

BOOK REVIEW

Politics and Tradition between Rome, Ravenna and Constantinople: A Study of Cassiodorus and the Variae, 527–554. By M. SHANE BJORNLIIE. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. Xiii + 370. ISBN 978-1-107-02840-1.

The *Variae* are a sixth-century collection of 468 letters arranged in twelve books, followed by a philosophical treatise on the soul. While recent scholarship has drawn attention to the literary character of the *Variae* and interpreted them within the socio-political context of Ostrogothic Italy (e.g. C. Kakridi (2005) *Cassiodorus Variae*), the book under review reads them against the background of Justinian's reign and the Gothic War. More specifically, Bjornlie argues that Cassiodorus composed the *Variae* either just before the fall of Ravenna in 540 or after his subsequent arrival in Constantinople with the aim of rehabilitating, in the eyes of the eastern bureaucracy, the Italian elite who had served the Amals.

After an introduction and an introductory chapter, the book consists of two parts. The first of these starts with a chapter sketching the structure and intellectual background of the eastern bureaucracy, emphasizing its devotion to tradition and classical paideia. The next chapter highlights the upsetting nature of Justinian's legal and religious innovations, especially for the bureaucratic elite. According to Bjornlie, this bureaucratic elite had a significant hand in the events of the Nika-riot. Chapter Four elaborates on the images of Justinian and his reforms drawn in literary sources from Zosimus, or at least his interpretation under Justinian, over authors writing under Justinian, to later reinterpretations. Bjornlie's conclusion here is that "to any politically sensitive observer, Justinian's will was not uncontested, nor was his reign entirely secure" (123). This conclusion explains why, in Bjornlie's view, Cassiodorus (and others) focused their efforts not on the Emperor but on the bureaucratic elite.

The next two chapters expand the horizon from Constantinople to Rome and Ravenna. Chapter Five emphasizes the prestige and power of the Anicii not only in Rome but also in Constantinople. The opposition, within Italy, of Rome's senatorial elite to the palatine elite at Ravenna is thus doubled up in the imperial

capital, where the Anicii are close to Justinian whereas Cassiodorus, as a prominent representative of the palatine elite, bets largely on the bureaucratic elite. Chapter Six examines how this opposition is played out in the *Variae* by focusing on the figure of Boethius: according to Bjornlie, the *Variae* at once counter the image of the Amal court and its palatine elite evoked in Boethius' *De consolatione*, and obscure Cassiodorus' own persona at the time and in the aftermath of Boethius' execution.

The other major part of Bjornlie's book consists of five chapters on the *Variae* and a brief general conclusion. Chapter Seven discusses the prefaces and intended audience of the *Variae*, as well as their *varietas* and inclusion of encyclopedic material. Chapter Eight emphasizes the importance, in the *Variae*, of tradition: in Cassiodorus' presentation, the Amal court, in contrast to Justinian, stands for tradition in matters as diverse as justice and building. Chapter Nine focuses on different conceptions of nature (good or good and bad; constant or subject to change) and their implications for legislation. Chapter Ten, in turn, explores the link established in the *Variae* between the ability to penetrate into the deeper meaning and quality of nature and people and the ability to rule well. Chapter Eleven, finally, shows how Cassiodorus selected and arranged the letters in the *Variae* in order to depict himself and the palatine elite that had served the Amals in as positive a light as possible. According to Bjornlie, Cassiodorus' purpose in doing so was to recommend this elite for further bureaucratic service after Justinian's reconquest of Italy—a goal he did not attain.

Bjornlie's book is set to provoke discussion. While most readers today acknowledge that letter collections such as Cassiodorus' are 'part historical reality and part rhetorical presentation' (332), some will disagree with the amount of rhetoric seen in the *Variae* by Bjornlie, who envisages not only selection and arrangement, but also changes and interpolations. Recent research on ancient letter collections suggests, though, that Cassiodorus may not be exceptional in this respect (e.g. R. Gibson (2013) 'Reading the Letters of Sidonius by the Book', in J. Van Waarden and G. Kelly (eds.) *New Approaches to Sidonius Apollinaris*). Other readers will disagree with Bjornlie's political analysis: was there really such an opposition between the emperor and the bureaucratic elite, or between the Roman senatorial elite and the provincial palatine elite? As Bjornlie formulates his argument and constructs his book, this seems a crucial point; but as a matter of fact, his interpretation of the *Variae* has much to recommend it even if one is not willing to answer these questions affirmatively. Indeed, suppose the collaboration between Justinian and his bureaucracy was much smoother than Bjornlie sug-

gests, Cassiodorus had all the more reasons for targeting them, as they could influence imperial decisions. Likewise, if the boundaries between senatorial and Palatine elites were much less strict than Bjornlie suggests— it should not be forgotten, for whatever it is worth, that Cassiodorus' own *agnomen* was Senator! —there was still a reason why Cassiodorus had, and would wish, to rehabilitate the palatine elite before anybody else. As a result, future scholarship on Cassiodorus and his *Variae* will need to engage not only with the many stimulating interpretations of individual letters offered by Bjornlie, but also with his interpretation, sensitive to political power games in Italy as well as Constantinople, of the collection as a whole.

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