PART I

The Variae *as windows onto painted curtains*

INTRODUCTION

Sometime in the late 560s a group of artisans carefully removed, tessera by tessera, the portraits of more than a dozen people from the mosaics flanking the nave of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. These mosaics portray, on the south wall, the palace (*palatium*) of the Amal king Theoderic conflated with a profile of the urban landscape of Ravenna and, on the north wall, a profile of the nearby suburb of Classe. The figures removed from the two mosaics originally held ideologically key positions before the city gates of Ravenna and Classe and within the colonnaded arches of the *palatium*. In their stead, the mosaicists filled the vacancies of the portals and arches with mosaics portraying draperies and coloured brick. Only disembodied hands, extending beyond the altered zones, and palimpsest shadows of the former figures remained to remind the audience that earlier associations had been expunged from the church.[1] These new empty spaces represent carefully arranged fields of rhetorical communication that have much to tell about the political, religious and cultural realities confronting their contemporary audience.

Built and consecrated early in the reign of Theoderic (491–526), a so-called barbarian king of the Arian Christian sect, Sant'Apollinare Nuovo was a monumental public space that would accumulate contradictory associations over the course of the first half of the sixth century.[2] Through its physical proximity to the *palatium* of Theoderic in the heart of Ravenna, the church in the first stage of its history contributed to the celebration of Amal governance in Italy. The figures previously visible in the architectural spaces of the nave mosaics (including a portrait of Theoderic and a dedicatory inscription bearing his name) signified the close association between political and religious conceptions of the late

[1] On this function of *damnatio memoriae*, Hedrick, *History*; Urbano, 'Donation', 71–110; Flower, *Forgetting*.

[2] In general on Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Deliyannis, *Ravenna*, 146–74; on the deletions of iconography and portraits sponsored by the Amals, 164–72.

antique state.[3] After 540, when Justinian's soldiers entered Ravenna and initiated what would become a long period of eastern imperial control of the city, it became necessary to detach the church from the obvious celebration of the political successes of the Amal dynasty. The need for this intervention in public memory did not become imperative until after 554, when Justinian's *Constitutio Pragmatica* finally declared eastern imperial victory in what had been nearly two decades of war in Italy (the Gothic War). Thus, late in the 560s, the bishop of Ravenna, Agnellus, rededicated the church in the name of St Martin and systematically removed images identifiable with Amal rule.[4] For those who might have remembered the significance of the original figures, such a *damnatio memoriae* served as a reminder that the Amals, despite their success under Theoderic, had ultimately failed as a political and dynastic regime. The erasure privileged a competing interpretation of the Amals by which they were understood as heterodox Christians who had subjected Italy to 'barbarian' rule. The curtained empty zones of mosaic in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo illustrate how the clear stamp of Theoderic's success as a ruler, visible elsewhere throughout the city in its architectural fabric, was reimpressed on Ravenna as the legacy of barbaric despotism that had been conquered by the eastern Roman Empire.

The nave mosaics at Sant'Apollinare Nuovo testify to the ability of late antique media to present communicative silences. They offer an interesting analogue to the proper subject of this study – the collection of legal and administrative letters that Cassiodorus compiled as the *Variae*. The altered mosaics of Sant'Apollinare and the letters of the *Variae* have much in common as 'windows onto painted curtains'. Each in its own way represents a response to the polemic surrounding the postwar reputation of Amal rule in Italy. In fact, this study will argue that the *Variae* act as a piece of polemical literature in a manner comparable to that of the visual medium of the mosaics. Where the mosaics literally opened windows onto painted curtains to obscure a previous ideological message, the individual letters of the *Variae* operate as tesserae in the production of a composite image that also functions as an ideological curtain or screen. In the preface to his heavily abridged translation of the *Variae*, Thomas Hodgkin in 1886 vented his frustration at attempting to penetrate the opacity of the letters by stating, 'The curtain is the picture.'[5] This description characterized for Hodgkin the difficulty entailed in understanding, in its own terms, the performance of sixth-century history that he encountered in the *Variae*. What Hodgkin wanted in

[3] Agnellus, *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis* 85–9.
[4] Wood, 'Theoderic's monuments', 252–60; Deliyannis, 'St. Martin'.
[5] Hodgkin, *Letters*, vi.

the *Variae* was a window into the day-to-day operation of the state in sixth-century Italy. What he found was a culturally specific performance. This study suggests that reading the *Variae* is considerably more complicated than translating the surface rhetoric and bureaucratic jargon of a late antique chancery. Rather, the collection represents Cassiodorus' attempt to construct a composite image of Amal rule in Italy for a particular audience. In this sense, the *Variae* are an attempt at literary portraiture which responds to events and conditions at a particular moment in Cassiodorus' career. Much as the later artisans of Sant'Apollinare preserved some features of the original mosaic programme (the architecture of the *palatium* and urban profiles of Ravenna and Classe), introduced features to create a new programmatic statement (twin processions of martyrs and saints) and effaced other elements entirely (Theoderic and members of his court), Cassiodorus too engaged in a revisionist presentation of Italy under the Amals by selectively preserving, enhancing and deleting from the historical reality that the letters purport to represent.

