the fact that Gratian had suspended the public funding for most of the pagan cults of Rome; the argument brought to justify this decision being the principle of the religious neutrality of the imperial power in terms of religious matters. However, for numerous pagans, this decision represented an attempt against the very essence of the *religio publica* that had made Rome such a great power. As rightly recalled by Domenico Vera, the *religio publica* could not function without public funding as the protection of the gods and the worship rendered to them by the community were interdependent. For the pagans, any attempt or change in the agreement between the Roman state and the divine sphere led automatically to an alteration of this agreement, having as a final consequence the end of the protection of the gods over Rome’s empire (see Vera, *Commento*, p. 14). Thus, when Symmachus puts in Rome’s mouth these complaints, he precisely restates this idea that Gratian’s policy is altering a multi-secular contract of the Roman power with the gods that had ensured for centuries Rome’s protection and greatness. Moreover, when Rome states that she is free (*libera*), Symmachus restates a motif widespread in Roman aristocratic ideology, namely the fact that Rome was faithful towards emperors, but that she remained free if the emperors behaved not as *domini* (“masters”) – and worse as tyrants –, but as *cives* (“citizens”). This corresponded to the ideal of the *civilis princeps*, citizen-emperor, that each emperor should seek to achieve (about this point see Vera, *Commento*, p. 56; about the permanence of the ideal of citizen-emperors in the 380s see the praise of Theodosius I composed in 389 CE, [Latin Panegyric XII \(2\).12.3-6](#)). By saying that Rome lost her freedom due to the religious reforms taken by Gratian, Symmachus thus implies that Gratian acted as a tyrant, and that the actual emperor should respect and be loyal towards the old pagan Rome. In a more general perspective, Clifford Ando concludes about this kind of literary exercise in which Rome addresses one or more emperor(s): “if these passages were intended to honor the emperor, they nevertheless implied the priority of Rome herself as the repository of authority” (Ando, *Imperial Ideology*, p. 45). This corresponds precisely to the message that Symmachus may have wanted to spread through this prosopopeia.

Another interesting passage of Rome’s prosopopeia is her discussion of the fact that the respect for the *religio publica* and the performance of Roman religious rites had ensured the protection of the city of Rome, but also the greatness of Rome’s Empire for centuries. This idea is developed when Rome says: “This worship brought the world under my laws, these sacred rites repelled Hannibal from the walls, and the Senones from the Capitol.” Concerning the two *exempla* taken from Rome’s Republican past by Symmachus to illustrate the idea that the worship of the gods had always ensured the protection of the city, they have also been quoted in a totally reverse perspective by Christian authors to prove that on the contrary, Roman gods were inefficient in ensuring that protection (on Christian criticism of this idea that Rome owes its expansion and success to her *pietas*, see [Tertullian, Apology XXV.12-17](#)). In one famous letter composed in 384 CE in reaction to Symmachus’s arguments, Ambrose actually asks where Jupiter was when the Gauls sacked Rome in 390 BCE. He also mocks the fact that geese had been the guardians of the most important temple of the Romans. About Hannibal, Ambrose says that he worshiped the same gods as the Romans, which made appreciation of any victory from one side difficult to understand. He also asks why the Roman gods, if they were so powerful, let Hannibal go as far as Rome’s walls (Ambrose of Milan, *Letter XVIII.4-7*; arguments then restated in Prudentius, *Against Symmachus II.684-689*; about Ambrose and Prudentius’s discussion of the arguments that Symmachus puts in the mouth of Rome in this prosopopeia, see Gnllka, “Zur Rede der Roma”).

While in the framework of his rhetorical confrontation with Christians the examples quoted by Symmachus to prove that the worship of the gods and the performance of religious rites had actually ensured the city of Rome a pluri-secular protection could be easily interpreted in a reverse perspective, the most interesting point of his argumentation is when he puts in Rome’s mouth the idea that it is thanks to the cult of the gods (*cultus*) that Rome had succeeded to bring (*redigere*) the world under her laws. In this sentence, Symmachus presents the proper worship of the gods as being the major cause of the fact that the gods favoured Rome by allowing her to constitute such a great Empire. Interestingly, Symmachus does not describe Rome’s successes and the constitution of the Roman Empire by insisting upon Rome’s military strength, nor upon her conquests. Symmachus chose on the contrary to present the establishment of Rome’s domination upon the world through a legal perspective: the conquered peoples being placed – voluntarily or by force – under Rome’s laws. The idea that Rome’s power had been established thanks to the establishment or the sharing of her laws is an idea that is well attested in various later praises of Rome. For instance, in his praise of Rome composed roughly at the same time, Ammianus presents the two main foundations of Rome’s power as being her military strength and her laws. Ammianus actually praises Rome for her legal production, but he does not insist upon her capacity to share her laws with foreigners as it is the case in the praise of Rome composed fifteen years later by Claudian (see [Claudian, On the Consulship of Stilicho III.136-137](#)). Ammianus thus prefers to highlight a different aspect: the imposition of Roman law went along with the success of liberty (*libertas*) ([Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XIV.6.5](#)). The use that Symmachus



