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Ammianus, Magnus Maximus and the Gothic Uprising*

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ABSTRACT

It has been asserted that the usurper Magnus Maximus can be identified with the commander Maximus who served during the Gothic uprising of 376–77. This assertion is tempting because it connects imperial events in Africa, the Balkans and Britain during a pivotal period. However, this note aims to dispel this identification. It does so by both examining the socio-institutional ramifications of promotion in the imperial chain of command and cross-examining literary traditions previously overlooked in this identification.

Keywords: Ammianus; Britain; Balkans; Goths; Magnus Maximus

The western usurper Magnus Maximus holds a peculiar place in the history of Late Antiquity.¹ As commander of an imperial army stationed in Britain, he made a bid for the purple against the ruling emperor Gratian in 383.² He managed to suborn most of Gratian's troops in Gaul and have the fleeing emperor assassinated, after which he quickly established his sovereignty over the rest of Gaul and Spain.

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¹ On Maximus, see *PLRE* 1: 'Magnus Maximus 39', 588; Birley 1983; Lunn-Rockliffe 2010; Omissi 2018, 263–89.

² *Epit. de Caes.* 47; Prosper *s.a.* 384; Oros. 7.34.9–10; Zos. 4.35–6.

For a few years Maximus maintained recognition from the Eastern emperor Theodosius, so long as he refrained from extending his dominion over the Central Empire of Gratian's younger brother Valentinian II. When he eventually did march on Italy in 387, Valentinian fled to Thessaloniki and managed to broker military succour from his Eastern colleague. The following year, Maximus was defeated in several set-piece battles, apprehended and executed.

This bare-bones survey of his five-year reign does not make Maximus particularly stand out. Indeed, he could be compared to earlier Western usurpers who managed to establish themselves against a reigning dynasty for several years until finally vanquished, such as Magnentius or Postumus.³ Yet, in hindsight, Maximus does stand out for several reasons. He was the last soldier-emperor to conduct effective government from Trier, which had received a quasi-continuous imperial presence since the time of the Tetrarchy a century earlier. The abandonment of this imperial residence on the Rhine would contribute significantly to the breakdown of this frontier a generation later.⁴ Maximus also holds the dubious honour of being the first emperor to have executed a Christian on the charge of heresy.⁵ As emperor, he made a conspicuous display of his Christian credentials in communication with the bishop of Rome, stressing among other things his early baptism.⁶ It has also been plausibly suggested that Maximus was the first emperor to station on special conditions barbarian auxiliaries in Britain, such as Irish and Saxons.⁷ This would become a recurring phenomenon on the continent during the early fifth century. The aim of this note is to revisit Maximus' alleged role in what probably was the most (in)famous barbarian settlement on imperial soil in Late Antiquity: that of the Gothic Tervingi and Greuthungi in 376.

Maximus' career before his rise to power is shrouded in obscurity. Given his downfall and subsequent *abolitio memoriae*, it was inevitable that Symmachus would expunge his panegyric to the usurper, though the modern scholar wishes it were still extant.⁸ That being said, it is clear he was of Spanish origin and affiliated to the Theodosian family, either as a relative or more likely as a client.⁹ From Ammianus and Zosimus we learn that he served under the eponymous father of Theodosius in Britain and Africa.¹⁰ His previous service on the island was probably a factor in him eventually receiving a command there, though its exact nature is disputed. It has been suggested, however, that, between his African sojourn and British command, he served on the Danube either as *dux Moesiae* or *dux Scythiae*. This presupposition essentially rests on his identification with a namesake mentioned by Ammianus. This Maximus, together with the *comes rei militaris* Lupicinus, was blamed for the inept organisation of settling the Greuthungi south of the Danube in 376–77.

