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Theoderic the Great vs. Boethius: Tensions in Italy in the Late 5th and Early 6th
Centuries

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In 524AD the Roman senator Boethius was executed for committing treason against Theoderic the Great, the ruling gothic king in Italy. Boethius was never given a trial, and the charge of treason may have been an exaggeration of what actually happened. The charges levied against Boethius were never actually given in a detailed account; they have merely been hearsay on the part of historians throughout the ages. The reasoning behind the fall of Boethius has been told in a variety of accounts giving various reasons for the downfall of the friendship between the gothic king and the roman senator. There were three major reasons causing tension in Italy during this time which were; the relations between the Goths and the Romans, differences in the two main religions in Italy; Arianism and Catholicism, and Theoderic's relationship with the Romans in Italy and Constantinople. Each of these reasons plays a part in Theoderic's decision to arrest and execute Boethius without trial.

Because Theoderic was a Goth and Boethius was a Roman Senator, the relationships between the Goths and Romans were divided among those loyal to either the gothic monarchy or the roman senate.

Doubtless the Romans had reason to dislike the Goths. The Goths, a people of *virtus*, did not always trouble themselves to behave *civiliter*, and no matter what compact Theoderic came to with Constantinople the fact remained that Italy was still what it had been in the time of

Odoacer, a land under the control of barbarians.¹

For this reason the relationships between the Goths and Romans, during the time of Theoderic were very strained, some modern scholars even describe the Goths as “huge, fair-skinned, beer-drinking, boasting thanes on one hand, and as an insecure barbarian tribe trying very hard to prove that they were worthy to lord it over the ancient heart of Empire on the other.”² One problem with the view presented by scholars is that,

The question involves problems of evidence, for our literary evidence for the Goths comes from Romans, and frequently is more revelatory of the perspectives of its authors than of any objective reality, while non-literary sources, in particular archaeological data, tend to be difficult to evaluate.³

Theoderic’s ruling over both of these nations could have brought about its own problems such that the Roman people may have felt unrepresented. However, during his time as king “He clearly hoped that relations between them would be good, enjoying the thought that the two nations would live in common and concur in the same desires.”⁴ Despite the fact that the power in Italy lay with the Goths they only “constituted a tiny minority of the population.”⁵ Whereas the Romans made up the bulk of the population in Italy, they had little control over military matters.

¹ John Moorhead, *Theoderic in Italy* (Oxford: 1992), 110-111. (*virtus* is the Latin word meaning ‘Virtue’ and *civiliter* is the Latin word meaning ‘Civility.’)

² Moorhead, 66.

³ Moorhead, 66.

⁴ Moorhead, 66.

⁵ Moorhead, 67.

Theoderic was able to keep the peace between the Goths and Romans in Italy for many years while he was in power. In spite of this a number of different theories have been proposed to explain what truly happened that led to the events in 524 A.D. Some focused on the relationships between the Goths and Romans in Italy during the reign of Theoderic. While others focused on Theoderic's relationship with Roman Emperor in Constantinople and the tensions it created between himself and the senate in Rome.

The Romans were represented in Italy through the Senate in Rome, and although Theoderic moved the capital of the west to Ravenna the Senate "continued to meet in Rome, and it, or perhaps more accurately its members, remained important to Theoderic."⁶ It also held significant influence over the king through much of his reign. Although this was not always the case especially in matters concerning Theoderic's relationship to Constantinople, this influence greatly shows the role of the Senate in Italian society.

The Goths and Romans in the workforce of Italy, were very divided,

A cleavage between civilian and military careers had already existed in the later empire, and so a strict division of employment between Goths and Romans could be held to have constituted no more than the imposition of race on a dichotomy which had already existed, and indeed, as the army towards the end of the imperial period in the West had become increasingly barbarized, to have been an thoroughly natural development.⁷

⁶ Moorhead, 144.

