

Introduction

CASSIODORUS, THE *VARIAE*, AND THEIR WORLD

The *Variae* are an important source of primary evidence for the study of late antiquity. Cassiodorus, their author, wrote toward the end of a period in which the Mediterranean world assumed striking differences from what we consider a classical Roman Empire. In general terms, late antiquity (ca. 300–600) is characterized by the coalescence and then the fragmentation of political unity on scales not previously experienced under the Roman Empire. At the beginning of this period, the Roman Empire reached its greatest extent, spanning from the deep hinterlands of North Africa to the Rhine and the Danube in Europe, and from Britain and the Atlantic shores of Europe to the culturally fertile crescent of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers at the Persian frontier in the east. Although these far-flung regions were initially treated as conquests, by the time of Emperor Constantine's reign (306–37), people from every corner of the empire self-identified as Roman: peasants lived their lives in accordance with the diverse customs and languages of their own provinces, but from the Rhine to the Euphrates the members of the empire's governing and military classes could at some level identify themselves as Roman. The expansion of military and civil service facilitated this to a great degree. Where the emperor Augustus and his successors (a dynasty known today as the Julio-Claudians, who ruled from 27 B.C. to 68 A.D.) had relied on a coterie of senatorial

appointments made in Rome and the support of soldiers conscripted largely from Italy to govern their subjects, by the fourth century the Roman Empire drew men to state service from cities across the Mediterranean and recruited soldiers from the villages and fields of every province, and even from beyond imperial borders. In this sense, the fourth century was a period of grand cosmopolitanism. It also saw the empire reach its greatest accumulation of wealth, as the now-massive imperial bureaucracy enabled tax collection on a scale never witnessed before. Late antiquity is also when Christianity emerged as the dominant religion of the Mediterranean world, slowly but ineluctably eroding the traditional partnership between the state and what were increasingly thought of as “pagan” gods. Thus, the fourth century may be seen as the high point of the Christian Roman Empire. By contrast, the fifth century witnessed increasing fragmentation: civil wars fractured the unity of the military and bureaucratic establishment, the rise of Christian bishops and clergy as political leaders altered the orientation and culture of the classical city, and new immigrants to the empire offered alternatives to traditional government at the regional level. Only in its eastern provinces, with the imperial seat firmly anchored at Constantinople, would the Roman Empire resist the forces that tore at the social and political fabric of the western provinces.

Thus, scholarship uses the term *late antiquity*, with increasingly wide scope, to demarcate a period in which the Roman Mediterranean’s cultural, religious, and political characteristics transitioned from what we generally recognize as “classical” to what we think of as “medieval.” Upon even cursory examination, however, it becomes clear that there were many late antiquities from the fourth to the seventh century. The grandeur of imperial power in the mid-fourth century, for example, contrasts markedly with the disintegration of imperial boundaries evident at the end of the fifth century. And, almost inversely, the modest ambitions of Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century contrast, again markedly, with the deeply entrenched position of the church at the end of the sixth century. Furthermore, regional differences in the Roman and former Roman world become increasingly evident in this period. Whereas Italy, for example, shared political, religious, and material cultures with the rest of the Mediterranean in the second century, in the sixth century it bore the marks of profound economic and cultural differences from

other regions of the western Mediterranean and from the eastern empire, its partner during the last Roman centuries. In a setting where not only discontinuity, rupture, and transition but also continuity were the norm, it is difficult to identify definitive watershed moments, let alone sources that can be said to typify a particular late-antique moment. One of the rare exceptions is the *Variae* of Cassiodorus.

The letters of the *Variae* represent approximately thirty years (507–40), during which their author served as a senior magistrate of the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy. Cassiodorus was thus a privileged participant in the peninsula's political, economic, cultural, and religious life in the first half of the sixth century. The 468 letters that he collected and published under the title *Variae* originally served as political and administrative instruments, correspondence with other high-placed officials in the last Roman-style government in Italy. More than official documents, however, they are also the literary product of a highly educated individual author, and as such they reveal an extended and nearly continuous period with a level of detail and variations of texture not found in any other late-antique text.

