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Cassiodorus

'Variae' – The Letters of Cassiodorus



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The Collected Works of
CASSIODORUS

(c. 485-c. 585)



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‘Variae’ — The Letters of Cassiodorus

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Cassiodorus (1911)

Cassiodorus (1913) by Paul Lejay

The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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Medieval Library

MAGNUS AURELIUS CASSIODORUS



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Variae - The Letters of Cassiodorus



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The Translation



Ancient ruins at Scylletium, near present-day Catanzaro, Calabria, Italy — Cassiodorus' birthplace

‘Variae’ — The Letters of Cassiodorus



Translated by Thomas Hodgkin, 1886

A Roman statesman and scholar of Syrian descent, Cassiodorus was born at Scylletium, near present-day Catanzaro in the Calabria region of Italy, in c. 485. His ancestry included some of the most prominent ministers of the state, extending back several generations. His great-grandfather held a command in the defense of the coasts of southern Italy from Vandal sea-raiders in the middle of the fifth century; his grandfather served in a Roman embassy to Attila the Hun, while his father acted as Praetorian Prefect to Theoderic the Great.

In his twentieth year, Cassiodorus began his career under the auspices of his father, when the latter made him his *consiliarius* upon his own appointment to the Praetorian Prefecture. In his judicial capacity as prefect, he held the absolute right of appeal to any magistrate in the empire and the *consiliarius* served as legal advisor in cases of great complexity. He is believed to have worked as *quaestor sacri palatii* from c. 507-511, as consul in 514, then as *magister officiorum* under Theoderic and later under the regency for Theoderic's young successor, Athalaric. Fortunately, Cassiodorus kept numerous records and letter books concerning public affairs, helping us to better understand his life and times. At the Gothic court, his literary skill was so esteemed that when serving in Ravenna, he was often entrusted with drafting significant public documents. His culminating appointment was as praetorian prefect for Italy, effectively the prime ministership of the Ostrogothic civil government and a high honour for any public career of the time. Cassiodorus also collaborated with Pope Agapetus I to establish a library of Greek and Latin texts that were intended to support a Christian school in Rome.

When Athalaric (c. 516-534), the king of the Ostrogoths in Italy, died in early 534, the remainder of Cassiodorus' public career was dominated by the Byzantine reconquest and dynastic intrigue among the Ostrogoths. His last letters were drafted in the name of Vitiges. Around 537, he left Italy for Constantinople, from where his successor was appointed. It is reported that Cassiodorus remained in the eastern capital for almost two decades, concentrating on religious questions. He notably met Junillus, the quaestor of Justinian I during his time in Constantinople.

Cassiodorus spent his career trying to bridge the sixth-century cultural divides between East and West, Greek culture and Latin, Roman and Goth, as well as between an orthodox people and their Arian rulers. In his retirement, he founded the monastery of Vivarium on his family estates on the shores of the Ionian Sea, when his writings turned to subjects concerning religion. It appears not to have been governed by a strict monastic rule, such as that of the Benedictine Order.

Cassiodorus devoted much of his life to supporting education within the Christian community at large. When his proposed theological university in Rome was denied, he was forced to change his approach to how material was learned and interpreted. His most important work, the *Variae*, shows that, like Augustine of Hippo, Cassiodorus viewed reading as a transformative act for the reader. It is with this in mind that he designed and mandated the course of studies at the Vivarium, which demanded an intense regimen of reading and meditation. By assigning a specific order of texts to be read, Cassiodorus hoped to create the discipline necessary within the reader to become a successful monk.