Generally it was rare that a Goth would be in a profession other than that of a soldier, and it was also uncommon for powerful Romans to be something other than a politician. However, we do see some instances of Roman Commanders in the military, and Theoderic did appoint some Goths to higher offices in the state.

The division of employment between the Goths and the Romans was such that, the Goths would go out and fight the battles while the Romans stayed and manned the civil service. Such a separation of labor made for a rise in disruption between the two peoples. “Theoderic had often been responsible for the appointment of consuls, patricians, and prefects;”⁸ the Romans knew that most if not all high civil offices were appointed by the king, and this allowed the Goths “to exercise power over Romans in various ways.”⁹ The Romans still held a significant amount of the high civil offices but because of Theoderic, they “must have been aware that there were non-military areas of power from which they were excluded.”¹⁰

Theoderic’s ability to appoint his advisors to high positions allowed the Goths a better chance of holding some non-military positions in Italy, but “the fact that Goths were put in positions of authority over even the most powerful Romans would have been conducive to feelings of ill-ease.”¹¹ With the consulship of Eutharic, Theoderic’s son, in 519

⁷ Moorhead, 72-73.

⁸ Moorhead, 73.

⁹ Moorhead, 73.

¹⁰ Moorhead, 73.

¹¹ Moorhead, 74.

and the advent of Goths to membership of the senate cannot have given pleasure to the Romans, for whom such dignities were the highlights of a life well lived; whatever the distinction between the roles of Goths and Romans in society which could be drawn in broad terms, the Romans may have felt that their position was being eroded.¹²

However, previous to 519, Boethius held the consulship in 510, over a decade before most of the trouble between Goths and Romans came to a head, and also after 519 Boethius' two sons shared the consulship in 522. The increase of Goths in higher civil offices during the latter part of Theoderic's reign created heavy tension between the Goths and Romans within Italy and also enlarged the suspicions of Theoderic against the senate.

Goths and Romans were divided not only in civilian, military and society but also before the law. "Legal matters are complicated by the existence of a code legislating for 'barbarians and Romans' substantially based on Roman law which . . . has been referred to as the *Edictum Theodorici* and ascribed to Theoderic the Ostrogoth,"¹³ made for a different sets of laws under which Goths were to adhere separately from those which Romans would adhere. This meant that Goths and Romans were to be judged in different ways.

This is made clear by the formula for the appointment in various cities of the *comes Gothorum*, an official whose power extended beyond the merely military to some degree. In the case of disputes between Goths

¹² Moorhead, 75.

¹³ Moorhead, 75-76. (*Edictum Theodorici* is Latin, meaning 'Theoderic's edicts', the term 'Ostrogoth' is abbreviated in the bulk of this paper as 'Goth'.)

the official would put an end to them in accordance with Theoderic's edicts; when a Goth and a Roman fell out he would consult with a Roman learned in the law and come to a fair decision; when a case arose between two Romans it would be heard by Roman judges sent by the government into the provinces: in this way each person would keep the laws of his own people, and despite the diversity of judges there would be one justice for all.¹⁴

This was yet another separation between the two peoples creating more tension by complicating the lives of those living in Italy during this time.

Prior to their arrival in Italy the Goths had largely been living on what they could extort or plunder from the Romans, it is scarcely surprising that violent behavior continued, despite the allotment of thirds and the donatives which Theoderic paid his troops. Theoderic's army often treated the civilians badly, and the terror among the people . . . may have been justified.¹⁵

Due to this poor treatment by the Gothic troops, many different instances of violence occurred. Little effort was done to make a better arrangement for both Goths and Romans, which gave the Romans reason to want the Emperor in Constantinople to come and create a better system.

In addition to the tensions cause by the poor treatment of civilians by Gothic troops, the religious differences of the Goths and Romans also increased the strain on the relationship between the two peoples.

