

Introduction

ITALY IN THE SIXTH CENTURY

Sometime after 540, the former Roman magistrate Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator, or Cassiodorus, completed the collection of letters known as the *Variae*. He did so in the midst of the tumultuous conflict between the ruling Goths of Italy and the forces of the eastern Roman emperor, Justinian. This conflict, the Gothic War, would last eighteen years (536–54) and was the impetus for Cassiodorus's publication of an epistolary profile of his previous service under the Gothic Amal rulers. Probably less clear to Cassiodorus at the time was the fact that, like the Gothic War itself, the record of public service embedded in the *Variae* was a testimonial to a final stage in the unraveling of a tradition for imperial power in the former provinces of the western Roman Empire, making the *Variae* a palimpsest of momentous events, both of its own time and also of the extended history of the end of the western Roman Empire.

The end of the western Roman Empire and the emergence of “successor states” (Vandalic North Africa, Visigothic Spain and Gaul, Frankish and Burgundian Gaul, and Ostrogothic Italy itself) was a complex and protracted process that occurred for different reasons on a region-by-region basis over the course of the fifth century, but it is a process that had direct bearing on Italy's political position in Cassiodorus's lifetime. By the sixth century, the western Mediterranean was no longer organized by a single, coherent state apparatus. Political and economic

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structures had become regionalized and reoriented around nonprofessional military elites. Being Roman, too, had transformed in meaning and had yielded to more regional, and more relevant, kinds of identities. By contrast, imperial power in the eastern Mediterranean had become even more focused on Constantinople as a “new Rome.” Although the fifth century had also imposed profound changes upon the political culture and social structures of the eastern Mediterranean, the eastern Roman Empire nonetheless preserved the administrative, fiscal, and cultural instruments of imperial power to a degree not seen in former western provinces in the sixth century. Thus, by Cassiodorus’s lifetime, the western “successor states” and the eastern Roman Empire represented increasingly divergent historical trajectories. Nonetheless, the interconnectedness of the eastern and western Mediterranean should never be dismissed. The constant movement of ecclesiastical envoys, royal and imperial delegations, merchants and tradesmen, armies and migrant peoples, and even private entrepreneurs, ensured that political, religious, and cultural communication persisted between the western and eastern Mediterranean throughout the sixth century.

The position of Italy in this new matrix of what had been a centralized Roman provincial system was perhaps unique, in that it had become a frontier between the evolving “successor states,” on the one hand, and the eastern Roman Empire, on the other. For centuries, Italy had served as the center stage of a vast empire and as a reservoir for imperial wealth and political talent. But by the beginning of the sixth century, Italy’s control over western provinces had contracted considerably to include primarily the Italian peninsula and its Alpine hinterland, Sicily and the Dalmatian coastal zone. The consequent reduction in economic resources that attended the loss of a provincial system necessitated that the scale of imperial administration in Italy was proportionately, and substantially, reduced. These changes, however, were neither abrupt, nor even conclusively disruptive. The process of paring provinces away from Italy’s control occurred mostly in the first three decades of the fifth century. By the time the Goths arrived under Theoderic in 489, Italy already had over half a century to accommodate itself to very different circumstances. New economic hinterlands and new channels of political patronage developed for the political elite, a process of regionalization that transformed Italy into a self-contained polity that was no longer dependent on provincial resources. Similarly during the fifth century, the detachment of the emperor’s role as the ceremonial figure of state from the exercise of military power, visible particularly during the reigns of Honorius (393–423) and Valentinian III (425–55), had paved the way for the period of *arriviste* warlords in Italy that culminated in the reign of Odoacer as king of Italy (476–89). It was largely during the period following the death of Valentinian III that real governing power resided with a military class settled in northern Italy and ruling from Ravenna, while the traditional senatorial elite of Rome assumed a more or less ancillary role in the political culture of

Italy. Thus, when Theoderic arrived during the generation of Cassiodorus's father, the political, administrative, and economic patterns of governance over which he assumed control had already been set. Theoderic's primary innovation was to graft the army that had followed him from the Balkans (collectively known today as the "Ostrogoths") onto the military hierarchy of Italy's existing government.

