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## QUINTUS AURELIUS SYMMACHUS AND THE ROMAN RELIGION<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, the renowned orator of Late Antiquity, took an active role in upholding the traditions of the ancient Roman religion. The present paper examines his relationship to religion and his priestly activities, mainly through his letters.

*Keywords:* Symmachus, *pontifex maior*, *collegium pontificum*, ancient Roman religion, letters

Orator and politician Quintus Aurelius Symmachus has proven to hold only a single priesthood in his life: he was a *pontifex maior*. According to an inscription found on the Caelian Hill, he was given the office at a very young age,<sup>2</sup> in the first half of his twenties, sometime between 360 and 365, and he conscientiously carried out the related duties throughout his life. Before turning to what we learn from his letters about his priestly activity, first, it is useful to briefly summarize the most important information about the priestly office in question.

In ancient Rome, four major priestly colleges supervised the state cult: the *collegium pontificum*, the augurs, the *quindecimviri*, who were responsible for the preservation of the Sibylline books, and the *epulones*, the organizers of fest-

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<sup>2</sup> ILS 2946: *Eusebii*. | *Q. Aur. Symmacho* v. c. | *quaest., praet., pontifici* | *maiori, correctori Lucaniae et Brittiorum* | *comiti ordinis tertii*, | *procons. Africae, praef. | urb. cos. ordinario* | *oratori disertissimo*, | *Q. Fab. Memm. Symmachus* | v. c. *patri optimo*. The inscription, found on the Caelian Hill, the site of the former home of the Symmachus family, was given by Memmius Symmachus to his father. Each office is listed in the order in which it was granted (see in this regard: Cameron 2011, 140), and since we know that he held the office of *corrector Lucaniae et Brittiorum* in 365, he must have gained the title of *pontifex maior* before then. On the detailed political career of Symmachus see Sogno 2006. Besides his political career, the character traits that can be drawn from his letters are also analysed in detail by Matthews 1975, 1–31.

ive games and sacrificial feasts.<sup>3</sup> The activities of the *collegium pontificum* were primarily related to the cult of Iuppiter Optimus Maximus and Vesta. The college was led by the *pontifex maximus*, and in addition to the other *pontifices*, the body included the *rex sacrorum*, the Vestal Virgins, as well as the *flamines* (the three *flamines maiores* and the *flamines minores*), who were bound by many ritual constraints.<sup>4</sup> Originally, there were only three high pontiffs,<sup>5</sup> but over time their number rose to six, then to nine, later to fifteen, and in the time of Caesar, the number of members of the college reached sixteen. From the reign of Augustus onwards, the *pontifex maximus* was the all-time emperor, who assumed the title at the same time as he took his office. The ruler had a right to keep the state religion under control, but it is not to be thought that he actively and regularly participated in the work of the college: in fact, he was replaced by the so-called *promagister*, chosen from among the other pontiffs. The title of *pontifex maximus* was taken even by those emperors who rejected the ancient Roman religion, such as Constantius II, who, according to the *Theodosian Code*, was the first to ban the public display of sacrifices. Nevertheless, when he visited Rome, he made sure to replenish the *collegium pontificum*, which had just been depleted.<sup>6</sup> The first ruler to lay down the title of *pontifex maximus* was Gratian,<sup>7</sup> but he too held it during the early years of his reign. Subsequently, Theodosius probably did not even take up the title,<sup>8</sup> and the priestly college gradually declined until it lost its importance altogether, with the title *pontifex maximus* being found again later, among the titles of popes.

The main task of pontiffs was to control the state cults. They led the sacrificial ceremonies, advised state leaders on religious matters, supervised the calendar, and established the order of festivals and feast days. They wrote down the decrees and decisions made by the body in books, which were then used as guides for times to come, but they were not only allowed to act in the interests of the state but also advise private individuals, supervise adoptions, enforce burial rules and were responsible for the transmission of religious obligations. The selection of future Vestal Virgins was also among their duties, and, as we will see later in the letters of Symmachus, tending to the cult of the goddess and

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3 For a full list of the priestly bodies reserved for members of the senatorial order, see Rüpke 2007, 223–226.

