Prudentius, Against Symmachus Preface 80-89, I.1-8

The religious sickness of the “race of Romulus”

Name of the author: Prudentius
Date: 402 CE to 403 CE
Language: Latin
Category: Christian
Literary genre: Apologetic, Poetry and Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: Against Symmachus
Reference: Preface 80-89, I.1-8

Commentary:
Aurelius Prudentius Clemens was born in 348 CE in the Roman province of Tarraconensis, possibly in Calahorra (see Italo Lana, Due capitoli prudenziani, p. 3-10; https://pleiades.stoa.org/places/246279). It is thought that he died in the early fifth century (certainly after 405 CE, see below) in the Iberian Peninsula. We do not have many details of his life, and what we do know is from his autobiographical Praefatio and a few of his other works, including his two poems Against Symmachus, the first of which the present extract is taken from. Prudentius had been a lawyer, and been provincial governor on two occasions (according to the Praefatio 16-18). None of Prudentius’s contemporaries speak of him, and we do not know whether he was born into a Christian family or converted later. Given that he gives no conversion account, it is possible that the former was the case. It seems that Prudentius worked for a period in civil service, and then in his later years took up an ascetic lifestyle in a small community, and took to writing, concentrating on composing hymns, poems, and apologetic works defending Catholic Christianity (see Antony Dykes, Reading Sin, p. 2-3). Prudentius collected together his Christian poems during this latter period of his life, added a preface, and dated this to 405 CE. One of the most prominent features of Prudentius’s writings is the influence they take from classical authors such as Virgil and Horace (John Wallace-Hadrill, The Barbarian West, p. 12, n. 2, describes Prudentius, along with Lactantius, as attempting to unite Christianity and classical culture). Perhaps most notable in this regard is Prudentius’s famous allegorical poem the Psychomachia (Battle of Spirits), which draws heavily on the style of the Aeneid in its account of Christianity defeating pagan religion (for further bibliography of Prudentius’s utilisation of classical literature, see recently Paula Herskowitz, Prudentius, p. 2, n. 4, and for some older studies, Macklin Smith, Prudentius’ “Psychomachia”, p. 14-15, with n. 12-14).

The work from which the present extract is taken is the first of Prudentius’s two poems Against Symmachus (also known as the Books Against Symmachus, Libri Contra Symmachum). It offers Prudentius’s arguments against the senator Symmachus’s request for the altar of Victory to be restored to the Senate House, a topic which was also dealt with by Ambrose of Milan. Indeed, Prudentius uses Ambrose’s letters on this subject as a model for his own work. Ambrose wrote in response to the Memorial of Symmachus, composed by the pagan senator as a petition to the emperors Valentinian II, Theodosius I, and Arcadius (but mainly the first of these, who was sole emperor of the West), asking for the altar to be put back in its rightful place and former Roman religious rites to be observed (392 CE). His arguments are essentially that it is sacrilegious to abandon Rome’s ancient customs, and that the Christianised empire is being punished with famine due to the gods being neglected (on the controversy surrounding the removal and requested restoration of the altar of Victory, which involved more than one attempt by Symmachus to persuade the emperors to reverse the decision of to remove it, see the commentaries on Ammianus Marcellinus, Res Gestae XIV 6.3-6; Ambrose of Milan, Letter LXI.1, 4-6). The altar was first removed by Constantius II in 357 CE, then put back by Julian, before being removed again in 382 CE by Gratian. As Karla Pollman states, the ideology of the Aeneid, which tells a story of a losing side (Troy) becoming victors was Christianised by authors such as Prudentius after the empire took Christianity as its official religion under Theodosius, and Rome “turned from persecutor into protector” (“Unending Sway,” p. 179). Some scholars have argued that the purpose of Prudentius writing the Against Symmachus was a renewed request by Symmachus in 402 CE for the altar to be restored (for instance, see Timothy Barnes, “The Historical Setting,” p. 382). However, this has been rejected by others (see, for example, Jill Harries, “Prudentius and Theodosius,” p. 82-83; S. Döpp, “Prudentius’ Gedicht Gegen Symmachus”; Alan Cameron, The Last Pagans, p. 338-339). As Döpp argues, it seems more likely that it was written in 402 CE because of the victory of Stilicho at the battle of Pollentia against...
the Goths in that same year, which Prudentius could use as proof that the Christian God was supporting the Roman empire (Pollman, “Unending Sway,” p. 181, also takes this view, stating that Prudentius wishes Rome to be “reborn as a Christian polity”). As Pollman argues, Prudentius needed to prove two things: 1) that pagan religion was bad for Rome, and 2) that the adoption of Christianity by all of Rome’s people would enable it to prosper even more. In order to do this, the author begins by showing that Rome’s gods were no better than human beings, and that Roman religion was founded on error. He then sets about demonstrating that Rome’s success was always due to God’s will (see especially I.287-290), and that as a civilising power, Rome ought to adopt the religion which had made Constantine such a dominating force (I.467 ff.) This ideology, of course, follows in the line of that developed by Eusebius (Pollman, “Unending Sway,” p. 181-182).