Thus, the Italy reflected in Cassiodorus's *Variae* was liminal, both geographically and temporally. The nearly continuous (and always competitive) political dialogue that Italy had exchanged with the eastern empire since the early fifth century contributed to the maintenance of a political language that was the direct legacy of Roman Empire. In this sense, Italy maintained the pretensions of an imperial state to a degree far greater than other western regions. The ancient density of Italy's urban centers also contributed to a relatively complex late-antique administration. This maintenance of ancient tradition, so pronounced in the *Variae*, became the hallmark of the Amals, the Gothic ruling family, first under Theoderic, and then with his successors, Amalasantha and Athalaric. At the same time, many of the realities imposed upon other regions of the postimperial West are visible in Cassiodorus's lifetime: diplomatic communication between royal courts that reveals the insecurity of political partnerships, new ideologies based on Romans as "civilians" and a culturally distinctive (and nonprofessional) military class, contracted economic and administrative horizons, and the increased importance of royal oversight to compensate for the increasingly inadequate reach of a professionalized administration.

For a region that is both an inheritance from Roman Empire and a legacy of its demise, Italy in the sixth century is notoriously difficult for modern historians to characterize. On the one hand, so many markers point to continuity with the previous imperial culture of Roman Italy—the maintenance of fiscal habits, relatively robust attention to urban fabric, and the appointment of traditional political offices such as consuls and praetorian prefects. On the other hand, capturing the essence of Italy in the sixth century requires carefully assessing the scope and character of what are often regarded as "imperial" features. For example, while there is ample testimony to tax collection, the evidence usually appears in response to the difficulty of sustaining regular collection with a reduced administration. Similarly, while it is clear that urban centers remained the focal point for economic and administrative activity in the sixth century, it is also clear that the city's role as a theater for these activities relied, in part, on the central administration, but also increasingly on the local church as civic benefactor. And where appointments to political office are amply attested, so too is reliance of the government on new roles, such as Gothic *saiones* (special agents of the royal court), to fulfill traditional administrative needs. Even the baroque style of a text like the *Variae* can be interpreted with completely different frames of reference—either in terms of stylistic continuity with a classical intellectual and governmental tradition, on the one

hand, or in terms of rhetorical pretension in the face of insistent cultural change, on the other.

Compounding the difficulty of understanding sixth-century Italy is the nature of the sources. Although fairly abundant, textual sources describing Ostrogothic Italy can often be frustratingly myopic. Where sources for sixth-century Italy are rich, they can nonetheless sound like a chorus of half-utterances. The *Variae*, by contrast, provide perhaps the most holistic view of the region. As a collection of letters representing the concerns and activities of a late-antique administration, the *Variae* provide sometimes opaque, sometimes vivid perspectives of a startling range of life in the sixth century (diplomatic letters, administrative directives, the resolution of legal disputes, sentences for crimes against individuals and the state, military mobilization, attention to building projects, and appointments to military, administrative, and even honorary posts). As a whole, the collection offers the most fully elaborated and coherent expression of governmental ideology to survive from antiquity. Additionally, it informs our understanding of interstate relations, state administration and finances, land management practices, the church and religious culture, ethnic relations in Italy, literary interests, and the limits of “scientific” knowledge for the period. Furthermore, the collection offers tantalizing glimpses into the lives of women, children, the rural poor, and slaves—the frequently underrepresented voices of late ancient sources. The panoply of individuals addressed and mentioned in the collection is nothing short of a propogographical treasure, with many persons of both high station and low who otherwise would have escaped the historical record. Thus, the *Variae* are an astonishing resource, providing not only a complete profile for life in Ostrogothic Italy, but also a frame of reference for both late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The liminal quality of Ostrogothic Italy, and of the *Variae* as its putative witness, has ensured that Cassiodorus’s collection figures prominently either as a source representing the end of antiquity or as a source projecting the beginning of the Middle Ages. Modern scholarship has accordingly availed itself of the *Variae* for *longue durée* studies of law and government, economy and the environment, the church and social history. In terms of sheer literary precocity, not to mention the impact of the collection on our understanding of an era as a cultural and historical setting, it would not be unreasonable to compare Cassiodorus’s legacy to the impact of Chaucer on the modern understanding of fourteenth-century England, or William Shakespeare on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Of course, like any textual source of great compass, reading the *Variae* imposes considerable challenges. As a collection depicting the legal, administrative, and social life of Italy, the *Variae* have always enjoyed a particular legitimacy as “documentary” sources. Their authenticity as faithful “records” of the aims, interests, and policies of the Amal court has been almost universally accepted. This is partially the

result of the assumed documentary nature of the letters and their potentially enormous historical utility, which has made them impervious to the same kind of literary analysis that has proven so useful to understanding the presentational aspects of epistolography in earlier classical settings. As a result, studies increasingly approach the *Variae* as highly rhetorical literary products that owe more to the compositional strategies and interests of Cassiodorus after he vacated his last official post. Assigning more agency to Cassiodorus as opposed to Amal policy has proven difficult because of the lacunose nature of the collection's historical context. The obscurity of important issues, such as the date of the collection's completion, Cassiodorus's relationship to actors in the great political and religious dramas of his day, and where he completed the collection, have made the *Variae* resistant to precise placement within political and social circumstances. Thus, whether the *Variae* should be understood as a "record" of Cassiodorus's efforts as amanuensis to individual Gothic rulers, as a "representation" of the ideological platform that Cassiodorus designed for Gothic rulers during thirty years of service, or as the "creation" of his authorial intentions after the fact, all remain a matter of debate.

