



## [Symmachus, Speeches II.12-14](#)

The benefits of Roman conquest and occupation

**Name of the author:** Symmachus

**Date:** 370 CE Jan 1st

**Place:** Trier

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** Discourse

**Title of work:** Speeches

**Reference:** II.12-14

**Commentary:**

Quintus Aurelius Symmachus was born c. 340 CE in an old and very influential senatorial family from Rome (his father L. Aurelius Avianus Symmachus had been prefect of the city of Rome in 364-365 CE). He was a Roman senator, and became famous for his political career, but also for his skills of orator and epistolographer (about his *cursus* see *PLRE* I, Symmachus 4, p. 865-870). Having previously fulfilled the quaestorship and the praetorship, he also held the sole priesthood of his career by being *pontifex maior*. Symmachus is attested in 365 CE as being *corrector Lucaniae et Brittiorum*, namely provincial governor of the province of Lucania and Bruttium. In 368 CE, he was designated and sent as senatorial envoy to the imperial court established at Trier in order to deliver the traditional speech of praise on the fifth year anniversary of Valentinian I's rule. It is at the occasion of his stays at the imperial court that he pronounced speeches, among which the text presented here that was composed after Symmachus took part in a military campaign led by Valentinian I along the Rhine in 369 CE. It is also at the time he had access to the court that Symmachus received the honorary rank of *comes tertii ordinis*, "count of the third rank". In 382 CE, confronted by the series of anti-pagan measures taken by the emperor Gratian, Symmachus was sent as a representative of the followers of traditional Roman religion and asked the emperor Gratian in the Senate to restore the Altar of Victory that had been removed from the Senate House; yet Gratian refused Symmachus to be heard (see *Relatio* III.1; more generally about this official letter composed when Symmachus was prefect of the city of Rome in 384 CE see [Symmachus, Relatio III.8](#)). From the summer 384 CE to the beginning of the year 385 CE Symmachus fulfilled the prefecture of the city of Rome. We know some of the issues he was confronted with when he fulfilled this office, as 49 of the official letters or *Relationes* he addressed to the emperor Valentinian II during that period have been preserved. Many of them deal with the day-to-day business of a prefect of the city of Rome, and especially with everything related to Rome's grain supply, yet Symmachus also deals with other matters. For instance, in one of the most famous ones, the *Relatio* 3, Symmachus argues for the restoration of the Altar of Victory and defends the cause of religious tolerance towards Roman traditional cults (see [Symmachus, Relatio III.8](#)). After the fulfilment of his short prefecture of the city of Rome, Symmachus continued to play a role in the most influential aristocratic circles of the Western Empire; as an example, he attended the inauguration at Milan of the consul of the year 387 CE. Even if he temporarily supported the usurper Magnus Maximus in 388 CE, he was elected consul in 391 CE. In the last decade of his life he spent most of his time to work for the interests of his family and friends. He died in 402 CE.

Concerning the work of Symmachus, it is divided between the 902 letters that have been selected and preserved in a collection of ten books (probably not collected and put in circulation at the same time, see Sogno, "The Letter Collection," p. 179-182), and the *Relationes*, namely the selection of 49 letters that Symmachus addressed to the ruling emperor Valentinian II when he was prefect of the city of Rome. According to Domenico Vera, most of the collection of the *Relationes* remained first in Symmachus's private archives, and it is probably not before the VI<sup>th</sup> century CE that the "dossier" of the prefectoral letters of Symmachus would have been gathered as a collection (Vera, *Commento*, p. xc-xcv, though contested by Jean-Pierre Callu who considers that c. 385 the corpus of the *Relationes* may have started to circulate; see Callu, *Symmaque*, p. liv-lv). Finally, as mentioned previously, Quintus Aurelius Symmachus also composed speeches, some of them (8) being gathered into a collection. The text presented here comes from this collection, more especially from the group of three speeches that Symmachus pronounced when he was present at Trier at Valentinian I's court in 368-370 CE. In the first speech delivered on the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 368 CE, Symmachus gives the Senate's address to celebrate Valentinian's *quinquennalia*. In the second one, he delivers a panegyric to Valentinian to celebrate his assumption of his third consulship. In the third one, delivered on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 369 CE or on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January 370 CE, Symmachus delivers a panegyric



for Gratian on the occasion of his tenth birthday.

