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Politics and Tradition Between Rome, Ravenna and Constantinople

A Study of Cassiodorus and the Variae, 527–554

M. SHANE BJORNLIIE



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AND CONSTANTINOPLE

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POLITICS AND TRADITION BETWEEN ROME, RAVENNA AND CONSTANTINOPLE

The *Variae* of Cassiodorus have long been valued as an epistolary collection offering a window into political and cultural life in a so-called barbarian successor state in sixth-century Italy. However, this study is the first to treat them as more than an assemblage of individual case studies and to analyse the collection's wider historical context. M. Shane Bjornlie highlights the insights the *Variae* provide into early medieval political, ecclesiastical, fiscal and legal affairs and the influence of the political and military turbulence of Justinian's reconquest of Italy, and of political and cultural exchanges between Italy and Constantinople. The book also explores how Cassiodorus revised, updated and assembled the *Variae* for publication and what this reveals about his motives for publishing an epistolary record and for his own political life at a crucial period of transformation for the Roman world.

M. SHANE BJORNIE is Assistant Professor of Roman and Late Antique History at Claremont McKenna College. His research interests include ethnography, late antique letter collections, ancient political culture and the 'decline and fall' of the Roman Empire.

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For Atia, Aisling, Adelheid and Michelle

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Att. Sett.</i>	S. Leanza, ed., <i>Atti della Settimana di Studi su Flavio Magno Aurelio Cassiodoro</i> (Soveria Mannelli, 1986)
<i>Cassiod.</i>	S. Leanza, ed., <i>Cassiodoro: dalla Corte di Ravenna al Vivarium di Squillace, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi</i> (Soveria Mannelli, 1993)
<i>CC Just.</i>	M. Maas, ed., <i>Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian</i> (Cambridge, 2005)
<i>CCSL</i>	<i>Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina</i>
<i>Cités Ital.</i>	M. Ghilardi, C. Goddard and P. Porena, eds., <i>Les cités de l'Italie tardo-antique (IVe–VIe siècle): Institutions, économie, société, culture et religion</i> (Rome, 2006)
<i>CIC</i>	<i>Corpus Iuris Civilis</i>
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
<i>Crisis Oik.</i>	C. Chazelle and C. Cubitt, eds., <i>The Crisis of Oikoumene: The Three Chapters and the Failed Quest for Unity in the Sixth-Century Mediterranean</i> (Turnhout, 2007)
<i>CSEL</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
<i>CShB</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae</i>
<i>LCL</i>	<i>Loeb Classical Library</i>
<i>MGH AA</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores Antiquissimi</i>
<i>MGH CM</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Chronica Minora</i>
<i>MGH Form.</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Formulae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi</i>
<i>MGH Poet.</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Poetae Latinae Aevi Carolini</i>
<i>MGH SRM</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum</i>
<i>MGH SRG</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum</i>
<i>Ostrogoth.</i>	Barnish, S., and F. Marazzi, eds., <i>The Ostrogoths from the Migration Period to the Sixth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective</i> (Woodbridge, 2007)

List of abbreviations

<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia. Cursus Completus, Series Graeca</i>
<i>Phil. Soc.</i>	A. Smith, ed., <i>The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity</i> (Swansea, 2005)
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Latina</i>
<i>PLRE</i>	<i>Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire</i>
<i>Teoderic.</i>	<i>Teoderico Il Grande e I Goti d'Italia: Atti del XIII Congresso Internazionale di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo</i> (Spoleto, 1993)
<i>TLRE</i>	A. Jones, <i>The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey, AD 284–395</i> (Baltimore, 1964)
<i>TTH</i>	<i>Translated Texts for Historians</i>