During this time, when the barriers of our frontier were unlocked and the realm of savagery was spreading far and wide columns of armed men like glowing ashes from Aetna, when our difficulties and imminent dangers called for military reformers who were most distinguished for the fame of their exploits: then it was, as if at the choice of some adverse deity, that men were gathered together and given command of armies who bore stained reputations. At their head were two rivals in recklessness: one was Lupicinus, commanding general in Thrace, the other Maximus, a pernicious leader (*dux exitiosus*). Their treacherous greed was the source of all our evils. I say nothing of other crimes which these two men, or at least others with their permission, with the worst of motives committed against the foreign new-comers, who were as yet blameless;

³ *PLRE* 1: 'Fl. Magnus Magnentius', 532 and 'M. Cassianus Latinus Postumus 2', 720. On the wider phenomenon of usurpation in this era, see Wardman 1984; Paschoud and Szidat 1997; Szidat 2010; Omissi 2018.

⁴ Halsall 2007 makes the most compelling case for the dramatic reversal of imperial fortune in the Rhineland. The archaeological record for the two decades following the departure of emperors from Trier shows signs of visible stress in northern and eastern Gaul. On the breakdown of the Rhine frontier in the early fifth century, see Drinkwater 1998; Kulikowski 2000; Modéran 2014, 43–68; Wijnendaele 2016, 276–8.

⁵ *V. Mart.* 11; Prosper *s.a.* 385.

⁶ *Coll. Avell.* 40.1.

⁷ Rance 2001.

⁸ In this regard, it is rather astonishing that his two letters have survived in the *Collectio Avellana*.

⁹ Pacat. 24.1, 31.3, 43.6; Zos. 4.35.3.

¹⁰ Serving the elder Theodosius: Pacat. 12.31.1; Zos. 4.35.1; Joh. Ant. *Fr.* 211.2 (Mariev 2008). Serving in Africa: Amm. Marc. 29.5.6, 29.5.21.

but one melancholy and unheard-of act shall be mentioned, of which, even if they were their own judges of their own case, they could not be acquitted by any excuse.¹¹

It was John Matthews who first conjectured that these two Maximi were actually one and the same person.¹² This identification has received some followers and was championed recently by Anthony Birley.¹³ Besides having the same name, the identification essentially rests on two further arguments: progression in the chain of command as a *quid pro quo* for supporting Theodosius I and Ammianus possibly echoing Pacatus' description of Magnus Maximus as a *homo funebris* ('murderous man'), when describing the *dux* Maximus as *exitiosus* ('pernicious').¹⁴ Let us first begin with the most attractive aspect of this theory.

If Magnus Maximus was the *dux* based in Thrace c. 377, one has to explain how he ended up in Britain six years later at the latest. The suggested answer is that he may have been part of the Eastern faction that was instrumental in the elevation of Theodosius I.¹⁵ Considering Maximus had already been part of the Theodosian entourage, the new Eastern emperor could not have ignored this type of windfall. As a result, Maximus was given a command in Britain. This suggestion further helps to explain Zosimus' enigmatic comment that Maximus felt slighted that Theodosius was deemed worthy of a throne, while he had not even received a respectable command.¹⁶ By 383, Maximus' resentment certainly would have reached its peak when Theodosius elevated his firstborn son Arcadius to *Augustus, nota bene* without Gratian's permission, at which point he may have felt it was high time to carve out a position for himself in the imperial college. Attractive as it is, this scenario is not without difficulties.

It has often been assumed that on the eve of his usurpation, Maximus was serving as *comes Britanniarum*.¹⁷ This is unlikely, since this office was most probably only formalised under Stilicho.¹⁸ In Birley's own reconstruction, Maximus ended as *dux Britanniarum*. Around the time of his usurpation, he had scored a victory over the Picts and Scoti.¹⁹ While one cannot exclude the possibility that Maximus had been *comes* of the littoral tract, his victory over enemies habitually descending on Britain from the north indicates that he was probably operating closer to Hadrian's Wall than the Channel. However, there are no known cases of a *dux* from one frontier province becoming *dux* of another. Such a scenario could theoretically be alluring for a *dux* aspiring to expand his scope of climbing up the ladder, by moving to a new province closer to a centre of imperial patronage. In this regard, there could have been no worse transfer for Maximus than moving from the lower Danube, conveniently near Constantinople, to Britain, whose peripheral position from imperial residences made it a volatile province in the late Roman Empire. This was virtually the equivalent of a demotion.