The text presented here is an excerpt from the second speech of this collection. It was delivered on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 370 CE, when Symmachus was present at Trier and praised the fact that Valentinian I started his third consulship. This speech mainly deals with the last expedition the emperor led in 369 CE in Rhineland, an expedition in which Symmachus has taken part. It is important to recall that this expedition happened after years of tensions with the Alamanni. In fact, having been disappointed by the gifts that the Romans offered them during the summer 365 CE, Alamanni raided the Roman provinces across the Rhine in the last months of 365 CE. Roman defences were overwhelmed, the Alamanni plundered the frontier region and withdrew immediately after. They repeated the operations at the beginning of the year 366 CE and the various military commanders sent to counter them were defeated. Valentinian then sent the *magister equitum* Jovinus to lead the operations. Possibly in June 366 CE, Jovinus succeeded to defeat many Alamannic groups, the remaining ones being obliged to withdraw. In 367 CE, Valentinian became seriously sick and in response to political rumours that circulated at court, he proclaimed Gratian Augustus in front of his troops at Amiens on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August 367 CE. Having been informed that a coup d'état had occurred in Alamannic territory, Valentinian decided to lead, with his son Gratian, an important military campaign against the Alamanni, a campaign that started in 368 CE (on the chronology of the events, see Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 267-279). Ammianus Marcellinus describes these operations: Valentinian and the Roman troops crossed over the Rhine and proceeded without resistance up to Solicinum where they inflicted a serious defeat to the Alamanni (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XXVII.10.5-16). Ammianus later adds that Valentinian then fortified the entire Rhine, and that in some places he built or rebuilt some forts on barbarian lands (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XXVIII.2.1; this fortification programme can be dated from 369 CE onwards). Then, Ammianus states that under the third consulship of Valentinian and Valens in 370 CE, Valentinian decided to use the Burgundians as allies in order to subdue the Alamanni and their king Macrinus who continued to perform violent raids inside the Empire. However, this agreement between the Burgundians and Roman authorities failed (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XXVIII.5.8-13; on the chronology of the events narrated by Ammianus, see Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 279-285). Some elements narrated by Ammianus, such as the fortification programme or the fact that Roman authorities and the Burgundians concluded agreements partially matches Symmachus's testimony in his second speech. However, the expedition led by Valentinian and praised by Symmachus does not correspond to the one described by Ammianus, as the one described by Symmachus probably happened in June 369 CE, that is when Valentinian started his military building programme (see Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 289).

At the beginning of Symmachus's second speech (§ 1-2), the orator praises Valentinian for his consulships, but also for having founded so many cities in the Rhineland after his expedition of 368 CE, that is during his second consulship. He ends § 2 by stating that Valentinian had been obliged to fulfil the consulship for a third time because it was necessary to prevent this recently annexed region to reject Rome's authority. In § 3 Symmachus insists upon the fact that he saw in person the latest exploits of Valentinian during the expedition that may have occurred in June 369 CE. From § 4 to 9, Symmachus describes the military abilities and exploits of Valentinian during this expedition, during which he succeeded to reach, with a small force sent by boat, a place called *Alta Ripa* ("High Bank") on the left bank of the Rhine. This small force established a bridgehead at this very place that then enabled to send larger troops on Alamannic settlement. Symmachus then narrates how the Roman armies dispersed, thanks to a surprise attack, the Alamanni who were on the run. However, Symmachus insists upon the fact that the barbarians were spared and free to run away, and that no destruction was perpetrated, showing thus the clemency of Valentinian (§ 10-11). John Matthews thus concludes on the narrative that Symmachus gives of this expedition: "The 'campaign' witnessed by Symmachus seems rather to have resembled a conducted tour of the frontier region" (Matthews, *Western Aristocracies*, p. 34). The § 11 ends with a short development about the fact that the Alamanni were ashamed of having been spared by Rome, and that, in spite of their embarrassment, they had to feel gratitude towards the victor, Rome. The text presented here appears just after this development, and highlights how Valentinian's conquest of this region had been associated with a clever policy made of the control and pacification of the native populations, diplomatic agreements with the Burgundians, and the settlement of defensive and/or urban networks in the areas in which the Roman troops had recently progressed (§ 12-14). Then Symmachus insists upon the fact that many Alamanni actively took part in the restoration of this transrheneish province and into the construction of the Roman fort buildings (§ 15-16). If one believes this last detail it would prove that there may have existed an agreement between Rome and the Alamanni that had been evacuated from the zone between the Rhine and the Neckar recently taken by the Roman soldiers (see the discussion in Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 292).