The rich detail and impressive range of topics found in the collection encourage scholarship to treat each letter as an authentic response to a distinct historical moment, although the fact that the Gothic War dominated political life in Italy at the precise moment that Cassiodorus gathered the collection cannot be dismissed. Both the Gothic War and internal evidence for Cassiodorus's authorial intentions requires that scholarship take into account the extent to which the collection "performed" a carefully choreographed presentation of the Gothic government of Italy. The extent to which letters may be trusted as unadulterated witnesses to specific historical moments or as selective presentations adapted during the composition of the collection must be weighed carefully and on an individual basis. It is probably best to reach a compromise, in which the *Variae* are understood as a collection of documents that preserve the activities of the Gothic government, which Cassiodorus later revised for ideological coherence and consistency, to the extent of altering the content of some letters and, perhaps, in more specific cases, inventing others.

CASSIODORUS AS STATESMAN AND AUTHOR

Details concerning Cassiodorus's life (c. 485–580) are known almost exclusively through his own writing (most prominently, the *Variae*). The family of the Cassiodori seem to have originated in the eastern empire but sometime before the mid-fifth century had become large property owners in Calabria. The family's resources in land and horses likely brought them to the attention of imperial authorities and Cassiodorus's great grandfather is noted for having mobilized these resources in the

defense of Sicily and southern Italy against the Vandals.¹ Valentinian III honored Cassiodorus's grandfather with an appointment to the imperial bureaucracy as *tribunus et notarius*, in which capacity the famous Roman general Aetius entrusted him with a diplomatic expedition to Attila.² Although the family's political role during the troubled years between the death of Valentinian III and the deposition of Romulus Augustulus is unattested, Cassiodorus's father had a secure place in the administration of Italy, holding a succession of governorships and palatine offices first under Odoacer (476–89) and then under Theoderic.³

Cassiodorus probably first came to Theoderic's attention while his father held the praetorian prefecture of Italy (*Praefectus Praetorio Italiae*). At the time, Cassiodorus served his father as an aid (*consiliarius*) and had an opportunity to recite a panegyric in honor of Theoderic.⁴ By the time his father received patrician rank as a reward for his service as *Praefectus Praetorio* (*Variae* 1.3 and 1.4), Cassiodorus had assumed responsibility for official state correspondence as *Quaestor*, an office that he held circa 507–11.⁵ Cassiodorus's consulship in 514 was probably intended to sustain the connection between the Gothic court and the Cassiodori. Cassiodorus reciprocated in 519 by offering a panegyric to Theoderic's son-in-law, before the Senate, on the occasion of Eutharic's consulship and later by composing a history of the Goths at Theoderic's request.⁶ When a member of a prominent senatorial family, Boethius, fell out of favor with Theoderic in 524, Cassiodorus was at hand to assume the condemned scholar's previous post as *Magister Officiorum*, an office that he continued to hold probably until 528, under Theoderic's successor Athalaric.⁷ Cassiodorus's particular affinity with the Amal court continued after leaving this office. When the coastline of southern Italy had been threatened, presumably again by the Vandals, Cassiodorus abandoned literary retirement and, imitating his grandparents, assumed responsibility for the military mobilization of the region and provisioned Gothic soldiers from his own resources.⁸ With the end of the military threat, Cassiodorus then assumed the primary role in restoring order to the region.⁹ By the time of his appointment as *Praefectus Praetorio* in 533, Cassiodorus had already provided valuable service to the Gothic government in a variety of capacities, both officially and *ex officio*, for nearly three decades.

1. *Var.* 1.4.14; 1.4.17.

2. *Var.* 1.4.10–13.

3. *Var.* 1.4.3–6.

4. *Ordo generis Cassiodorum* 29–30.

5. *Var.* 9.24.3–5.

6. *Var.* 9.25.3–5.

7. *Var.* 9.24.6–7.

8. *Var.* 9.25.8–9.

9. *Var.* 9.25.10.