Alternatively, Maximus may have been given a position as *comes rei militaris*. This certainly would have counted as a promotion, even though *duces* and *comites* remained only at *spectabilis* rank. However, before the formalisation of the position of *comes Britanniarum* we know of only two *comites rei militares* operating in Britain. These are the elder Gratian in the 340s and the elder Theodosius in 367.²⁰ The latter is instructive, because he crossed over to Britain with continental *comitatenses* at the instruction of Valentinian I and

¹¹ Amm. Marc. 31.4.9–10: *Per id tempus nostri limitis reseratis obicibus atque, ut Aetnaeas favillas armatorum agmina diffundente barbaria, cum difficiles necessitatum articuli correctores rei militaris poscerent aliquos claritudine gestarum rerum notissimos: quasi laevo quodam numine diligente in unum quaesiti potestatibus praefuere castris homines maculosi: quibus Lupicinus antistabat et Maximus, alter per Thracias comes, dux alter exitiosus, ambo aemulae temeritatis. Quorum insidiatrix aviditatis materia malorum omnium fuit. Nam ut alia omitteremus, quae memorati vel certe sinentibus isdem alii perditis rationibus in commeantes peregrinos adhuc innoxios deliquerunt illud dicitur, quod nec apud sui periculi iudices absolvere ulla poterat venia, triste et inauditum* (tr. Rolfe 1939).

¹² Matthews 1975, 96.

¹³ Williams and Friell 1994, 22; Birley 2005, 448; den Boeft *et al.* 2013, 162. One should also point here to Roberts 1997, a peer-reviewed essay based on the author's MA dissertation *Magnus Maximus: Portrait of a Usurper*.

¹⁴ Pacat. 43.4; Amm. Marc. 31.4.9.

¹⁵ Matthews 1975, 96; Birley 2005, 448.

¹⁶ Zos. 4.35.4.

¹⁷ Paschoud 1979, 412; Ridley 1982, 194 (101); Curran 1998, 105; Potter 2004, 550; Sogno 2006, 118 n. 37.

¹⁸ Mann 1991; Birley 2005, 401–4.

¹⁹ *Chron. Gall.* 452, 4; Kötter and Scardino 2017, 82–3.

²⁰ Elder Gratian in Britain: Amm. Marc. 30.7.2–3; elder Theodosius in Britain: Amm. Marc. 27.8.6–10; Pacat. 5.2.

immediately returned to Gaul at the end of his campaign.²¹ This poses the greatest hitch to the aforementioned reconstruction of Magnus Maximus' transfer to Britain: it works from the presumption that Theodosius I as Eastern emperor was in a position to grant a *Western* command before 383. *Quod non*. Between Theodosius' accession in 379 and his own downfall in 383, Gratian's military entourage kept a short leash on the allocation of commands in his realm. Even more so, the elevation of Valentinian II in 375 had already been used to settle scores regarding which men were going to keep their command, lose their command or receive a new command.²² Throughout Gratian's reign, Theodosius found himself in an inferior position, scrambling what precious little military resources he could to the Balkans and spending the next three years containing the Goths. Relations between the two emperors were never cordial.²³ Hence it is simply inconceivable that Theodosius could have exercised any prerogative to award a distinctively Western command to Magnus Maximus, if the latter had previously been based in Thrace. The problems do not stop there.