We have selected the passage presented here not so much because of the information it gives about the events of 369-370 CE, but rather because of the speech that Symmachus develops about the reactions of the barbarian



peoples to Rome's conquest and about the advantages of Roman civilisation. Whereas the aim of Valentinian's campaign of 369 CE was more to expel raiders and to resolve some "minor frontier skirmishes" than to fully conquer the territory in which the Alamanni evolved, it is interesting to see that in this second speech, Symmachus presents this campaign as a real conquest (quotation taken from Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 299). This can be explained by the context of the delivery of this speech. It was pronounced in front of a civilian audience present at Trier that must have expected that the emperor would not only preserve the security of the Western Empire, but also take the initiative to be one step ahead of barbarian threats (Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 299). It is interesting to note that when Symmachus asks: "Will they [i.e. the Alamanni] disperse far away when not only your standards but also some new settlements follow them?" (§ 12), he seems to be hoping for an effective reoccupation of the area across the Rhine by the Roman troops (Callu, *Symmaque*, p. 15).

To present this campaign of 369 CE as a conquest enables Symmachus to develop one major theme of imperial ideology: the clemency of the Roman power towards subdued populations (see § 12). Symmachus goes one step further by stating that it is by "sparing them" that the emperor "[has] also changed the customs of these peoples" (about the fact that submission of the barbarians is often presented in panegyrics as leading to their acculturation and as being a proof of Roman generosity, see Del Chicca, "Panegiristi e barbari," p. 119). The change of customs can be explained by the fact that the Alamanni would have abandoned their policy of raids to evolve, under the control of the Roman power, in a Romanised environment. As stated by John F. Drinkwater: "... [Symmachus] claims that it is precisely by not subduing the Alamanni by force but by exercising *clementia* (and by practicing diplomacy with the Burgundians), that the emperor could pacify, dominate and even Romanize them" (Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 299). This theme is directly connected to another one, namely the way Symmachus represents the barbarians and the territories in which they evolved – in this case *Alamannia* (§ 12) – towards the Empire. Symmachus's opinion is clear: "The ones that you have got out of the iron, you add them to the Empire (*imperium*)". The orator restates this idea when he presents the region (*regio*) in which some Alamannic groups lived and which had been occupied by the Roman troops, as having been reintegrated inside the Roman province of Germania I: "yourself you [i.e. the inhospitable region] are already represented, as all the other provinces, with the crenelated crown". In this sentence, Symmachus assigns to Roman provinces – and in particular to Germania I to which Alamannia was added to – crenelated crowns. This attribute was more usually assigned to cities, but, in this case it enabled an echo of the process of urbanisation that Symmachus previously assigned to the occupied area (on this point see below). However, contrary to what Symmachus says, the military operation of 369 CE was not undertaken in order to proceed to a territorial annexation. It was not driven by any offensive goal, but was rather undertaken to prevent plunders inside the Empire and to reinforce the defence system on the Rhenan frontier. Thus, as rightly noticed by John F. Drinkwater, when he implies that a region that served as some kind of buffer area to protect the Roman provinces was actually part of Rome's provinces, Symmachus offers a distorted definition of Rome's *imperium*: "Symmachus treats *imperium* as other than the direct control of territory. (...) *Imperium* no longer produced *pax*, rather *pax* was *imperium*. This allows Symmachus to maintain Roman claims of world rule and aspirations to world domination" (Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 299).

