THE EDUCATIONAL WORK OF CASSIODORUS,
CHRISTIAN LITERARY HUMANIST

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Before we look at the work of Cassiodorus in the area of education and at the ways in which he reshaped Christian education along lines that would not hide its relationship to reservoirs of classical learning, some biographical information should be of interest and help in understanding the man better.¹

Cassiodorus², whose complete name was Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator (Senator is a real name, not a title), and whom Maisie Ward calls “one of the last great men of Romania”³, was born c.480 at Scyllacium (Squillace) in southern Italy into a distinguished and prominent family. For three generations members of his family had served, almost always successfully, a variety of political leaders. Cassiodorus’ father rose to positions of great importance under the Ostrogothic rulers, Odovacar and Theodoric, occupying under the latter the office of governor of Sicily and, as a reward for his tact and skill, being appointed praetorian prefect from 503 to 507, a very important office involving the promulgation of imperial laws and edicts, the levying of an annual general tax, the nomination, supervision, and if necessary, punishment and deposition of provincial governors, and service as the highest judge of appeal. It is into this tradition of political service that Cassiodorus was born and for which he was trained.

The evidence of Cassiodorus’ own works indicates that he received the usual instruction in philosophy and rhetoric which was given in his day to the young person of noble rank who aspired to governmental office. It appears also as if he had an interest in natural history, judging by fairly frequent fanciful allusions to natural phenomena in his Variae.

Cassiodorus entered public life in 503 through being appointed by his father, just made praetorian prefect, to the post of consiliarius or assessor, a position comparable to that of an assistant magistrate, and one normally held at that time by someone fresh from his studies in the learned professions. He continued in this office until
507, when as a result of an oration delivered in praise of Theodoric (generally considered by commentators to have been genuine in its enthusiasm), he was given by the emperor the extremely important office of quaestor, whose duties were to give a final revision to laws signed by the emperor, and to clothe them in suitable language, to reply to petitions presented to the emperor and to hold audiences with foreign ambassadors, delivering fitting harangues to them or writing replies to letters they had brought with them. The quaestor was, in effect, the mouthpiece of the emperor, and for this reason, someone as fluent and learned in law as Cassiodorus was a fortunate acquisition for a ruler like Theodoric who, though anxious to make a good impression upon his Roman as well as his Gothic subjects, could not himself speak or write Latin with any great degree of facility.

For the next twenty-six years, Cassiodorus, now one of the first ten men in the country, continued to strive to build a strong Italian state in which Gothic and Roman elements might be fused together in complementary and harmonious fashion, serving Theodoric and his successors faithfully, and occupying various governmental positions. In 514 he became consul, thus acquiring an honour much sought by Roman nobles despite its lack of real authority, while in 523 he was elevated by Theodoric, undoubtedly because of his glorification of the Goths in his writings, to the high position of master of the offices. In this capacity, he was in charge of the civil service of the Ostrogothic state, a post he held until 527. For the next six years, Cassiodorus held no official position, but on 1st September 533 he was appointed praetorian prefect, a post his father had occupied before him, and which he was to hold until 537 when, on the appointment of one, Fidelis, to the office of prefect, he retired from public life to give his attention to philosophy and religion.

During his political life, and during interludes when he held no official position e.g. from 512 to 522, and from 527 to 533, Cassiodorus had tried his hand at writing. The principal products of this labour were Variae, a collection of letters and communications (468 in all) written by him over a period of thirty years, which form an important historical source, though turgid in style and not easy to read; Chronicon, which was an abstract of the history of the world from the Biblical Flood right down to his own day and for the most part consisting of borrowings from writers
like Eusebius; and *Gothic History*, a by no means impartial history in twelve books, no longer extant, aiming to vindicate the claim of the Goths to rank on a par with the Greeks and Romans as historic nations of antiquity, and to exalt the Amal line to which Theodoric belonged.

During the closing years of his political career, Cassiodorus wrote, as others such as Cicero, St Augustine and Claudianus Mamertus had done before him, a short philosophic treatise, *De Anima*, which really marks Cassiodorus' turning not only to abstract philosophy but also to religion.

His literary labours in the area of religion began with his lengthy *Commentary on the Psalms*, heavily indebted to St Augustine, and containing, among other things, refutations of heresies and erudite material about all the sciences which the world had knowledge of at that time. At the time of the new Gothic invasions of Rome between 546 and 548, he appealed to Christians to make a show of resistance and followed this up by travelling, in the capacity of an emissary, to Constantinople to implore the Byzantine emperor to do all in his power to reconquer Italy. While in Constantinople, he most likely became acquainted with the theory of Jewish theological teaching expounded at Nisibis, a claim for which has been made as the oldest university in the world, and, in addition, had the opportunity to meet scholars who had dedicated most of their adult lives to the preservation and editing of manuscripts. It is likely that these experiences, together with his own interest in Scriptural study, caused Cassiodorus to make a definite decision to found a monastery in the West for profound study of the Scriptures.

