

CASSIODORUS SENATOR, Flavius Magnus Aurelius (generally known as Cassiodorus, although his main name was Senator), statesman, writer and founder of the religious community of Vivarium; born around 485, possibly in Squillace (in modern-day Calabria, Southern Italy), died around 580 in Vivarium.

THE LIFE OF CASSIODORUS

Cassiodorus was born around 485 to a family of possibly Syrian origins. His ancestors had been living in Squillace, southern Italy, for at least three generations and had already held important public offices: his great-grandfather had defended Bruttium (Calabria) and Sicily from an attack by the Vandals; his grandfather was on friendly terms with Aetius and had taken part in an embassy to Attila; and his father enjoyed a distinguished career at the imperial court of Ravenna and then became governor of Sicily. When Theoderic arrived in Italy in 489, he handed over the island to him, thereby gaining his confidence. His timely support for the Ostrogoths was rewarded with the praetorian prefecture.

It was in the service of his father that Cassiodorus began his public career in the role of *consiliarius*, probably before his twentieth birthday. In 507, he was promoted to quaestor, a kind of legal adviser of the sovereign who had the task of writing the public documents of the kingdom. He held this office at least until 511. According to the so-called *Anecdoton Holderi*, a short summary of a biography of Cassiodorus possibly written by himself, he obtained the quaestorship thanks to a (now lost) panegyric in honor of the Gothic king, although it is likely that his father's influence had also played a significant role. When Cassiodorus was at the court of Ravenna, he wrote many letters on behalf of the sovereign and his activity was rewarded with the consulate in 514.

Between 511 and 523, he did not hold public offices with the exception of the consulate, which involved only honorary duties. Scholars since Mommsen have often conjectured that he was appointed governor of Lucania and Bruttium, but this view cannot be maintained, as Giardina has shown. The absence of Cassiodorus from the public scene coincided with a period of intense literary activity: during this time he wrote a panegyric in honor of Theoderic, which he recited in Rome in 519, and on the same occasion he circulated a *Chronica* written on behalf of Eutharic, Theoderic's heir. It is also likely that he began writing the now lost *Gothic History* in this period and concluded it before 533.

Cassiodorus' return to the court occurred during the most serious crisis of Theoderic's reign, the trial of Boethius on a charge of high treason. The philosopher, who was *magister officiorum* at that time, was replaced by Cassiodorus himself, who held the office during the last years of Theroderic and oversaw the accession to the throne of his grandson Athalaric (526) as an eight-year-old boy. The regent, Theoderic's daughter Amalasuntha, decided to discharge him in 527; it seems that he had to assume a military command for a short while following Athalaric's accession, probably in order to defend the Italian coasts from a possible Vandalic incursion.

Cassiodorus returned to the palace in 533, once again at a moment of great uncertainty for the kingdom. After the execution of a group of nobles who had plotted against Amalasuntha, he was appointed as praetorian prefect. While executing this most important office of Ravenna's court, Cassiodorus witnessed the death of Amalasuntha, the accession to the throne of Theodahad, his deposition and the first years of the reign of Vitiges, whom he praised in a panegyric that he delivered in order to celebrate the king's marriage with Matasuntha, Amalasuntha's daughter. It seems that he no longer played any role in the drafting of the royal correspondence after 537/538, leading most historians to conjecture that he had left the court, perhaps following the execution of a group of hostages of senatorial rank by order of Vitiges in 537. However, the end of his public career had no dramatic consequences for Cassiodorus, who was able to devote himself undisturbed to his literary

interests. At the end of his service at Ravenna's court, he may have been awarded the title of patrician.

The end of Cassiodorus' public career coincided with a profound inner crisis, often referred to using the term 'conversion'. It was in any case a clear break from both a personal and a literary point of view. After the *Variae*, he wrote only religious works and never again tried to seek an office at either Ravenna or Constantinople. The few references to his public career to be found in his religious works are overshadowed by bitterness and repentance; the glory of the world is considered a source of sin and only Christ can offer salvation.