The circumstances in which Cassiodorus produced the *Variae* also make it one of the rare witnesses to a regional watershed moment. When he assembled his collection, the Ostrogothic kingdom, as the final stage of the centuries-long transformation of the western Roman Empire, had preserved elements of the Roman Empire completely absent from other regions of the western Mediterranean. Indeed, “Ostrogothic kingdom” and “Ostrogothic Italy” are terminologies of modern convenience; contemporaries such as Cassiodorus simply referred to their state as *res publica*, a locution designating the Roman state. However little the *res publica* of sixth-century Italy may have resembled the earlier Roman state, it is significant that the Ostrogoths self-consciously attempted to project their state as continuing this imperial tradition. But any pretense to preserving the *res publica* came to an abrupt end in the lifetime of Cassiodorus, when the eastern emperor Justinian attempted to “reclaim” Italy for the “Roman” empire in 535. The ensuing Gothic War lasted nearly twenty years and wrought havoc on the political and economic life of Italy. Societal changes already in process were exacerbated by the conflict and became so entrenched that the Italy which emerged toward the end of the sixth century was no longer a single state, but a mosaic of dislocated regions,

contested by a variety of powerful forces: the rising papacy, the Lombards who held power in the north, and the remaining imperial authority. In a very essential sense, Italy had become “medieval.” Thus, Cassiodorus’s life straddled the transition from classical to medieval, and the *Variae* serve as witnesses poised on the precipice of that change.

Although this transformation was profound, so was the continuous process of wide societal change beginning in the early fifth century that culminated in Ostrogothic Italy. Thus, the *Variae* are also important witnesses to the difference between sixth-century Italy and earlier phases of late antiquity. In political terms, it is often convenient to fasten upon the deposition of Romulus Augustus by the warlord Odoacer in 476 as the end of the Roman Empire in Italy, but in fact the matter is far more complicated. It could be argued that the end began with the death of Emperor Theodosius I in 395 and the subsequent permanent division of the empire into eastern and western states. Although these successor empires tended toward cooperation, and most fifth-century western emperors received the support of Constantinople and even shared the appointment of consuls with it well into the Ostrogothic period, the development of independent states in the provincial territories of the western empire (in North Africa, Spain, Gaul, and Britain) diminished the financial and political resources of Italy’s central imperial authority. Thus, when Odoacer deposed Romulus Augustus (who was an imperial appointment of questionable legitimacy by another rogue military commander), he assumed control over an Italy that had long since lost its extended political, military, and economic apparatus. For all that might have been “barbarian” about Odoacer, he enjoyed the full support of the Senate and the Roman army in Italy, in addition to the tacit acquiescence of the eastern emperor Zeno (ruled 474–91), for a prosperous span of thirteen years.

Before that, Odoacer’s career in the western Roman military had been shaped by events beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire that would also contribute to his eventual ruin and the rise of the Ostrogothic state. In 454, the confederation of Germanic and Hunnic peoples maintained during the lifetime of Attila (d. 453) ended with the Battle of Nedao. The *Life of Saint Severinus* by Eugippius portrays the Germanic Odoacer as a young adventurer en route to Italy through the frontier province of Noricum, and it seems very likely that he, and many others like him, offered himself, whether as a refugee or an opportunist, for

military service in the Roman Empire. (The same circumstances brought the family of Theoderic, who eventually overthrew Odoacer, to the Balkans later in the 450s.) Gothic and Germanic peoples conquered by the Huns had quickly become instruments and partners of Hunnic power. After these formerly subject peoples rejected Attila's heirs at the Battle of Nedao, one of the Gothic groups that had enjoyed success under the Huns was incorporated into the Roman Empire and settled in the province of Pannonia. In the sixth century, this people became known as "Ostrogoths," to distinguish them from the "Visigoths," who had entered the empire in the late fourth century.

