

CASSIODORUS: UNSUNG SAVIOUR OF ANTIQUITY

Violet Moller explains why Cassiodorus was such a pivotal figure in the preservation of Greek and Latin texts – and of classical education more broadly

Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator was one of the last great Romans; he was born, with a silver spoon firmly in his mouth, into a wealthy family in late fifth-century Calabria. A distinguished lineage – his father, grandfather (who was part of an embassy to Attila the Hun) and great-grandfather all served in high office – ensured a smooth route to power for young Cassiodorus.

He was appointed *consiliarius* when he was just 20 years old, rising to the position of *magister officiorum* (chief minister) to Theodoric, the Ostrogothic king of Italy, in 523. Theodoric was keen to preserve and assimilate as much imperial Roman culture as he could and Cassiodorus, as a member of the Roman elite, was on hand to help with this. He took over the role of chief minister from the disgraced, and soon to be brutally executed, scholar Boethius. These two men dominated classical learning in sixth-century Italy. Thanks to their efforts, the tenets of the Roman education system were preserved and passed on in western Europe.

Boethius, as author of works such as *The Consolation of Philosophy*, has retained a reputation through the intervening centuries. Cassiodorus was not so fortunate. His contribution has been largely forgotten, which is a shame, because he played an important and remarkable role in the history of knowledge.

His initial plan was to found a theological school in Rome, supported by a library of Greek and Latin texts that he established in

collaboration with Pope Agapetus I. Sadly, conditions in the eternal city during the mid-sixth century were not really conducive to study, and things only got worse when the Byzantines deposed the Gothic king as part of their reconquest of Italy in 536. Twenty desperate years of war followed; Justinian's attempt to protect Roman culture and reunify the old empire destroyed far more than it saved. Within a few decades, all the lands he reconquered had slipped away; the empire in the west was lost for good.

Cassiodorus retired from the world of politics in 538, fleeing the chaos in Italy in favour of Constantinople. He spent the rest of the period of conflict there, but strangely never served the emperor in any official capacity. It is likely he spent much of his time studying, perfecting his Greek and travelling around Asia Minor. One of the places he visited was Nisibis, which was a great centre of scholarship, one of the few during this period. When he returned from Constantinople, he settled on his family estates near Squillace and founded a large monastic complex called Vivarium. For Cassiodorus, this was the culmination of a long-held dream, something he had been planning since the failed attempt to found a school in Rome.

Situated on the far southern coast of Calabria, close to the shore of the Ionian Sea, Vivarium was well placed, accessible via the roads that led north to Rome and south to Sicily, and the east–west maritime routes between Spain, Africa, Greece and Constantinople. The

complex actually contained two monasteries. One was a retreat for those seeking a life of silence and contemplation and the other was a traditional monastery where monks lived, worked and prayed together.

At Vivarium's heart was the library Cassiodorus founded and personally stocked with books. It was divided into two main sections – Greek and Latin – which were stored in separate cupboards. This library, as Cassiodorus explained, was based on the idea 'of what had been done formerly in Alexandria and of what was being done now in the Syrian town of Nisibis'. He must have brought back many of the Greek texts with him from Constantinople, and at least some of these were non-religious – many of them were translated into Latin so that the monks could read them. They included what later became known as the 'liberal arts': rhetoric, logic, grammar, arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music – subjects that were becoming increasingly side-lined in favour of Christian texts as religion took over every aspect of education. By the end of the century, the only real option (aside from a private tutor at home) if you wanted to learn to read and study was to enter a monastery.

A library is dependent on a good supply of texts to fill its shelves and Cassiodorus took care of this by building a large scriptorium at Vivarium. Not only this, he insisted that book copying was carried out by specially trained monks working to a high standard. In doing so, he helped to re-establish a degree of professionalization and quality in

book production not seen for many years. In monasteries, copying texts was not valued; it was usually done by either the very young, or the very old and infirm – anyone who was not capable of doing other more important, strenuous tasks. Cassiodorus put writing and book production at the centre of monastic life. This focus was gradually adopted by other foundations in the following centuries.