The *Variae* comprise 468 documents that Cassiodorus arranged in twelve books.[6] As a collection of dispositive letters (legal judgments and administrative directives), the *Variae* treat an almost panoptic range of official activities: appointment to public offices, the collection of taxes and the management of state property, criminal cases and civil disputes, the maintenance of urban amenities, and the diplomatic correspondence of Amal rulers to eastern emperors and other so-called barbarian rulers. Taken as a whole, the *Variae* span more than thirty years of Cassiodorus' activities as an intimate member of the palatine service attached to the Amal court.[7] The presumably official nature of the collection, its chronological breadth and the rich range of materials contained within the individual letters have made the *Variae* a prized source for scholars concerned with early sixth-century Italy. The *Variae* have been prominent in studies of political and ecclesiastical affairs, fiscal and legal administration, urban life and rural production, barbarian ethnogenesis and the transmission of classicism. Yet it must be emphasized that the *Variae* are also among the most idiosyncratic of late antique epistolary collections.[8] Typical epistolary collections take the form of personal letters directed by a

[6] See Fridh, *Opera*; O'Donnell, *Cassiodorus*; Pferschy, *Formular*; Krautschick, *Cassiodore*; Viscido, *Studi*; MacPherson, *Rome*; Barnish, *Cassiodorus*, xiv–liii; Jouanaud, 'Pour qui Cassiodore', 721–41; Gillett, 'Cassiodorus' *Variae*', 37–50; Kakridi, *Cassiodors Variae*; Giardina, *Cassiodoro*; Bjornlie, 'A reappraisal', 143–71.

[7] The letters purportedly represent Cassiodorus' official correspondence as quaestor, *magister officiorum* and praetorian prefect under, successively, the rulers Theoderic, Athalaric and Amalasuntha, Theodahad and Witigis.

[8] Note the apt description of O'Donnell, *Cassiodorus*, 86.

single author to members of a wider community of correspondents. The *Variae*, however, contain presumably official governmental documents. The edicts, judicial responses, diplomatic letters and administrative *formulae* written in the names of various Ostrogothic rulers have the appearance of a résumé of the Ravenna chancery. As an additional departure from the norm, Cassiodorus addressed two prefaces (opening Books I and II) to the audience of the *Variae* and he attached to the collection a treatise on the soul (the *De anima*), the preface of which continues Cassiodorus' previous address to the audience of the *Variae*.[9] This level of direct interaction with an intended audience is not found in earlier epistolary collections. The combination of documentary material with what is essentially a philosophical inquiry into the source of wisdom (the *De anima*) similarly lacks a precedent. Furthermore, Cassiodorus embedded within the letters of the *Variae* an encyclopaedic range of digressive material. Individual letters contain excursuses pertaining to everything from the behaviour of animals, the motion of stars and the nature of music, to the origins of writing, the history of law and the accomplishments of engineering. In terms of their formal structure as a collection and the content of individual letters, the *Variae* are as unprecedented among epistolary collections as they are among bureaucratic writing and legal literature. Cassiodorus' authorship is uncontested. What remains problematic and debatable is the extent to which the letters represent the mode of expression characteristic of the Ostrogothic chancery rather than Cassiodorus' own agenda.[10]

This book suggests that the letters represent a documentary record of the Ravenna chancery which Cassiodorus later subjected to heavy revision reflecting the political exigencies that attended the fall of the Amal court during the Gothic War. In particular, this book suggests that Cassiodorus drew heavily upon themes of the political discourse of Constantinople at a time when it seemed that the eastern imperial control of Italy was imminent and his own social and political position had suddenly become quite precarious.[11] From Cassiodorus' perspective during the opening stages of the Gothic War, the protraction of the conflict to almost two decades (535–54) and the total fragmentation of political power in Italy in the aftermath could not have been foreseen.

It was in this period, during the late 530s and early 540s, that the *Variae* were politically relevant, not during the preceding decades when Cassiodorus first penned the original letters in fulfilment of various

[9] Cassiodorus later referred to the *De anima* as the thirteenth book of the *Variae*, *Expositio Psalmorum* 145.2.