Scholars such as Jill Harries and Danuta Shanzer (“The Date and Composition”) have argued that the two books of the Against Symmachus were composed separately, with the first as a panegyric to Theodosius, which was written at the end of the fourth century, but not published until later on, early in the fifth, along with the second book. However, this theory has been challenged by the likes of Döpp and Charlet (“La poésie de Prudence,” p. 381-382), who argue that the two books were composed conceived of and composed together as a unit in 402 CE. Charlet views the structure as supportive of this, with the first book discussing pagan theology, political theology, and natural theology, before presenting Theodosius as the leader who suppresses paganism in favour of Christianity. Symmachus is then presented as paganism’s defender, with book two refuting his arguments. Our passage, taken from the end of the preface and the beginning of the first book of Against Symmachus, laments that the Roman people, referred to as the “race of Romulus” (gens Romulei) are suffering due to their ignorant desire to cling onto pagan religion, despite the fact that the emperor himself accepted Christianity and had thus taken steps to rid Rome of her former religious habits. Theodosius I had forbidden pagan worship in the late-fourth century, at first simply reaffirming the ban on sacrifice which had been instigated under Constantine. Between 389 and 391 CE the so-called Theodosian decrees (see Theodosian Code 16.10.10, 16.10.11; see p. 472-476 of Clyde Phar’s edition) threatened the practicing of divination with death, made it a criminal offence for magistrates not to punish forbidden pagan activity, made pagan holidays work days, and extinguished the fire in the Temple of Vesta, disbanding the ancient order of the Vestal Virgins (see Gerard Friell and Stephen Williams, Theodosius: The Empire at Bay, p. 45, 58, 105-132). Prudentius desires for the “sickness” of paganisim to be cured once and for all, so as not to cause the Roman people and her “great men” to fall further into harmful idolatry.

The reference to the “race of Romulus” (gens Romulei) is particularly notable in this passage, and in order to fully understand the context in which it is mentioned, we must briefly look back to the beginning of the preface of the present book. Our passage opens by addressing the “saviour” (salvator) of the race of Romulus, which is a reference to the Apostle Paul. At the beginning of the preface to the first book Against Symmachus, Prudentius describes Paul as a tamer of the “wild” (ferus) Gentiles with the teachings of Christ, which put right their monstrous religious rites. As Cillian O’Hogan recognises, the language Prudentius uses is reminiscent of Roman military language, with Paul as a Roman general taming uncivilised people. Christians are presented in terminology that is usually used of non-Romans (see Prudentius and the Landscapes, p. 76, n. 11, which cites Horace, Epistles II.1.156 as possible influence here; see also Horace, Odes IV.5.1-40, in which the poet pleads with Augustus to return from his military campaigns to act as custodian (custos) to the gens Romulei). So, the use of the expression gens Romulei to refer to the Roman people can be explained by the fact that it was frequently used in poetic works (see also Horace, Carmen Saeculare 47). That our passage presents Paul as the saviour of the race of Romulus, therefore, reinforces the notion that Christianity has triumphed, in this context over the Roman people, who were formerly practicing what in Prudentius’s eyes were uncivilised religious rites. Moreover, that Paul is placed at the very start of this poem against Roman religion is significant also because Paul was himself a Roman citizen who turned from another religion (in his case Judaism) to follow Christ (on Paul and his Roman citizenship, see the commentary on Acts 21:27-40 and 22:22-29). The implied pagan reader of this work, therefore, is provided with an example of a Roman who “has seen the error of his ways,” and as O’Hogan argues, this may have been a familiar model to a Roman reader who knew stories of important Roman military commanders who took Rome’s “civilising” power to other nations (O’Hogan, Prudentius and the Landscapes, p. 76). Just as Rome tamed, and in its own view improved, the peoples that it subdued, Christianity can do the same for the Roman people by setting them on a better path and steering them away from error. Prudentius writes this, of course, as a Roman citizen himself, but one who is concerned that a significant proportion of his fellow Romans are too invested in holding onto the religious practices which defined their ancestors.