Unless otherwise noted, all primary sources have been translated by the author.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book began with an interest in explaining the dramatic departures of Cassiodorus' epistolary collection, the *Variae*, from other paradigms for the publication of letter collections in ancient and late antique writing. Doing so has required questioning the validity of a number of trusted models for the political, literary and social context of the *Variae*. As a result, this book offers a substantial departure from the *communis opinio* concerning Cassiodorus, the *Variae* and sixth-century Italy. However, for all that is new in this book, much derives from steadily accumulated advances in the understanding of how the ancient literate elite wrote and read epistolary collections, the impact of literature on political culture and the sensitivity of communities to the transmission of political ideas and ideology. Even with the support of new scholarly approaches to old problems, suggesting a new model for understanding Cassiodorus and the *Variae* has required the interest, generous encouragement and frank criticisms of a good many people.

The many accumulated debts incurred while writing this book began with a doctoral thesis at Princeton University, where I benefited immeasurably from the mentorship of Peter Brown and Bob Kaster. Peter Brown combined scholarly wisdom with indefatigable patience in a manner worthy of the very best late antique bishops. Bob Kaster managed the difficult feat of clothing red ink with kindness and respect, and was always available to read Cassiodorus' Latin with me. For their willingness to continue reading and commenting on the book manuscript, I owe a professional debt; for the *humanitas* and friendship, I am grateful at a more personal level. Others read and offered valuable comments on substantial portions of the dissertation, subsequent articles or the manuscript itself. Among these, I am especially grateful to Clifford Ando, Celia Chazelle, Gerda Heydemann, Bill Jordan, Michael Maas, Volker Menze, James O'Donnell, Ralph Mathisen, Michele Salzman, Bryan Ward-Perkins and Ian Wood. For conversations, comments on more specialized points and friendly encouragement, I should also like to thank Jonas Bjørnebye, Kim Bowes, Thomas Brown, Averil Cameron, Maurizio Campanelli,

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Finally, I dedicate this book to my four Muses – my wife and our three daughters. There is no proper recompense for the time that they cheerfully sacrificed that I might write this book.

CONTENTS

<i>List of abbreviations</i>	page x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii

Part I. The Variae as windows onto painted curtains

Introduction	I
--------------	---

1 CASSIODORUS AND ITALY IN THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES	7
Empire in the sixth century	7
Cassiodorus and the Gothic War	11
Locating the <i>Variae</i>	19
The <i>Variae</i> in a context of political urgency	26

Part II. Cassiodorus and the circumstances of political survival

Introduction	35
--------------	----

2 THE AGE OF BUREAUCRACY	39
Ideology and legitimacy	39
Structures of political power at Constantinople	41
The structure of the eastern bureaucracy	44
Bureaucratic intellectual culture	48
Neoplatonism and bureaucratic culture	53
3 THE REIGN OF JUSTINIAN	60
Regime change	60
Bureaucracy under siege	62
Contesting law and religion in Constantinople	67
The Nika Revolt	72
The aftermath	77
4 VOICES OF DISCONTENT IN CONSTANTINOPLE	82
The literary public of political complaint	82
Zosimus at the threshold of the debate	85
Marcellinus Comes on Zosimus and empire	90