[10] See Fridh, *Terminologie*, 1–5. [11] Compare McKitterick, 'Roman history', 21–9.

public offices. It was as a collection that the *Variae* had the potential to make an intervention in how eastern imperial victory in Italy might impose a reinterpretation of the previous fifty years of Ostrogothic governance. This book will suggest that the object of the *Variae* was the political rehabilitation of the Italian elite who had served as the palatine bureaucracy of the Amals. The book will claim that, in essence, the *Variae* are an apologetic work intended to counter the notion that the former palatine elite served a 'barbarian' regime. The collection aimed to demonstrate their suitability to return to a role in the government at Ravenna. This study examines how Cassiodorus positioned a number of ideologically charged themes in the letters of the *Variae* to demonstrate that suitability. These were themes deployed in a contemporary moral and legal discourse concerning proper governance at a time when it appeared that there was still a possibility of creating a political framework in Italy that would include the former bureaucratic elite of Ravenna. More importantly, this study will suggest that Cassiodorus' portrayal of western palatine service in the *Variae* engaged in a debate about the proper definition of imperial rule emerging from the polemical discourse surrounding the reign of Justinian. The sources that Cassiodorus drew upon in order to construct an idealized persona of state service originated not only in Italy, but also in Constantinople. As we shall see, much of the digressive material that Cassiodorus included in the letters (for which the collection received its name) provided anchor points for the polemical themes of an apologetic project that was responsive to political conditions at the eastern capital.

Therefore, rather than a collection of entirely genuine artefacts from the Ostrogothic chancery, this book argues that the *Variae* represent a literary enterprise. At a point when it became clear that the Gothic War would irrevocably alter the terms by which the palatine elite of Ravenna enjoyed its status, Cassiodorus selected, edited and arranged letters from a pre-existing assemblage in order to represent his contribution to the government at Ravenna. He interpolated select letters with thematic digressions and, in some cases, even invented new letters. Thus, although much of the material in the collection does indeed correspond to the actual political and cultural conditions of Ostrogothic Italy, specific themes found in the collection represent Cassiodorus' later intervention in the public record of the Ostrogothic regime and more properly correspond to the period when the Gothic War was drawing a new social, economic and political map for Italy. Rather than a privileged window into the experiment of a post-Roman 'barbarian' regime, the *Variae* are, in fact, a window into the impressive range of cultural and political communication between the new sixth-century states of the western

Mediterranean and the continued embodiment of the Roman Empire at Constantinople.[12] The differences between Italy and the eastern empire (social, political, economic, religious) were substantial enough at the advent of the Gothic War that Cassiodorus could only offer a favourable portrayal of western palatine service by adapting that portrayal to certain norms of the eastern imperial capital, such as had not been current in Italy. Thus the *Variae* also offer a lens through which to observe the interaction of politics, religion, philosophy and literature between the eastern and western Mediterranean.

[12] For a recent example of the range of Mediterranean communications in this period, Conant, 'Mediterranean communications', 1–46.

Chapter 1

CASSIODORUS AND ITALY IN THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES

EMPIRE IN THE SIXTH CENTURY

In the early 590s a late contemporary of Cassiodorus, Gregory of Tours, reflected on the events of the previous three centuries and observed that 'a great many things have been happening', both matters that were well ordered by traditional probity (*rectae*) and those unacquainted with the guidance of virtue (*improbae*).[1] Gregory deplored the capricious savagery of kings, the impudence of heretics and the penury of learning that had come to replace the attainments of a former age. In this way, he viewed his own society as a consequence of dramatic decline. Gregory used this grim portrayal of decline, found in the preface of his *Decem libri historiarum*, to realize a new definition for sixth-century society based on the church and the vigour of orthodox faith which, for him, represented the last strand of continuity with former times. Gregory's capacity for rhetorical hyperbole has been duly noted in modern scholarship and his history stands as but one of many literary projects in a long tradition extending from Livy and Sallust that portrayed cultural crisis.[2] At the same time, Gregory's rhetorical stage-setting also captures something very real in what it meant for Mediterranean society in the sixth century to have been the heir to centuries of Roman *imperium*. For many of the post-classical elite like Gregory, the sixth century was a vantage point from which the peak of past grandeur and the uglier senectitude of that past were both visible. Of course, the same may also be said of nearly any period within the long sweep of Roman history. Cato, Tacitus and Boethius probably all thought themselves equally justified as 'the last of the true Romans', albeit Romans defined in very different terms. Thus Gregory and his contemporaries were a part of a truly *longue durée* in which the portrayal of cultural decline was a stock piece of the cultural performance by which a literate elite promoted themselves as

[1] Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, *praefatio*.
[2] Goffart, *Narrators*; James, 'Gregory of Tours'; Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*; Mitchell and Wood, *World of Gregory*.

conservators of an authentic *romanitas*. However, it is important to note that interpreting the significance of over 1,000 years of Roman past was a contentious activity. Contemporaries did not doubt that their society was in some significant way a legacy of Roman empire, but the terms defining what it meant to be a society in the tradition of Roman Empire was open to challenge.

