

Boethius in the Court of Theodoric the Great

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The early medieval philosopher Boethius was recognized as a brilliant man from a young age, and soon found himself raised to a high position in the court of Theodoric, then ruler of Italy. He took this public position out of his philosophical convictions, while those same convictions led to his later expulsion, by execution, from that society. This paper will outline Boethius' position in Italian society, his role in Theodoric's court and his ultimate fall as he failed, or rather refused, to participate in the political games required of someone in his position.

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius was born in approximately 480, a mere four years after the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire, placing him in the earliest period of the middle ages. He was born into an upper-class family, the Anicii, who had served the public in the Roman Empire. His father continued that public service under Odovacer, the usurper who took control of Italy when the Empire fell in 476, as Prefect of the City, Pretorian Prefect, and later Consul (Barrett 34). However, the young Boethius became orphaned at seven when his father was killed. The child was adopted by, as he later called them, “men of the very highest rank” (Boethius 35). It is often assumed that Boethius was adopted by Symmachus, who served as “Head of the Senate and a pillar of the Catholic Church” (Barrett 34), as well as the great-grandson of another famous Symmachus who fought for the rights of practicing pagans in Rome; though the details of his adoption are “by no means certain” (Moorhead, “Boethius” 32). What is

certain is that Boethius married Symmachus' daughter, Rusticiana (Moorhead, "Boethius" 14). The nobility of his birth, his adopted family and his marriage into Symmachus' family elevated Boethius, providing him with the opportunities he needed for his study.

Boethius was literate in Greek as well as Latin, and became an expert scholar in Greek philosophy. His primary project was his work on translating the texts of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle (Barrett 35). It was due mostly to Boethius that Europe had any primary texts from ancient Greek philosophers during the middle ages, as his were the only translations of most Aristotelian works until the twelfth century (Spade 70). In his own time, he was greatly respected for his work, with his contemporaries addressing him as "'your prudence', 'your wisdom', and 'most learned of men'" (Moorhead, "Boethius" 15). His studies included "music, mathematics, astronomy [and] theology" (Barrett 36) in addition to Greek philosophy.

For the majority of his life, the ruler in Boethius' home of Italy was Flavius Theodoric, or Theodoric the Great. Theodoric was king of the Ostrogoths, and, beginning in 488, he led an invasion of Italy against Odovacer (Moorhead, "Theodoric" 22). In 493, a treaty between Odovacer and Theodoric was signed to allow both of them to rule in Italy. However, at the banquet to celebrate the agreement, Theodoric took up his sword and killed Odovacer, and also sent an order to kill all of Odovacer's loyal soldiers (Moorhead, "Theodoric" 26). Although history reports that Theodoric directly told Odovacer that he was seeking vengeance for his family members killed by Odovacer's men, some historians, medieval and contemporary, claim that the killing was justified, or necessary for Theodoric, as Odovacer was similarly planning to reclaim full control of Italy (Barret 24). Regardless of this detail, it seems that Theodoric was welcome in Italy, as the Romans were not particularly fond of Odovacer to begin with (Moorhead, "Theodoric" 28). Although Theodoric was of Arian faith, which was in conflict with

orthodox Catholicism over some major dogmatic points, he never oppressed Catholicism and preserved most Roman institutions, though he was viewed as an outsider by Catholics in his kingdom (Moorhead, “Boethius” 17). Despite the violent entrance of the Ostrogoths and the removal of the previous ruler, Theodoric's rule over Italy was generally a peaceful one. At the height of his power, Theodoric controlled the Ostrogothic kingdom, including Italy, and acted as regent for the Visigoths who controlled the area east of his kingdom and the majority of the Iberian Peninsula. His enclosure was established at Ravenna in existing Roman palaces, Ravenna having served as the Roman capital late in the Empire's existence (Barrett 44). However, the king did not seek to develop an exclusively noble retinue as would become common in later medieval courts. Instead, Theodoric was able to maintain favour largely by preserving existing Roman society as much as possible, and by inviting common Romans into his court.

As much as Boethius' family status helped him gain recognition as a scholar, it was his own intellectual merit that gained him a position in Theodoric's court. In fact, the appointment of Boethius to the position of *magister officiorum*, Master of the Offices, broke with Theodoric's previous habit of inviting only lower-class families into his retinue (Moorhead, “Boethius” 18). The role of the *magister officiorum* was one from the Roman Empire, and was maintained in Ostrogothic Italy. It involved overseeing most government and court services, and was perhaps the highest administrative position available in the court of Theodoric. The position also saw the philosopher move from his home in Rome to Ravenna, where the king held his court. Boethius was previously a man of solitary study (Barrett 38), but chose to pursue public involvement based on his philosophical convictions, which stem from his reading of Plato. Plato writes that “until political power and philosophy entirely coincide . . . cities will have no rest from evils . . . nor, I think, will the human race” (*Republic* V, 473c), and Boethius takes this seriously, writing

that “philosophers should take part in politics in order to prevent the state from falling into the hands of the stupid and the wicked” (Boethius 11). It is out of this moral duty that Boethius broke from his main life's work, translating the works of the Socratic philosophers, and took his public role in the court of Theodoric.

