CHAPTER 13

Intellectual Culture and Literary Practices

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Introduction

In a panegyric composed in 507, Ennodius, a learned Roman cleric of aristocratic descent, hailed Theoderic, the Gothic king of Italy, for restoring peace, prosperity, and the traditional culture of eloquence. Although Ennodius’ rhetoric should not be taken at face value, it reveals important things about his intellectual world. For Ennodius and his peers, *eloquentia* signified Roman civility and refinement, and an ability of their ruler to share their values gave them hope that their social and cultural milieu would remain the same.

Literary sources of the time project an image of continuity, intentionally cultivated by late 5th- and 6th-century writers but also grounded to a certain degree in their experiences. While the economy and society of Italy continued to change under Ostrogothic rulers, the cultural hierarchies of the late Roman Empire appear to have remained the same and intellectual pursuits of the educated elite developed along the same lines as those of their earlier counterparts. The senatorial aristocracy retained its position of influence, service to Ostrogothic kings continued to provide opportunities similar to those open under late Roman emperors, and traditional education was still valued as a necessary prerequisite for a career in the royal administration or in the church.

The peaceful decades of Ostrogothic rule in Italy, and especially the long reign of Theoderic (493–526), witnessed an intense literary activity. This chapter will focus on several aspects of the intellectual culture and literary practices

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*I thank Shane Bjornlie, Kristina Sessa, and Emily Albu and her students for their helpful comments and suggestions.*


of the Roman elite in Ostrogothic Italy. I will begin by discussing the traditional education of this group and then turn to a survey of their intellectual interests and literary pursuits. Next I will address the philosophical culture of the period, and finally the ways in which the intellectuals of Ostrogothic Italy negotiated the balance between antique literary culture and Christian learning.

**Education**

The traditional Roman system of the liberal arts continued to function in Ostrogothic Italy. Ultimately going back to the ideals and practices of the classical Greek *paideia* adopted by the Roman world centuries earlier, late antique education became increasingly focused on developing literary knowledge and rhetorical skills. Available in its full extent only to members of the elite, secular education continued to provide Christian aristocratic families with a shared culture, sense of identity, and access to power.3

After learning the basics at home, children would usually begin their studies with a grammarian who taught them further reading and writing skills, correct pronunciation, and the beginnings of rhetorical composition. When students moved on to a rhetor’s school, they would continue reading and interpreting classical Latin texts. The *auctores* traditionally included Virgil (most often cited by 6th-century writers), Silius Italicus, Terence, and Ovid. Students also practised rhetorical exercises and gradually progressed to composing their own orations.4

Two men, a secular statesman and a cleric, both schooled in rhetoric, emphasized the importance of such studies for the next generation of young Romans. Cassiodorus, who for several decades served in the Ostrogothic administration, praised grammar in a letter he drafted on behalf of King Athalaric. The letter, addressed to the Roman senate, argued for increasing the salaries of the teachers of grammar and rhetoric. “The school of grammar has primacy”, Cassiodorus wrote, “it is the fairest foundation of learning, the

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