

BOOK REVIEW

Cassiodorus. The Variae: The Complete Translation. Translated by M. SHANE BJORNLIIE. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019. Pp. 519. Hardback, \$125.00. ISBN: 978-0-5202-9736-4.

The *Variae* of Cassiodorus, twelve books containing 468 letters and documents spanning three decades of Ostrogothic rule (c. 506-38), have long been mined for information on both the character of Amal kingship in Italy and the life of their author (c. 485-580). A “complete profile” of a time and place straddling the border of antiquity and the Middle Ages (4) seems to be captured in the collection’s pages. Indeed, the survival of the *Variae* is perhaps the single most obvious reason that the reign of Theoderic (489-526) maintains its warm reputation as Roman Italy’s Indian summer. Even Cassiodorus’s flowery chancery style seems to guarantee that the *Variae* embody “the most fully elaborated and coherent expression of governmental ideology to survive from antiquity” (4). The work’s canvas is suitably broad. Individual letters address many of the age’s towering figures: the learned Boethius, for example, the Frankish king Clovis, the Visigoth Alaric II and the Emperor Justinian. Many documents, often anthologized or excerpted, parade Cassiodorus’s encyclopedic knowledge of the arts (the development of Roman drama [4.51] and music [2.40]), the sciences (mechanics [1.45] and surveying [3.52]) and nature (the story of purple [1.2] or the ecology of Bruttium [8.31]), as well as secular history (Alaric’s sack of Rome [12.20]) and legend (Ceres and Pan [6.16]). Most letters, sent either in Cassiodorus’s own name (as Praetorian Prefect) or composed by him for Italy’s Gothic rulers (Theoderic, Athalaric, Amalasantha, Theodehad and Witigis), foreground appointments to office, the dispensation of justice, diplomacy, economic arrangements or social problems. Two books consist solely of formulae (standardized letters of appointment), the kind of bureaucratic boilerplate that has often epitomized the intricacies of the late Roman administration. Such an abundance of topics and correspondents has encouraged targeted strikes that bypass the subtler architecture and themes of the *Variae*.

More recently, however, scholars have begun to treat the *Variae* as a unified literary text (rather than simply a collection of “documents”) and to ask incisive

questions about the personal and political forces that spurred Cassiodorus to revisit his archives and assemble such an idiosyncratic, large-scale work. Shane Bjornlie has been at the forefront of this historicist reassessment. His 2013 study, *Politics and Tradition Between Rome, Ravenna, and Constantinople* (Cambridge University Press), opened up new interpretive fronts in appreciation of the *Variae* (see, for example, the perceptive *BMCR* review by Scott Bruce). The historical and literary-critical foundations Bjornlie laid down there inform both his concise essay in 2017's *Late Antique Letter Collections: A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide* (University of California Press) and the twenty-page introduction to the volume under review. Bjornlie has shown beyond doubt how the discrete political, intellectual and artistic surfaces of the *Variae* meld to project a distinctly positive image of Amal rule in Italy. For Bjornlie the definitive backdrop to the publication of the *Variae* is formed not only by the near certainty of an East Roman victory in Italy following Belisarius's capture of both Ravenna and the Gothic king Witigis in 540, but also by debates about Justinian's headstrong rule rippling through Constantinopolitan intellectual circles. Bjornlie contends that, compiling the *Variae* in Constantinople in the mid-540s (rather than earlier in Italy), Cassiodorus revised documents and letters he had composed years or decades earlier in order to assimilate Amal rule to a vision of philosophically informed collaborative government championed by many in the eastern capital's bureaucratic establishment. The ultimate aim of the *Variae*'s complex apologetic program, he concludes, was to "rehabilitate the reputations of the [Italian] palatine elites who served the Amals" and secure for them a role in the post-war settlement in Italy (13-14). *The Variae: The Complete Translation*, that is, derives from a long and thoughtful relationship between a good scholar and a fascinating text.

It will be the great gift of this volume to permit more readers to read the *Variae* as holistically as Bjornlie and other scholars now do. Previously those seeking out the *Variae* in English were limited to the "condensed translation" (London 1886) of the eminent late 19th-century historian of "Italy and her Invaders," Thomas Hodgkin, or the select letters (110 in number) translated by S.J.B. Barnish for the *Translated Texts for Historians* series (Liverpool University Press 1992). Barnish himself has contributed substantially to the reevaluation of Cassiodorus and the *Variae* in recent years and the introduction and notes to his Liverpool volume remain essential, but Bjornlie has given us the first complete translation of Cassiodorus's masterful exercise in image making and self-presentation. Bjornlie's notes are necessarily minimal but each letter or element is preceded by a synopsis of its contents. Readers desiring fuller commentary can turn to the six volumes of

Cassiodoro: Varie edited by Andrea Giardina, Giovanni Cecconi and Ignazio Tantillo (Rome 2014-20). Bjornlie concludes with three Indices: Individuals; Concepts, Peoples, and Terms; and Places. His underlying Latin text is the edition produced for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* by Theodor Mommsen in 1894 (*MGH AA 12*), which includes contributions from Ludwig Traube. Translation is, as far as possible, “word for word,” attempting to preserve something of Cassiodorus’s “baroque syntactical structures.” Exceptions are necessary, of course, such as overriding Cassiodorus’s “penchant for the future perfect and perfect infinitive,” and some terms (e.g., *imperator*, *regnum* and the titles of administrative posts and ranks) understandably remain in Latin (21). Overall, the translations are fluid and sonorous. Often—especially in comparison to Barnish who typically adjusted his English to accommodate modern sensibilities—Bjornlie’s lexical as well as syntactical fidelity impart an archaic coloring, communicating, perhaps, something of the self-conscious “grandeur” (21) of Cassiodorus’s ornate, metaphorical and rhythmic late Latin prose.

It is worth noting in closing that Cassiodorus’s *Variae* do not stand alone in their day as a rifling of the archives for the purpose of setting the record straight or enshrining a particular version of the past. In the 530s and 540s, in the midst of the Gothic War, Rome’s bishops sponsored compilation and composition of the first two editions of the *Liber Pontificalis*, an invaluable biographical “history” of the Roman episcopacy that reached back to the apostle Peter; the work drew heavily on archival and legendary material, much of it tailored to contemporary ends. Moreover, it was probably in the mid-550s, not long after Cassiodorus assembled the *Variae*, that the final version of the *Collectio Avellana* was assembled. Though the editor(s) of this extensive collection of 244 ecclesiastical and imperial documents remains unidentified, the compilation’s selection and organization were clearly intended to bolster papal authority at a time of crisis provoked by the Three Chapters affair. Against this broad background of archival excavation and literary codification a comprehensive translation of the *Variae* is even more welcome.

DENNIS TROUT

University of Missouri, troutd@missouri.edu