Cassiodorus is rivalled only by Boethius in his drive to preserve and explore classical literature during the earliest years of the Dark Ages. He found the writings of the Greeks and Romans valuable for their expression of higher truths where other arts failed. Though he saw these texts as vastly inferior to the perfect word of Scripture, the truths presented in them played to Cassiodorus' educational principles. He was unafraid to cite Cicero alongside sacred texts and he acknowledged the classical ideal of good being part of the practice of rhetoric. His love for classical thought also influenced his administration of his monastery. Cassiodorus connected deeply with Christian Neoplatonism, which saw beauty as concomitant with the 'Good'. This inspired him to adjust his educational program to support the aesthetic enhancement of manuscripts within the monastery. Classical learning would by no means replace the role of Scripture within the monastery; it was intended to augment the education already underway.

Cassiodorus' legacy is often understated, but profound. Prior to the founding of Vivarium, the copying of manuscripts had been a task reserved for either inexperienced or physically infirm devotees, and was performed at the whim of literate monks. Through Cassiodorus' influence, the monastic system adopted a more vigorous, widespread and regular approach to reproducing documents within the monastery. This new approach to the monastic lifestyle was perpetuated especially through German religious institutions. The change also became associated with a higher purpose: the process was not merely associated with disciplinary habit, but also with the preservation of history. During Cassiodorus' lifetime, theological study was on the decline and classical writings were disappearing. Even as the victorious Ostrogoth armies remained in the countryside, they continued to pillage and destroy Christian relics in Italy. Cassiodorus' programme helped ensure that both classical and Christian works were preserved.

Despite his contributions to the monastic order, literature, and education, Cassiodorus' labors were not well acknowledged. After his death, he was only partially recognised by historians of the age, including Bede, as an obscure supporter of the Church. In their descriptions of him, medieval scholars have been documented to change his name, profession, place of residence and even his religion. Some chapters from his works have been copied into other texts, suggesting that he may have been read, but not generally known.

The *Variae* represents a vital literary and administrative bridge between the classical Roman world and the early medieval period. In essence, it is composed of a collection of official letters and edicts, providing a primary historical source for the Ostrogothic Kingdom. The text stands as a testament to the preservation of Roman civic culture under Germanic rule. At the time of writing most of the letters, Cassiodorus was serving as a high-ranking minister under Theodoric and his successors. The letters were born out of a specific political necessity: the Ostrogothic rulers wished to legitimise their authority over a predominantly Roman population. By employing Cassiodorus, a Roman aristocrat trained in traditional rhetoric, the Gothic court could issue administrative commands that mirrored the prestige, law and language of the old Roman Empire.

The *Variae* is divided into twelve books containing over 450 documents, including royal decrees, diplomatic correspondence and appointments to public office. Books I to V feature state letters written on behalf of King Theodoric, while Books VI and VII contain standardised formulas for various administrative offices, offering templates for future bureaucrats. Books VIII to X comprise letters written for Theodoric's successors, including Athalaric, Amalasuintha and Theodahad. The last two Books

consist of letters Cassiodorus wrote in his own name, while serving as Praetorian Prefect, focusing heavily on taxation and provincial management. The subject matter of these letters is incredibly diverse. They address major geopolitical treaties, the funding of public games, the regulation of food supplies and even architectural preservation. Throughout the text, Cassiodorus weaves in moral philosophical digressions and scientific observations, ranging from the mechanics of water clocks to the nature of chameleons.

The *Variae* had a profound and long-lasting impact on early Christian and medieval intellectual history. Firstly, it established a blueprint for medieval statecraft and diplomacy. For centuries, Western European chancelleries used the *Variae* as the definitive guidebook for drafting official Latin correspondence, shaping the development of the *ars dictaminis* (the art of letter writing) in the Middle Ages. Secondly, it helped bridge secular Roman rhetoric with Christian intellectual culture. Although the *Variae* is primarily a secular administrative work, it reflects the transition toward a Christianised world view. Cassiodorus demonstrated to later monastic scholars that classical education, rhetoric and grammar were essential tools for governing a Christian society. Finally, the preservation of the *Variae* laid the groundwork for Cassiodorus' later monastic project at Vivarium. The administrative discipline found in these letters directly influenced the survival of both classical and patristic literacy through the monastic scriptoria of the medieval period.



