

Symmachus and the Mysterious Case of the Number Seven: Constructing Elite Identity

Michelle Salzman, Riverside

In the last quarter of the fourth century, the great Augustan scholar Varro and his works became newly relevant in elite circles in Rome. Varro's *Hebdomades* and the wide spread cosmological associations attributed to the number seven provide, in my view, an important clue for resolving the mystery of the publication of Symmachus' Letters. As I will show, these letters were intended as a seven book work. There are several implications to this suggestions, including the fact that a seven book publication would make it unlikely that Symmachus was modeling his collection on the letters of Pliny, as many scholars have suggested.

Admiration for Varro and his works (including the *Hebdomades*) did not go unchallenged. Jerome, traveling in Rome in these same elite circles in these years contested Varro's reputation at least two decades before Augustine chose to make Varro the object of his more famous critique in the *City of God*. Hence, it was not only Varro's theology that drew Augustine to argue against him; rather, as this paper will show, it was the late fourth century resurgence of interest in Varro in elite circles in the Rome of the Symmachi that made him a contemporary, contested figure whose importance for the construction of elite identity in the late fourth century has yet to be fully appreciated..

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