



## [Latin Panegyric XII \(2\).12.3-6](#)

The citizen-emperor

**Name of the author:** ?

**Date:** 389 CE

**Place:** Rome

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** Eulogy / Panegyric

**Title of work:** Latin Panegyric

**Reference:** XII (2).12.3-6

**Commentary:**

The extract presented here comes from the latest work of the corpus of the *Latin Panegyrics*, even though in the manuscripts it is placed at the beginning, just after Pliny's *Panegyric of Trajan* (about the XII *panegyrici latini*, from which this text is extracted, see [Latin Panegyric II \(10\).1](#)). These two points have led scholars to conclude that the author of this panegyric of Theodosius, Latinus Pacatus Drepanius, must have been responsible for the collection of the various speeches (among the first scholars who defended this opinion see Pichon, *Les derniers écrivains*, p. 137; followed by Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise of Later*, p. 6-7; Rees, "Bright Lights," *contra* L'Huillier, *L'Empire des mots*, p. 169). Latinus Pacatus Drepanius was a Gaul, possibly born at Aginium, modern day Agen (see Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letters* VIII.11.1-2), and who then probably lived in Bordeaux where he must have taught rhetoric in one of the schools of the city (on the fact that the author lived in Bordeaux, see *Latin panegyric XII (2).2.1*; Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise of Later*, p. 437). Ausonius does not mention him in his *Commentario professorum Burdigalensium*, probably because Pacatus was still alive when he composed it (see Galletier, *Panegyriques Latins*, p. 49). The two men must have been close friends, as Ausonius dedicated various works to him.

Concerning the context of composition and elocution of this speech, Pacatus pronounced it at Rome, slightly after Theodosius's final victory over Maximus at the end of August 388 CE. Concerning Maximus's usurpation and reign, it should be recalled that he had been proclaimed Augustus by his troops in Britain, where he fulfilled the military office of 'companion' of the Britains (*comes Britanniarum*), during the spring of 383 CE. He then invaded Gaul and defeated the emperor Gratian at Lutetia. One of his men killed the emperor retreating on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August at Lyon. One direct consequence of Maximus taking control of Gaul and killing Gratian was that many barbarian groups threatened anew various provinces. The Picti and Scots re-invaded Britain. The Huns and Alani went into Pannonia, and the Juthungi into Rhetia – Pannonia and Rhetia being provinces that were under the authority of the young half-brother of Gratian, Valentinian II, who was then 8 years old and lived in Milan. Maximus then established his residence in Trier and asked Valentinian II to join him there. After the sending of legations, Theodosius recognised Maximus as emperor in August 384 CE with the condition that he did not attack Valentinian's territories, namely Italy and Illyricum. Maximus was then entrusted with Britain, Gaul, and Spain. During this period, Maximus proceeded to various administrative reorganisations in the provinces of Gaul and Spain, and nominated officers among his supporters. In 387 CE, Valentinian II and his mother Justina asked Maximus for help to push back a barbarian offensive in Pannonia. Maximus accepted, but then he broke his commitments and invaded Italy. Valentinian II fled to Thessalonica. Maximus arrived in Milan and took the consulship for the year 388 CE. Theodosius decided to react and, with the permission of the Senate of Constantinople, he led a military operation with the help of numerous barbarians, especially Gothic contingents, which ended with Theodosius's victories in Illyricum and in Italy. He definitively defeated Maximus at Aquileia and executed him on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 388 CE. After a long stay in Milan, Theodosius stayed in Rome, where he celebrated a triumph for his victory over Maximus, from the 13<sup>th</sup> of June to the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 389 CE.