Cassiodorus, as depicted in the 'Gesta Theodorici': Leiden, University Library, 1177



Sixth century half-silver coin depicting Theodoric the Great, King of the Ostrogoths (471-526). As ruler of the combined Gothic realms, Theodoric controlled an empire stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Adriatic Sea.

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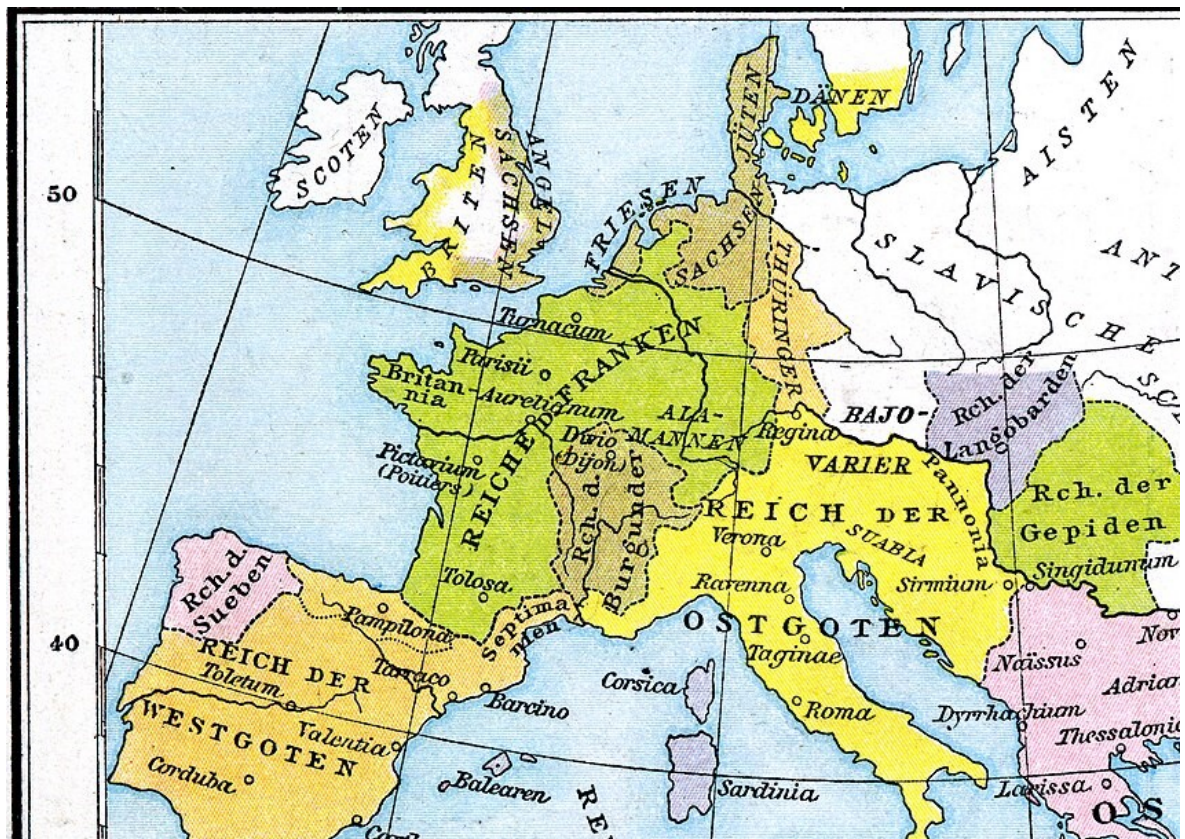
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The Ostrogothic Kingdom (in yellow) at the death of Theodoric the Great in 526



Sixteenth century depiction of Pope Agapetus I (489-536), who was the bishop of Rome from 535 to his death.

PREFACE.