4 Thomas Köves-Zulauf has dealt with the activities of the Roman priesthoods – including the pontiffs and flamens – in several studies. I recall with gratitude the seminars on the history of religion which he conducted and in which I had the opportunity to participate. His fascinating explanations always revealed the extraordinary complexity and depth of Roman religion.

5 A minimum of three people were needed to set up a college (cf. *Tres faciunt collegium. Digesta* 50,16,85).

6 Cf. Symmachus, *Relationes* 3,6–7; Watts 2015, 91.

7 In connection with this, see Cameron 1968, 96–102.

8 We cannot say this with absolute certainty because of the lack of sources, as in the case of his predecessor Valentinian II. Cf. Cameron 2007, 355–356.

matters relating to her priestesses placed many tasks upon them. Their decisions were called *decreta*, which the leaders of the state had to enforce.

Regarding religion, the most important result of the brief reign of Emperor Aurelian (270–275) was the introduction of the cult of Sol Invictus in Rome. The ruler wished to unify the peoples of different cultures by introducing the worship of a supreme deity that was accepted and equally honoured by every citizen of the empire. To achieve this goal, he built temples and established a festival in honour of the Invincible Sun, furthermore, he also established a new priestly college: the college of the *pontifices Dei Solis*, which was not only independent of the *collegium pontificum* but was also equal in rank to it.<sup>9</sup> The operation of the old college of pontiffs was not disturbed by this, but to distinguish themselves from the new order, the members started to call themselves *pontifices maiores*, that is, the older priesthood. However, the name *pontifex maior* had a connotation as if it was referring to priests that are in a higher hierarchical position, which was not the intention of the members of the college, thus, from the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, they began to use the name *pontifex Vestae*, referring to the significant role they played in the cult of the goddess.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the terms *pontifex maior* and *pontifex Vestae* denote the same priesthood. In the case of Symmachus, we come across the use of the former version of the name, perhaps because he acquired the office at the same time the name change took place, however, it is also conceivable that he used the older form due to his fundamentally conservative attitude.<sup>11</sup>

There was an example of Symmachus holding this priestly office, as his father, Avianus Symmachus was also a *pontifex maior* and he operated as a *quindecimvir* as well.<sup>12</sup> Although the influential scholar of Late Antiquity, Alan Cameron emphasizes that the election to ancient priesthoods depended much

9 For more details on Aurelian's religious reforms and the cult of Sol Invictus, see: Halsberghe 1972, 131–162; Watson 1999, esp.: 201–202.

10 According to our present knowledge, the first senator to refer to his priestly office as *pontifex Vestae* was Memmius Orfitus, father-in-law of Symmachus, cf. Cameron 2011, 133–134.

11 Cameron 2011, 134 assumes the latter.

12 Cf. ILS 1257: *Phosphorii. | Lucio Aur. Aviano Symmacho v. c. | praefecto urbi, consuli pro praefectis praetorio in urbe Roma finitimisque | provinciis, praefecto annonae urbis Romae, pontifici maiori, quindecimviro s. f., multis legationibus | pro amplissimi ordinis desideriis | apud divos principes functo qui | primus in senatu sententiam rogari solitus auctoritate prudentia atq. | eloquentia pro dignitate tanti ordinis magnitudinem loci eius inpleverit, auro inlustrem statuam, quam | a dominis Augustisq. nostris senatus | amplissimus decretis frequentib. inpetra-bit (sic), idem triumphatores principes | nostri constitui adposita oratione iusserunt, quae meritorum eius ordinem, ac seriem contineret, quorum perenne | iudicium tanto muneri hoc quoque addidit, ut alteram statuam pari splendore etiam apud Constantinopolim | conlocaret. | (In latere) dedicata III kal. Maias | d. n. Graliano IIII et Merobaude cos.* This is the last official inscription in which a person holding the priestly offices of the old Roman religion is publicly honoured, all later epigraphic memorials are from the private sphere. Cf. Orlandi 2011, 432–433. On the relationship between Symmachus and his father, see also Tóth 2020, 179–202.

more on origin and relationships than on religiosity or competence,<sup>13</sup> and Symmachus was not lacking either one, yet, based on the surviving sources of and from him, his religious commitment and competence cannot be questioned. We know that his brother, Celsinus Titianus, was also a member of two priestly colleges,<sup>14</sup> but it is uncertain exactly which ones. Some researchers believe that he may have been a *pontifex Vestae* and a *pontifex Solis*, but this can only be assumed on the basis that the two positions were often held together.<sup>15</sup>

