

Cassiodorus: The *Variae*. The Complete Translation. Translated by Michael Shane Bjornlie. Oakland, CA: University of California Press 2019. 519 p., 3 maps. \$ 125.00/£ 97.00. ISBN: 978-0-520-29736-4.

The book under review offers a complete English translation of Cassiodorus' *Variae*, a work which – undeservedly – has played little role in the scholarly debate about late antique letter collections and the way they shape (and are shaped by) the political, cultural, and social landscape of the so-called 'successor states' in the Mediterranean. The twelve books of the *Variae* contain 468 official letters mainly issued by the rulers of Ostrogothic Italy (507–537). Five books were written in the name of Theoderic the Great (Cassiod. var. 1–5), three in that of his successors Athalaric, Amalasuintha, Theodahad, and Vitiges (Cassiod. var. 8–10). Books six and seven contain template letters (*formulae*); the last two books (Cassiod. var. 11–12) were written in Cassiodorus' own name in his capacity as *praefectus praetorio*. The letter collection is complemented by a philosophical treatise on the soul (*De anima*), which Cassiodorus intends to be understood as the thirteenth book of the *Variae* (pp. 16–17). Michael Shane Bjornlie's book is the first full English translation of all letters of the *Variae*. It does not include the treatise entitled *De anima*.

Over the past decade, Bjornlie has published a monograph and several articles on the *Variae*, investigating their political, social, and cultural background in the Western and Eastern Empire of the fifth and sixth centuries. His monograph, a revised version of his dissertation, aims at contextualising the *Variae* within the transformative phase of the Gothic War under Justinian. It also suggests a close relation between the letter collection and the treatise *De anima* appended to it.¹ His articles shed light on various aspects of Cassiodorus' work: They include papers on encyclopaedic topics and handbook articles on the structure, style, and significance of Cassiodorus' letters. Furthermore, Bjornlie has paid close attention to the concept of *amicitia* as

1 M. S. Bjornlie: *Politics and Tradition Between Rome, Ravenna and Constantinople. A Study of Cassiodorus and the Variae, 527–554*. Cambridge/New York 2013 (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought Ser. 4, 89). Bjornlie's dissertation manuscript "The *Variae* of Cassiodorus Senator and the Circumstances of Political Survival, ca. 540–545" (2006, Princeton University) is published on ProQuest, URL: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/50a82ad436c18e80f3d166b9f944ae0c/1?p-q-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y> [03.10.2021].

well as to the two prefaces of the *Variae*. He is the co-editor of Brill's companion to Ostrogothic Italy.² Apart from his work on Cassiodorus, Bjornlie has published an edited volume on the life and legacy of Constantine as well as, among others, articles on the sack of Rome in 410 and on Romans, barbarians, and provincials in Ammianus Marcellinus.³

Bjornlie's book opens with an introduction (pp. 1–22), complemented by a brief outline of key historical events in chronological order⁴ (pp. 22–24) as well as by three lists of indictional years – which are relevant to Cassiodorus' career as *quaestor*, *magister officiorum*, and *praefectus praetorio* at the court of Ravenna (pp. 24–25). He also provides readers with three black-and-white maps of the sixth-century Mediterranean as well as of the northern and southern region of Ostrogothic Italy (without page numbers). The main body of the book contains the translation of all 468 letters of the *Variae* (pp. 31–499). Every translation is preceded by a brief summary (of between two and ten lines) of the respective letter's content and its links to other letters in the collection. The book closes with a bibliography of related reading, with one section devoted to the *Variae*, one to Cassiodorus, one to Ostrogothic Italy (pp. 501–503). Finally, it contains three indices: 1) individuals (pp. 505–512); 2) concepts, peoples, and terms (pp. 513–516); 3) places (pp. 517–519). The index of individuals lists not only the letters' addressees and other contemporary persons named in the *Variae*, but also Graeco-Roman deities (e.g. Diana, Isis) as well as authors (e.g. Tacitus, Terence) and mythic figures (e.g. Muses, Hercules). When dealing with historical persons, Bjornlie

- 2 J. Arnold/M. S. Bjornlie/K. Sessa (eds.): *A Companion to Ostrogothic Italy*. Leiden/Boston 2016 (Brill's Companions to European History 9).
- 3 M. S. Bjornlie (ed.): *The Life and Legacy of Constantine*. Traditions Through the Ages. London/New York 2017; M. S. Bjornlie: *The Sack of Rome in 410. The Anatomy of a Late Antique Debate*. In: Y. R. Kim/A. E. T. McLaughlin (eds.): *Leadership and Community in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honour of Raymond Van Dam*. Turnhout 2020 (*Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* 26), pp. 239–279; M. S. Bjornlie: *Romans, Barbarians, and Provincials in the Res Gestae of Ammianus Marcellinus*. In: W. Pohl et al. (eds.): *Transformations of Romanness. Early Medieval Regions and Identities*. Berlin/Boston 2018 (*Millennium Studies* 71), pp. 71–90.
- 4 The list sorted by year starts 425 with the grandfather of Cassiodorus being appointed *notarius et tribunus* and ends in 580, the year in which Cassiodorus probably died.

