CHAPTER 17

Bishops, Ecclesiastical Institutions, and the Ostrogothic Regime

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Introduction: Politics and Western Ecclesiastical Development

In a period characterized by instability and rapid change, the complexity of Ostrogothic Italy is reflected in the ambivalence with which our sources describe Theoderic. Late Roman authors represent him both as a man from a tough military tradition, at the head of a polyethnic amalgamation dominated by rival leaders, and as an eastern consul, who had spent his entire youth at the court of Constantinople; also as a good and just king at the beginning of his reign, but as tyrannical and cruel in his final years. Tyrannos by reputation but imperator in reality, Theoderic was legitimated as king of the Goths in Constantinople. Criticized as an inlitteratus, he was still capable of appreciating the beauty of literary form and preferred to use the Daedalian rhetoric of Cassiodorus in his official correspondence. To these ambivalences we must add his religious policy. Arian in faith, he enriched his residential city Ravenna with splendid sacred buildings for that cult, but was also a powerful patron

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of the Nicene church during the Acacian schism.\textsuperscript{5} While the personality of Theoderic was marked by contradictions and ambiguities, his religious policy, not unlike other areas of his administration, was characterized by a firm determination to preserve the tradition of the Roman Empire, from which Cassiodorus often declared he drew inspiration.

According to a noted social theorist, however, declarations of loyalty to tradition intensify precisely when a community is faced with collapse. Nevertheless, innovations rarely appear in programmatic statements; rather, they are concealed in the interstices, under an ideology of the \textit{mos} that forms part of a recognized system of customs, making them less jarring to the collective consciousness.\textsuperscript{6} The network of ecclesiastical dioceses and monasteries, which can be reconstructed with some certainty in Ostrogothic Italy (see the following chapter), is a good example of consistent stability in the face of change.

Theoderic’s correspondence with select members of the Nicene clergy (e.g. the bishop of Rome, bishops of Italian towns, presbyters, and members of monastic communities) similarly reveals a strong mixture of tradition and innovation. His letters contain references to imperial traditions, which were part of a complex weave that sought to combine familiar images with the bright threads of a new policy. Because the 4th and 5th centuries did not produce evidence analogous to Cassiodorus’ \textit{Variae}, the political relations that the Ostrogothic king forged with Nicene bishops might seem to be a new practice. In fact privileges granted to bishops and the church from Constantine onwards through the constitutions now collected in the \textit{Theodosian} and \textit{Justinianic Codes} were also the result of political relations. Not unlike his imperial predecessors, therefore, Theoderic secured the growth of a privileged church, the Nicene church, and the development of some monasteries, male and female, almost always dependent or related to that church. He realized this through the protection of ecclesiastical and monastic property, the granting of special tax exemptions, and the recognition of judicial powers to the bishops. There is much discussion among scholars about the nature of the bishop’s authority, and on the hypothetical increase of the bishop’s judicial powers in relation to the diminished authority of government. In point of fact, however, the Ostrogothic king’s judicial authority remained strong.

Ancient texts can be misleading in this regard because the act of granting power and privileges to bishops celebrates the sacredness of churchmen. No longer just monks and nuns, who were considered holy by virtue of their

\textsuperscript{5} On Arianism in the Ostrogothic Kingdom, see Cohen in this volume.

\textsuperscript{6} Hobsbawn, “Social Function”, p. 3.