The question of religion is both complicated and comparatively well documented, and will require extended discussion. At the time of their arrival in Italy the Ostrogoths were Christians of a belief we may conveniently term Arian, although the relationship between their belief and the doctrines promulgated early in the fourth century by the

¹⁴ Moorhead, 77. (*comes Gothorum* is Latin, meaning 'friend of the goths'.)

¹⁵ Moorhead, 78.

Alexandrian cleric Arius is not as clear as one would wish.¹⁶

Although we know little about the Arian religion, we do know that it was a type of Christianity and may have still had some pagan sympathies. Consequently, when the Goths marched into Italy we do not know how many years of Christian practice they had.

While in Italy Theoderic's relationship with the Catholic Church is for the most part genuinely good. This could be due to the fact that his mother had converted to Catholicism, which suggests that she had previously been pagan. Because his mother was a Catholic, Theoderic had been raised with a very good understanding of the Catholic religion. Another reason he may have had a good relationship with the Catholics is that he may have simply been a good ruler, and was able to show great wisdom in dealing with multiple groups of people.

It has also been suggested though not proven that Theoderic may have been baptized a Catholic at birth, though he proclaimed himself to be an Arian not a Catholic. Despite that Theoderic was publicly an Arian he "did nothing against the Catholic religion,"¹⁷ as he was the son of a Catholic mother, and even went to "St. Peter's 'most devoutly and like a Catholic' on his one recorded trip to Rome."¹⁸

Far from imposing his will on the Church Theoderic was content to let it see to its own affairs, to such an extent that in 502 he refused to

¹⁶ Moorhead, 89.

¹⁷ Moorhead, 92.

¹⁸ Moorhead, 92.

become involved in the judgement of Pope Symmachus and insisted that the bishops who had assembled in Rome for this purpose come to a decision . . . Just as Theoderic could be distinguished from emperors by his failure to build Catholic churches, so too he could be distinguished from them by his extreme reluctance, at this stage of his reign, to intervene in the affairs of the Church . . . must have regarded this as a desirable characteristic.¹⁹

We do know that during Theoderic's reign he was tolerant of both Arianism and Catholicism, leading to the belief that Arians were open to the idea of coexisting with the Catholics peacefully. While the Romans, most of whom were Catholic, especially those outside of Italy, were not as willing to cooperate and, "By the time of Theoderic, Arianism could afford to be tolerant because, having become a mark, perhaps something of a defiant one, of national identity, it had no aspirations to universality. The aspirations of Catholicism were quite different."²⁰

On many occasions Theoderic could have intervened in the affairs of the Church but, due to his not being a Catholic chose to leave the administration of Church issues to the officials of the Church. One such occasion of Theoderic's staying out of Church business was during the Laurentian Schism.

Theoderic's finding in favour of Pope Symmachus and his subsequent visit to Rome must have seemed to have resolved the schism which had broken out on the election of that Pope in 498 . . . before long the vehemence so often characteristic of Church politics had combined with urban unrest which was common in late antiquity to produce in Rome a situation on which Theoderic looked with extreme taste.²¹

¹⁹ Moorhead, 91-92.

²⁰ Moorhead, 95.

²¹ Moorhead, 114.

However, he was reluctant to get involved in the goings on of the Church because of his different religion.

The continued disarray of Rome proved more than he could endure so finally, “After Easter had passed Theoderic ordered that a synod be held in Rome to give judgment concerning Symmachus.”²² This produced tension in the Catholic Church especially because “some felt that, in principle, charges against a Roman pontiff could not be heard, no matter how grave the accusations; others believed that the king’s order should be obeyed.”²³ Although Theoderic was not pleased with the state of Rome during this time he still did not become fully involved in the Churches problems, and allowed them to settle their own issues.

Theoderic’s relationship with the Catholic Church was by no means bad, but it was by no means good either. Theoderic was very lenient with the Catholic Church on many matters; this not only helped but it also hindered his political relationship with the Catholic Church officials. Because Theoderic was not a Catholic he was considered unwelcome when it came to deciding what the Catholic Church could and could not do, and only when things got out of control he did force his hand.