indicates their social status, the office they held, and refers to the corresponding entries in the “Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire” (*PLRE II*). He also lists all letters of the *Variae* in which the respective person occurs (e.g. “Johannus, *referendarius*, recipient of *Castrum Lucullanum*: *PLRE II*, ‘Ioannes 72,’ 611; *Var.* 8.25”, p. 509). The index of concepts, peoples, and terms refers among others to various late antique offices (e.g. *comes*, *praefectus urbis*), social groups (e.g. *curiales*, *possessores*), and literary topics (e.g. natural history, classical references, and digressions on a range of subjects) within the collection.

At the beginning of his introduction, Bjornlie is concerned with contextualising the *Variae* in the cultural, social, and political world of Ostrogothic Italy (1–5).⁵ As he does in his monograph entitled “Politics and Tradition Between Rome, Ravenna and Constantinople”, Bjornlie argues that the *Variae* were assembled in the late 540s, possibly at a time when Cassiodorus was in exile in Constantinople (p. 1, pp. 7–8). He takes the Gothic War to be the key event for understanding how the *Variae* were assembled and how they may be seen to communicate on different levels (pp. 7–10). The *Variae*, Bjornlie suggests, can be read as a “palimpsest of momentous events” (p. 1) – not only of its own day but also of the transition period when the Western Roman Empire gave way to the so-called ‘successor states’. Italy is said to have been a region of geographical and temporal liminality (p. 3). On the one hand, Bjornlie argues, Italy was a natural border between the Western and Eastern part of the Empire. Having lost its provincial system, it needed to rebuild its administrative structures; while warlords were in power (e.g. Odoacer), the Italian elites needed to distinguish themselves in the military sphere. On the other hand, Amal rule in Italy was based on the rich Roman tradition as well as on a close dialogue between the cities of Italy and Constantinople, for instance in matters of self-administration. Apart from the liminal role of Ostrogothic Italy, Bjornlie emphasises the “frustratingly myopic” nature of our sources (p. 4). Most pieces of information about sixth-century Italy we can gather constitute no more than “half-utterances” (p. 4) difficult to interpret. In light of this fact, Bjornlie highlights the immense value of the *Variae*: The letters offer unique insights into the administration,

5 Bjornlie states that parts of the introduction are based on his article M. S. Bjornlie: The Letter Collection of Cassiodorus. In: C. Sogno/B. K. Storin/E. J. Watts (eds.): A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide to Late Antique Letter Collections. Oakland, CA 2017, pp. 433–484.

culture, and politics of the transition period between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (pp. 16–17). The *Variae* are administrative writings compiled in the form of a letter collection; drawing on the encyclopaedic tradition, they adapt and transform the chancellery style of Late Antiquity. They stand out not only for their two prefaces, but also for placing official letters next to more personal ones, for providing us with the earliest corpus of ancient *formulae*, and for complementing twelve books of letters with a philosophical treatise (p. 17). Bjornlie argues that Cassiodorus has had an immense intellectual impact: He is to our perception of the late antique West what Chaucer and Shakespeare are to our perception of medieval and Renaissance England respectively (p. 4).

After the historical contextualisation of the *Variae*, Bjornlie gives an account of Cassiodorus' career (pp. 5–10) and of his “Nachleben” (pp. 17–19). Furthermore, he elaborates on the compositional principles discernible in his letter collection (pp. 10–17). Notably, in contrast to most other scholarly discussions of Cassiodorus' self-representation in the *Variae*, Bjornlie emphasises the importance of the work's two prefaces (pp. 11–13).⁶ The diverse nature of the *Variae*, Bjornlie argues, finds its expression in particular pairs or groups of letters – letters that may seem disconnected in terms of their position within the corpus, but that are nevertheless closely linked in terms of their style and/or subject matter (p. 15). Similar points can be made about Cassiodorus' use of literary digressions (e.g. on natural phenomena, architecture, or the *spectacula*, pp. 15–16). This chapter of Bjornlie's book seems particularly convincing to me. Among other things, it is remarkable for finding strong connections between the *Variae* and other works of Cassiodorus' oeuvre, e.g. his *Historia Gothorum* (p. 10), *Chronica* (p. 13), and *De anima* (pp. 16–17).