Upon his return to Italy, Cassiodorus founded a double monastery on his ancestral estates at Scyllacium, either c540 or possibly several years afterwards c552. One section, for the solitary hermit, was situated among the "pleasant recesses" of Mount Castellum; while the other, for the less austere cenobite, was called Vivarium because of the fish ponds made by Cassiodorus and fed from the river Pellena, on whose banks he built baths for the use of the sick. As Maisie Ward points out in her *Early Church Portrait Gallery*, Cassiodorus was proud of his baths and ponds, of his self-fading lamps, of his sundials for summer use and of his reliable water-clocks for winter and night time.
Was Cassiodorus a monk? Many mediaevals thought so, even making him into a Benedictine monk, but it is generally considered today by most scholars that he was not a cleric. The noted Benedictine mediaevalist, Dom Jean Leclercq⁵, is positive that Cassiodorus, even though sharing and directing the life of the monks was not a monk nor did he think as a monk, and that he never received the vocation. There is also considerable speculation among scholars as to what Rule of Life Cassiodorus' monks followed. L.W. Jones thinks that the recommendations of Cassian who had died a hundred years earlier formed the basis of their rule; Cardinal Schuster in his life of St Benedict (1953) and some Benedictine writers, e.g. Dom Chapman, see the Rule of St Benedict as the guiding principle; whilst there is a school of thought that sees the monks of Cassiodorus as zealous copyists and that their rule possibly stemmed from Gaul, most likely from Lerins.⁶ Whatever the truth of the matter may be, the founder of the monasteries was a busy man, attempting to accomplish at Vivarium the purpose previously projected in 535 or 536 in company with Pope Agapetus for Rome — the establishment of a school of theology and Christian literature similar to those at Alexandria and Nisibis, a project that had gone no further than the creation of a Christian library by Pope Agapetus.

It is at Vivarium that Cassiodorus spent the remaining years of his long life — he was ninety-five when he died — and made his historic contributions to education. These contributions took various forms; some were highly practical, others merely theoretical, but they all belong to the broad category of educational doctrine. In a way all his work is related to An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings, written for the instruction of his monks at some time after 551⁷, and when we ask what was Cassiodorus' influence on education, we are at the same time asking what message did this book, undoubtedly his best work, have for the Christian educational world.

Book One lays down in some detail Cassiodorus' plan of study of Divine Scripture, comparing the ascent to a proper understanding of the Scripture to Jacob's ladder, the rungs being the writings of the Fathers of the church. He describes briefly the nine volumes which make up the monastery copy of the Old and New Testaments. Furthermore he explains the best commentaries on each book, e.g. Augustine and Ambrose on Genesis, Jerome and
Hilary on Matthew. He gives some explanatory remarks about four chief councils of the church — Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon. He lays down methods to be followed in emending the Scriptures, lists historians of value in interpreting the Scriptures, discusses works on geography and a number of agricultural and medical treatises. Above all he justifies the study of secular literature through the liberal arts as a means to an end, that of prescribing a cultural programme for Christian use.

Book Two contains a more detailed treatment of secular letters as seen in the seven liberal arts. Grammar is very briefly treated, but rhetoric and dialectic are given lengthier treatment. Music, arithmetic and astronomy receive equal, though not very extensive treatment, while geometry suffers much the same fate as grammar, being given scant attention. For all these disciplines, Cassiodorus suggests classical authors for consultation and study.

The Introduction to Divine and Human Readings served as a guide and an inspiration to librarians to search out copies of works recommended by Cassiodorus. In addition, the manuscripts collected and preserved by him provided a steady source for knowledge of the Fathers and the important Latin authors. Both patristic and classical literature might have survived without Cassiodorus' labour, but credit should go to him for having kept them in a reasonably accessible form.