During the Laurentian schism it was clear that the Roman *plebs* supported Symmachus, whereas the senators supported Laurentius. Boethius, a Roman senator and a very strong Catholic was

²² Moorhead, 116.

²³ Moorhead, 116.

widely assumed . . . an adherent of Pope Symmachus, apparently on no more evidence than an interpretation of the letter of Bishop Avitus to Faustus *albus* and Symmachus as being supporters of the pope. Once this piece of evidence is dislodged there are no grounds for numbering Boethius among the supporters of Pope Symmachus.²⁴

As well as being an influential senator during political career Boethius was also highly involved in theological pursuits and he wrote on many different subjects for the Catholic Church.

In one of his works he wrote on several different theological issues for the Catholic Church. “At first sight, the five short treatises known as the *opuscula sacra* (‘short theological works’) do not seem to form a coherent group.”²⁵ However, “on closer scrutiny, the five works fit closely together. If, as seems likely, it was John the Deacon (probably the same John who became Pope in 523) who made and published the collection, he showed by doing so how well he understood the mind of his pupil and friend.”²⁶

His reluctance to involve himself in the affairs of the Catholic Church played a major role in Theoderic’s ability to keep the peace between the Arians and Catholics in Italy. Although they lived in somewhat peaceful coexistence in Italy some minute evidence can be found there is “an interesting piece of evasiveness in Cassiodorus’ Chronicle which suggests that this author did not wish to draw attention

²⁴ Moorhead, 132-133.

²⁵ John Marenbon, *Boethius* (Oxford: 2003), 66.

²⁶ Marenbon, 66.

to the division between Arians and Catholics”²⁷ However, there are very little pieces of direct evidence that unrest between the Arians and Catholics existed in Italy.

It is very difficult to see any trace of religious controversy in the mosaics produced during Theoderic’s life at Ravenna . . .it is arguable that the massive building programme undertaken by Catholics and Arians at Ravenna during and after the life of Theoderic was partly prompted by rivalry, and we may suspect that for the Goths an essential feature of their Arianism was simply that it was not the faith of the Romans.²⁸

One of the Catholics main goals was to bring about an end to religious separation through conversion and reconnect the Empire, and among the Goths in Italy there had been a steady flow of conversion from Arianism to Catholicism. This is also proof showing Theoderic’s tolerance towards both religions. Though there is much evidence to support the conversion of Arians to Catholicism, there is nothing to indicate a single Catholic was converted to Arianism in Gothic Italy.

Another piece of evidence that Theoderic was in fact a good ruler able to keep the peace between the Catholics and Arians, is that in Constantinople Emperor

Justin’s persecution of Arians in the East was very probably designed to create trouble between Theoderic and his Catholic subjects, and at any rate, it did create trouble; Theoderic sent the Pope and other ecclesiastics on a mission to the Emperor, either to seek tolerance in the East, or to threaten reprisals in Italy, or both²⁹

This intolerance of Arianism in the East enhanced the tension between Arians and Catholics in Italy.

²⁷ Moorhead, 91.

²⁸ Moorhead, 94.

²⁹ C.H. Coster, “Procopius and Boethius, I,” *Speculum* 23 (1948): 284.

As time passed the separation of religion as a way to differentiate the Goths from the Romans became an unusable method due to the high conversion rate among the Arians to Catholicism.

As time passed religion would have become less satisfactory as a focus or awareness of being different from Romans, as more Goths . . . adopted the Roman religion, just as they were adopting the Latin language and Roman names . . . compared with both other barbarian kings and Roman emperors, Theoderic was non-interventionist in the affairs of the Church.³⁰

Furthermore, there is the relationship that Theoderic had with the Roman Emperor in Constantinople. This could be a reason why he changed his mind so drastically with regard to the Romans towards the end of his time in power.