It should be pointed out that the name Maximus is ubiquitous. The first volume of the *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* alone records 11 namesakes who were late Roman officials and (near) contemporaries of Ammianus.²⁴ Furthermore, Ammianus seems *prima facie* to hold neutral opinions of the Maximus serving the elder Theodosius in Africa and the usurper whom Sextus Rusticius Julianus served as *praefectus urbanus*, both of whom we plausibly can identify as Magnus Maximus. Yet Ammianus utterly despised the *dux* in Thrace. If one wishes to identify the *dux* Maximus with Magnus Maximus, it should be on the basis of other sources that can help to back up this claim. Here one should note that Ammianus is not the only author who was aware of a Maximus who served in Thrace and kick-started the Gothic uprising.

In his chronicle, Jerome leaves out Lupicinus, who shared with Maximus *exitiosus* the *onus* of the debacle, and singles out the latter as the guilty party.²⁵ Jerome ends his chronicle before Magnus' usurpation, yet he does refer to the latter event in later work. In his letter to Heliiodorus, written *c.* 396, he compiles a catalogue of calamities that had befallen the Empire in recent decades. Jerome mentions both usurpations, such as Magnus Maximus' and Eugenius', and barbarian depravations in the Illyrians provinces, such as those by the Goths.²⁶ The church father clearly distinguishes these as different disasters, and does not attempt to identify Maximus as the man responsible for barbarian brutality in the Balkans. This pattern is also noticeable among other authors. Zosimus allocates space in his history to the Danubian *duces*, without trying to identify their identity or specific command, but the context makes it clear that these must be Lupicinus and Maximus.²⁷ Still, he makes no attempt to draw a connection between this Maximus and Magnus Maximus when he introduces the latter.²⁸ More revealing is Orosius' account, where both the *dux* Maximus and the *tyrannus* Maximus are mentioned in the same work. Following Jerome, he also squarely

²¹ Amm. Marc. 27.8.

²² Kelly 2013 remains the most insightful analysis of the complex manoeuvres that occurred at this time.

²³ This is best explained by the fact that, during the *interregnum* following Valens' death and disappearance, Theodosius effectively seized imperial power. Gratian waited no less than six months before eventually recognising Theodosius as *Augustus*, while panegyrics addressed to the Western emperor during this interval made no mention of the latter whatsoever. See Errington 1996a; Sivan 1996; Omissi 2018, 255–63.

²⁴ *PLRE* 1: 'Maximus 8', 581; 'Maximus 11', 581; 'Maximus 12', 581; 'Maximus 13', 582; 'Maximus 14', 582; 'Maximus 15', 582; 'Maximus 16', 582; 'Maximus 17', 582; 'Maximus 18', 583; 'Maximus 24', 585; 'Magnus Maximus', 588.

²⁵ Jer. *Chron. s.a.* 377.

²⁶ Usurpations: Jer. *Ep.* 60.15: 'What to say of Procopius, [Magnus] Maximus, and Eugenius, who, while they ruled at any rate, were a terror to the nations?' (*Quid loquar de Procopio, Maximo, Eugenio, qui utique, dum rerum potirentur, terrori gentibus erant?*). Gothic depravations: Jer. *Ep.* 60.16: 'Scythia, Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly, Dardania, Dacia, Epirus, Dalmatia, and all the provinces of Pannonia, have been sacked, pillaged and plundered by Goths, Sarmatians, Quadi, Alans, Huns, Vandals and Marcomanni' (*Scythiam, Thraciam, Macedoniam, Thessaliam, Dardaniam, Daciam, Epiros, Dalmatiam, cunctasque Pannonias Gothus, Sarmata, Quadus, Alanus, Huni, Vandali, Marcomanni vastant, trahunt, rapiunt*). I would like to thank Jessica van 't Westeinde for pointing out this reference to me.

²⁷ Zos. 4.20.6 refers obliquely to 'Those responsible for protecting the cities at the Danube' (Τῶν δὲ τὰς ἐπὶ τοῦ Ἰστροῦ πόλεις φρουρεῖν τεταγμένων). Ridley 1982, 79 translates this more economically as 'The garrison commanders in the cities of the Danube'. Given the context, this is not without justification.