The Ostrogoths' official status within the empire was *foederati*, or "federated peoples," bound to the Romans by treaty (*foedus* in Latin), and although they were not technically citizens, they were expected to act as soldiers in the Roman army. As leading members of this new military reserve, Theoderic's family, the Amals, soon rose to prominence in the political affairs of the eastern empire. Theoderic himself spent much of his childhood as a political hostage in Constantinople, at the court of Emperor Zeno, who later appointed him consul and senior field commander of the military in the Balkans. By 488, Theoderic had acquired authority over most of the federated peoples in the Roman military who were settled along the Danube and in the Balkans. Facing the prospect of having to allocate even more authority to him in the eastern empire, Zeno settled upon the expedient of offering him the governance of Italy, which Odoacer had been enjoying as the emperor's nominal regent.

Theoderic entered Italy in 489 with a diverse collection of federated soldiers and their families, who had served the Roman state for well over a generation. The military forces with which Odoacer opposed Theoderic were "Roman" in the very same terms: federated peoples who had been systematically settled as military reserves, in this case primarily in northern Italy. The war lasted four years, with successes and losses on both sides, but Theoderic managed to secure the support of the Roman Senate early in the conflict, likely as a result of Zeno's support. He eventually deposed Odoacer, executing him in Ravenna in 493, and from that point set about establishing the Amals as the new ruling dynasty in Italy. In political terms, probably very little differentiates Theoderic's rule in Italy from those of Odoacer and previous fifth-century emperors, except perhaps the length of his

reign (491–526) and its overall success. The *Variae* refer to Theoderic and to each of his Amal successors as *Princeps*, a Latin word meaning “foremost or most prominent,” a designation appropriate for an emperor, and other sources use the similar terms *imperator* and *augustus*. Theoderic established a tenuous diplomatic balance with Zeno’s successor in the east, Anastasius, which in part depended upon allowing a degree of autonomy, although only limited participation in government, to the traditional senatorial elite in Rome. Ruling for the most part from Ravenna and northern Italy (as had Odoacer and the last generation of fifth-century military commanders), Theoderic primarily relied upon elite families from the Italian provinces outside Rome, such as the family of Cassiodorus, to constitute the apparatus of civilian government. The military comprised the federated soldiers whom Theoderic had either brought with him from the Balkans or incorporated from Odoacer’s forces and had settled, along with their families, as landowning communities primarily in northern and central Italy. This heterogeneous group, collectively known as the Goths, became part of a political ideology, prominently represented in the *Variae*, whereby the “Goths” preserved the state with arms and the “Romans” preserved it with peaceful citizenship.

In a very real sense, Theoderic was a western Roman emperor to the same extent as the others of the fifth century: he was familiar with the political culture of Constantinople, had been elevated to positions of public rank, and supported the rule of Roman law. As a result, civilian government in Cassiodorus’s Italy assumed a style very similar to that of the fifth century, with appointments to traditional high offices and bureaucratic departments made by the king (emperor) and his representatives. By contrast, the military assumed an ethnicized identity, as “Goths,” despite the fact that the Goths’ service as “Roman” soldiers did not differ from that of other Roman federated peoples. This rhetoric—that the state was clearly divided into two distinctly different peoples, Goths and Romans—has promoted the modern view of Ostrogothic Italy as a barbarian state that entertained Romanizing traditions, while it would probably be more accurate to understand Theoderic’s Italy as a continuation of the fifth-century Roman Empire with adaptations to the scale of government operations. Some of what appear to be “ethnic” differences between Romans and barbarians beginning in the late fifth century were, in fact, social differences between civilian and mili-

tary populations that became formalized under Theoderic. It should also be noted that there is much disagreement among modern scholars concerning the proper definitions of Gothic and Germanic ethnicity, and the *Variae*, as the chief source of information for the former, often serve as a focal point for these debates.