Literary sources are silent on the life of Cassiodorus between 540 and 550, but it is likely that he went into exile at Constantinople during this time, either spontaneously or because he was forced to move there together with king Vitiges by Belisarius. It is impossible to rule out that he remained in Italy until 546/547, when the fightings between Totila and Justinian's troops forced many aristocrats into exile, but this is on the whole unlikely. For there is no evidence that he had already founded Vivarium before moving to Constantinople. On the 18th of March, 550, Pope Vigilius, who was on the Bosphorus, notes that Cassiodorus was there too and defined him as a *religiosus vir*, a religious man. He was briefly involved in the Three-Chapters controversy, but his works suggest that he avoided taking sides openly.

His return to Italy is impossible to date with precision; however, it is likely that he did not set foot on Italian soil again before the spring of 555. Shortly afterwards, he founded Vivarium, which is described as a monastery (*monasterium*) in his works even if no rule has survived and it is not known whether Cassiodorus ever took the monastic vows. Vivarium was the realization of a project already sketched two decades earlier, at the time of Pope Agapitus (535-536), to whom Cassiodorus had confided that he desired to create a theological school in Rome. The community of Vivarium quickly grew into one of the main Italian cultural centers and became specialized in the copying of manuscripts and the translation of Greek works into Latin.

Information about the last phase of Cassiodorus' life is scarce. At the age of ninety-two, he composed a short booklet, entitled *De orthographia (On Correct Writing)*, in order to help the monks who were not able to write correctly in Latin. He died in around 580, almost certainly in Vivarium. His burial place is unknown. In 1952, a sixth-century sarcophagus with two short Greek graffiti was uncovered near Squillace and attributed to Cassiodorus, but this conjecture is far from certain.

THE WORKS OF CASSIODORUS

According to the *Anecdoton Holderi*, Cassiodorus began his career with a (now lost) panegyric of Theoderic. He also wrote panegyrics on behalf of Eutharic (519) and king Vitiges (536/537). Only a few fragments of these works survive. A panegyric of Amalasuntha, which was read in front of the senate in 533, is included in *Variae* 11.1.

His first fully preserved work is the *Chronica*, a universal chronicle that ends in 519 with the consulate of Eutharic. Cassiodorus also wrote a *Gothic History (Gothorum Historia)* in twelve books, in which he narrated the deeds of the Gothic people from their mythical origins until the reign of Theoderic. This work is regrettably lost, but an epitome has survived (entitled *De origine actibusque Getarum*, often abbreviated to *Getica*) thanks to Jordanes, who summarized the *Gothic History* in Constantinople in around 550. The relationship between these writings has been debated for centuries. It is now generally accepted that Jordanes was not a slavish epitomist and that he integrated the information provided by Cassiodorus with other sources, although the general layout of the *Getica* and many specific passages can be clearly traced back to Cassiodorus. The *Gothorum Historia* was the first history of a Germanic people that was written not from the perspective of the Romans, but from that of the Germanic people itself. Its immediate aim was to legitimate the succession of Eutharic and, after his death, that

of his son, the young Athalaric. It was completed by 533. According to Momigliano, Cassiodorus continued to update his work until 551, but most scholars have now rejected this reconstruction.

Cassiodorus' main work is represented by the *Variae*, which consists of twelve books containing 468 letters, edicts and *formulae* for appointments composed on behalf of the Gothic rulers between 507 and 537/538. It is a source of fundamental importance concerning the administration of late antique Italy, as well as sixth-century politics and diplomacy. The title alludes to the different stylistic levels which were used when drawing up the epistles. The *Variae* contains ordinary chancery letters, documents that are the result of an extremely refined rhetorical education and epistolary panegyrics. Its date of composition, the possible reworking of some epistles and their recipients have been the subject of lively scholarly debate. The traditional thesis, according to which this letter collection was published before 540 without significant alterations in order to serve as an epistolary model and to bear witness to the political importance assumed by rhetoric and style during the Ostrogothic kingdom, has recently been challenged by Bjornlie, who argues that the *Variae* was instead carefully edited (altering several documents) and published during Cassiodorus' stay in Constantinople in order to favour his return to the political fray in either Byzantium or Ravenna. Any changes that the letters underwent during the editorial process doubtless deserve the utmost attention, but Bjornlie's reconstruction has been met with considerable scepticism, since it does not take into due consideration what Cassiodorus writes in the preface of his work, namely that he was writing in order to provide future public servants with an epistolary model. Bjornlie's endeavours also overlook the true significance of his conversion, which put an end to any desire to return to his previous life, as is clearly shown by Cassiodorus' religious works.