The accumulation of priestly offices was a common phenomenon in Late Antiquity. It also happened in the earlier imperial period that someone had several functions in the state cult, but this was usually accomplished by being a member of one of the four above mentioned larger colleges and holding another, less important function. We only know of some exceptional cases where the same person held an office in two of the four main colleges.<sup>16</sup> This situation changed by the time of Late Antiquity when the fact that someone was a member of more colleges was not regarded as unusual.<sup>17</sup> The appreciation of the role of mystery cults belonging to private religiosity can be attributed to the same period, which is proven by the fact that the inscriptions erected by private individuals also mention these titles in addition to their functions in the state religion.

Such changes in processes can be interpreted on the basis of changes occurring in political relations. The role of many formerly prestigious public offices is being downgraded, from effective political power to ceremonial functions. Christian members of the senatorial aristocracy could expect greater grace and more privileges from the majority of rulers than their non-Christian counterparts, yet religious secularization did not exist at this time: that is, a function in the state religion continued to provide an opportunity to realize public ambitions. It was just as possible to build a network of contacts, gain recognition among the people, and influence the development of state affairs through priestly offices, as well as with the help of political offices. Not to mention that

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<sup>13</sup> Cameron 1999, 503–504.

<sup>14</sup> *Ep.* 1,68, where Symmachus thus admonishes his brother as follows: *Effice, oro te, ut divinitus videatur oblatum tui honoris auxilium et utriusque te sacerdotii antistitem recordare*. The letter is about how Celsinus has to help a certain Rufus, who is treasurer of the *collegium pontificum*, to protect one of the landed estates of the college in North Africa. It is not revealed what is threatening the wealth of the priesthood there, but it is clear that Symmachus expects the same thoroughness and efficiency from his brother as he himself would show.

<sup>15</sup> We also see this in the case of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, who will be discussed later. On the supposed priestly offices of Celsinus Titianus, see Seeck 1883, cvi; Salzman – Roberts 2011, 137.

<sup>16</sup> For more details on the participation of the senatorial elite in priestly bodies during the Roman Republic and the early imperial period, see Beard—North—Price 1998, 99–108, 192–196.

<sup>17</sup> For more on this issue, see Iara 2015, 165–214, mainly: 173–175.

participation in the institutions of the state religion was an immanent part of the traditional values of contemporary aristocracy. Against this background, it is understandable that there was serious competition for traditional priestly offices,<sup>18</sup> and obtaining one, let alone several, was a great honour and privilege. Change only occurs when Christians realize that they can put the Roman elite on their side in large numbers if they offer positions and ranks that ensure the preservation of the former status and authority of pagan aristocrats.<sup>19</sup> The two memberships of Avianius Symmachus in the larger colleges are thus evidence of his *dignitas*. From that point of view, it is more peculiar than natural that his son held only one function and, as we know, did not even participate in private cults.<sup>20</sup>

Of all the activities of Symmachus in the promotion of traditional Roman religion, his efforts on behalf of the Victoria altar are undoubtedly the most significant, and the famous *Relatio 3* – which can be seen as a kind of apology for pagan religion – is linked to this. Information on his activities as *pontifex maior* can be found in his collection of letters, which is preserved in ten books. The letters of Symmachus present us an aristocrat with an extensive network of contacts, and even if his correspondence is not as informative as that of Cicero or Pliny the Younger,<sup>21</sup> and he uses disguised language on many occasions when he speaks of certain people and events, we can still learn more about contemporary Rome and the relationships between the members of the aristocracy, as well as other things, such as issues concerning the ancient Roman religion.

Symmachus wrote several times about his priestly duties to his friend Vet-  
tius Agorius Praetextatus,<sup>22</sup> who was also a *pontifex Vestae* (in his case we already find this title on his inscriptions), in addition he held several other priestly offices and was initiated in various mystery cults.<sup>23</sup> He was a prominent figure within the group of defenders of the old, or pagan Roman religion. His life seems to indicate that participation in religious activity was extremely important to him, although Symmachus repeatedly criticises him for spending too much time away from the city of Rome and therefore not being able to participate regularly in the work of their college.<sup>24</sup>

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18 Except the office of flamens, who were subject to many constraints.