The Roman power is thus praised by Symmachus as being clement, not only in the way he dealt with the submitted Alamanni, but also because the presence of Roman troops in this occupied territory is presented as a guarantee of its future Romanization. The idea that a period of conquest goes hand-in-hand with a successive period of Romanization of the conquered peoples and spaces is of course a common topic in Roman literature. In the *Agricola*, having narrated the two military campaigns led in 77 CE and 78 CE, Tacitus offers a general reflection about the cultural effects of the imposition of Roman rule to the Britons. First, Tacitus presents Rome as a civilizing power bringing peace, comfort and culture to these un-civilised Britons. To prove his points, he presents the construction of temples, forums and houses as the most visible and beneficial manifestation of Rome's presence and rule. However, at the difference of Symmachus, Tacitus also deals with the enervating effects of some aspects of Roman civilisation as he concludes this development with the sentence: "In their ignorance they [i.e. the Britons] called this 'culture' (*humanitas*), when it was part of their enslavement (*servitutis*)" ([Tacitus, Agricola XXI](#)). In the text presented here Symmachus only highlights the positive consequences of the settlement of the Roman civilisation in this occupied zone, even if he admits that the acceptance of Roman authority and thus of living in this Romanised environment lead to submission. This idea appears implicitly when he writes: "The lands have more felicity to serve (*serviunt*) my Prince than to resist (*resistunt*) him" (§ 14). Symmachus mainly defines Roman civilisation by the settlement of a dense networks of cities. This idea appears when Symmachus asks ironically where the Alamanni who by the past laid siege to the cities of Germany I were, and answers that they were now "besieged by cities" (§ 13), that is that they were now surrounded by all the cities built or rebuilt by the Romans. This idea that the Roman civilisation was first and foremost characterised by the creation of cities is well attested among Greek authors. For instance, Aelius Aristides defended the idea that Rome spread a civilisation of Hellenistic origin that extended Athens's model, a civilisation that he characterised first and foremost by the fact that Rome created cities and developed an urban way of life (see Aelius Aristides, *The Roman Oration* 93-99; on



this source [Aelius Aristides, \*The Roman Oration \(extracts\)\*](#)). To define the Roman civilisation (*cultus*), Symmachus also alludes to the amenities provided by the urban way of life when he opposes the charms of the Roman towns (*venustatis urbium*, § 14) and the poverty of the Alamannic settlements characterised by “houses made of twigs” and “the straw of the roofs”. However, as recalled by John F. Drinkwater, these Alamannic settlements must have been more than simple villages as the imperial power thought necessary to send a large amount of military forces to control the region, as a consequence these settlements must have been relatively important Alamannic centres of power (Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 290). Yet, Symmachus’s aim in this speech was not to give a precise description of the military campaign, nor of these barbarian settlements. All that mattered to him was to highlight how Roman conquest went necessarily hand in hand with the disappearance of poverty, destruction and violence, negative characteristics associated with the Alamanni.

In conclusion, it is easy to imagine that, instead of the construction of new cities, the construction of military buildings as bridgeheads beyond the Rhine and the reinforcement of the network of fortifications on the left bank of the Rhine must have been the priorities of Valentinian when he undertook the various punitive expeditions across the Rhine between 368 and 371 CE. As rightly recalled by John F. Drinkwater, “Valentinian never intended to conquer the *Alamanni*,” all that he wanted was to re-establish security in the frontier zones, to tame turbulent barbarian groups, but also to remain not far from his imperial residence at Trier. So, if Valentinian concretely pursued a defensive strategy, he presented it however as a conquest strategy as conquest was “the traditional way of dealing with an intractable enemy” (Drinkwater, *The Alamanni*, p. 299). Pronouncing this second speech at Trier for the emperor, Symmachus restates this message and goes further by implying that the region of Alamannia, soon reunited, will be integrated inside the province of Germania I. This projection was also useful for him to connect his praise of Rome’s attitude toward the enemies she defeated with the traditional themes of the generosity of the imperial power, and that of the ability of the Romans to bring peace and a highly civilised way of life. However, at the difference of Tacitus who, in the *Agricola*, presents the conquered Britons as having suffered from some of the enervating effects of Roman civilisation, Symmachus presents an uncontested version of the advantages of Roman civilisation and extends the reasoning to the conclusion that the Alamanni had even to be grateful towards the Roman emperor for having submitted them.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Alamannia](#)
- [arma](#)
- [beneficium](#)
- [Burgundiones](#)
- [castellum](#)
- [castrum](#)
- [civitas](#)
- [cultus](#)
- [ferrum](#)
- [foedus](#)
- [gens](#)
- [Germania](#)
- [hostis](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [incola](#)
- [ius](#)
- [legatio](#)
- [limes](#)
- [oppidum](#)
- [pax](#)
- [princeps](#)
- [provincia](#)
- [terra](#)
- [urbs](#)
- [venustas](#)
- [vexillum](#)



Thematic keywords in English:

- [Alamanni](#)
- [Alamannia](#)
- [barbarians](#)
- [imperial borders](#)
- [imperial generosity](#)
- [military camp](#)
- [Rhine](#)
- [Roman army](#)
- [Roman civilisation](#)
- [Roman clemency](#)
- [Roman domination](#)
- [Roman empire](#)
- [Roman generosity](#)
- [Roman infrastructures](#)
- [Roman occupation](#)
- [Roman peace](#)
- [submission](#)
- [Valentinian I](#)

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