While the fate of Cassiodorus' library is a mystery, scholars believe that a bible (known as the *Codex Grandior*) made in the scriptorium was purchased in Rome in 679 by Ceolfrith, Abbot of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow in northeastern England. Ceolfrith had made the long journey to Rome (astonishingly, a journey he made no fewer than five times) in order to buy books and ornaments to furnish his new monasteries. Back in the scriptorium of Wearmouth Jarrow, the *Codex Grandior*, which no longer survives, was copied and this new version, the *Codex Amiatinus*, was taken to Italy by Ceolfrith on his last journey south. He had planned to give it to the Pope as a present, but unfortunately died before he reached Rome; the *Codex* ended up in the library of a monastery in Tuscany. A gigantic tome weighing 34kg, it is the oldest surviving complete copy of the Latin (Vulgate) version of the Bible. The exquisite quality of the script and the beauty of the hand-painted illustrations provide us with a fabulous witness to the achievements of Cassiodorus and the scribal traditions he founded. In 2018, the *Codex Amiatinus* was brought back to England for the first time in 1,300 years to play a starring role in an exhibition of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts at the British Library in London.

Ceolfrith was able to buy the *Codex Grandior* in 679 because the Vivarium monastery was no longer active and its library was being sold off. The fact that we know so much about the books it contained is down to the *Institutiones* that Cassiodorus wrote to act as a teaching curriculum



Cassiodorus shown in the Gesta Theodorici, 1176–1177, Netherlands (Leiden University Libraries; Leiden MS Vul. 46, fol. 2r).

for future generations, describing the subjects and listing the texts needed to study them. The *Institutiones* is divided into two books: divine and secular. As such, it is an explicit attempt to combine the Christian and the profane into one harmonious curriculum, in order to give young men everything they needed to go on to lead productive, fulfilled lives, inside or outside the Church.

Cassiodorus was a devoted Christian, but one who realized the need for a broad, balanced education. He must have been horrified at what he saw going on around him in sixth-century Italy – schools closing and the whole apparatus of the classical education system collapsing. Prominent churchmen were also becoming aware of this situation and beginning to realize that simply being able to read the Bible was not enough – priests and monks needed to be properly educated.

Officially, steps were taken to ensure that young men were taught in monasteries, but Cassiodorus had a much more profound influence on the survival of the classical education than any decree passed by the Papacy. Librarians and

scholars used the *Institutiones* as a bibliographical guide throughout the Middle Ages and, as such, it was one of the most influential texts of the period. Book 2, the secular section, describes the central tenets of these subjects: rhetoric, grammar and logic (the Trivium), followed by geometry, astronomy, arithmetic and music. These went on to form the framework of medieval education.

Just a couple of decades earlier in the sixth century, the other great monastic manual of that period had been written by St Benedict of Nursia. Benedict's *Rule* was extremely influential, providing the guiding principles of the huge network of Benedictine monasteries that were founded over the following centuries, many of which endure to this day. As a guide to monastic life, it is mainly concerned with the practicalities of how to organize a monastery and live a pious life. Reading is prescribed as a regular part of the monk's routine, but there is no detail about education or secular texts. Later in the Middle Ages, after the monastery had been refounded for the second time in 949, the scriptorium became famous for the quality of its manuscripts and talents of its scholars, but there is no evidence this was the case in Benedict's time. In this early period, it was Cassiodorus who kept the flame of intellectual enquiry burning at Vivarium.

Cassiodorus' desire to unite the two halves of the old Roman Empire within the walls of his library was a defining feature of his life and achievement. But he was pushing against an unstoppable tide; by the end of the sixth century an almost total cultural and intellectual schism had taken place, one that was not redressed until the Renaissance. However, thanks to his efforts, some Greek knowledge was preserved and passed on in the West, and classical education survived, albeit in a much-reduced form. For this, and the tradition of monastic book production he founded, Cassiodorus deserves to be remembered and celebrated.