As the ruler of Italy, Theoderic furthermore forged relationships with ruling families across the western Mediterranean and with peoples of the former Hunnic Empire. Marriage alliances with the Vandals of North Africa, the Visigoths of southern Gaul, the Franks of northern Gaul, and the Thuringians of the eastern Rhine lands are visible in the *Variae*. Although many of these unions proved to be less secure than intended, it is certainly the case that, at its height, the Amal family exerted influence over Italy and Sicily; Dalmatia and Pannonia, on the frontier with the eastern empire; Raetia and Noricum, at the Roman Empire's former northern frontier; and southern Gaul and Spain. Over the course of Theoderic's lifetime, the state he ruled came close to realizing the former dimensions of the Roman Empire's western expanse, but that ended with the Gothic War.

Theoderic died in 526, leaving his throne to his grandson Athalaric, whose mother, Theoderic's daughter Amalasuntha, served as regent. Upon Athalaric's premature death in 534, Amalasuntha proved incapable of commanding the loyalty of Italy's military nobility, so she appointed her cousin Theodahad as co-ruler to appease them. This proved disastrous for the Ostrogothic state. Theodahad murdered Amalasuntha within a year, and her death provided a convenient pretext for the eastern emperor Justinian to send his forces to invade Italy. After his troops took Sicily and Naples, Gothic soldiers assassinated Theodahad and elevated Witigis as the next king, initiating what would become a twenty-year succession of Gothic rulers, who held power throughout the Gothic War. Witigis, however, was the last one to whom Cassiodorus offered allegiance. When Witigis surrendered Ravenna in 540 and was removed to Constantinople with the core of what remained of the Amal court, Cassiodorus's public life ended and he turned to the publication of the *Variae*.

Cassiodorus was probably born around 485, hence at the height of Odoacer's reign in Italy. His own writings, primarily the *Variae*, are the basis of the majority of what is known of his biography. The *Variae* report that his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all held ele-

vated positions in the western imperial government, beginning in the reign of Valentinian III (425–55), and an eastern branch of the family was apparently prominent in Constantinople in the late fifth century. The family's patrimonial estate was located in the southernmost district of Bruttium (in the area of modern Squillace, in what is now Calabria), where Cassiodorus retired at the close of his public career. That career probably began in 503, when his father assumed the highest-ranking public appointment in the realm as praetorian prefect and Cassiodorus served as *consiliarius*, or aide, to his father's official role. Subsequently, Theoderic appointed him *quaestor*, from 507 to 512, during which time he drafted most, if not all, of the Amal court's official correspondence. His services earned him a consulship in 514, which he may have celebrated in Rome, or perhaps Milan or Ravenna. At the time, Rome and Constantinople each appointed one consul every year; Cassiodorus was named consul without colleague, perhaps an indication of tensions between Italy and the east. In 523, Theoderic appointed Cassiodorus master of offices, the position that administered palace personnel and the daily affairs at court. Cassiodorus was tapped to fill a vacancy resulting from the downfall of the previous master, the famous senator and scholar Boethius, who was accused of treason and executed along with his father-in-law, the prominent patrician Symmachus. Because of these circumstances, Cassiodorus's elevation could not have been well received by the established families in Rome, and there is evidence in the *Variae* of opposition to his increasing influence at court.

Theoderic died in 526, and Cassiodorus continued in the role of master of offices under Amalasuntha and Athalaric. After stepping down in 527, he may have returned to his family estate and held some position of local leadership, perhaps as governor of Bruttium. In 533, however, he was recalled to the capital (Ravenna) as praetorian prefect, the most demanding of civil offices in Italy, formerly held by his father. While Cassiodorus was serving in this capacity, Athalaric died, followed swiftly by the accession of Theodahad, the death of Amalasuntha, and the outbreak of war with the eastern empire. The final years of Cassiodorus's prefecture, when the new king Witigis was campaigning against Justinian's imperial agents, including a year-long siege of Rome (537–38), must have been the most trying of his career. After Witigis finally surrendered in Ravenna in 540, it is generally assumed that Cassiodorus accompanied the captive Amal court to Constantinople,

where many émigrés had already sought asylum from the turmoil in Italy. Papal sources place Cassiodorus in Constantinople as late as 551, and it may have been Justinian who finally conferred the rank of patrician upon him. In 554, Justinian issued his Pragmatic Sanction, declaring an end to hostilities in Italy, and Cassiodorus may have returned to Bruttium then, where he founded a monastic community and spent the remainder of his life, until perhaps 580, in scholarly and religious retirement.