Cassiodorus is recognised as one of the first Christian educators to make the monastery a place of study as well as a place of seclusion where members of the monastic community would have ample opportunity to cultivate the spiritual life. For his monks to be studious and to some extent learned, proper implements were necessary and it is towards this end that Cassiodorus collected as many manuscripts as possible and duplicated them, for in this way several monks might use them to further their scholarly purposes. As part of his literary monasticism, Cassiodorus told his monks that instead of working in the field or at some other manual task, they could fulfil their religious requirement of labour by copying manuscripts. For him, the office of scribe was the one that appealed most of all of the tasks that required physical effort. The great merit of his monastic work lay in his determination to utilize the manual resources of his monks for the preservation of divine and secular learning and for
its transmission to posterity. The greatness of his accomplish-
ment, especially with respect to secular learning, becomes even
more apparent when literary activity in Italy is considered at the
end of the fifth century. Whilst the first half of this century had
seen revisions of works of numerous secular authors e.g. Virgil,
Horace, Caesar, Martianus Capella among many others, the second
half, characterized by the dislocation of the senatorial class, had
seen a consequent decline in the cultivation of secular letters, with
interest in little except the revision of theological works. In the
sixth century Cassiodorus fills this gap with his innovating monastic
plan, for whatever one may think of the educational influences of
monasticism in general, his monastery in its own day performed a
remarkably useful service to scholarship and to learning both divine
and secular. While E.K. Rand may be generous in his estimation of
Cassiodorus’ influence, there is much to be said for his claim that
it is to his broadly laid plan that we owe in large part the preserva-
tion of such works as we have of classical Latin literature today.

Cassiodorus did not want his work to stop with the collection
and multiplication of manuscripts, important as it was, and so he
attracted to the monastery a small but capable group of grammarians
and translators who worked on the texts as they became available,
translating, correcting and editing them. The scholarly tasks
completed by these monks included assembling the complete body
of Scripture from the text of St Jerome, translating many of the
Fathers, translating and assembling the works of early church
historians, preparing Biblical commentaries, translating the
Antiquities of Josephus, and dividing the Bible into chapters
together with the addition of appropriate titles and summaries.

In fulfilling the role of a librarian, Cassiodorus was interested
in every phase of the preservation of manuscripts. He admonished
his monks to take the greatest care when dealing with manuscripts —
he actively sought them out and was prepared to pay well for them —
because he believed they were involved in a sacred enterprise. The
corrector’s work was especially critical, but it was not only accuracy
that was sought but some beauty of expression as well. He asked
his correctors to correct with care, and to form corrected letters to
correspond to the original text. He believed it entirely inappropriate
for anything unsightly to appear in the glorious works the monks
were preparing, and he would have been greatly disappointed if any-
thing remained in the manuscripts to offend the eyes of students
subsequently using them. He saw the correctors as servants not only of themselves but of all Christians as well, and as guardians of the Church's principal treasures, bringing light to the souls of men.

No detail in the process of copying was overlooked. Punctuation and spelling were matters for special attention, especially the latter, on which subject Cassiodorus felt impelled to supply a treatise as a result of a request from his monks for some guidance, even though he had supplied some hints for spelling in Book One of his *Introduction to Divine and Human Readings*. To this end, he wrote in his extreme old age, certainly the nineties, the *De Orthographia*, a compilation from twelve grammarians of a list of rules to be observed. One of the greatest sources of error, the confusion between b and v is treated very fully, and although a compilation, the book must have been very useful to the monks.

Cassiodorus also had something to say about bookbinding, as he considered care should be taken to bind sacred writings in covers worthy of their contents, as the householder in the parable provided fitting garments for all who came to his son's wedding feast. He even prepared a volume containing samples of various sorts of binding and directed anyone interested in bindings to choose that which seemed best to him.

What has been said about Cassiodorus' best-known work, while not illuminating its content, has been sufficient to indicate its general nature. What counts is not so much what Cassiodorus wrote about the liberal arts, nor the fact that he is supposed to have been the first to use the word trivium to denote the three literary disciplines, grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, following upon Boethius' earlier designation of quadrivium to indicate the four scientific disciplines of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy, but the pedagogical message that his work contained. This was, firstly, the authenticity of classical education's claim for a place in Christian schools and, secondly, the way this classical knowledge might be used to serve the fundamental objectives of Christian education.

As the founder of literary monasticism, Cassiodorus was responsible for a greater, although admittedly uneven, dissemination of learning throughout the West. His *Introduction to Divine and Human Readings* was used as a textbook and a bibliographical reference for centuries, and wherever it was used and with whatever
care, it always conveyed the message that classical learning could make life in temporal society more fruitful and satisfying, points not always accepted in his day when profane authors were still being denounced with fanaticism as "authors of stupidity and perdition". By making a commitment to literary monasticism, Cassiodorus preserved and perpetuated the classical tradition, putting his monks to work copying and reproducing classical authors. How much or how little a few copying monks could do is not the point, for one monastery could not supply the literary requirements of all Europe, but what is important is that from Cassiodorus' time forward, it was a respectable commission for monks to engage in secular literary work. Moreover, in Cassiodorus' eyes, secular learning was not seen in a propaedeutic role for divine study but was to stand on a balanced footing with divine learning, the very reason why he wrote Book Two of the *Introduction*.