In the east, Constantinople stood in the fullest flower of its role as an imperial capital, boasting the largest urban population in the Mediterranean and drawing on the resources of an economy that could trace lines to commercial contact with Persia, India and China.[3] Eastern Mediterranean cities shared common elements of a largely Christian Hellenic culture and the urban elite classes accepted, and even competed for, a participatory role in the political rituals of an imperial state that was still ideologically Roman. Indeed, the eastern Mediterranean society of the early sixth century had achieved the kind of cultural and political integration not even found under emperors of the Pax Romana. The emperor who received acclamation in the *kathisma* of the Hippodrome, in the great churches and in the palace of Constantinople represented an idea that was still universally accepted in the Mediterranean as the apex of political rule in the civilized world. So-called barbarian peoples, including the sophisticated Sasanian Empire to the east, regularly submitted gestures of deference to this sublime realization of perfect empire. This, of course, is the perspective regularly promoted by the imperial court. The reality of eastern Mediterranean society was decidedly more complicated. For example, it is hardly possible to speak of the eastern empire as a unified Christian empire. Although the emperors had long forsaken traditional Roman cults, many Christians in the east (including the emperor) had difficulty agreeing on who was properly Christian.[4] So-called paganism, which had not enjoyed a legal face since Theodosius in the late fourth century, throve in surprisingly public quarters. Above all, the so-called barbarians, especially the Sasanians, applied far more leverage on the imperial court than any self-respecting emperor could admit. Even the so-called Roman army of the east was regularly composed of Goths, Herulians, Huns, Isaurians and Armenians. What made these soldiers Roman was the regular receipt of the emperor's gold solidus.[5] The portrayal of a monolithic eastern imperial culture in the historical sources for the early sixth century is often quite distinct from

[3] Daryaee, 'Persian Gulf', 1–16; Morony, 'Economic boundaries', 166–94; Whittaker, *Rome*, 163–80.
[4] Chazelle and Cubitt, *Crisis Oik.*; Menze, *Justinian*.
[5] Lee, 'Empire at war', 113–33; Rance, 'Narses', 424–72; Heather, '*Foedera*'.

how the societies of the eastern Mediterranean actually behaved. Yet the governing elite of predominantly Greek-speaking Constantinople would call themselves Romans with enthusiastic confidence well into the fourteenth century, perpetuating a very rhetorical performance of imperial power.

In the west, by contrast, the Roman Empire had followed a different trajectory. After becoming an effectively separate empire with the death of Theodosius in 395, the western provinces accommodated themselves to changing social, economic and political conditions in a complex process once commonly (and misleadingly) referred to as 'decline and fall', although now more often discussed in more nuanced terms of the 'transformation' of the Roman world.[6] Throughout the course of the fifth century, the direct influence of imperial power in Italy contracted and local provincial elites negotiated the formation of independent regional forms of political power. These new regimes were often based on elements of the fragmented western Roman military or on concentrations of immigrant settlers ('barbarians') who at some point had assumed the role of the Roman military.[7] By the end of the fifth century, Italy itself would bear the indelible stamp of these processes of social, economic and political change. Where once the great villas of elite landowners marked Italy as the epicentre of trans-Mediterranean consumerism, the countryside of the late fifth century was increasingly fragmented by new patterns of abandonment and resettlement that often lacked the traditional orientation toward urban markets.[8] Where the local *curiae* of Italian cities and towns had played an integral role in maintaining a fiscal economy and in sustaining a vibrant habit of endowing the urban fabric, the local church and its bishop were increasingly the focus of urban organization, economic activity and local patronage.[9] Where Roman legions had previously defined imperial frontiers beyond the Alps with their encampments, immigrant settlers recruited for military service (federated soldiers) now lived as ad hoc militias in both towns and the countryside.[10]

[6] MacMullen, *Corruption*; Ward-Perkins, 'Continuists, catastrophists', 157–76; Liebeschuetz, *Decline*; Heather, *The Fall*; Ward-Perkins, *The Fall*; O'Donnell, *The Ruin*.