These philosophical principles kept Boethius busy in his public office, where he found himself “opposing the plans of selfish and unprincipled men, and in the effort to keep [his] conscience clear and do what was lawful and right” (Boethius 11). In his writings, he details several instances in which he fought against other officials for whatever he perceived as the just course of action. He even indicates that in these activities he had the support of the king in at least some cases (Boethius 12), but that would change in time.

In 523, an accusation was made by Cyprian, another official of Theodoric's court and, at the time his Minister of Finance, against the senator Albinus. Cyprian claimed that Albinus had sent a letter to the eastern Roman Emperor Justin, casting Theodoric in an unfavourable light. Boethius was happy to defend the Senate and its senator, but his opponents produced testimony that convinced Theodoric to charge Boethius with treason (Moorhead, “Boethius” 19). Behind this motivation was the existing tensions between Theodoric and Emperor Justin. Theodoric's Arian religion saw Jesus as distinct from and inferior to God, a view deemed heretical by Catholic religion and the orthodox views of the Byzantine Empire. Due to his religion, Theodoric was always an outsider in Italy, and as a viceroy of the Eastern Roman Empire it was important for him to maintain favour with the Emperor in order to maintain Gothic control along the northern Mediterranean (Moorhead, “Theodoric” 36). Having successfully led the invasion of Odovacer's Italy himself, Theodoric would not have been interested in allowing Justin to control his territory from the east. For this reason, any suspicions or accusations of treason against

Theodoric's kingdom, especially attempts to bring opposition from Constantinople, had to be met with strict penalty.

In 523, Boethius was arrested. He was charged firstly with defending the treasonous senate. His accusers were not able to fully demonstrate Boethius' own wrongdoing, and went on to add additional charges, insisting that Boethius was corrupt and had turned to sacrilege in his pursuit of political power (Barrett 69). Boethius himself equates the content of this charge as an attack on his own love of philosophy, with his opponents attempting to convince the king that Boethius has been corrupted by a twisted ideology (Boethius 17). Ultimately, they were successful, and Boethius was sentenced to execution.

While awaiting his death, which would come in 524, Boethius wrote his most famous work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, in which he mounts a defense of the senate, and of himself, insisting innocence on each of his charges. In the text, he attacks the political landscape of Theodoric's court, in particular his accusers and their dishonesty in their quest for power. Ultimately, Boethius explains that he was unable to navigate the politics of the court, insisting on maintaining his own philosophical ideals against “the dogs of the court” (Boethius 14), those less honourable men who would lie and cheat their way into power. When Boethius was appointed, Theodoric would have been around the age of seventy and had no obvious heir (Moorhead, “Boethius” 19). The growing favour of Boethius in the retinue of Theodoric and in the eyes of Italian society in general provided his opponents with substantial motive against him. Through his insistence of his innocence and the testimony of some early medieval historians, it is believed by many scholars that Boethius was innocent, and that others in the court did indeed conspire against him (Spade 70). Indeed, there is little evidence that Boethius was interested enough in politics to have any political motives of his own (Barrett 73), as his main project was to spread

the works of antiquity, his notion of the philosopher's role in politics being one of duty rather than of personal interest. There is even some evidence suggesting that Theodoric may have had some sense of guilt for what happened to Boethius, the effects of the rhetoric to which he had been subjected having worn off later (Barrett 71). Regardless of what the king or anyone else thought afterwards, it is clear that Boethius was, in part, a victim of his lack of skill in politics, as he was unable to successfully defend himself or the senate within Theodoric's court.

Despite his early death, Boethius was able to build a substantial legacy. As has been stated, his translations, particularly those of Aristotle, were among the only available sources of Greek literature in the middle ages, and through them Boethius had a significant impact on medieval philosophy as a whole. Boethius was a founder of scholasticism, which blended Aristotelean philosophy with Catholic teachings and remained the *de facto* position of philosophers until the enlightenment. The *Consolation* also includes a more robust development of Boethius' neoplatonist philosophy, which would become a part of medieval educational curriculum for centuries (Barrett 39). Although he was unable to fulfill all of his ambitions, Boethius did manage to make a name for himself, one that would escape the politics of Theodoric's court.

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