The speech from which this text is extracted was pronounced in Rome in front of the emperor and the Roman Senate, a year after Theodosius's victory over Maximus. Two passages suggest that Pacatus may have delivered it shortly after Theodosius's arrival in Rome and before the celebration of the triumph (see XII (2).46.4 and 47.3-4; Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise of Later*, p. 444). There is no explicit evidence in the speech for the argument that Pacatus was part of an official delegation sent by some Gallic cities or provinces in order to defend their interests and to ensure Theodosius of their loyalty. During the five years of Maximus's usurpation/reign, the Gallic



aristocratic milieux had been divided between those who gave their support to Maximus, and those who had suffered from Maximus's confiscations, exactions, and religious persecutions, especially against Priscillianists. However, the fact that Pacatus speaks in the name of all the inhabitants of Gaul (see XII (2).23) and enumerates the various misfortunes experienced by them under the "tyrant" and "beast" Maximus (XII (2).24.4-6) shows that he may have delivered this speech while he was the official representative of some Gallic aristocratic groups who might have suffered heavy losses under Maximus's usurpation/reign (about this point, see Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise of Later*, p. 438-439).

The main purpose of this panegyric is to praise Theodosius for having annihilated the "tyrant" Maximus. The praise is structured in three parts. In the first part the author praises Theodosius's origins and some aspects of his personality, especially his beauty and his maturity (§ 4-7). Next, Pacatus praises his other virtues that enable him to be a good military commander and a good emperor (§ 8-20) (about the virtues assigned to Theodosius in this panegyric and the predominance of *virtus*, see L'Huillier, *L'Empire des mots*, p. 332, 343-344). The text presented here comes from this part and deals in particular with the fact that, even when he was emperor, Theodosius continued to behave as a private citizen. In the third part of the speech, the orator presents some concrete examples of Theodosius's public achievements. Although references to his campaigns against various barbarian peoples and his submission of the Persian king are very briefly mentioned (§ 22), this third part is mainly dedicated to the description of Theodosius's campaign and victory over Maximus (§ 23-46).

The text presented here comes from a passage in which Pacatus highlights the fact that Theodosius became emperor against his will, a situation which shows how different Theodosius is from the other emperors who had been promoted to the imperial throne thanks to the support of their armies, because of the absence of any other candidate, or thanks to kinship. The impression that implicitly comes from this passage is that Theodosius became emperor strictly thanks to his personal virtues (see Tournier, "La me?moire," § 13). Pacatus even goes so far as to say about Theodosius: "it is one ambition of the candidate not to be elected" (12.1-2). This last statement is a commonplace in imperial praise. Pacatus actually refers to a ritual which existed at the very origin of the Principate, and which had been perpetuated from reign to reign. For example, Augustus took pains to record for posterity that he refused dictatorship, the annual consulship that had been granted to him in perpetuity, and also to be elected as guardian of laws and customs with supreme power (*Res Gestae* V.1, V.3, VI.1). Similarly, Tiberius was reluctant to take the succession of his adoptive father (Wallace-Hadrill, "*Civilis princeps*," p. 36). Jean Béranger has listed most of the sources mentioning emperors denying imperial power: 30 emperors are concerned by the *recusatio*, and Theodosius and Maximus are the last ones he mentions (see Béranger, *Recherches sur l'aspect*, p. 139-140). Aside from the fact that the *recusatio imperii* was commonplace in imperial praise, it might be asked why Pacatus chose specifically to insert it in this panegyric of Theodosius. There are three explanations. First, we will see that this motif was very common when emperors wanted to be represented according to an ideal model, that of the *civilis princeps* (citizen-emperor), which is the case here (see below). Second, Theodosius was not part of the Valentinian dynasty, and by consequence his ability to rule the empire was not confirmed by any dynastic charisma. The *recusatio imperii* was a way to insist upon the fact that the candidate to the imperial throne was supported by all and that he had all the merits to become emperor (see Béranger, *Recherches sur l'aspect*, p. 141-142). Third, the *recusatio imperii* was a motif that was also useful to make the distinction between the good *princeps* and the tyrant (see Béranger, *Recherches sur l'aspect*, p. 153). Pacatus deals with this last distinction when in § 3 he mentions Theodosius's philosophy and principles of life and brings them into opposition with the avidity (*aviditas*) of the men who covet an unrestrained power, but also with their cruelty (*crudelitas*), their greed (*cupiditas*) in relation to the goods of other private citizens, and their lust (*libido*). The vices enumerated here are commonly attributed to tyrants, and one can easily imagine that behind these words the orator is necessarily targeting Maximus. Then Pacatus shows how Theodosius's personality and behaviour are radically opposed to these tyrannical vices. In opposition to the *aviditas* of power, Pacatus highlights Theodosius's denial of the imperial throne. Contrary to the tyrants' love for "living a life without laws," Pacatus develops an interesting reflection about the fact that Theodosius always submitted himself to the laws (§ 5, see below). In opposition to the tyrants' *cupiditas* towards the goods of the other *privati*, Pacatus opposed Theodosius's ability to remain himself a simple *privatus* even after having been raised to the imperial throne (§ 5), and also his unwillingness to plunder the goods of others (§ 5). Contrary to the tyrants' *crudelitas* and *libido* Pacatus mentions Theodosius's "aversion of human blood" and "respect for virtue" (§ 5).