Contents

The <i>Anonymus Valesianus</i> as imperial propaganda	94
Junillus Africanus and the biblical basis for empire	97
The anonymous <i>Dialogue on Political Science</i>	99
Procopius and the 'secret' riposte	102
The Gothic histories of Jordanes and Cassiodorus	109
John Lydus at the centre of conflict	113
John Malalas	117
Echoes of controversy	121
5 THE ANICII BETWEEN ROME, RAVENNA AND CONSTANTINOPLE	124
New audiences for Constantinopolitan controversy	124
The Western Senatorial and Palatine Divide in Constantinople	127
The political importance of the Anicii	134
The fall of Boethius and the Amals	138
Western Anicii in Constantinople during the Gothic War	144
Memories of Boethius and Theoderic during the Gothic War	147
The <i>Ordo generis</i> of Cassiodorus	159
6 THE MEMORY OF BOETHIUS IN THE <i>VARIAE</i>	163
Rewriting family histories	163
Rewriting the <i>De consolations</i> and the Anicii	165
The constructed memory of Boethius	171
<i>Part III. Reading the Variae as political apologetic</i>	
Introduction	185
7 LITERARY ASPECTS OF THE <i>VARIAE</i>	189
The prefaces and audience of the <i>Variae</i>	189
The rhetorical purpose of <i>varietas</i>	199
The <i>Variae</i> and the late antique chancery	206
8 ANTIQUITAS AND NOVITAS: THE LANGUAGE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN THE <i>VARIAE</i>	216
Justinianic law as <i>novitas</i>	216
<i>Antiquitas legis</i> in the <i>Variae</i>	222
The virtue of conserving the past	227
The <i>formulae</i> as models of traditionalism	230
The ethics of public building	234
The <i>Variae</i> in contrast	240
Church building in the <i>Variae</i>	248
<i>Civilitas</i>	251

Contents

9	NATURA AND LAW IN JUSTINIAN'S NOVELLAE AND THE VARIAE	254
	Sixth-century cultural debates	254
	The new natural law and the classical tradition of <i>natura</i>	256
	Classical <i>natura</i> and the divine	260
	Christian interest in <i>natura</i>	262
	Neoplatonic interest in <i>natura</i>	265
	<i>Natura</i> in the <i>Variae</i>	268
	<i>Natura</i> as the source of tradition and moral governance	273
	Cassiodorus' sources for <i>natura</i>	279
10	READING GOOD GOVERNANCE IN THE VARIAE AND THE DE ANIMA	283
	Discerning probity	283
	Procopius and reading nature	287
	Cassiodorus and the portrayal of reading probity	289
	The <i>De anima</i> and the soul as the instrument of reading probity	293
	<i>Conscientia</i> and spiritual light	299
11	THE VARIAE AS APOLOGETIC NARRATIVE	306
	Cassiodorus and self-presentation	306
	Theodahad as a rhetorical foil	311
	Theodahad's failed vision	314
	Rhetorical arrangement in the <i>Variae</i>	320
12	CONCLUSION: INNOVATIVE TRADITIONALISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCE	329
	<i>Bibliography</i>	334
	<i>Index</i>	365

PART I

The Variae as windows onto painted curtains

INTRODUCTION

Sometime in the late 560s a group of artisans carefully removed, tessera by tessera, the portraits of more than a dozen people from the mosaics flanking the nave of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. These mosaics portray, on the south wall, the palace (*palatium*) of the Amal king Theoderic conflated with a profile of the urban landscape of Ravenna and, on the north wall, a profile of the nearby suburb of Classe. The figures removed from the two mosaics originally held ideologically key positions before the city gates of Ravenna and Classe and within the colonnaded arches of the *palatium*. In their stead, the mosaicists filled the vacancies of the portals and arches with mosaics portraying draperies and coloured brick. Only disembodied hands, extending beyond the altered zones, and palimpsest shadows of the former figures remained to remind the audience that earlier associations had been expunged from the church.¹ These new empty spaces represent carefully arranged fields of rhetorical communication that have much to tell about the political, religious and cultural realities confronting their contemporary audience.

Built and consecrated early in the reign of Theoderic (491–526), a so-called barbarian king of the Arian Christian sect, Sant'Apollinare Nuovo was a monumental public space that would accumulate contradictory associations over the course of the first half of the sixth century.² Through its physical proximity to the *palatium* of Theoderic in the heart of Ravenna, the church in the first stage of its history contributed to the celebration of Amal governance in Italy. The figures previously visible in the architectural spaces of the nave mosaics (including a portrait of Theoderic and a dedicatory inscription bearing his name) signified the close association between political and religious conceptions of the late

¹ On this function of *damnatio memoriae*, Hedrick, *History*; Urbano, 'Donation', 71–110; Flower, *Forgetting*.