Although Cassiodorus argued that secular learning was both wanted and needed, he did not follow the oratorical tradition that had been marked out by Quintilian in his *Institutio Oratoria* in the first century A.D. and which had not been forgotten in the centuries between Quintilian and Cassiodorus; indeed, as has been noted, Cassiodorus was trained in this tradition. For Cassiodorus, however, when the arts of the trivium were studied, they were not to be pursued with the expectation that they would serve as foundations for eloquent speech. Their new role was to provide students with a basic literary education, one that led to competence in conducting the everyday affairs of church and state and commerce, and one that meant that the linguistic discipline was to be set within the framework of the time. So Cassiodorus could be something less than a classical purist and still recommend a relevant education in the linguistic discipline. In fact, language became exceptionally important in Cassiodorus' syllabus, and more clearly than perhaps ever before, the schools now became the principal agents for preserving and passing on the cultural literary inheritance.

It could well be asked why was Cassiodorus listened to when others, such as St Jerome and St Augustine, had made somewhat similar pleas for secular learning and had so little influence in reforming the schools, although a very recent book on the educational influence of St Augustine presents a compelling case for the priority of Augustine in this matter. It is not an easy question to answer but there could be some point to the argument.
that Jerome stopped largely on the level of example and Augustine on the level of theory, whereas Cassiodorus descended to the day-to-day problems of the classroom, dealing with instruments where his predecessors stayed largely with example and precept.

It must be admitted that Cassiodorus did not stay with the best well-known authors when he wanted to justify an encyclopaedic view of learning, but if he had limited his literary recommendations to only the very best of the classical writers, he might have made his contemporaries recoil from learning as they were not ready to deal with the best. He thought it was possible to obtain broad learning by going to the easier, and not so stylistically difficult writers, although he did not do so exclusively, and the announced purpose of the Introduction was to provide an easy and safe equivalent to traditional education for the monks in the monastery, such traditional education to be given mainly through grammar and logic.

Grammar was accorded an unassailable position, and for Cassiodorus meant "skill in the art of cultivated speech — skill acquired from famous writers of poetry and prose; its function is the creation of faultless prose and verse; its end is to please through skill in finished speech and blameless writing," to be taught principally from the Ars minor and Ars maior of Donatus. It is true that Quintilian said much the same about grammar, all important in his view, but where he thought of the orator using speech in public, Cassiodorus thought of speech, both oral and written as a private accomplishment, as important in one's study or in the teacher's classroom as on the public rostrum.

In like manner, logic was raised to a more respectable level in Cassiodorus' programme of studies. In the development of logic and in the eventual subordination of rhetoric to it, thereby running counter to the Roman tradition of the primacy of rhetoric, the Middle Ages were indebted to Capella, Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville, but as R.W. Southern has shown so convincingly, it was in reality Boethius who provided the inspiration for mediaeval logicians of the tenth and eleventh centuries such as Gerbert at Rheims cathedral school. In any event, both the rise of logic to a position of greater importance in school learning and the continuation of classical bodies of knowledge about logic were outcomes for which Cassiodorus must be given some credit.

The fate of the excellent monastic library which Cassiodorus
had assembled at Vivarium and of his own personal library containing, notably, a collection of medical works, is a matter yet to be discovered, according to L.W. Jones, ranked as one of the foremost contemporary authorities on Cassiodorus. Very little is known about the history of Vivarium after Cassiodorus’ death. While the Lombards were despoiling the northern section of southern Italy, the area in the southwest that included Squillace and Vivarium remained until 1060 in Byzantine control and enjoyed relative peace. Whether the monastery kept its Roman character after its founder’s death or whether it succumbed to the increasing pressure of the Greek influences surrounding it is not known. At one time, mainly owing to the publication of a book, which lacks definite evidence, in 1911 by an eminent German scholar, Rudolf Beer, it was thought that the Vivarian books had been taken to Bobbio, not long after that learned monastic centre had been established by the great Irish missionary, St Columban in 612 A.D.; but, as E.K. Rand points out in his article in Speculum (1938), the tendency is not to believe Beer, as his hypothesis was too vague to allow any degree of certainty. Though the exact course of the wanderings of Cassiodorus’ manuscripts after they left Vivarium in the seventh century is not known, quite probably some of them at least served as models for copies made in the Carolingian period; and a French scholar, P. Courcelle, has claimed that some of them went to the Lateran Library, a collecting-centre for transcriptions and the sale of manuscripts, where, notably in the seventh and eighth centuries, the Western world came to acquire them. The evidence, however, is very slender, and the later history of Vivarium’s manuscripts yet remains to be undertaken, a study which L.W. Jones claims should be rich and profitable.