The period of Cassiodorus's tenure as Praetorian Prefect must have been the most difficult of his public career. Although Cassiodorus was doubtlessly intimate with the personalities and activities of palatine service at Ravenna, the years from 533 to 540 would witness a rapid succession of changes of royal personalities. Theoderic had died in 526, leaving his daughter Amalasantha as regent over governmental affairs for her young son Athalaric. When Athalaric died prematurely in 534, Amalasantha appointed her kinsman Theodahad as co-ruler. Internecine feuding among Gothic families and Theodahad's ambitions led to Amalasantha's death in the following year (535). The murder of Amalasantha, who had favored rehabilitating the relationship between the Amals and the Roman Senate, may have precipitated Justinian's attempt to conquer Italy. Soon after her fall, Belisarius crossed from Carthage, where he had recently toppled the Vandals from their control of North Africa, and initiated the Gothic War. Shortly thereafter (536), Gothic soldiers assassinated Theodahad on suspicion of betraying Italy in exchange for a lucrative settlement with Justinian. The Gothic soldiery elevated Witigis as the next king of Italy.¹⁰ Based on the testimony of letters written in the name of Witigis (*Variae* 10.31–35), Cassiodorus probably continued to serve as *Praefectus Praetorio* until the capture of Ravenna in 540, whereupon Belisarius transported Witigis and the Gothic court to Constantinople. The Gothic War then entered a new phase, with the accession of the energetic Totila as king of the Goths. Eastern imperial successes in Italy became reversals and the war continued until 554.

For Cassiodorus and other Italians intimate with the Gothic government, the capture of Ravenna, which remained firmly in imperial hands throughout the war, represented the loss of a way of life. The *Variae* are carefully silent concerning the war, even in the two prefaces where Cassiodorus explains the purpose of the letter collection. However, later sources from Cassiodorus further removed from the war make it clear that the Gothic War represented a dramatic rupture in the social and political realities to which a generation of palatine elite had become accustomed. In the preface to his *Institutiones*, Cassiodorus recalled how peaceful endeavors had been abandoned on account of "raging wars and turbulent struggles in the Italic kingdom."¹¹ Sometime during the Gothic War, Cassiodorus collected, revised, and composed the letters that he called the *Variae*. An earlier generation of scholarship assumed that Cassiodorus assembled the *Variae* between 537 and 540, by which reckoning the capture of Ravenna figured as the terminus of his political aspirations, a view that has cast the *Variae* as mementos of a former public life and which, inadvertently, has obscured ambitions for the rehabilitation of the bureaucratic elite that Cassiodorus might have had after the fall of Ravenna. However, analysis of the political context suggests that Cassiodorus may have

10. Procopius, *Wars* 5.2–11.

11. *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum, praefatio* 1.1.

produced the *Variae* later in the 540s, in response to the vacillating fortunes of the Gothic War. In addition to the uncertainty concerning the date of the *Variae*, it is not known for certain where Cassiodorus assembled the collection. Individual letters do not disclose whether, as original documents, they may have been written on behalf of Gothic kings in residence at Rome, Ravenna, or, perhaps more likely, itinerantly as the court moved between the various estates owned by the Amal family throughout Italy. Similarly, a range of possibilities have been suggested concerning where Cassiodorus assembled the individual letters as a collection—at Rome after the siege of Witigis, at Ravenna either before or during the siege of Belisarius, at Cassiodorus's estates in Calabria (Vivarium), or perhaps when he was a political exile in Constantinople. The supradiction to the *Variae* addresses Cassiodorus as *Praefectus Praetorio et Patricius*, leading some to assume that he compiled the *Variae* while still in office. However, no mention is made of his patrician status within individual letters or the prefaces to the collection. Even *Variae* 9.24 and 9.25, which announce his appointment as *Praefectus Praetorio*, are silent on the matter of patrician status, indicating patrician status did not accompany this appointment. If he received patrician status upon leaving office (as occurred in the case of his father), this probably did not happen until Witigis set aside royal authority in 540. It then seems likely that Cassiodorus received patrician status from Justinian, who made a habit of awarding this particular honorary title as a conciliatory gesture during the Gothic War.¹² There is, therefore, a strong case for Cassiodorus having received the patriciate after 540 in Constantinople, where he commenced work on the *Variae* in particularly volatile political circumstances.

