



CASSIODORUS, MAGNUS AURELIUS

CASSIODORUS, Magnus Aurelius (b. ca. 485, d. after a.d. 580), Latin author of three historical works containing material on Iran.

The senator Cassiodorus was born into a family of eastern, probably Syrian, origin long settled in Italy. Having won the confidence of Theodoric, king of the Goths, who ruled Italy from Ravenna, he rose to the highest positions. He was brought up as a pagan but at the summit of his career was converted to Christianity. Subsequently he retired to a monastery, the Vivarium, which he had himself established, at Squillace in Calabria. It was there that he died at a very advanced age. Three of his numerous surviving works, all in Latin, contain material on Iran: (1) the *Tripartite Ecclesiastical History*, (2) the *Chronicle*, (3) the *History of the Goths*.

Historia Ecclesiastica Tripartita (ed. W. Jacob and H. Hanslik, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* LXXI, Vienna, 1972) is a massive compilation culled from the works of three earlier church historians, namely Socrates (b. ca. 360; books 11-12), Sozomenus (contemporary with Socrates, author of an ecclesiastical history written between 430 and 450), and Theodoretus (bishop of Tyre in Syria, b. at Antioch ca. 393). Cassiodorus makes frequent mentions of the relations of Sasanian Iran with Rome and with Christianity: He concurs with Sozomenus's opinion that the conversion of Persians to Christianity had been a result of their commercial contacts with



the Osroenians and the Armenians (3.1.5, p. 129). The persecution under Šāpūr II (r. 309-79), as described by Sozomenus, and its victims is mentioned (3.2.27-28, pp. 136-37). The siege of Nisibis by Šāpūr II (in 337 or 338) is related in detail, with special emphasis on the importance of interventions by the local bishop, James (5.33.7f., pp. 294-96). Also taken from Sozomenus is an otherwise unknown story about a Persian monk named Arsacius (Arsaces), who lived on a tower at Nicaea in Bithynia (4.23, pp. 265-66). In book 12 there is a rather long account of the mission of Marutha, bishop of Mesopotamia, to the king of the kings, Yazdegerd I (Sdegerdis; r. 399-420), which led to the official recognition of Christianity in the Persian empire (11.8, pp. 636-38). Later there is a mention of the hostile attitude of Yazdegerd's son and successor Bahrām IV (Barabanis, Gororanis; r. 388-99) and of the resumed Perso-Roman war (invasion of the formerly Armenian province of Arzanene, fighting in Mesopotamia) up to the conclusion of a peace agreement between Bahrām IV (q.v.) and the emperor Theodosius in 422 (12.15, pp. 646-50).

Chronica (ed. Th. Mommsen, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi* XI/1, 1894, pp. 120-61) is a compilation of materials from various earlier sources, particularly the *Chronicle of Hieronymus*. It contains passages about Iranian history in which several errors deserve notice:

Year 106 (p. 140), capture and occupation of Seleucia, Ctesiphon, and Babylon by Trajan. However, it is common knowledge that Trajan captured these three cities in the course of the year 116 and had to abandon them in 117.

Year 224 (p. 146): victory of Alexander (Severus) over Xerxes, king of Persia (likewise in the *Chronicle of Hieronymus*, p. 215). Here the king's name has been altered (following Hieronymus, *ibid.*) and should be Artaxerxes, i.e. Ardašīr I. The campaign in fact took place in 231-33, and although one of the armies sent by Alexander Severus managed to break into Media, another was soundly defeated by Ardašīr's troops.

Year 286 (p. 149): death of [Carus](#) struck by lightning after he had defeated the Parthians (*sic*) and encamped on the far side of the Tigris. Carus certainly conquered Mesopotamia and advanced up to the walls of Ctesiphon, but this campaign took place in 282-83, and Carus died in 283.

Year 306 (p. 150): appearance of the wife, sisters, and children of Narseh in front of the imperial chariot at the triumph of Diocletian and Maximian in Rome. This triumph celebration was in fact held in 303. Although it is true that



Galerius had captured some members of the Sasanian royal family during his victorious campaign in 297, Narseh had soon afterwards obtained the return of these captives under the treaty concluded at Nisibis later in 297 or early in 298 (see Seston, p. 182).

Historia Gothorum, written at the earliest in 530, is known to us only in the abridgement made by Jordanes under the title *Getica* (ed. Th. Mommsen, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi* V/1, Berlin, 1882). Although it is difficult to assess how much of the surviving text comes from Cassiodorus and how much from Jordanes (see Mommsen, pp. xli f., and more recently Barnish), it must certainly have been Cassiodorus who, on the assumption that the Goths of Thrace had gradually assimilated the Scythians, an Iranian people (see Orosius, *Adversus Paganos* 1.16.2 and 5.34.5; cf. Svennung, pp. 29f.), did not hesitate to credit the Goths with exploits which in other literary works are attributed to the Getae as well as to the Goths, though more often to the latter (see Wagner, p. 79, n. 48).

According to Cassiodorus's account (as revised and perhaps completed by Jordanes), the Goths were natives of the island of Scandia (i.e., Scandinavia) who had migrated southward and eastward, entering Asia and coming into contact with the Medes and Persians. One of their kings, Thanausis, subdued the whole of Asia and then made an alliance with Sornus (or Sormuz), king of the Medes, to whom he ceded his realm against payment of a tribute; but a number of his troops left him and settled in Asia. It was to these Gothic settlers that the Parthians, who were descended from them, owed their name because "Parthi" means "fugitives" (a fanciful etymology borrowed from Justin's epitome of the history of *Trogus Pompeius* 41.1). Thanausis after his death was exalted by his subjects to the rank of a god (*Getica* 10.47-48, pp. 66-67). His wife Marpesia, however, again marched into Asia at the head of an army of Amazons and won several great victories. She thrust as far as the Caucasus and gave her name to the "Rock of Marpesia," later renamed the "Caspian Gates" by Alexander. She then subdued Armenia, Syria, Cilicia, and all Asia Minor (*Getica* 7.49-61, pp. 66-67). At a later time Cyrus, king of the Persians, attacked Thomyris, queen of the Amazons, and was victorious in a first encounter but in the end was defeated together with his "Parthians." Further on it is stated that Darius demanded the hand of the daughter of Antyrus, king of the Goths and that after the rejection of this demand he marched against the Goths with 200,000 men and was defeated. Subsequently Xerxes, the son of Darius, led a huge army against the Goths in the hope of avenging his father



but was also defeated (*Getica* 10.61-64, pp. 71-72).

By adapting stories from Greek and Latin historians (Herodotus, Justinus-Trogus Pompeus, and others) to his own preconceptions, Cassiodorus has given us a wholly spurious reconstitution of the history of the Goths in ancient times. It can be taken as a fact that the Goths, who are mentioned as being settled northwest of the Black Sea in the first half of a.d. the 3rd century, had come under Iranian influence insofar as they had adopted certain Iranian customs (see Musset, p. 81), but if any fragments of epic traditions preserved by the eastern Goths were reported to him by the Goths of Italy, these are now lost among the fables.

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