THE ABSTRACT OF the 'Variae' of Cassiodorus which I now offer to the notice of historical students, belongs to that class of work which Professor Max Müller happily characterised when he entitled two of his volumes 'Chips from a German Workshop.' In the course of my preparatory reading, before beginning the composition of the third and fourth volumes of my book on 'Italy and Her Invaders,' I found it necessary to study very attentively the 'Various Letters' of Cassiodorus, our best and often our only source of information, for the character and the policy of the great Theodoric. The notes which in this process were accumulated upon my hands might, I hoped, be woven into one long chapter on the Ostrogothic government of Italy. When the materials were collected, however, they were so manifold, so perplexing, so full of curious and unexpected detail, that I quite despaired of ever succeeding in the attempt to group them into one harmonious and artistic picture. Frankly, therefore, renouncing a task which is beyond my powers, I offer my notes for the perusal of the few readers who may care to study the mutual reactions of the Roman and the Teutonic mind upon one another in the Sixth Century, and I ask these to accept the artist's assurance, 'The curtain is the picture.'

It will be seen that I only profess to give an abstract, not a full translation of the letters. There is so much repetition and such a lavish expenditure of words in the writings of Cassiodorus, that they lend themselves very readily to the work of the abbreviator. Of course the longer letters generally admit of greater relative reduction in quantity than the shorter ones, but I think it may be said that on an average the letters have lost at least half their bulk in my hands. On any important point the real student will of course refuse to accept my condensed rendering, and will go straight to the fountain-head. I hope, however, that even students may occasionally derive the same kind of assistance from my labours which an astronomer derives from the humble instrument called the 'finder' in a great observatory.

A few important letters have been translated, to the best of my ability, verbatim. In the not infrequent instances where I have been unable to extract any intelligible meaning, on grammatical principles, from the words of my author, I have put in the text the nearest approximation that I could discover to his meaning, and placed the unintelligible words in a note, hoping that my readers may be more fortunate in their interpretation than I have been.

With the usual ill-fortune of authors, just as my last sheet was passing through the press I received from Italy a number of the 'Atti e Memorie della R. Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Provincie di Romagna' (to which I am a subscriber), containing an elaborate and scholarlike article by S. Augusto Gaudenzi, entitled 'L'Opera di Cassiodorio a Ravenna.' It is a satisfaction to me to see that in several instances S. Gaudenzi and I have reached practically the same conclusions; but I cannot but regret that his paper reached me too late to prevent my benefiting from it more fully. A few of the more important points in which I think S. Gaudenzi throws useful light on our common subject are noticed in the 'Additions and Corrections,' to which I beg to draw my readers' attention.

I may perhaps be allowed to add that the Index, the preparation of which has cost me no small amount of labour, ought (if I have not altogether failed in my endeavour) to be of considerable assistance to the historical enquirer. For instance, if he will refer

to the heading *Sajo*, and consult the passages there referred to, he will find, I believe, all that Cassiodorus has to tell us concerning these interesting personages, the Sajones, who were almost the only representatives of the intrusive Gothic element in the fabric of Roman administration.

From textual criticism and the discussion of the authority of different MSS. I have felt myself entirely relieved by the announcement of the forthcoming critical edition of the 'Variae,' under the superintendence of Professor Meyer. The task to which an eminent German scholar has devoted the labour of several years, it would be quite useless for me, without appliances and without special training, to approach as an amateur; and I therefore simply help myself to the best reading that I can get from the printed texts, leaving to Professor Meyer to say which reading possesses the highest diplomatic authority. Simply as a matter of curiosity I have spent some days in examining the MSS. of Cassiodorus in the British Museum. If they are at all fair representatives (which probably they are not) of the MSS. which Professor Meyer has consulted, I should say that though the titles of the letters have often got into great confusion through careless and unintelligent copying, the main text is not likely to show any very important variations from the editions of Nivellius and Garet.