It seems to be generally agreed that Cassiodorus, whilst not being one of the intellectual giants of his age and never becoming an awe-inspiring figure, nevertheless left his imprint upon his own era and upon succeeding centuries. He was neither a great thinker nor an eminent theologian but he had perseverance rather than genius. For this reason, he has been slower in receiving due appreciation than two other members of the Italian aristocracy of his time – Boethius and St Benedict.

As Jean Décarreaux puts it so succinctly, “He was a sensible pedagogue, a methodical worker, a precise grammarian, a well-informed bibliographer who demanded a high standard of work,
which he endeavoured both to inspire, lead and control". Others before him had had manuscripts transcribed, but his work was more systematic than that of his predecessors and it had more important results. His deliberate broadmindedness regarding secular literature permitted it to be discreetly tolerated in the monastic scriptorium. It has been suggested that his medical books were taken over by Monte Cassino and that they played their part in the medical science of the day until the emergence of the school of Salerno. His *Variae* were used as models by the chancelleries of the Middle Ages, whilst his direction, organisation and classification of books in the bookcases (*armaria*) of the monastic library justly earned for him the honorific title of Father of Librarians.

It is impossible to evaluate accurately the extent, probably very considerable, to which Cassiodorus' cultural programme was a model for monastic use in the Middle Ages, but on three points there can be little doubt about his influence. First, at the very least, the *Introduction to Divine and Human Readings* must have served in many centres as a bibliographical guide and an inspiration to librarians to look around for good old copies of the works recommended. Second, Book Two of the *Introduction*, 'Secular Letters', took a place along with the works of Donatus, Martianus Capella, Priscian, and Boethius as one of the important schoolbooks of the early Middle Ages. Third, the manuscripts of Vivarium and of Cassiodorus preserved in sound form for generations to come both the Fathers of the Church and the ancient classical Latin authors. This two-fold culture might of course have survived somehow without the aid of Cassiodorus, but as it is the credit should go primarily to him. L.W. Jones gives a very impressive survey of the number of times Cassiodorus' works, or works listed by him, are mentioned in manuscripts up to the thirteenth century, and of his general influence on the culture of the Middle Ages. Truly as G. de Ghellinck says in his history of Latin Literature in the Patristic and Middle Ages, Cassiodorus was the literary and religious guide to learning in the Middle Ages. As a maker of scholarly tradition, he will always be remembered, and he has earned, says Pierre de Labriolle, "the eternal gratitude of Western civilization."
NOTES

1. The principal source for details on his life and career is his own *Variae* or Diverse Letters, prepared and edited during the closing years of his public life (at the end of 537 A.D.).

2. Most of this information about Cassiodorus' career is taken from L.W. Jones' excellent introduction to his translation of *An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings* (Octagon Books Inc., 1966).


6. Lérins was an island off the coast of Provence, that since the fifth century A.D. had been a centre of monastic settlement favouring a combination of the solitary and the cenobite, with an attachment to the practice of manual labour and a devoted study of Scripture.

7. M.L.W. Laistner in his *Thought and Letters in Western Europe A.D. 500-900* (Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1957 edition) says not later than c562. Laistner's treatment of Cassiodorus is more detailed with respect to classical and patristic authors recommended for study than most commentators.

8. Before him, St Pacomius had encouraged monastic copyists; in the monastery of St Martin at Tours, the younger monks were copyists while St Jerome in his cell at Bethlehem had shown what great results a single recluse could obtain from patient literary toil. Cassiodorus' work, however, is more systematic than that of his predecessors and shows deeper insight into the needs of his time.

9. Not all monks were copyists. See E.K. Rand *Founders of the Middle Ages* (Harvard University Press, 1928) p.244 for a delightful description of the role of the "weaker brethren" and also for an excellent summary of Cassiodorus' place in the history of Christian culture pp.240-248.


16. As quoted by J. Décarréaux, op. cit. p.244.

17. Ibid, p.245.

18. L.W. Jones op. cit. pp.49-64.