Throughout Theoderic's rule, he had good relations with the Catholic Church, and the Senate, but with the Emperor, he was continually trying to clarify his position. Towards the end of his reign he began to change his opinion of the Romans in the senate and there started to be a gradual decline of Roman influence over Theoderic.

With regard to Theoderic's relationship with the Roman Senate there are many letters written from the king to senators on many subjects. Theoderic sent numerous letters to the Senate that were full of flattering sentiments again showing the Senates' importance to the king. "Theoderic's letters to the senate are interesting from more than one point of view . . . These letters concern a multitude of topics, but the largest group contains notifications of appointments to office for which the assent

³⁰ Moorhead, 96.

of the senate was sought.”³¹ The Senate, or more accurately, it’s members remained important to Theoderic up until the latter part of his reign, evidence of this importance can be seen when Theoderic moved the minting of coins from Milan and Ravenna to Rome with a desire to conciliate the Senate.

On one occasion Theoderic writing to the Senate “encouraged it’s members not to overreact to the empty words of the people,”³² after a time when Rome had been troubled by civil disturbance, he also advised them “to bring their complaints to the *praefectus urbis Romae*, so that the guilty would be punished in accordance with the laws.”³³ Without the Senate Theoderic would have not a way to relate to or command the Romans in Italy, though the Senate was extremely important, it was also a cause of much grief to the king. Theoderic needed to always be aware of the Senate and it’s members, because they held much power by way of the people, and the Senate was also important to the Emperor in Constantinople.

The relationship between Theoderic and the Emperor in Constantinople is confusing, partially due to the agreement between Theoderic and the Emperor Zeno that was contracted in 488 before Theoderic went to Italy. This agreement was not fully completed and becomes even more complicated upon Zeno’s death in 491. Theoderic unsure if the new Emperor Anastasius would act in the way that Zeno

³¹ Moorhead, 145.

³² Moorhead, 146.

³³ Moorhead, 146. (*praefectus urbis Romae* is Latin, meaning ‘the city prefect of Rome’)

would have, Theoderic grew ever more concerned with this matter.

After Zeno's death the Goths named Theoderic King (of the Goths), although after the death of his father, Theodemer, he was already technically the king of his people. This perceived coronation can be seen as a confirmation of Theoderic's legitimacy as king of the Goths. This announcement of Theoderic as king and its effect on his relationship with Constantinople is difficult to judge, and even after this confirmation Theoderic continues to send for recognition from Constantinople.

In 493 Theoderic once again seeks recognition as the ruler of Italy from Constantinople "by this time Theoderic's position in Italy was much stronger than it had been in 490, but the second mission to Constantinople was as fruitless as the first."³⁴ Also "it is possible that Anastasius delayed recognition of Theoderic"³⁵ for his own political reasons, and a conclusion was not reached by the time of Anastasius' death either.

Until the end of 499 Constantinople had still not recognized Theoderic as ruler of Italy, even after he gained his recognition the capacity in what he was recognized was still unclear. Though Theoderic's relationship with Constantinople was unstable due to the changing of emperors, he maintained peace in Italy under him for over three decades.

All of these events leading into the sixth century contributed to the fall of

³⁴ Moorhead, 37.

³⁵ Moorhead, 37.

Boethius in 523. Henry Chadwick describes the life of Boethius and the state of Italy during the reign of Theoderic. Boethius was noted to be perhaps the last of the true classicists he spoke Latin as his native language, was fluent in Greek, and lived the life of a Greek philosopher unlike many of his contemporaries. “As an educator Boethius consistently believes practice to be far less important than theory. His educational ideal is intended to produce men of understanding rather than of practical action and technique.”³⁶ Boethius had a very successful political career as a Roman he quickly rose to a high office under Theoderic’s rule. Beginning in his youth Boethius gained favour with Theoderic and was requested on more than one occasion to assist the king in deciding who and what would be sent to gain the favor of some other bureaucrat.