I now commend this volume with all its imperfections to the indulgent criticism of the small class of historical students who alone will care to peruse it. The man of affairs and the practical politician will of course not condescend to turn over its pages; yet the anxious and for a time successful efforts of Theodoric and his Minister to preserve to Italy the blessings of *Civilitas* might perhaps teach useful lessons even to a modern statesman.

THOS. HODGKIN.

NOTE.



THE FOLLOWING NOTE as to the MSS. at the British Museum may save a future enquirer a little trouble.

(1) 10 B. XV. is a MS. about 11 inches by 8, written in a fine bold hand, and fills 157 folios, of which 134 belong to the 'Variae' and 23 to the 'Institutiones Divinarum Litterarum.' There are also two folios at the end which I have not deciphered. The MS. is assigned to the Thirteenth Century. The title of the First Book is interesting, because it contains the description of Cassiodorus' official rank, 'Ex Magistri Officii,' which Mommsen seems to have looked for in the MSS. in vain. The MS. contains the first Three Books complete, but only 39 letters of the Fourth. Letters 40-51 of the Fourth Book, and the whole of the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Books, are missing. It then goes on to the Eighth Book (which it calls the Fifth), but omits the first five letters. The remaining 28 appear to be copied satisfactorily. The Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, and Twelfth Books, which the transcriber calls the Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth, seem to be on the whole correctly copied.

There seems to be a certain degree of correspondence between the readings of this MS. and those of the Leyden MS. of the Twelfth Century (formerly at Fulda) which are described by Ludwig Tross in his 'Symbolae Criticae' (Hammone, 1853).

(2) 8 B. XIX. is a MS. also of the Thirteenth Century, in a smaller hand than the foregoing. The margins are very large, but the Codex measures only 6-3/4 inches by 4-1/4. The rubricated titles are of somewhat later date than the body of the text. The initial letters are elaborately illuminated. This MS. contains, in a mutilated state and in a peculiar order, the books from the Eighth to the Twelfth. The following is the order in which the books are placed:

IX.	8-25,	folios	1-14.
X.		"	14-33.
XI.		"	33-63.
XII.		"	63-83.
VIII.		"	83-126.
IX.	1-7,	"	126-134.

The amanuensis, who has evidently been a thoroughly dishonest worker, constantly omits whole letters, from which however he sometimes extracts a sentence or two, which he tacks on to the end of some preceding letter without regard to the sense. This process makes it exceedingly difficult to collate the MS. with the printed text. Owing to the Eighth Book being inserted after the Twelfth, it is erroneously labelled on the back, 'Cassiodori Senatoris Epistolae, Lib. X-XIII.'

(3) 10 B. IV. (also of the Thirteenth Century, and measuring 11 inches by 8) contains, in a tolerably complete state, the first Three Books of the 'Variae,' Book IV. 5-39, Book VIII. 1-12, and Books X-XII. The order, however, is transposed, Books IV. and VIII. coming after Book XII. These excerpts from Cassiodorus, which occupy folios 66 to 134 of the MS., are preceded by some collections relative to the Civil and Canon Law. The letters which are copied seem to be carefully and conscientiously done.

These three MSS. are all in the King's Library.

Besides these MSS. I have also glanced at No. 1,919 in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Like those previously described it is, I believe, of the Thirteenth Century, and professes to contain the whole of the 'Variae;' but the letters are in an exceedingly mutilated form. On an average it seems to me that not more than one-third of each letter is copied. In this manner the 'Variae' are compressed into the otherwise impossible number of 33 folios (149-182).

All these MSS., even the best of them, give me the impression of being copied by very unintelligent scribes, who had but little idea of the meaning of the words which they were transcribing. In all, the superscription V.S. is expanded (wrongly, as I believe) into 'Viro Senatori;' for 'Praefecto Praetorio' we have the meaningless 'Praeposito;' and the Agapitus who is addressed in the 6th, 32nd, and 33rd letters of the First Book is turned, in defiance of chronology, into a Pope.



End of Sample