

Symmachus. Oration II. To Valentinian. 1 January 370. Translated Saylor Rodgers

1 . . . is paid for the labor.² Perhaps a distaste for the celebration and frequent repetition of awards³ would come over you, were you not to consider us and what would be our apparent ingratitude. For you the highest honor is in strength, the most complete honor in character. It is not the shoulders of lictors but the necks of the nations which carry your real axes,⁴ kings preserve your decrees, forts are raised up instead of fasces.⁵ You decide among the hostages with the victor's authority and order those whom you send back to travel one path, those whom you receive to retrace it.⁶ Although the garment rich with clinging gems encircles your sacred shoulders and colored garlands cover your consular robe,⁷ yet the ornament which the Rhine has earned and the border has received is more distinguished.⁸ Your services have surpassed the state's prayer:⁹ what you take is for a year, what you establish, eternal.

2 . . . ³ We take nothing away from your earlier¹⁶ accomplishments, Augustus, if we repeat only the recent ones.¹⁷ I am no less astonished,¹⁸ of course, at what I have learnt, but I admire more what I have proved by experience.¹⁹ I wish that at least what I know would recommend my slight intellect!²⁰ I am bereft of an honorable defense: I used to praise what I myself had not seen with greater indulgence for my shortcomings. 4 If anyone wants to investigate the secrets of nature,²¹ let him follow you: he will not be held back by rivers' courses, by the opposition of mountains,²² by wandering roads. All things which are fortified for us lie open against the barbarians. Your two-horned neighbor²³ knows that it must submit to curved vessels to avoid having to furnish a path for footsteps;²⁴ he who can cover over streams finds sailing child's play. Nor are we hindered by the barriers of steep terrain: this very bank in barbarian territory, to which altitude gave its name,²⁵ attests²⁶ that the heights have given way to the depths; those who could²⁷ attack on the plain recently fled our ascending army.²⁸ You would in fact have preferred to conquer in battle, but it turned out to be more glorious that the fierce²⁹ nation of the Alamanni saw . . .

¹² I shall say what no monuments attest to: the inhabitant of Alamannia lives for you; those whom you subtract from slaughter you add to the empire. It is enough that you have changed the character of the peoples by sparing them. What remains free for them since their wellbeing has been subjected by your kindness, and their territory by your fortresses?⁵² By right they are free for the moment, but already captive by shame. Or will they disperse to faroff places, when not only your standards but your new towns pursue them?

¹⁸ Let the rest of the cities, which private hands have marked out, envy the new ramparts;⁷⁵ if there are any of the princes' creating, may they be stung with jealous spite. They have renowned founders, but no artisans clad in purple, do they? I was present,⁷⁶ venerable Augustus, when you set aside your arms and traced out the foundations, occupying your fortunate right hand with builders' lines.⁷⁷ For this reason I promise your towns eternal good fortune: he who is next after god⁷⁸ begins things which are eternal. The glory of Syracusan Archimedes has abided until now; for the end has taught that the contrivances of a clever man were worth nothing for his citizens.⁷⁹ If he could not protect what was walled, when would he have been able to fortify what lay open? Those who watch over cities establish them more skillfully.

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²⁰ Into what peril has my speech fallen? I dare neither describe nor be silent about the form of the city's foundation. But I shall heed my confidence, which counsels boldness. Nature's gift first presents itself to onlookers, the embankment of soil and the friendly bend⁸⁵ of two rivers;⁸⁶ next a skilled hand has surrounded the twin placement of ramparts with a mole.⁸⁷

There follows a stage of walls sloping downwards only at that part where the waters touch edges of the towers.⁸⁸ For the Rhine is confined from both sides with dikes, to have it render its passage safe for various uses. These themselves⁸⁹ which are encircled with towers, are properly fitted out for their work, the joints separated only with numerous apertures opens up a passage for concealed casts of arrows. The gilded elevation of the middle of the citadel stands firm, bedecked with roof for trophy, over which through courses sloping downward a breastwork of smooth lead is covered. What feelings should we believe were yours, Augustus, while you were building these works? You fortified them, as if anxious; you adorned⁹⁰ them as if carefree.

21 An ancient tale has recorded that a giant's hand once advanced mountain-towers to the stars. Perhaps he tried to do such a thing, for it is not worthy of belief that young men, although Earthborn,⁹¹ carried Pelion and Ossa.⁹² While they were attempting the extraordinary, they wrought something weak; but tradition has increased the odium, so that the fragility of a building negligently erected be freed from the fault of carelessness under the pretence of a divine conspiracy. Or if faith in such things is established, you have great proof of your merits: these buildings of yours were brought to completion by heavenly favor as great as the hatred by which those fell to ruin.

...

28 . . . from the source of the Rhine to the mouth of the ocean he has covered the river banks with a garland of military works.¹¹⁴

30 ... You have discovered, greatest of princes, another sort of laurel: while you explored the secrets of the world, while you erected not barracks but buildings in the innermost parts of foreign lands, you celebrated a triumph of peace. 31 Let others sing of what remains: I, as witness, shall perform my duty. I shall go through cities, I shall go through nations more boastful, having praised the victor; I shall say to the senate and people of Rome: "Send the fasces into new provinces, provide governors for across the Rhine."¹¹⁹ Of you, moreover, venerable Gratian,¹²⁰ I shall relate grand things, but I shall promise greater ones. The state will know that it is protected by twin guardians but generous as if to one, that two princes fight on a common tribute, that there are more necessary expenditures of labor than of money. This is the advantage of a felicitous age, to offer united allegiance to each and to obtain separate benefits. What is paid is moderate because you take it together; what is accomplished is splendid because you both eagerly perform it.¹²¹