Regardless of the precise date and location of “publication,” the *Variae* are a product of the Gothic War, a period in which the relative successes of Amal governance faced the revisionism of eastern imperial propaganda and the animosities of those political exiles, particularly the senatorial elite of Rome, who had reasons to disavow prosperity under a “barbarian” regime. From the report of Cassiodorus's *De anima*, a philosophical treatise that he appended to the letters, assembling the *Variae* had been a troublesome and lengthy process. The difficulty of completing the *Variae* should not be imagined in terms of the effort required to collect the 468 letters that Cassiodorus included in the collection. Cassiodorus's analogy for the completion of the *Variae* as being “received in the quiet of the harbor to which I had come, if not with praise, at least freed from care,” implies having weathered at least the threat of social and political censure before arriving at sanctuary.¹³ Whether the safe harbor that Cassiodorus imagined in the *De anima* was Constantinople, where sources locate him as late as circa 550, or at Vivarium, where

12. Procopius, *Wars* 5.8.3–4; Jordanes, *Getica* 313.

13. *De anima* 1.

Cassiodorus eventually retired and dedicated himself to religious scholarship, the context in which he produced the *Variae* was one of conflict.

The foundations for this conflict were complicated. First, it seems that the Amal family had come to depend upon the municipal elites of Italy as a source of bureaucratic manpower, as opposed to the senatorial elite of Rome who, although still the recipients of traditional honorary titles, were less frequently selected for offices with real political and judicial authority. The condemnation of Boethius was a case in point for the mistrust that existed between palatine and senatorial circles. Cassiodorus held senatorial rank, but his family's patrimonial base was provincial Calabria, where the combination of land, horses, and education had made several generations of Cassiodori indispensable to the government of Italy. It should be noted, however, that the emperor under whom the Cassiodori first became political participants (Valentinian III) was the last emperor to spend significant time at Rome; subsequent Cassiodori flourished under the patronage of rulers who preferred northern Italy to the senatorial seat of social and political interaction at Rome. The success of Amal "outsourcing" for administrative talent is evident in the intimacy of Cassiodorus's career with royal affairs. Panegyrics to Theoderic, Eutharic, and Matasuntha (Theoderic's granddaughter whom Witigis married) speak to open commitment to the regime. Similarly, the consistency in range of topics addressed by individual letters of the *Variae* implies that, contrary to the tradition of alternating public office with private retirement (*otium*), Cassiodorus was, more often, a permanent fixture among Amal rulers. Where it should be expected that the traditional competences of the *Quaestor*, *Magister Officiorum*, and *Praefectus Praetorio* would have differentiated the topics of letters in the *Variae*, it appears instead that Cassiodorus attended a similar range of legal, administrative and diplomatic duties in each office. The *Variae* even draw attention to Cassiodorus's having assumed the responsibilities outside of his current office as a token of his value to the court.¹⁴ Cassiodorus may not have been unusual for having made a career of his dedication to the Amal court. Theoderic apparently requested the company of Cassiodorus's aging father out of respect for their shared affection.¹⁵ Those who did not similarly bask in palatine preferment had cause for resentment. The *Variae* also draw attention to the alienation that Amal preferment had caused, making objections to Cassiodorus's appointment as Praetorian Prefect particularly rancorous.¹⁶

The events of the initial phase of the Gothic War only exacerbated prejudices and hostilities that were otherwise probably latent in Italy's political culture. Witigis' siege of Rome (then under Belisarius's control) and later Milan resulted in the

14. *Var.*, *praefatio* 1.7; 9.24.6.

15. *Var.* 3.28.

16. *Var.* 11.1.18.

execution of senatorial hostages at Ravenna and, in the case of Milan, the profligate slaughter of civilians.¹⁷ During the course of the Gothic War, members of prominent senatorial families from Rome found refuge and receptive audience with Justinian in Constantinople. It was during this period that the execution of Boethius and his father-in-law, the esteemed senator Symmachus, became a symbolic token for the injustice inherent in a “barbarian” government. Cassiodorus, whose own political career had advanced in the wake of Boethius’s downfall, as *Praefectus Praetorio* of the last Amal king, was conspicuously vulnerable. It is not known precisely whom among the Gothic court Belisarius removed to Constantinople. Procopius reports that Witigis and Matasuntha were deported with a Gothic host of great size.¹⁸ Provincial Italians who had constituted the majority of the administration in Italy (especially its most numerous branch under the *Praefectus Praetorio*) are not specifically mentioned, although Cassiodorus’s residence in Constantinople is known from later sources.¹⁹ The *Constitutio Pragmatica*, with which Justinian planned the postwar settlement in 554, maintains an ominous silence concerning the administration of Ravenna, while stipulating the privileges of the senatorial elite (among them, specifically, several relations of Boethius), the church, and the great landowners. The period from 540 to 554, therefore, was one in which the future of the former administrative elite of Italy was undetermined. As a record of that administration, whether authentic or partially fabricated, the *Variae* aimed at shaping the postwar settlement of Italy. Unfortunately, Cassiodorus’s better-known reputation (particularly in the Middle Ages) as a Christian exegete, have overshadowed what was probably a period of great political urgency for both Cassiodorus and his former political dependents in the praetorian prefecture of Italy.²⁰