[7] Halsall, 'Childeric's grave'.

[8] For bibliography, Cavarría and Lewit, 'Bibliographical essay', 3–51; also Christie, 'Landscapes', 256–75; Marazzi, 'Late antique Italies', 119–59; Francovich and Hodges, *Transformation*; Christie, *Archaeology*.

[9] Pietri, 'Aristocratie', 417–67; Ward-Perkins, *Building*; Lizzi, *Vescovi*; Wataghin, 'Christianization', 209–34; Liebeschuetz, *Decline*, 104–36; Barnish, '*Religio*', 387–402; Christie, *Archaeology*; Cooper and Hillner, *Religion*; Bowes, *Private Worship*; Lizzi, *Conversione*.

[10] Barnish, 'Taxation', 170–95; Heather, 'Fourth-century'; Durliat, 'Cité', 153–79; Heather, '*Foedera*', 292–308; note also Vegetius, *Epitoma rei militaris* 1.7, 1.20, 1.21, 2.3 and 2.18, on the disappearance of field training indicative of a standing army.

The Variae *as windows onto painted curtains*

In Rome, the Senate still presided over local public life and an annually appointed consul celebrated public games at the Circus and Colosseum, but the urban population had long since contracted to well under half that of its height and the political governance of Italy had long since passed to Ravenna, where the last in a series of federated soldiers (today referred to as the Ostrogoths) held power.[11]

The Ostrogoths arrived in Italy in 489 after well over a generation of previous service as immigrant recruits to the eastern imperial army.[12] The stage for their expedition to Italy had been set by the complicated and fluid military culture of the eastern empire in which military commanders in the provinces competed for the preferment of the emperor in Constantinople. Negotiations with the eastern emperor Zeno cleared the way for Theoderic the Amal to enter Italy with a substantial contingent of Goths. After deposing the previous military ruler of Italy (Odoacer) in 491, the Goths settled throughout northern and central Italy with Theoderic as their king at Ravenna.[13] The social, political and economic landscape of Italy was substantially different from that of the Balkans and Constantinople, not least because Italy had two cultural and political capitals: Rome and Ravenna. Nonetheless, the Goths attempted to erect a regime that maintained the rhetorical style of Roman imperial government.[14] They were assisted in this endeavour by selectively recruiting from the Italian landowning elite to serve at the palatine court of Ravenna, where they received office and status. In most cases, these palatine Italians were drawn from municipal origins.[15] By contrast, the Amal court at Ravenna showed a studied deference to the senatorial aristocracy of Rome and, for the greater part, relegated the senatorial elite to the maintenance of the ancient capital.[16] It is important to note

[11] Ruggini, *Economia*; Chastagnol, review, 210–12; Chastagnol, *Le Sénat*; Wes, *Kaisertums*; Cecconi, *Governo*; Wickham, review, 238–9; Honoré, *Law*, 1–29; Marazzi, 'Rome in transition', 21–39; MacGeorge, *Warlords*; Ghilardi, Goddard and Porena, *Cités*; Halsall, *Migrations*, 220–83; McEvoy, 'Imperial office'.

[12] On Goths in the eastern empire, Wolfram, *Goths*; Heather, *Goths*; Heather, 'Roman Balkans', 163–90.

[13] On the arrival of Ostrogoths in Italy, Ennodius of Pavia, *Panegyricus* 6.23–8.47; Procopius, *Wars* 5.1.2–31; *Excerpta Valesiana* 36–57; Jordanes, *Getica* 268–95; on their settlement, Bierbrauer, *Italien*; Settia, 'Fortificazioni'; Vera, 'Proprietà'.

[14] Momigliano, 'Italian culture', 207–36; Jones, 'Odoacer and Theoderic', 126–30; Burns, *Ostrogoths*; Brown, *Byzantine Italy*, 77–99; Moorhead, *Theoderic*; Barnwell, *Roman West*; Heather, 'Ostrogothic Italy', 317–53; Heather, 'Theodoric', 145–73; Amory, *Ostrogothic Italy*; Heather, 'Roman and Goth', 86–134; Halsall, *Migrations*, 284–338; Barnish, '*Cuncto Italiae*', 317–37; Kitchen, 'Italia and Graecia', 116–19.

[15] Barnish, '*Cuncto Italiae*', 328.

[16] Cassiodorus, *Variae* 7.31, indicates that the *princeps urbis romae* and his staff served in residence at Rome as the representatives of Amal authority; the core of the administrative and military apparatus of the Amals was housed in Ravenna.