Bjornlie assumes that the *Variae* were not only shaped by the circumstances of their original conception (at some point between 507 and 537), but that they were later revised by Cassiodorus for the purpose of “ideological coherence and consistency” (p. 5) in the context of the Gothic War. In this

6 Cf. also M. S. Bjornlie: Audience and Rhetorical Presentation in the *Variae* of Cassiodorus. In: RBPH 92, 2014, pp. 187–207; M. S. Bjornlie: The Rhetoric of *Varietas* and Epistolary Encyclopedism in the *Variae* of Cassiodorus. In: G. Greatrex/H. Elton/L. McMahon (eds.): *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity*. Farnham/Burlington, VT 2014, pp. 289–303.

sense, the *Variae* can be understood as “a collection of documents that preserve the activities of the Gothic government” (p. 5). Bjornlie has included all of Cassiodorus’ letters into a single book so that modern readers – just as their late antique forerunners – may encounter the *Variae* in its entirety, as a deliberately assembled collection of letters (p. 5, pp. 19–22). In this regard, Bjornlie’s clearly goes beyond earlier English translations of the *Variae*: The one by Thomas Hodgkin 1886, who merely paraphrased the letters’ content, and the one by Samuel Barnish 1992, who restricted his publication to a selection of 110 letters (pp. 19–20).⁷ Bjornlie takes into account the findings of Andrea Giardina and his colleagues, who have recently published an extensive Italian commentary of the *Variae* (p. 20). Their five volumes also include the first full translation of the *Variae* in Italian.⁸ Bjornlie’s expressed aim is to render “Cassiodorus’ text word for word, as closely as possible, according to the meaning best suited to a given script of Latin” (p. 21). Furthermore, he attempts to reproduce (as far as possible) Cassiodorus’ baroque style, oscillating between the bureaucratic and administrative sphere on the one hand and the literary and “idiosyncratic” one on the other (p. 20). Prudently, Bjornlie leaves untranslated certain culture-specific terms whose English equivalents would be “unsatisfactory” (p. 21). These include the names of administrative offices and related terms (e.g. *quaestor*, *praefectus praetorio*, *imperator*, or *princeps*) or various instances of the pronouns *ille* and *illa*, which often function as “place holders” (German: ‘Leerformeln’) for specific terms omitted in the letters (p. 21). Bjornlie’s translation is based on the MGH edition by Theodor Mommsen 1894, but takes into account the lexical emendations offered in the CCL edition by Åke Fridh 1973 (pp. 21–22).⁹

- 7 T. Hodgkin: *The Letters of Cassiodorus. Being a Condensed Translation of the Variae epistolae of Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator*. London 1886; S. Barnish: *The Variae of Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator. Being Documents of the Kingdom of the Ostrogoths in Italy, Chosen to Illustrate the Life of the Author and the History of his Family*. Liverpool 1992 (Translated Texts for Historians 12).
- 8 A. Giardina (ed.): *Varie. Flavio Magno Aurelio Cassiodoro Senatore*. Vol. 2–5. Rome 2014–2016. The translation of the first two books of the *Variae* with commentary and introduction has not been published yet.
- 9 T. Mommsen: *Cassiodori Senatoris Variae*. Berlin 1894 (Monumenta Germaniae historica. Scriptores 1. Auctores antiquissimi 12); Å. J. Fridh: *Magni Avrelii Cassiodori Variarum libri XII. De anima*. Turnhout 1973 (Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 96).

The translations of the individual letters are preceded by brief introductions: Bjornlie summarises the letters' content and, if applicable, points out their connections to other sections of the *Variae*. He does not address the scholarly debates revolving around the dating of individual letters and/or larger letter groups. This is rather unfortunate – not only because the letters' (uncertain) dating contributes to any historical (or philological) interpretation of them, but also because it is central to Cassiodorus' revision process Bjornlie highlights elsewhere.

The translation is written in clear and well-structured English; it follows the bureaucratic style of Cassiodorus and incorporates much of the Latin text's literary ornament. Modern readers will gain a vivid impression of Cassiodorus' world as both statesman and author, constantly bridging the gap between his daily work as an official at the court of Ravenna and his self-representation as a Roman senator and a part of the literary elite. Once readers take a closer look at Bjornlie's translation, however, they will realise that – at least occasionally – its lexis and syntax are markedly different from what we find in Mommsen's edition. In the opening paragraph of Cassiod. var. 3.38, for instance, Bjornlie's translation suggests that *ubi* refers to *initia* (i.e. the Gallic regions Theoderic has just reclaimed).¹⁰ I fail to see this connection in the Latin original.¹¹ Apparently, the conjunction *ubi* refers to *in regionibus Gallicanis* (Cassiod. var. 3.38.1); *initia* does not refer to "areas at the very origin of the conflict" (p. 149) but to the fact that Theoderic has recently regained dominion over the southern Gallic regions.¹² A similar case can be observed in Bjornlie's translation of Cassiod. var. 3.43.1: Cassiodorus opens the letter with a general statement on how he imagines Theoderic's 'new' subjects in

10 p. 149: "Although it may be consistent with the intent of our devotion that where civility may be practiced, there too would moderation be practiced, nonetheless, we especially want matters conducted well in Gallic regions; both areas where the recent devastation did not convey harm, and areas at the very origin of the conflict, ought to instill the good report of our name."