makes of this idea of Rome's ability to spread its laws and to impose them upon the conquered is totally different, as it is precisely to prove that one consequence of the proper worship of the gods is that they favoured Rome and her conquest policy. As rightly emphasized by Clifford Ando, this remark of Symmachus is quite similar to a passage of one speech of Libanius called "For the temples," pronounced in 386 CE, on the other side of the Empire. In this speech he says: "And it was with these gods to aid them that the Romans used to march against their foes, engage them in battle, conquer them, and, as conquerors, grant the vanquished a condition of life better than that which they had before their defeat, removing their fears and allowing them a share in their own civil life" (Libanius, *Speech XXX.5*; translation of A. F. Norman quoted in Ando, *The Matter of the Gods*, p. 163).

Interestingly, in this passage Libanius gives various arguments to prove the necessity to preserve the temples and to maintain the traditional forms of worship (about the attempts against the temples in the Eastern Empire in the 380s and later on, see [Codex Theodosianus XVI.10.12](#)). Like Symmachus, Libanius argues that the utility and effectiveness of the traditional cults and forms of worship have been proved by the prestigious history of the Roman Empire, especially by its conquests. However, Libanius develops the idea in a way which is different from that of Symmachus, and which is also typically Greek, as he insists more upon the civilizing effects that the Roman conquest had upon the conquered people.

To conclude, through this prosopopeia of Rome Symmachus tries to defend the foundation of the Roman *religio publica*, namely the link existing between the Roman state, the worship of the gods and the performance of traditional forms of worship, and the protection of the Roman community. One major argument developed by Symmachus here is that this link could not be suppressed without damaging an element that had ensured the greatness of Rome and its Empire for centuries. Symmachus therefore restated here an idea that had been repeated by Roman authors from the Republican period onwards, but was then increasingly challenged due to the constant progression of the Christian faith in the Roman Empire and in the imperial circles.

Keywords in the original language:

- [ceremonia](#)
- [cultus](#)
- [deus](#)
- [lex](#)
- [orbis](#)
- [pater patriae](#)
- [pax](#)
- [princeps](#)
- [ritus](#)
- [Roma](#)
- [senectus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [ages of Rome](#)
- [ancestral rite](#)
- [divine protection](#)
- [divine support](#)
- [freedom](#)
- [religious rite](#)
- [Roman cults](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman religion](#)
- [Roman Republic](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Rome \(personification\)](#)

Bibliographical references:



[Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire](#)

Ando, Cliffordbook*Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*BerkeleyUniversity of California Press2000

[Through the Eye of a Needle. Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD](#)

Brown, Peterbook*Through the Eye of a Needle. Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*PrincetonPrinceton University Press2012

[Symmaque. Discours – Rapports](#)

Callu, Jean-Pierrebook*Symmaque. Discours – Rapports*ParisLes Belles Lettres2009

[Commento storico alle Relationes di Quinto Aurelio Simmaco: introduzione, commento, testo, traduzione, appendice sul libro X, 1-2, indici](#)

Vera, Domenicobook*Commento storico alle Relationes di Quinto Aurelio Simmaco: introduzione, commento, testo, traduzione, appendice sul libro X, 1-2, indici*PisaGiardini editori e stampatori1981

[The Matter of the Gods. Religion and the Roman Empire](#)

Ando, Cliffordbook*The Matter of the Gods. Religion and the Roman Empire*BerkeleyUniversity of California Press2008

[“Zur Rede der Roma bei Symmachus Rel. 3”](#)

Gnilka, Christianarticle-in-a-journal464-470118/4“Zur Rede der Roma bei Symmachus Rel. 3”Hermes1990

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Symmachus, Relatio III.8](#)

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

- [Read more about Symmachus, Relatio III.8](#)

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



[Tertullian, *Apology* XXV.12-17](#)

The impiety and brutality of Rome's expansion

- [Read more about Tertullian, *Apology* XXV.12-17](#)

Text

[Symmachus, *Relatio* III.15](#)

Famine as divine punishment following Gratian's anti-pagan legislation

- [Read more about Symmachus, *Relatio* III.15](#)

Realized by:

[Marie Roux](#)



Source URL: <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/symmachus-relatio%C2%A0iii9-10>