19 According to the calculations of Jörg Rüpke, there were 52 different priestly offices in 374, but only 3 in 402, the year of Symmachus' death, and only one unidentifiable office between 406 and 408, held by Flavius Macrobius Longinianus, with no data from later years. Cf. Rüpke 2008, 421; Mitchell 2016, 165–166.

20 In connection with this, see Matthews 1973, 175–195.

21 For a comparison of the letters of Pliny and Symmachus, see Kelly 2013, 261–287.

22 On his personality and career, see Kahlos 2002. Letters to Praetextatus in Hungarian translation: Tóth 2021, 151–181.

23 We could say that he broke a record among his contemporaries regarding the number of priestly offices he held.

24 Cf. Symm. *Ep.* 1,47; 49; 51.

From one of the letters written by Symmachus to him<sup>25</sup> we learn that the priests of the state cult (*publici sacerdotes*) handed over the supervision of a ceremony to the citizens. We do not know exactly what cult activity it was and why was it handed over, but certainly, Symmachus did not disapprove of it. According to his words, we can conclude that the decision of the priesthood was made on the basis that the benevolence of the gods would be lost if the ceremony was not maintained through the cult, thus they most likely believed that the citizens would perform the necessary sacred duties better than the priesthood had done in the past.

In another letter, he wrote about a miracle observed in Spoleto.<sup>26</sup> There was some kind of *ostentum*<sup>27</sup> in the town of Spoletium in Umbria, therefore, an expiatory ceremony was held, as was customary at that time. We do not know what that miraculous phenomenon exactly was that terrified the inhabitants — *ostentum* or *prodigium* usually meant earthquakes, eclipses, and epidemics —, but it seemed appropriate to resort to an atoning sacrifice in order to restore the broken harmony between men and gods. Sacrifices were presented by the *potestates*, with the help of priests, however, the ceremony to Iuppiter had to be performed eight times before it was finally considered successful, and Fortuna Publica, the other venerable deity, had not yet accepted the offerings at the time of writing, although the sacrifice was iterated eleven times. As discussed above, one of the main activities of pontiffs was the supervision of sacrifices. This letter may have been written sometime between 365 and 384 when at least twenty years had elapsed since the first imperial decrees prohibiting public sacrifice. *Cesset superstitio, sacrificiorum aboleatur insania* — reads the decree of Constantius II in 341.<sup>28</sup> Five years later, when the immediate closure of pagan temples is decreed, it is again promulgated that sacrifices must be refrained from on penalty of death.<sup>29</sup> In 353, a ban on night-time sacrifices comes into force, then it is formulated again in 356 that the punishment for sacrifices and veneration of cult sculptures is decapitation.<sup>30</sup> We could go on listing the measures issued from time to time with the same content (two such decrees were issued during the consulship of Symmachus in 391), however, this is more than enough to show that the respective rulers had a strong intention to ban sacri-

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25 *Ep.* 1,46: *Convenit inter publicos sacerdotes, ut in custodiam civium publico obsequio traderemus curam deorum. Benignitas enim superiorum, nisi cultu teneatur, amittitur. Ergo multo tanto ornatior quam solebat, caelestis factus est honor.* Here and below, the original Latin text of the letters of Symmachus is quoted from Callu's edition of the text: Callu 2002–2003.

26 *Ep.* 1,49.

27 He mentions worrying miraculous signs in another letter, but there he also describes an *ostentum*: *Ep.* 6,40.

28 *Codex Theodosianus* (hereinafter: *CTh*) 16,10,2.

29 *CTh* 16,10,4.

30 *CTh* 16,10,6.

fices, but the actions taken failed to enforce this intention. Ritual practices, which, according to tradition ensured the welfare of the individual and the community could not be prevented either in Rome or in other parts of the empire despite the promise of severe punishment. (The situation was the same in the eastern half of the empire.) As the great efforts made to conciliate the miracle in Spoleto were unsuccessful, Symmachus says that nothing else can be done: the colleagues must be called together.

