

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, PhD

‘On the Soul,’ ‘On the Liberal Arts,’ ‘On orthography,’ Cassiodorus. (485-585)

The Setting

Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator (his daily life name) was a Christian scholar, diplomat, , and administrator working with the same government, that of Theodoric, for which his predecessor, Boethius, had worked. (In fact it was on the death of Boethius that Cassiodorus inherited the high diplomatic position he would for most of his life occupy within the Ostrogoth Kingdom, arguably the most influential of the multiple ‘barbarian tribes’ which were dismantling the Roman Empire.

Family background

Cassiodorus was of a distinguished lineage, several generations back. For at least three generations the ancestors of Cassiodorus had served as stalwart protectors of both the declining Roman and the nascent Ostrogothic Kingdom as stalwart protectors. They had contributed to warding off competing ‘barbarian’ incursions, and subsequently to manning the new bureaucracy of the Gothic Empire.

Cassiodorus’ career path

From the age of twenty Cassiodorus began to work for the Ostrogothic court, where his colleagues were rapidly impressed by his organizational skills and particularly by his writing style, which, though to our ears rather pompous and overly courtly, was of a tenor greatly valued in Theodoric’s court. (One can only imagine the rare language blends generated within the formerly Roman provinces, in which Silver Latin was being mated with the Germanic structures of Gothic.) By the end of his courtly career, Cassiodorus had risen to a position equivalent to that of Prime Minister of the Ostrogothic Kingdom.

Advancing into the power structure

The ultimate ambitions of Cassiodorus were already apparent in his early career, when he collaborated with the Pope (Agapetus I) to build a library of Greek and Latin texts which were intended for use in a Christian school which Cassiodorus hoped to have founded in Rome .(It was Cassiodorus’ trademark that wherever he went, in working as a Christian for the Goths, he was on the lookout for ways to fuse Christian spirituality with scholarship, with what we might today call research projects.) This papal project failed, but was to prove a significant milestone in the efforts of Cassiodorus’ entire life project of devoting books and literate culture to the preservation of the classical past. The last decades of his life were to be spent in Constantinople, where he buried himself in the reading of Christian and classical texts, and greatly deepened his sense of the meanings of Christianity. This deepening involved grasping the intractable issue of Eastern versus Western Christianity, the perplexing relationships between Goths and Romans, and the relation between Orthodox worshippers and their Arian leaders.

The writings of Cassiodorus

Like his predecessor Boethius, Cassiodorus was a voluminous writer, compiler, and scholar. We have from his pen a vast library of official correspondence—written by Cassiodorus as part of his service to the Emperor Theodoric. Cassiodorus has left us a history of the Goths, which survives only in the abridgment by Jordanes, a sixth century Gothic historian, who tightened up Cassiodorus’ multi-volume History of *the Goths*. There is a major text, *Training in Divine and Secular Literature*, written between 543-555, which outlines the features of the trivium and quadrivium educational system, which was to dominate educational training throughout the Middle Ages. (It was to become a capstone for the pedagogical practice of that monastery known as Vivarium, which Cassiodorus established and directed in the last

years of his life. And which was developed in close physical and spiritual proximity to the monastery which Benedict of Nursia was just in the process of founding in southern Italy.) In that pedagogical work Cassiodorus was at pains to undertake at Vivarium, he worked to prepare his students for a highly trained reading of the Bible, including both the reading of Christian historians, Flavius Josephus and the Latin fathers of the Church, and any number of Church based scholars from the early Christian period. Cassiodorus wrote a treatise on the soul, its virtues and vices—one of his few texts concerned with theology. There was also a text version of the Bible as well as a detailed commentary on the Psalms.

Other works

These latter works were written during the extensive period when Cassiodorus was living in Constantinople, and had leisure time for scholarship and reflection. So was a late work, *De Orthografia*, a compilation of the studies of eight distinguished grammarians of Latin, containing their aids to correct spelling and handwriting—which were of great importance in a world dependent on eye and hand to preserve written thought. Finally Cassiodorus busied himself in Constantinople with the writing of an oversized, and loosely structured *Historia Tripartita*, largely borrowed from the ecclesiastical histories of three contemporary historians—Theodoret, Sozomen, and Socrates—and reproduced carelessly and with many errors of spelling and fact; to which we might add that the work in question became one of the most used ‘world histories’ throughout the Middle Ages. In a pre-printing age where endless hand copying did the culture work, errors were an unceasing hazard, as were the mistakes of understanding which followed on those errors.