Most of these virtues assigned to Theodosius deliver the same message, they are here to prove that Theodosius is an ideal emperor because he embodies the ideal of the *civilis princeps*, that is the emperor who adopts the conduct of a citizen among citizens. His *civilitas* is the opposite of the *superbia*, that is the disdainful behaviour of the king or of the tyrant (on the *civilitas* of the emperor see Wallace-Hadrill, "*Civilis princeps*," p. 33, 42-43; the use of the term *civilitas* to refer to the personality of the ideal emperor only appears during the second century CE with Suetonius). Concerning this ideal of the *civilis princeps*, one should note that it had been first associated with Pompey (see



Marcone, “Il nuovo stile”), before being associated with Augustus. Then, it was variably used during the first century and much more frequently during the second century CE. During the third century associations between emperors and this ideal are clearly less frequently attested, the sole emperors benefitting from this association being Septimius Severus, Severus Alexander and perhaps Marcus Julius Philippus. The *civilis princeps* embodies the ideal of the Republican monarch, an ideal that was based on and cultivated thanks to various ideological positions. First, the *civilis princeps* had to behave as an ideal citizen, and thus had to be a model of *virtus* and accessibility. Second, he had to respect the two main components of the *Res publica*, namely the Roman people and the Senate. Third, he had to refuse excessively numerous and prestigious honours and offices. Finally, he had to accept free speech and criticism, except when it put the *Res publica* in jeopardy. Even if the *civilis princeps* made the effort to present or represent himself among his fellow citizens, he remained the *primus inter pares*, “the first among his peers” (on the public practices that led to periodically reactivating the ideal of the *civilis princeps*, see the forthcoming work of Pascal Montlahuc entitled *Autour du prince citoyen*; for a popular article on this theme, Montlahuc, “L’empereur romain”).

By associating Theodosius with this image of the *civilis princeps*, Pacatus reuses a common but interesting reflection about the relationship between the citizen-emperor and Roman law. The panegyrist explicitly states that the good *princeps* is one that submits himself to the laws: “You are the same man you always were, and you allow to yourself only what was allowed by the laws (*quantum per leges licebat*).” In reality, due to his status and his superior power, the emperor was above the laws, but he could not abuse this dominant position without risking to see the Principate drifting into tyranny (on that theme see Christ, “Leges super principem”). Thus, one response of the imperial power that had been chosen in order to conciliate the two elements consisted of rituals and speeches spreading the message that the emperor acted in the same way as any private citizen (*privatus*), and that as a consequence he graciously submitted to the laws (on that theme see Béranger, “L’accession d’Auguste”). In that perspective, Pacatus’s remark about Theodosius’s choice to allow to himself only what the laws allowed clearly echoes Pliny’s *Panegyric of Trajan* 64 in which Pliny deals with consular elections and recalls how Trajan surprised everyone by presenting himself to swear the consular oath to obey the laws, a formula that no emperor had ever used on such an occasion. Then, in the following chapter, Pliny writes: “On the rostrum, too, by a similar scruple, you submit yourself to the laws, laws that, Caesar, had never been written for the emperor. But you do not want to have more rights than us, the result being that we are all the more willing for you to have more. Here I hear for the first time, I understand for the first time not that ‘the prince is above the laws,’ but that ‘the laws are above the prince,’ Caesar bows to the same restrictions as any other consul” (*Panegyric of Trajan* 65). One should note that scholars have convincingly demonstrated that Pliny’s *Panegyric of Trajan*, placed at the beginning of the collection of the *Latin Panegyrics*, had been used by Pacatus not only as a literary example, but also as a text serving as a “normative authority on ideological aspects of being a Roman emperor” (see Rees, “Bright Lights,” p. 211-212; for other intertextual connections see Rees, “Afterwords of praise,” p. 178-179). Roger Rees has thus noticed another passage of Pliny’s panegyric dealing with Trajan’s *civilitas* – when he states that Trajan’s triumphal entry in Rome contrasted with the *superbia* of Domitian (22.2) – that must have been the source of inspiration for Pacatus, who applied it to Theodosius (XLVII.3). Even if in Pliny’s *Panegyric of Trajan* the treatment of Trajan’s image as a *civilis princeps* is much more developed than in Pacatus’s, the fact that the Gallic orator also develops in this text, and in other parts of his work, this praise of the *civilitas* of Theodosius shows that he considers it to be part of the ideological aspects that had to be stressed to present Theodosius (Rees, “Bright Lights,” p. 211, and n. 36).