THE *VARIAE* AS AN EPISTOLARY COLLECTION

Cassiodorus arranged the letters of the *Variae* in twelve books, perhaps in purposeful symmetry to the twelve books of his Gothic history which was in circulation during the Gothic War. The first five books of the *Variae* include letters written by Cassiodorus in the name of Theoderic. Books 6 and 7 comprise *formulae* for appointments to public office, honorary titles, and particular legal and administrative enactments. In Books 8 and 9, Cassiodorus included letters written on behalf of Theoderic’s grandson Athalaric. The final selection of letters written in the names of Amalasantha, Theodahad, and Witigis combine in Book 10. Cassiodorus

17. Procopius, *Wars* 5.26.1 and 6.21.39.

18. Procopius, *Wars* 7.1.1.2.

19. Vigilius, *Epistula* 14; Jordanes, *Getica*, *praefatio* 1.

20. Note the list of religious texts mentioned in the *praefatio* of Cassiodorus’s *De orthographia*.

reserved Books 11 and 12 for the letters that he wrote in his own name as *Praefectus Praetorio*. Within each book, the content varies widely. Each book contains between twenty-five and fifty letters, with a considerable range in length of individual letters. Most letters fall between 200 and 250 words, with some barely managing a terse 50 words and other, more ornate letters swelling well beyond 1,000 words. In general, Cassiodorus observed a tendency to “bookend” by placing letters notable for the prominence of the recipient at the beginning and end of each book. Thus, books often commence and conclude with diplomatic letters to emperors or western kings, letters to the Senate or appointments of illustrious men to high honors.

Within each letter, Cassiodorus observed a particular regularity which generally conforms to the administrative style of the day. Most letters 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 disclosure of the particular circumstance attracting the court’s attention (for example, a complaint or report having reached the king), and then a decision for, or command to, the recipient of the letter (the *sententia*). Not infrequently, letters conclude with *exempla* or moralizing intended to further elaborate on the court’s decision. Topics range from letters of appointment to honorary offices at Rome to clerical positions at the palatine *scrinium* of Ravenna; letters to the eastern Empire or other western states concerning conflicts and alliances; administrative letters concerned with 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 maintain consistency with respect to the formal structure of administrative letter writing, the level of detail within individual letters varies widely. Some letters, such as 5.39, which concerns 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 Augustulus retired from the imperial throne in 476), offer only a few lines vaguely confirming the undisclosed decision of a magistrate. Still other letters were clearly intended to be literary works in their own right. A handful of letters in each book unfold lengthy disquisitions on encyclopedic topics (geography, nature, history, the arts, and the sciences) to an extent that, while providing fascinating insights into the intellectual culture of the sixth century, actually obscures the purpose of the letter.

Thus the formal and thematic structure of the *Variae* is quite complex, to which must be added the presence of two fairly elaborate prefaces, which Cassiodorus included at the beginning of Books 1 and 11. These prefaces are themselves sophisticated literary compositions. The first preface explains how Cassiodorus accepted the task of compiling the *Variae* at the request of colleagues, “so that the coming generation might esteem both the disinterested deeds of a clear conscience and the

burden of my duties, which I had endured for the sake of common advantage.”²¹ The preface then elaborates the exchange between Cassiodorus and his interlocutors. Cassiodorus had declined his colleagues’ request initially because the daily circumstances of public service had not allowed him to exercise the kind of style that would commend his reputation. His colleagues protested, citing the trust that Gothic kings had placed in him, the prestige of his office as Praetorian Prefect, and the enhanced value of letters written under genuine, as opposed to rehearsed, circumstances, “it will happen that those who are situated in more tranquil circumstances will more happily obtain the habit that you practiced while tossed about amid the dangers of various altercations.”²² Additionally, the preface claims that these colleagues reasoned Cassiodorus’s letters would preserve a record of the probity with which he and those appointed by him served Gothic kings and, furthermore, that he should not fear censure from an audience that so approved his history of the Goths.²³ In response, Cassiodorus yielded out of affection for his associates, but refused others to model their future efforts on his own hurried writing. Hence, the preface explains that his twelve books represented a more polished version, entitled *Variarum* as a token for the variety of materials contained within the collection.²⁴ The first preface ends with a discussion of the ancient precepts of literary style and their relation, in general terms, to the topics discussed in the collection.