When Cassiodorus was about to finish the *Variae*, he began working on a short philosophical-theological treatise on the soul entitled *De anima*, which was most likely completed before the fall of Ravenna (540). It represents the first religious work written by Cassiodorus and is generally placed in a close relationship with his conversion, although a marked interest in patristic texts is already detectable in his secular works. In a passage of the *Expositio Psalmorum*, Cassiodorus considers the *De anima* as the thirteenth book of the *Variae*, but this statement should be understood in the sense that the booklet circulated in the same manuscripts containing the letters and was placed after the twelfth book of the *Variae*.

His next religious work, the *Expositio Psalmorum*, was probably written in Constantinople. It is based on Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, but it also contains materials from other authors, such as Jerome, Hilary of Poitiers and Cyprian, as well as biblical quotations and reflections ascribable to Cassiodorus himself. In it he combines traditional allegorical exegesis of the Bible with a particular attention on the relationship between Christian knowledge and secular wisdom, the heritage of the classical world.

The two books of the *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum*, completed in Vivarium and aimed primarily at the members of his religious community, are dedicated to the relation of divine and secular learning. Modeled on the *Divinae Institutiones* of Lactantius as well as the *Instituta divinae legis* of Junillus, they represent a kind of bibliographic companion for the Christian scholar. The goal of this work was to reconcile the classical education with the study of the Bible and the fathers of the Church, showing that the traditional Graeco-Roman culture, although partly defaced by paganism, is fundamental to the notions that are necessary in order to look into the mysteries of the Scriptures. The genesis of the work was complex: it is possible that some parts date back to 535-536 and that several changes were made in subsequent years. At least three different versions are attested. Probably the *Institutiones* were already being circulated by 560/562, although the so-called *recensio maior* in two books, the last revision of the work edited by Cassiodorus, might have been finished shortly before his death in around 580.

During the last years of his life, Cassiodorus worked on the *Complexiones in Epistolis apostolorum et Actibus apostolorum et Apocalypsi*, a brief summary and commentary on the non-evangelical books of the New Testament, and the *De orthographia*, which he finished when he was 92 years old. This is a short treatise aimed at helping the monks who were charged with copying the manuscripts, and it consists of extracts from Latin grammarians such as Lucius Annaeus Cornutus and Priscian.

At the beginning of the *De orthographia*, Cassiodorus lists the works he composed after his conversion, mentioning a book on grammar (consisting of extracts from Donatus and other authors) and a *Liber memorialis* containing the titles of the Scriptures (and thus a very brief summary), both of which are lost. He also wrote a brief autobiographical work, the *Ordo generis Cassiodorum*, which survives in a summarized and reworked form in the so-called *Anecdoton Holderi*. It is not possible to establish whether this was originally an independent work, a letter or a biographical introduction to be placed before his books.

While he was in Vivarium, Cassiodorus promoted the translation of several Greek works into Latin, such as the *Historia Tripartita*, an ecclesiastical history consisting of passages taken from the writings of Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen and Theodoret of Cyrus, which covers the time span between the conversion of Constantine and 429. The translation was actually carried out by Epiphanius Scholasticus, but it is possible that Cassiodorus outlined the plan of the work; the preface was in all likelihood written by him.

Cassiodorus also worked on a commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (*Expositio sancti Pauli Epistolae ad Romanos*), consisting of a revision of Pelagius' commentary which aimed at expurgating its heretical content. The version Φ of the *Institutiones* is accompanied by a short anepigraphic booklet on the date of Easter, the *Computus Paschalis*, which is a slightly modified version of Dionysius Exiguus' *Argumenta Paschalia*; it is likely that this was composed by Cassiodorus himself.

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