In conclusion we have seen how this ideology of the *civilis princeps*, the origins of which go back to Augustus, and which is here applied to the Christian emperor Theodosius, is full of pretences. The fact that because of his *civilitas* the good emperor chose to be a citizen among the other citizens implies that the autocratic nature of his power is limited by his voluntarily choice to act as a *privatus*. However, we can note that the use of this ideal emperor-citizen model was absolutely not obvious if we consider how, from Diocletian onwards, the imperial figure underwent a real transformation, presented in an open and formalised way, as a monarchical and sacral power. This shift manifested itself via the transformation of imperial clothing (the emperors wearing and appearing publicly with clothing covered by gold, jewels, and embroidery, and with a diadem on their head), and via the transformation of the ceremonies that surrounded the emperors. One of the most well-known phenomena is Diocletian’s definitive imposition of the ritual of the *adoratio* of the purple, which, for the people who approached the emperor, consisted of bowing down at the emperor’s feet and kissing the bottom of his coat. This ritual of the *adoratio* continued even under Christian emperors who also took part in the process of keeping the emperor chosen by God at a distance from his subjects. As written by Yves Modéran, from Diocletian onwards, the inaccessibility of the emperor became an visible signal of his greatness (Modéran, *L’Empire romain*, p. 79). Interestingly, in 389 CE the Gallic orator Pacatus chose to revive this ideal of the *civilis princeps* and to apply it to Theodosius. His choice to associate Theodosius with this image of the emperor-citizen can be explained both by the literary model he follows, namely Pliny’s *Panegyric of Trajan*, a work in which the praised emperor, who is also of Spanish origin like Theodosius, is repeatedly presented as the model of the citizen-emperor. Moreover, just as the *civilis princeps* Trajan was placed in opposition to the



tyrant Domitian, Pacatus placed the *civilis princeps* Theodosius in opposition to the tyrant Maximus. Finally, it is interesting to note that, in Pacatus's description of Theodosius's *civilitas*, he enumerates many of the qualities that were usually associated with the *civilis princeps*, namely the fact that he is a model of *virtus*, that he respects Roman laws and thus Roman institutions, that he accepts free speech from his subjects (on that last point see [Latin Panegyric XII \(2\).23](#)).

Keywords in the original language:

- [crudelitas](#)
- [cupiditas](#)
- [imperator](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [ius](#)
- [lex](#)
- [libido](#)
- [princeps](#)
- [principatus](#)
- [privatus](#)
- [pudicitia](#)
- [ratio](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [secta](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [citizen](#)
- [emperor-citizen](#)
- [freedom](#)
- [imperial ideal](#)
- [imperial ideology](#)
- [principate](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [tyrant](#)

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