Perhaps he was referring to the members of the *collegium pontificum*, but it is even more likely that he was referring to the senate with his comment. In similar cases, it was customary that the problem was referred to the senate, which discussed the gravity of the matter and, if the case was considered to be a serious one, they sought advice from one of the large priestly colleges.<sup>31</sup> The last sentence of Symmachus' letter reads as follows: *Curabo ut scias, si quid remedia divina promoverint*. The term *remedia divina* suggests that he was probably expecting the *quindecimviri* to be asked, since in religious terminology the rituals suggested by the Sibylline books were commonly referred to as remedies: according to tradition, *fata ac remedia Romana*, or the fate and remedies of the Roman state, were written in these sacred books. If we were to take a look at the remedies most frequently suggested by the Sibylline books, supplication and *lectisternium* would surely be among them. The former was a prayer festival in which all citizens participated, regardless of age, gender, or rank. People marched in a procession from one temple to another with a wreath on their heads and a laurel branch in their hands, singing prayers and begging for the help of the gods. These supplications were sometimes extended to the whole of Italy and could last for several days. The *lectisternium* is a symbolic feast for the gods, during which sofas were placed around the well-loaded feast tables and statues of the gods that were to be reconciled were placed on them. The venue could either be a shrine or a private house. The citizens also prepared feasts in connection with the ceremony and opened their gates to welcome anyone who walked by.<sup>32</sup> An essential element of both remedies is that not only the authorities, i.e. the priests and the magistrates took part in them, but everyone, and certainly, in the case of the phenomenon experienced in Spoleto, one of these rites, or a similar ritual may have been deemed necessary as the sacrifices conducted by the leaders did not bring the desired results.

Another letter, also addressed to Praetextatus, gives us information about the practical operation of the *collegium pontificum* and the attitude of some of the priesthood towards the office:

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<sup>31</sup> Salzman 2013, 371.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Livius 5,13.

*“We had decided still to remain outside the city, but a messenger with news of our wavering fatherland changed our plans, since my own security seemed to me a dishonourable concern in the midst of common ills. In addition, the priestly administration of the sacred requires my attention and makes me responsible for my appointed month. I do not intend a colleague to take my place when there is such negligence among the priests. Once this sort of delegation of religious affairs was straightforward; now to desert the altars is, for Romans, a kind of careerism”*<sup>33</sup>

The number of Christians holding high public offices began to rise from the reign of Gratian, but, for example in Rome, the so-called pagans remained in the majority in leading positions. The change here began sometime after 380,<sup>34</sup> and it was probably at this time that the letter in question may have written, which emphasizes that for the sake of their political careers, fewer and fewer nobles are choosing to participate in the cults of the traditional Roman religion, and even those who hold these kinds of offices are paying less and less attention to their obligations, but not Symmachus, who diligently performs the duties required by the holy *officium*. This is also indicated by the fact that, even at the risk of his own safety, he returned to the city to conduct his priestly tasks. It seems that a system was developed in the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, in which the pontiffs divided their tasks among themselves by appointing two priests each month to carry out their current duties.<sup>35</sup> It is Symmachus’ turn at the time of writing, and that is why he returns to the city, but we do not know what danger he is in, which would have made it better to swap his duties with one of his companions.

Similarly, the subject of a letter<sup>36</sup> from 393 is also the returning to the city, and the circumstances are again uncertain. Symmachus writes to Nicomachus Flavianus — who, like Praetextatus, was a prominent figure in the pagan aristocracy, and a *pontifex maior* just like Symmachus — that he had to interrupt his leisure on his estate along the Via Appia not far from Rome, because he had to travel to the city for the festival of the goddess Vesta. It is clear that as a *pontifex* he was attending to the Vestalia festival in June, but we do not know why it was difficult for him to decide whether to stay in the city or return to the countryside after the celebration, in any case, leaving it up to Flavianus to decide which option to choose. Perhaps the struggle for the throne between Eugenius — with whom Flavianus also sided and who a year later ended his life with his

33 *Ep.* 1,51, transl. Salzman – Roberts 2011, 109.

34 Salzman 2002, 78–80.

35 Cf. Salzman—Roberts 2011, 108–109.

36 *Ep.* 2,59: *Suburbanum praedium, quod viae Appiae adiacet, incolebam, cum mihi litteras tuas in hoc missus exhibuit. Nosti rura quae loquimur, ubi magnas aedes in angustis finibus collocavi. Hic dulce otium — si quid absque te dulce est — paulisper exegimus. Nunc Vestalis festi gratia, domum repeto incertus maneamne cum civibus, an rursus in vicina concedam. Tu quid agere decernas ... debeo cognoscere.*



own hand — and Theodosius<sup>37</sup> brought about a situation in the city because of which Symmachus deemed staying there longer undesirable.