The second preface, introducing Books 11 and 12, opens with the curious observation that a preface often allows an author to anticipate the objections of an audience.²⁵ Cassiodorus then continues the main theme of the first preface: the respective censure or approval that his style of writing might secure with different audiences. Cassiodorus notes that readers accustomed to more leisurely circumstances (*otiosi*) would be likely to reject his effort, while he anticipated understanding and a favorable reaction from those who were similarly occupied in public service (*occupati*).²⁶ The preface also alludes to how concern of censure had led Cassiodorus to represent “fewer things than done,” but that in reporting what he had, he followed the advice of a trusted friend, Felix, whose discernment in such matters was proven by good character, knowledge of the law and refinement in style. It was at Felix’s behest that Cassiodorus included the final two books by which his own voice in state service should be known.²⁷ The second preface ends on a note similar to the first, with a discussion of precepts of style, this time related to Cicero’s recommendation concerning the relationship between reading and

21. *Var., praefatio* 1.1.

22. *Var., praefatio* 1.8.

23. *Var., praefatio* 1.8–11.

24. *Var., praefatio* 1.12–14.

25. *Var., praefatio* 11.1.

26. *Var., praefatio* 11.1–3.

27. *Var., praefatio* 11.4–5.

good composition. Both prefaces end with Cassiodorus excusing himself for having written at unseemly length and by inviting the readers to judge the collection on its own merits.²⁸

In addition to their relative novelty among epistolary collections, the two prefaces are remarkable in terms of how they provide Cassiodorus with his own voice. In a collection where the majority of letters have been addressed in the names of various Gothic rulers, the prefaces have an important role in signaling to the audience that Cassiodorus's authorship went beyond merely acting as a collector and compiler of state documents. The topic of literary style addressed in both prefaces was particularly suited to anchoring Cassiodorus's authorship of the letters. Treatments of rhetoric had for centuries viewed style as an index of interior character. As Cassiodorus's interlocutors in the first preface reminded him, "it is scarcely possible that speech is found inconsistent with character," and, more pointedly, the letters contained "the image of your mind."²⁹ Similarly, the preface to Book 11 drew explicit attention to the authorship of letters that Cassiodorus wrote in his own capacity as *Praefectus Praetorio*, "so that I, who have acted as the royal spokesman in ten books, should not be considered unknown for my own role."³⁰ It is also noteworthy that the two prefaces mirror each other in both function and themes, despite the fact that they introduce letters written under the cover of different names. Both prefaces express concern about the style of writing, the collection's reception by different audiences, the manner in which the collection represents the moral integrity of persons involved in the Gothic government, and the extent that potential repudiation shaped Cassiodorus's presentation of the letters. Literary presentation and historical reality are carefully balanced in these prefaces, as befits a collection the purpose of which was to portray a particular ethical virtue as the active agency in government. As Cassiodorus noted, it was his interest to tincture the merits of those in state service "in some measure with the color of history."³¹ Interestingly, this statement may reflect Cassiodorus's understanding of the function of epistolary collections. In his *Chronica*, written in 519, Cassiodorus referred to the epistolary exemplar, Pliny the Younger, as *orator et historicus*, whose talent was visible in the many works that had survived.³² For Cassiodorus, letter collections had the moral imperative of classical historiography and, like classical historiography, were just as subject to rhetorical fashioning.

Some sense of that rhetorical fashioning may be visible in the arrangement of books in the *Variae*. In a collection intended to rehabilitate the reputations of the

28. *Var.*, *praefatio* 1.18 and *praefatio* 11.9.

29. *Var.*, *praefatio* 1.10.

30. *Var.*, *praefatio* 11.6.

31. *Var.*, *praefatio* 1.9.

32. *Chronica* 756.