² In general on Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Deliyannis, *Ravenna*, 146–74; on the deletions of iconography and portraits sponsored by the Amals, 164–72.

antique state.³ After 540, when Justinian's soldiers entered Ravenna and initiated what would become a long period of eastern imperial control of the city, it became necessary to detach the church from the obvious celebration of the political successes of the Amal dynasty. The need for this intervention in public memory did not become imperative until after 554, when Justinian's *Constitutio Pragmatica* finally declared eastern imperial victory in what had been nearly two decades of war in Italy (the Gothic War). Thus, late in the 560s, the bishop of Ravenna, Agnellus, rededicated the church in the name of St Martin and systematically removed images identifiable with Amal rule.⁴ For those who might have remembered the significance of the original figures, such a *damnatio memoriae* served as a reminder that the Amals, despite their success under Theoderic, had ultimately failed as a political and dynastic regime. The erasure privileged a competing interpretation of the Amals by which they were understood as heterodox Christians who had subjected Italy to 'barbarian' rule. The curtained empty zones of mosaic in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo illustrate how the clear stamp of Theoderic's success as a ruler, visible elsewhere throughout the city in its architectural fabric, was re-impressed on Ravenna as the legacy of barbaric despotism that had been conquered by the eastern Roman Empire.

The nave mosaics at Sant'Apollinare Nuovo testify to the ability of late antique media to present communicative silences. They offer an interesting analogue to the proper subject of this study – the collection of legal and administrative letters that Cassiodorus compiled as the *Variae*. The altered mosaics of Sant'Apollinare and the letters of the *Variae* have much in common as 'windows onto painted curtains'. Each in its own way represents a response to the polemic surrounding the postwar reputation of Amal rule in Italy. In fact, this study will argue that the *Variae* act as a piece of polemical literature in a manner comparable to that of the visual medium of the mosaics. Where the mosaics literally opened windows onto painted curtains to obscure a previous ideological message, the individual letters of the *Variae* operate as tesserae in the production of a composite image that also functions as an ideological curtain or screen. In the preface to his heavily abridged translation of the *Variae*, Thomas Hodgkin in 1886 vented his frustration at attempting to penetrate the opacity of the letters by stating, 'The curtain is the picture.'⁵ This description characterized for Hodgkin the difficulty entailed in understanding, in its own terms, the performance of sixth-century history that he encountered in the *Variae*. What Hodgkin wanted in

³ Agnellus, *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* 85–9.

⁴ Wood, 'Theoderic's monuments', 252–60; Deliyannis, 'St. Martin'. ⁵ Hodgkin, *Letters*, vi.

The Variae as windows onto painted curtains

the *Variae* was a window into the day-to-day operation of the state in sixth-century Italy. What he found was a culturally specific performance. This study suggests that reading the *Variae* is considerably more complicated than translating the surface rhetoric and bureaucratic jargon of a late antique chancery. Rather, the collection represents Cassiodorus' attempt to construct a composite image of Amal rule in Italy for a particular audience. In this sense, the *Variae* are an attempt at literary portraiture which responds to events and conditions at a particular moment in Cassiodorus' career. Much as the later artisans of Sant'Apollinare preserved some features of the original mosaic programme (the architecture of the *palatium* and urban profiles of Ravenna and Classe), introduced features to create a new programmatic statement (twin processions of martyrs and saints) and effaced other elements entirely (Theoderic and members of his court), Cassiodorus too engaged in a revisionist presentation of Italy under the Amals by selectively preserving, enhancing and deleting from the historical reality that the letters purport to represent.

