

Panegyric Addressed to the Emperor Trajan

Source: Pliny, Panegyric 65–80. Lewis, Naphtali, and Meyer Reinhold. Roman civilization. selected readings Vol. 2, The Empire. New York ; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1990.

The Romans confined the panegyric—formal and detailed praise addressed to the subject—to the living, and reserved the funeral oration exclusively for the dead. The most celebrated example of a Latin panegyric is that delivered by the younger Pliny (100 CE) in the senate on the occasion of his assumption of the consulship, containing a somewhat fulsome eulogy of Trajan.

You have spontaneously subjected yourself to the laws, to the laws which, Caesar, no one ever drafted to be binding upon the princeps.¹ But you desire to have no more rights than we (the Senate); and the result is that we would like you to have more. What I now hear for the first time, now learn for the first time, is not, “The princeps is above the laws,” but “The laws are above the princeps, and the same restrictions apply to Caesar when consul as to others.” He swears fidelity to the laws in the presence of attentive gods—for to whom should they be more attentive than to Caesar? ...

Hardly had the first day of your consulship dawned when you entered the senate house and exhorted us, now individually, now all together, to resume our liberty, to take up the duties of imperial administration shared, so to speak, between yourself and us, to watch over the public interests, to rouse ourselves. All emperors before you said about the same, but none before you was believed. People had before their eyes the shipwrecks of many men who sailed along in a deceptive calm and foundered in an unexpected storm.... But you we follow fearlessly and happily, wherever you call us. You order us to be free: we will be. You order us to express our opinions openly: we will pronounce them. It is neither through any cowardice nor through any natural sluggishness that we have remained silent until now; terror and fear and that wretched prudence born of danger warned us to turn our eyes, our ears, our minds, away from the state—in fact, there was no state altogether. But today, relying and leaning upon your right hand and your promises, we unseal our lips closed in long servitude and we loose our tongues paralyzed by so many ills....

Here is the picture of the father of our state as I for my part seem to have discerned it both from his speech and from the very manner of its presentation. What weight in his ideas, what

unaffected genuineness in his words, what earnestness in his voice, what confirmation in his face, what sincerity in his eyes, bearing, gestures, in short in his whole body! He will always remember his advice to us, and he will know that we are obeying him whenever we make use of the liberty he has given us. And there is no fear that he will judge us reckless if we take advantage unhesitatingly of the security of the times, for he remembers that we lived otherwise under an evil princeps.²

It is our custom to offer public prayers for the eternity of the Empire and the preservation of the emperor ... “if [he] has ruled the state well and in the interest of all.” ... You reap, Caesar, the most glorious fruit of your preservation from the consent of the gods. For when you stipulate that the gods should preserve you only “if you have ruled the state well and in the interest of all,” you are assured that you do rule the state well since they preserve you.⁴⁹ And so you pass in security and joy the day which tortured other emperors with worry and fear when in suspense, thunderstruck, uncertain how far they could rely on our patience, they awaited from here and there the messages of public servitude....

In judicial inquiries, what soft severity [you display], what clemency without weakness! You do not sit as judge intent on enriching your private treasury, and you want no reward for your decision other than to have judged rightly. Litigants stand before you concerned not for their fortunes, but for your good opinion, and they fear not so much what you may think of their case as what you may think of their character. O care truly that of a princeps, and even of a god, to reconcile rival cities, to calm peoples in ferment, less by imperial command than by reason, to impede the injustices of magistrates, to annul everything that ought not have been done, in fine, in the manner of the swiftest star to see all, hear all, and like a divinity be present and be helpful forthwith wherever invoked! Such, I imagine, are the things that the father of the world (i.e., Jupiter) regulates with a nod when he lets his glance fall upon the earth and deigns to count human destinies among his divine occupations. Henceforth free and released in this area he can attend to the sky alone, since he has sent you to fill his role toward the human race. You fulfill that function, and you are worthy of him who entrusted it to you, since each of your days is devoted to our greatest good, to your greatest glory.

¹ C.f. Justinian Digest I. iii. 31 (quoting Ulpian): “The emperor is not bound by the laws.”

² A clear reference to Domitian, emperor 81-97 CE, cruel as C./Caligula, but much more intelligent and sane, and more dangerous.