People living in Italy experienced the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. as years of destructive chaos relieved intermittently by quieter periods of relative stability, in contrast to previous Roman centuries characterized generally by economic and military success. Historians of subsequent eras perceive the 5th and 6th centuries as decades of often-painful transition from late Roman Antiquity to the early European Middle Ages. The “fall of the Roman Empire” traditionally is set in A.D. 476. James O’Donnell elucidates how an event of that year, occurring shortly prior to the year of Boethius’s birth, came to be identified as the actual moment of this shift.¹ For this period of change, O’Donnell also attempts to dispel a potential misunderstanding, that historians know relatively little about occurrences during the reign of Theodoric, by enumerating various Latin documents that survive from the time:

Considering the devastation that would strike his Italy in the decades after his death, and the long history of political disunity and disarray that would follow, the survival of so many books and artifacts of his time is a testimony to the ambitions of the man and to his posthumous good fortune.²

The interpretations by historians and other researchers of the surviving evidence that relates specifically to the times, life, and work of Boethius comprise the subject matter that follows.

Boethius was born c. A.D. 480, making him an exact contemporary of such notables as Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus and Benedict of Nursia,

² O’Donnell, The Ruin, p. 128. In making this observation, O’Donnell is addressing the view expressed occasionally by Thomas Hodgkin and other scholars of the period that too few official records have survived to allow historians to make certain judgment on single incidents, due to a lack of factual details, which too often is true. For a general assessment of the larger picture of the period, O’Donnell is correct: documentation providing circumstantial evidence does exist in the sources he lists. However, official documents that provide direct evidence are scarce.
who probably were born the same year. He was also a close contemporary of the historical figure whom early histories and later legends refer to as Arthur of Britain, whose victory over the Saxons at Mount Baden generally is set in A.D. 516, when Boethius was in his mid-thirties. Arthur, of course, has become the focus of many tales since that battle was waged and won. Geoffrey Ashe ascribes the enduring appeal of Arthurian legend in part to its place in the larger context of the universal mythology of a golden age. “[Arthur] bestows a British shape on the perennial dream of a long-ago, long-lost golden age. This is a constant that runs as a haunting undercurrent through different versions [of the legends].” In 2m5 of the De consolatione philosophiae [hereafter Consolatio] (following 2p5 in which she begins to apply her stronger medication to cure her ailing patient, Boethius the prisoner), Lady Philosophy sings her paean to the lost Saturnian era:

How happy was that earlier age  
When men content depended on the thirsty land,  
And not yet sunk in idle luxury  
Sated their hunger only at their need  
With acorns gathered with ease.  
They had not learned to mix  
Wine with clear honey;  
Nor to dye shining silken stuffs  
With Tyrian purple.  

Boethius himself certainly never subsisted on acorns, but the shape of his life, as posited by his own biographical statements and by Lady Philosophy’s argument in the Consolatio, requires his “return” to a prelapsarian mind set, undistracted by the tempting but superficial preoccupations of wealth, power, fame, position, and pleasure that his final governmental situation had bestowed upon him among its several rewards. In broad outline, the tragic life of Boethius, as constructed in the Consolatio, suggests an archetypal return to a “golden period” in his own private life, such as the one to which Geoffrey Ashe refers in his discussion of the “golden era of Arthur” in British national lore, as the goal toward which Boethius

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