In addition to these brief comments on Cassiodorus’ writings, we need to mention the special attention he, like his predecessor Boethius, paid to the development of musical notation, and more broadly his contributions to the place of music in the development of the early church. He was well trained in the Greek system of musical notation, the only procedure in use, and in his applications of musical performance, to monastic work, he proved himself to be, along with Boethius (discussed above) the most influential exponent of musical art between antiquity and the later Middle Ages. Accordingly Cassiodorus figures as the most essential source available for the discussion of Church psalm and chanting in the formative period of Christianity in the West. He is also a source of information on many of the earliest instruments essential to Church rituals: shawm, bagpipe, organ, Pan pipe.

The tumult of the time

Life could not remain placid for long, in the climate of contentious ideas, which embraced Cassiodorus. The heat of the Gothic-Byzantine Wars in Italy (535) eventually obliged him to return to his family estates in Calabria, near the town of Catanzaro. (He expresses with great bitterness his sense that his diplomatic and ministerial career, on behalf of the order offered by Gothic rule, was in the end of no avail.) Retirement was simply a recognition of the turmoil of open country throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Once more in Calabria, he set up a monastery, at Vivarium, and filled it with monks and books—from his own private library—before returning for a final visit to Constantinople. By the establishment of this monastery Cassiodorus was fulfilling a lifetime dream, to sustain the tradition of classical culture right through into its ‘new’ cultural world of early Christianity. The very formation of this vision, in the crumbling conditions of sixth century Italy, had to demonstrate a beautiful counter cultural awareness of the world, and of the historical passage of cultures.

Cassiodorus in history

The historical place of Cassiodorus, is locked into the breadth of vision by which he committed himself to that Vivarium monastery into which he invested so much of his live energy, not to mention his abundant personal donations to the library with which he outfitted his religious retreat.

The choice Cassiodorus had to make, in stocking his library from his own personal collection, was how to reconcile classical learning with Christian doctrine, a feat in the accomplishing of which he was obliged to convince himself and his ecclesiastical overseers that the understanding of Greek and Roman classics was the firmest path to the learning process and into the antecedents of the Christian faith. We have

noted, however, that Cassiodorus' concern with pedagogy was an independent disciplinary concern of his, and that his innovations in that regard were among his enduring contributions to the mediaeval mind. For Cassiodorus was a pedagogue as well as a Christian devotee.

Hand work and brain work

The care Cassiodorus devoted, to the pedagogical skills of his monks, extended beyond the details of orthography, and of correct Latin usage—he doubled down on the importance of Latin grammar, which was shaky with many of the monks, involving retraining in the case system of Latin, the use of punctuation, and clarity of handwriting. To students of writing—you and me—who were brought up in the era of the printing press, the immense effort of carrying through a whole cultural transformation with your hands was to recognize—it is something we easily forget—that writing is foremost a manual act, performed by those wonderfully flexible appendages in which our arms terminate. It seems a piquant footnote to this point that in the Vivarium monastery those who proved slow at learning were given tasks in the fields, where in ploughing they were enabled simply to invest another use for the above mentioned appendages.

Study guide

Do Boethius and Cassiodorus seem to you deeply influenced by the new cult of Christianity? By their time the Christian Church had grown to maturity: in the Council of Nicaea the fundamental outlines of Christian belief had been laid down, the Church was expanding throughout western Europe, and the new cities and proto cultures, which had been developing from Ireland to Constantinople, were sprouting churches and church communities. Are these symptoms of interior change? Would the individuals who were generating this change be living out lives that were accordingly different from those that characterized lives in pre Christian classical times? The work of Peter Brown, on the hinge period between classical antiquity and the early middle ages, is a rich launching point for identifying the growing traits of a new period of world history. You might add, into your consideration of our own period, your thoughts about the present historical moment. We communicate quickly and too often, these days, on quasi apocalyptic matters. Do you think we are at the end of a cultural era, or at the beginning of a new one?