The *Variae* comprise 468 documents that Cassiodorus arranged in twelve books.⁶ As a collection of dispositive letters (legal judgments and administrative directives), the *Variae* treat an almost panoptic range of official activities: appointment to public offices, the collection of taxes and the management of state property, criminal cases and civil disputes, the maintenance of urban amenities, and the diplomatic correspondence of Amal rulers to eastern emperors and other so-called barbarian rulers. Taken as a whole, the *Variae* span more than thirty years of Cassiodorus' activities as an intimate member of the palatine service attached to the Amal court.⁷ The presumably official nature of the collection, its chronological breadth and the rich range of materials contained within the individual letters have made the *Variae* a prized source for scholars concerned with early sixth-century Italy. The *Variae* have been prominent in studies of political and ecclesiastical affairs, fiscal and legal administration, urban life and rural production, barbarian ethnogenesis and the transmission of classicism. Yet it must be emphasized that the *Variae* are also among the most idiosyncratic of late antique epistolary collections.⁸ Typical epistolary collections take the form of personal letters directed by a

⁶ See Fridh, *Open*; O'Donnell, *Cassiodorus*; Pferschy, *Formular*; Krautschick, *Cassiodore*; Viscido, *Studi*; MacPherson, *Rome*; Barnish, *Cassiodorus*, xiv–liii; Jouanaud, 'Pour qui Cassiodore', 721–41; Gillett, 'Cassiodorus' *Variae*', 37–50; Kakridi, *Cassiodorus Variae*; Giardina, *Cassiodoro*; Bjornlie, 'A reappraisal', 143–71.

⁷ The letters purportedly represent Cassiodorus' official correspondence as quaestor, *magister officiorum* and praetorian prefect under, successively, the rulers Theoderic, Athalaric and Amalasuntha, Theodahad and Witigis.

⁸ Note the apt description of O'Donnell, *Cassiodorus*, 86.

single author to members of a wider community of correspondents. The *Variae*, however, contain presumably official governmental documents. The edicts, judicial responses, diplomatic letters and administrative *formulae* written in the names of various Ostrogothic rulers have the appearance of a résumé of the Ravenna chancery. As an additional departure from the norm, Cassiodorus addressed two prefaces (opening Books 1 and 11) to the audience of the *Variae* and he attached to the collection a treatise on the soul (the *De anima*), the preface of which continues Cassiodorus' previous address to the audience of the *Variae*.⁹ This level of direct interaction with an intended audience is not found in earlier epistolary collections. The combination of documentary material with what is essentially a philosophical inquiry into the source of wisdom (the *De anima*) similarly lacks a precedent. Furthermore, Cassiodorus embedded within the letters of the *Variae* an encyclopaedic range of digressive material. Individual letters contain excursions pertaining to everything from the behaviour of animals, the motion of stars and the nature of music, to the origins of writing, the history of law and the accomplishments of engineering. In terms of their formal structure as a collection and the content of individual letters, the *Variae* are as unprecedented among epistolary collections as they are among bureaucratic writing and legal literature. Cassiodorus' authorship is uncontested. What remains problematic and debatable is the extent to which the letters represent the mode of expression characteristic of the Ostrogothic chancery rather than Cassiodorus' own agenda.¹⁰

This book suggests that the letters represent a documentary record of the Ravenna chancery which Cassiodorus later subjected to heavy revision reflecting the political exigencies that attended the fall of the Amal court during the Gothic War. In particular, this book suggests that Cassiodorus drew heavily upon themes of the political discourse of Constantinople at a time when it seemed that the eastern imperial control of Italy was imminent and his own social and political position had suddenly become quite precarious.¹¹ From Cassiodorus' perspective during the opening stages of the Gothic War, the protraction of the conflict to almost two decades (535–54) and the total fragmentation of political power in Italy in the aftermath could not have been foreseen.

It was in this period, during the late 530s and early 540s, that the *Variae* were politically relevant, not during the preceding decades when Cassiodorus first penned the original letters in fulfilment of various

⁹ Cassiodorus later referred to the *De anima* as the thirteenth book of the *Variae*, *Expositio Psalmorum* 145.2.

¹⁰ See Fridh, *Terminologie*, 1–5.

¹¹ Compare McKitterick, 'Roman history', 21–9.