Praetextatus was one of the best paternal friends of Symmachus, who was greatly appreciated by the orator in all respects, on whose support he always counted, and who was his best “comrade-in-arms” in the cause of Roman religion, yet, when Praetextatus died in December 384 and the Vestal virgins wanted to erect a statue in his honour, the orator strongly opposed the initiative. His reasons are again known from a letter he wrote to his cousin, the above-mentioned Nicomachus Flavianus, whom the orator generally called *frater* in his letters, referring to their kinship.<sup>38</sup> In a letter dated to 385, he awaited the return of Nicomachus Flavianus to Rome, as Flavianus was caring for his ill mother, and in his absence, Symmachus had to solely face many unpleasant experiences, and as an example, he mentions here the case of the statue. He says the Vestal virgins decided to erect a statue of honour for the deceased Praetextatus, and they asked for advice on the plan from the pontiffs — under whose authority they belonged — and they agreed, except Symmachus and some of his fellow priests. His arguments against the decision are typical of a conservative-minded Roman, who follows traditions strictly: it is not appropriate for Vestal virgins to erect a statue in honour of a man, even if that man happened to be a Vestal priest. No one ever before had received such an honour on the part of the priestesses, neither Numa, the founder of the religion, nor Metellus, its saviour, nor any other *pontifex maximus*, furthermore, this example may later result in that less deserving people could be given a similar honour. At the same time, he adds that he only says all this quietly, so as not to allow the enemies of their religion to hear his criticism and launch undeserved attacks against them.<sup>39</sup> He believes that if Nicomachus had been there with him, he could have prevented it.

Before we would assume that Symmachus thinks that his former friend does not deserve such an honour, it is important to note that at the same time, he himself asks the emperor to erect a statue, or even statues, to Praetextatus, in recognition of his immortal merits and as an example to posterity.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, he had no problem with whom the statue was being erected, but with who the of-

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37 About the conflict between Eugenius and Theodosius: Cameron 2011, 56–131.

38 Symmachus’ father and Flavianus’ mother were siblings.

39 *Ep.* 2,36,2–3: *Praetextato nostro monumentum statuae dicare destinant virgines sacri Vestalis antistites. Consulti pontifices, priusquam reverentiam sublimis sacerdotii aut longae aetatis usum vel condicionem temporis praesentis expenderent, absque paucis qui me secuti sunt, ut eius opificium statuerent adnuerunt. Ego qui adverterem neque honestati virginum talia in viros obsequia convenire neque more fieri quod Numa auctor, Metellus conservator religionum omnesque pontifices maximi nunquam ante meruerunt, haec quidem silui, ne sacrorum aemulis enuntiata noxam crearent inusitatum censentibus; exemplum modo vitandum esse rescripsi, ne res iusto orta principio brevi ad indignos per ambitum perveniret.* On the conflict over the erection of the sculpture, see Sogno 2006, 56–57.

ferors were, and based on this we can say that he strongly insisted on the observance of religious precepts and took his sacred duties so seriously that he was willing to confront his own companions for them as well. Furthermore, this letter also makes clear how important the appraisal of the priestly college was for him.

The same conservatism appears in two letters<sup>41</sup> addressed to a certain official, or officials, in which he demands that a Vestal virgin, named Primigenia, should be punished according to ancient customs<sup>42</sup> for losing her purity. A strict punishment is necessary for the interests of the state since the accused and her lover, Maximus — who otherwise confessed their sins — violated the sanctity of the ceremonies with their shameful deeds. We do not know exactly when

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40 On statues erected for the nobility in Late Antiquity, see Chenault 2012, 103–132, on Praetextatus: *passim*, but esp.: 125; Machado 2021, 632–666.