While Cassiodorus's public career demonstrates dedication to the Amal regime in Italy, he was just as committed to his life as a writer. He is known to have written, and likely recited before court, three panegyrics: one to Theoderic, another to Athalaric's father upon his receipt of the consulship in 519, and a final piece on the occasion of Witigis's marriage to Amalasuntha's daughter Matasuntha during the Gothic War, probably in 536. Additionally, Cassiodorus composed a chronicle of Roman consulships and a history of the Goths at Theoderic's bequest. The latter work, now lost, is the basis for the surviving *Getica*, written after the Gothic War by Jordanes in Constantinople. The *Variae* was compiled as a tribute to the end of Cassiodorus's public career, sometime between 538 (the year of the latest datable letter in the collection) and the 540s, after the fall of Ravenna as the Amal capital. Cassiodorus's location while he worked on the collection—whether Rome or Ravenna, or perhaps Constantinople or Bruttium—is not known. Before completing it, however, he composed a treatise on the soul, a traditional philosophical work known as the *De anima*. Although he is best remembered today for the *Variae*, throughout the Middle Ages Cassiodorus was widely renowned for his religious writings. At least one of these, a massive spiritual analysis of the Psalms (*Expositio Psalmorum*), had its origins in Constantinople. Others, such as the bibliographical *Institutes on Divine and Human Learning*, an ecclesiastical history from Greek sources, and several biblical works, were completed at the Vivarium, the monastic community that Cassiodorus founded on his familial estate.

THE VARIAE AS A LETTER COLLECTION

In its original, intended structure, the *Variae* is a collection of 468 letters arranged in twelve books (or chapters). The first five books consist

of letters written by Cassiodorus in Theoderic's name. Books 6 and 7 comprise *formulae* for appointments to public offices, the granting of honorary titles, and particular legal and administrative enactments. In Books 8 and 9, Cassiodorus gathered letters written on behalf of Athalaric. The final selection of letters, written in the names of Amalasuntha, Theodahad, and Witigis, constitute Book 10. Cassiodorus reserved Books 11 and 12 for the letters that he wrote in his own name as praetorian prefect. Each book contains between twenty-five and fifty letters, of considerably different lengths and with content that varies widely from that of the other books. Most letters fall between 200 and 250 words, but some barely manage a terse fifty words and more ornate ones swell well beyond a thousand words. In general, Cassiodorus observed a tendency to bookend, placing letters notable for the recipient's prominence at the beginning and end of each book: diplomatic missives to emperors or western kings, addresses to the Senate, appointments of illustrious men to high honors.

Within each letter, Cassiodorus observed a particular regularity that generally conforms to the administrative style of the day. Most commence with a *proemium* that introduces the subject matter in a highly abstract form, often in terms of an ethical or legal principle, followed immediately by the particular circumstance attracting the court's attention (for example, a complaint or report that had reached the king) and then a decision or command for the recipient of the letter (the *sententia*). Not infrequently, letters conclude with *exempla*, or moralizing intended to elaborate on the court's decision. Topics include appointments to honorary offices in Rome and clerical positions at the palatine *scrinium* of Ravenna; conflicts and alliances with the eastern empire and other western states; taxes, the allocation of resources to the military, and the maintenance of urban infrastructure; legal decisions concerning civil disputes and criminal cases; and formal edicts addressed to urban or provincial populations. Although most letters have the formal structure of administrative writing, their level of detail varies widely. Some, such as *Variae* 5.39 (see Section 5), concerning fiscal arrangements in Spain, offer the kind of dense detail expected of a formal edict. Others, such as 3.35 to Romulus (perhaps the same Romulus Augustus who retired from the imperial throne in 476), offer only a few lines vaguely confirming the undisclosed decision of a magistrate. Still others were clearly intended to be literary