11 Cassiod. var. 3.38.1: *Quamvis pietatis nostrae constet esse votum, ut ubique civilia, ubique moderata peragantur, maxime tamen optamus bene geri in regionibus Gallicanis, ubi et recens vastatio non portat iniuriam et ipsa initia bene plantare debent nostri nominis famam.*

12 Cf. A. Giardina (ed.): *Varie. Flavio Magno Aurelio Cassiodoro Senatore. Libri III–V.* Rome 2014, p. 51: "lo stesso inizio del nostro dominio".

the Gallic regions to live under Roman law.¹³ The relative pronoun *quos* depending on *delectamur* introduces this brief general statement (“those who”), a technique that is frequently applied in the *Variae*.¹⁴ In Bjornlie’s translation, *quos* does not refer to Theoderic’s people but – apparently – to *iure Romano*.¹⁵ Sometimes, Bjornlie’s (mis)interpretation of syntactic links pertains to the realm of semantics. In Cassiod. var. 3.51.6, for instance, he ignores the syntactic link between *missus* and *exituros*, therefore offering a misleading translation of *circensium ministri*.¹⁶ While this expression must refer to circus staff responsible for the organisation of the *spectacula*,¹⁷ Bjornlie renders them “attendants of the circus, having been sent out.”¹⁸

Occasionally, Bjornlie’s use of textual variants lacks in transparency. At Cassiod. var. 3.42.3, for instance, Mommsen reads *delectui vestro*; Fridh prefers the reading *delectu vestro*, which is attested too by several manuscripts. Bjornlie’s translation “by our choice” (p. 151), however, clearly refers to the reading *nostro* rather than *vestro*, which – we have to assume – he encountered in the critical apparatus of either Mommsen or Fridh. Though it would greatly benefit scholarly readers, such editorial decisions are rarely commented on by Bjornlie.

Publishing a full translation of Cassiodorus *Variae* is an arduous task, and Bjornlie deserves great praise for having accomplished it. Cassiodorus’ impact on our understanding of late antique administration, culture, language,

13 Cassiod. var. 3.43.1: *Delectamur iure Romano vivere quos armis cupimus vindicare, nec minor nobis est cura rerum moralium quam potest esse bellorum. quid enim proficit barbaros removisse confusos, nisi vivatur ex legibus?*

14 The phrase *delectamur* is similar to terms such as *amamus* (Cassiod. var. 2.2.1, 3.12.1, 3.25.1), *invat* (Cassiod. var. 3.23.1, 11.28.1), and *amplectimur* (Cassiod. var. 1.39.1, 2.4.1, 4.6.1).

15 p. 151: “We are delighted to live under the law of the Romans, whom we desire to protect with arms; nor is attention to moral behavior less of a concern to us than matters of war. For what does it profit to have banished barbaric disorder, except that life is lived according to laws?”

16 Cassiod. var. 3.51.6: *Biga quasi lunae, quadriga solis imitatione reperta est. equi desultorii, per quos circensium ministri missus denuntiant exituros, luciferi praecursorias velocitates imitantur.*

17 Cf. Giardina (n. 10), p. 296.

18 p. 160: “The two-horse rig was invented as though in imitation of the moon, the four-horse rig of the sun. The horses of the acrobats, by which the attendants of the circus, having been sent out, would proclaim the names of those about to be released from the gates, mimicked the swiftly advancing course of the morning star.”

and politics has long received little attention – not only in parts of scholarship (especially in classical philology), but also in university education. One reason for this neglect was the lack of a complete translation. I am confident that, thanks to Bjornlie’s translation and thanks to his sixth-century sourcebook published a year later, Cassiodorus will soon be more regularly discussed in the classroom.¹⁹ In sum, Bjornlie’s translation of the *Variae* stands out for being highly readable and for convincingly placing the letters into their historical context. Those (mainly) interested in late antique history will find what they are looking for. Some classical philologists, intrigued by Cassiodorus’ opulent style – e.g. by his preference for ambiguous syntactic relations and for semantic innovations – will reach the limits of what Bjornlie’s translation has to offer. With a view towards the future, it appears promising to pay closer attention to the relationship between the *Variae* and the philosophical treatment *De anima* complementing it. This may yield yet deeper insights into the language and style of Cassiodorus’ letters – and, I believe, Bjornlie has provided us with an important starting point for such an endeavour.

19 M. S. Bjornlie: *The Selected Letters of Cassiodorus. A Sixth-Century Sourcebook*. Oakland, CA 2020.

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