41 Ep. 9,147: *More institutoque maiorum incestum Primigeniae dudum apud Albam vestalis antistitis, collegii nostri disquisitio deprehendit. Quod et ipsius quae contaminavit pudicitiam sacram et Maximi cum quo nefandum facinus admisit confessionibus claruisse gesta testantur. Restat ut in eos qui caerimonias publicas abominando scelere polluerunt legum severitas exeratur. Quae tibi actio de proximi temporis exemplo servata est. Et ideo dignaberis, reip. utilitatem legesque considerans facinus cunctis ad hunc usque diem saeculis severissime vindicatum competenter ulcisci.* Furthermore: Ep. 9,148: *Secundum proximae aetatis exempla clarissimo et excellentissimo viro fratri nostro praefecto Urbi Primigeniae virginis quae sacra Albana curabat a collegio nostro vindicta delata est. Sed quia litteris eius causae probabiles adseruntur — quod neque muros Urbis aeternae tanti criminis ream fas sit intrare neque ipse ad longinqua possit occurrere, cum facinus, ubi admissum est debeat expiari — necesse esse perspeximus potestatem finitimam convenire et cui provinciarum iura mandata sunt, ut in Primigeniam quae pudici numinis maculavit arcana corruptoremque eius Maximum qui quidem flagitium non negavit severitas semper his adhibita exeratur. Dignaberis igitur consideratis confessionibus quae nefandi criminis tragoediam prodiderunt iniuriam castissimi saeculi reorum suppliciis vindicare.*

42 This ancient customary punishment is described by Plutarch as follows, *Parallel Lives*, *Numa* 10: “But she that has broken her vow of chastity is buried alive near the Colline gate. Here a little ridge of earth extends for some distance along the inside of the city-wall; the Latin word for it is *agger*. Under it a small chamber is constructed, with steps leading down from above. In this are placed a couch with its coverings, a lighted lamp, and very small portions of the necessities of life, such as bread, a bowl of water, milk, and oil, as though they would thereby absolve themselves from the charge of destroying by hunger a life which had been consecrated to the highest services of religion. Then the culprit herself is placed on a litter, over which coverings are thrown and fastened down with cords so that not even a cry can be heard from within and carried through the forum. All the people there silently make way for the litter, and follow it without uttering a sound, in a terrible depression of soul. No other spectacle is more appalling, nor does any other day bring more gloom to the city than this. When the litter reaches its destination, the attendants unfasten the cords of the coverings. Then the high priest, after stretching his hands toward heaven and uttering certain mysterious prayers before the fatal act, brings forth the culprit, who is closely veiled, and places her on the steps leading down into the chamber. After this he turns away his face, as do the rest of the priests, and when she has gone down, the steps are taken up, and great quantities of earth are thrown into the entrance to the chamber, hiding it away, and make the place level with the rest of the mound. Such is the punishment of those who break their vow of virginity.” Translated by Bernadotte Perrin (Loeb Classical Library edition).

these letters were written,<sup>43</sup> but, remarkably, their writer emphasized in both that there had been an example of a similar punishment recently, which confirms that even then, followers of the ancient Roman religion firmly believed that the purity of Vestal virgins was the key to the survival of the Roman state, and it would have unpredictable consequences if any of them committed an *incestum*.<sup>44</sup> Whether or not the sentence was actually carried out on Primigenia is not known. An issue regarding a different Vestal virgin is the subject of the letter 9,108: his unknown correspondent may have previously informed Symmachus that one of the priestesses was rumoured to be secretly planning to leave the order before the end of the service term of the Vestals. Symmachus did not want to give credit to such rumours, but as a *pontifex* and senator, he was obliged to pay attention to the matter and asked the recipient of his letter to confirm or refute the news. There is no information on further developments at this time either.

His orations and official reports to the emperors present Symmachus as a devoted believer in the traditional Roman religion, for whom religiosity was not only a pose, but he was convinced that the ancient religion and religious institutions of Rome have so far retained the empire. This image is not contradicted but reinforced by his letters. They reveal a man who carried out his pontifical duties with deep commitment, meticulousness, and respect for the ancient laws of religion. He did not want to use his priestly office to build a career like many of his contemporaries but to save Rome.

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43 Jean-Pierre Callu (2002, vol. 4, 84–85) dates them before 382, as this is the year in which Gratian revokes the privileges and financial support of the Vestal virgins.

44 For more details on sins committed by priestesses of Vesta and their punishment, see the study of Karolina Wyrwińska 2021, 127–151, chiefly: 144–147. From a different aspect, but on the same subject see also Cadoux 2005, 162–179, chiefly: 164–166.

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