The events leading up to the imprisonment of Boethius, and the circumstances that instigated his eventual execution, suggest that his death may have been a product of Byzantine ambitions attempting to restore Roman imperial rule. Due to some correspondence that was discovered between the emperor Justin and a Roman senator named Albinus, “which was hostile to Theoderic’s kingdom,”³⁷ Theoderic was convinced the entire senate was involved in treasonous activities.

Albinus was a man of some distinction, a member of the Decii and was a pillar of the senate. In attempting to defend his friend Albinus, Boethius

³⁶ Henry Chadwick, *Boethius* (Oxford: 1981), xi.

³⁷ Moorhead, 219.

unintentionally implicated himself and the rest of the senate in the plot to renew Byzantine rule in Italy.

When Boethius came to write the *Consolation of Philosophy* he did not intend to provide a full narrative of his fall. Nevertheless, the account provided there allows three elements of the case against him to be disentangled. In the first place, it was said that he had wished that the senate be safe. . . . Secondly, forged letters were produced by which people attempted to show that Boethius had hoped for Roman liberty. . . . The third accusation mentioned by Boethius sounds the most strange to modern ears. In addition to the charges mentioned above it was alleged that his ambition for office had led him to pollute his conscience with sacrilege and seek the assistance of the most vile spirits.³⁸

These charges against Boethius as described in his work the *Consolation of Philosophy* were more than likely not entirely accurate.

Whenever you have an author describing events in their own life, it is often difficult to find a neutral account of what actually happened. For example, according to Edmund Reiss, “Boethius’ overt concern in this impassioned defense is less with clarifying the charges against him or with recording the events leading to these charges than with protesting his innocence and with lamenting the injustice done to him.”³⁹

Due to the fragmented nature of other primary sources from this time period, the most complete account of the events of 524 A.D. comes from Boethius himself. Since the events that occurred in 524 A.D. eventually led to the death of Boethius, his

³⁸ Moorhead, 220-222.

³⁹ Edmund Reiss, ‘The Fall of Boethius and the Fiction of the *Consolatio Philosophiae*’, 77 (1981): 37.

works give insight to what his thoughts and opinions were regarding what was going on in Italy during that time.

Boethius' *Theological Tractates* (*opuscula sacra*) and the *Consolation of Philosophy* are perhaps his most famous. The *Theological Tractates* were written before his eventual imprisonment and execution, and discuss five major issues confronting the theologians of the day. The *Consolation of Philosophy* was written while he was in prison, it give an account of the events that led to his arrest, and reflects his final thoughts while he awaits execution.

Cassiodorus is another author who wrote works about the events that led to 524, but his works are mostly incomplete. What has been preserved is very similar in content to that of Boethius' *Theological Tractates*, albeit from a different point of view. Cassiodorus succeeded Boethius in 523 A.D. to the office of *magister officium*, when the senator was imprisoned on suspicion of treason against Theoderic. Perhaps his most famous work is his *Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning* which discusses his collaboration with Pope Agapit (535-36) on a Christian 'school' in Rome, giving details of how to incorporate Christian doctrine with the liberal arts and sciences. Despite many of his works being incomplete Cassiodorus gives insight to another side of the story we received from Boethius.

The origins of the Goths, coming from scattered tribes and transforming into a great military force, migrating to Italy, and becoming a new people, from two separate identities, gives insight as to why tensions arose in Italy. Theoderic

attempted control the evolution of his people, the Goths, and did his best to determine what rights they had, and how to better understand them.

Theoderic's journey to Italy and his rise to power, is probably the best documented of a barbarian career in this era. He has attracted the notice of many historians from different time periods. Theoderic came to power in Italy, and used his power to understand and solve the problems arising among the people under his rule. His ability to control the tensions in Italy during this time, are a key factor in how he was able to stay in power for nearly three decades.

During the time before the death of Boethius in 524 A.D. there was considerable unrest between the Romans and the Goths who were settled in Italy. Many of the reasons for this have to do with the political, military, cultural and religious disputes between the Romans and Goths.

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