The language of sickness and healing which Prudentius employs in this passage is also striking. Alan Cameron rightly interprets the medicina in I.3 as the emperor Theodosius’s anti-pagan laws of 391-392 CE (see above), which is supported by the use of prohibeo in line 10, which means to restrain or keep in check (Cameron, The Last Pagans, p. 338). The “new plague (lues)” of line 5 has been interpreted by those who date the text earlier than
402 CE as a reference to another request by Symmachus to restore the altar of Victory. However, as Cameron explains, the evidence does not support this (for a summary of the refutation of the arguments, see The Last Pagans, p. 338-339). Although it is not made explicit, it may be that Prudentius has in mind the so-called “pagan revival” under the usurper Eugenius, who after being made emperor in 392 CE allowed himself to be steered by his advisors into restoring pagan temples with public money (on the surrounding events, see again the commentary on Ambrose of Milan, Letter LXI.1, 4-6; see Cameron, The Last Pagans, p. 122-123). Either way, as mentioned above, the defeat of the Gothic Alaric by Stilicho in 402 CE was of vital importance for Prudentius’s argument, and it was this event which enabled his pro-Christian rhetoric to stand up against the events involving Symmachus and the altar of Victory from previous years. In Cameron’s words, “the actuality of the events behind Prudentius’s poem lay … in the battle that answered the most potent question raised by [Symmachus’s] original appeal.” The victory over Alaric provided assurance to anyone who would question whether Symmachus had been right to ask for the altar of Victory to be put back in her place, especially given two unsuccessful previous campaigns by Stilicho. This explains why in book II.709-712 Prudentius stresses that Stilicho was victorious after worshipping at Christ’s altar (The Last Pagans, p. 340). Prudentius therefore uses the historical exchange between Symmachus and the Christian emperors in order to make a more general point about the relationship between the Christian God and the Roman empire: as long as the Roman people are guided by a pious princeps, they can enjoy health and prosperity, but if the efforts of this ruler are undermined, this race of “great men” risk debasement.

Keywords in the original language:

- antiquus
- arx
- dolor
- gens
- gens Romulei
- lues
- medicina
- morbus
- pater
- princeps
- prohibeo
- Roma
- Romulidae
- Romulus
- salus
- salvator
- sanguis
- squaleo
- tingo
- toga
- turbo
- urbs

Thematic keywords in English:

- impiety
- plague
- race of Romulus
- Roman emperor
- Roman people
- Roman power
- Roman religion
- Rome (city)
- Romulus
- Saviour
sickness
toga

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Other sources connected with this document:

- Prudentius, *Against Symmachus Preface 80-89, I.1-8*
- Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae XIV.6.3-6*
- Ambrose of Milan, *Letter LXI.1, 4-6*
- Horace, *Carmen Saeculare 1-75*
• Read more about Horace, Carmen Saeculare 1-75

Text

**Horace, Odes IV.5.1-40**

Plea to Augustus to return

• Read more about Horace, Odes IV.5.1-40

Text


Paul is seized in the Jerusalem Temple, and appeals to his Roman citizenship

• Read more about Acts 21:27-40 and 22:22-29

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