palatine elite who served the Amals, Cassiodorus's own place in the collection, even when elusive, is purposeful. The two books of *formulae* (Books 6–7) separate the first five books written in the name of Theoderic (under whom Cassiodorus served as both *Quaestor* and *Magister Officiorum*) from those written in the name of Athalaric, whose accession occurred while Cassiodorus was still *Magister Officiorum*. Although Theodor Mommsen and others have attempted to differentiate letters of Cassiodorus's quaestorship from those written as *Magister Officiorum* under Theoderic, Cassiodorus nowhere signaled such a transition. In effect, the *Variae* have subjected the appointment that Cassiodorus received as a consequence of Boethius's execution to complete erasure. Even in letters for Athalaric which commence Book 8, where an informed reader may assume that Cassiodorus acted as *Magister*, the fact of his service in this office is undetectable. Mention of Cassiodorus as *Magister* appears only in the last letters written for Athalaric (*Variae* 9.24 and 9.25), which announce Cassiodorus's appointment as Praetorian Prefect. In effect, this completely disassociates the end of Theoderic's reign and the beginning of Athalaric's from Boethius's trial. Positioning the announcement of Cassiodorus's prefecture as the last letters attributed to Athalaric also has rhetorical purpose. Cassiodorus would have served as *Praefectus Praetorio* for more than a year before Athalaric's death, but the positioning of *Variae* 9.24 and 9.25 as the last letters attributed to Athalaric clearly signals Books 10–12 as representing the period of Cassiodorus's prefecture. It is in Book 11 that the reader first finds letters that Cassiodorus wrote in his own name announcing his elevation as *Praefectus Praetorio* (*Variae* 11.1–3). In the first (11.1) to the Senate at Rome, Cassiodorus attributed his elevation to the good governance and wisdom of both Athalaric and Amalasantha, with an extended eulogy of Amalasantha as the embodiment of all virtues possessed by previous Amal rulers.³³ Similarly, the first letter announcing his prefecture in the name of Athalaric drew attention to Cassiodorus's tutelage under Theoderic, suggesting that Cassiodorus's character as a servant of the state derived from an unbroken chain of Amal governmental virtue.³⁴ Book 10, the intervening space between Cassiodorus's appointment to the praetorian prefecture (*Variae* 9.24–25) and his acceptance of the office (*Variae* 11.1–3), offers a subtle portrayal of the rupture with that record of governmental virtue. The letters of Book 10 represent the reigns of Theodahad and Witigis as wholly inferior affairs. The report of Books 11 and 12, however, where Cassiodorus writes in his own name, represents continuity with the previous reigns of Theoderic, Amalasantha, and Athalaric and suggests that Cassiodorus and his colleagues were capable of governing Italy irrespective of failed kingship under Theodahad and Witigis. The manufacture of this rupture through the placement of letters suggests that the gov-

33. *Var.* 11.1.

34. *Var.* 9.24.3–8.

ernmental virtue of the bureaucratic elite was something received from exemplary tutors and the extent of failed government represented in Book 10 rested on the shoulders of Theodahad and Witigis.

Cassiodorus's hand in the arrangement of the collection is also apparent at the level of individual pairs of letters. In many ways, the *Variae* is a study in contrasts and comparisons. In some cases, the themes linking otherwise unrelated correspondence are subtle, and in other cases, quite deliberate. For example, in Book 3, Cassiodorus pairs two letters which deliver sentences for unrelated violent crimes, but with very different results intended to portray the ability of the court to discern what the justice of the day required in different circumstances: on the one hand, *Variae* 3.46 reduces a sentence of exile for the rape of a young woman, and on the other hand *Variae* 3.47 imposes permanent exile in a case of murder. In Book 4, Cassiodorus presents a series of letters, with one (*Var.* 4.29) addressed to the *Praefectus Urbis* at Rome who embezzled instead of built, while the following letter praises a dutiful senator for undertaking the patronage of a new building project, and the next sought to remind an otherwise forgetful bishop of his promise to complete an aqueduct. At times, thematic links may be explained in terms of Cassiodorus's own reading at a given moment. For example, in Book 5, the opening diplomatic pieces (*Var.* 5.1–2) to completely different nations appeal to familiarity with Tacitus on the part of the collection's readers. But at other times, it is clear that Cassiodorus intended for his audience to locate good and bad *exempla* through the comparison of letters. Thus, in Book 2, two elaborate letters explore the theme of filial devotion, with one (*Var.* 2.14) ordering a trial for a possible parricide, and the other (*Var.* 2.15) elevating a son to office as a legacy of his father's support for the state.

The art of depiction in the *Variae* is also present in the encyclopedic knowledge that forms a major theme throughout the collection. Cassiodorus positioned letters representing aspects of *enkyklios paideia* (encyclopedic learning) in each book of the collection: histories of different disciplines of the liberal studies, explanations of geography and natural history, and digressions into the importance of various arts and sciences. Although not present in every letter, the theme is present enough to draw attention to important persons (such as Boethius and Symmachus) and to invite comparisons (such as between Theoderic and Anastasius or Theodahad and Theoderic). In as much as *enkyklios paideia* drew from a coherent intellectual tradition that capitalized upon a discursive presentation of knowledge, Cassiodorus's strategy of selectively scattering encyclopedic content throughout the collection conformed to an established mode for representing universal knowledge. Importantly, representations of *enkyklios paideia* in the wider tradition of the literature were often tied to moral, and therefore ideological, representations of the world. The extent that the *Variae* participate in this literary tradition is tied to the ideological presentation of the government of Italy as "enlightened" and informed by universal ethics. In the case of each digression, the unfolding of a topic from the