²⁸ Zos. 4.35.4.

places the blame for the events culminating in Valens' fatal Gothic War on the shoulders of the *dux* Maximus.²⁹ Yet despite acknowledging that Magnus Maximus was a usurper, Orosius is a rare pro-Theodosian source who has good things to say about the former.³⁰ Clearly, to Orosius these two Maximus were not the same person. One could try to argue away these sources as jejune, and it has to be conceded that on fourth-century matters they ordinarily pale in comparison to the splendour of Ammianus' narrative. Nonetheless, we are faced here with at least three different literary traditions that do not try explicitly to identify Magnus Maximus as a Thracian-based *dux* in 377. Given that the Gothic insurrection and the violent overthrow of Gratian are two of the most heinous imperial events of the late fourth century, occurring within six years of one another, we could reasonably expect that at least *somebody* would have clearly recorded that one and the same person was to blame for both?

This ultimately brings us back to the question of how Pacatus may have treated the matter. Birley's argument that Ammianus was familiar with Pacatus' language carries some weight based on internal evidence.³¹ Yet one wonders why Pacatus did not gratefully pounce upon such ammunition for his vituperation of the usurper, i.e. that Magnus Maximus may have been the engineer of the imperial fiasco supreme of the fourth century. It could be countered that the Gothic crisis was a general embarrassment, one during which Theodosius also suffered setbacks, and that it was thus wiser to remain silent on the matter altogether.³² However, as two scholars astutely observe: 'There is a school of thought that maintains lofty silence is the best way to deal with criticism. That was not Pacatus' way.'³³ The settlement of the Goths in the Balkans under Theodosius has remained a never-ceasing point of contention, both for sources then and scholars now. Some contemporary accusations that Theodosius had acquiesced to the Goths probably stuck, since Pacatus gives proper attention to their exemplary service as soldiers.³⁴ In another clear break with previous tradition, the Gallic rhetor repeatedly and unambiguously names Maximus and allocates substantial space to him.³⁵ A choice trope of late Roman panegyrists was comparing and contrasting their subjects of praise with their antagonists, to the obvious glory of the former and glaring detriment of the latter.³⁶ Pacatus employs the same trick when describing Maximus as a low-born servant to Theodosius, scion of a noble house.³⁷ Considering the Gothic pandemonium of 377–82, it would have been an excellent opportunity for a spin doctor to strike a sharp disparity between a commander whom he celebrated as a paragon of proper conduct, and a commander who had turned original Gothic recruitment into an omnishambles of epic proportions. Pacatus did not do this, for the very simple reason that the latter man was not Magnus Maximus.

Surveying all these considerations, it is probably best finally to put to rest the idea that Magnus Maximus was Ammianus' *dux exitiosus*.

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²⁹ Oros. 7.33.11.

³⁰ Oros. 7.34.9: 'Maximus was a vigorous and able man, and worthy of emperorship, had he not risen to it by usurpation, contrary to his oath of allegiance' (*Maximus, uir quidem strenuus et probus atque Augusto dignus nisi contra sacramenti fidem per tyrannidem emersisset*).

³¹ See Amm. Marc. 17.12.17; Pacat. 27.3; Sabbah 1978, 325–30; Kulikowski 2012, 98.

³² On Theodosius' struggle against the Goths, see Burns 1994, 43–72; Errington 1996b; Kulikowski 2007, 144–53.

³³ Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 447.

³⁴ Pacat. 32.3–5.

³⁵ Pacatus names Maximus on no less than nine separate occasions. The central diatribe against the usurper takes up almost 180 lines, more than any other in the Gallic panegyrics. See Lunn-Rockliffe 2010; Omissi 2018, 279–83.

³⁶ Examples are copious, but, just to point out a few striking ones from panegyrics each a century apart, I note the juxtaposition of Maxentius and Constantine I in *Pan. Lat.* XII, Alaric and Stilicho in Claudian's *De Bello Gothico* and Odoacer and Theoderic the Amal in Ennodius' panegyric to the latter.

³⁷ Pacat. 31.1–2.

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