

Waiting for the barbarians: the frontiers of the Ostrogothic Kingdom during the reign of Theoderic

by Marco Cristini

Several letters written by Cassiodorus deal with Ostrogothic borders, describing the forts that guarded the Alpine passes, discussing the administration of frontier areas or lingering on the virtues and the vices of the people who inhabited them. The evidence provided by the *Variarum* indicates that frontiers were a crucial part of the Ostrogothic Kingdom during the reign of Theoderic, not only because they were the gates of Italy and had to be garrisoned to prevent hostile incursions, but also because they became a cornerstone of his political communication, stressing the difference between “Romanized” Goths and the “savage” tribes who lived beyond the Alps.

Middle Ages; 5th-6th centuries; Italian frontiers in the 6th century; Ostrogoths; Theoderic; Cassiodorus; *Variarum*.

Abbreviations

ThLL = *Thesaurus linguae Latinae*, Lipsiae 1900-.

Variarum II = Flavio Magno Aurelio Cassiodoro Senatore, *Variarum*, dir. A. Giardina, ed. by A. Giardina, G.A. Cecconi, I. Tantillo, with the coop. of F. Oppedisano, vol. 2, Roma 2014.

Variarum III = Flavio Magno Aurelio Cassiodoro Senatore, *Variarum*, dir. A. Giardina, ed. by A. Giardina, G.A. Cecconi, I. Tantillo, with the coop. of F. Oppedisano, vol. 3, Roma 2015.

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1. Introduction

During Antiquity, the defence of Italy's land borders represented an essential necessity for achieving a stable control of the peninsula, especially from the second half of the fifth century onwards, when the Alps once again marked the border between the Roman world and territories occupied by populations that were regarded as barbarians¹. The gradual transition from the imperial hegemony to a multipolar international order that occurred in Europe during these years was accompanied by the appearance of new political entities (e.g. the kingdoms of the Franks, Visigoths, Burgundians, Gepids), which were based in the former provinces of the empire and often had little internal cohesion, a feature that made it more difficult to prevent attacks and incursions through diplomatic initiatives.

The risks arising from this situation became evident between 489 and 493, during the conflict between Odoacer and Theoderic when, in the space of four years, the Alps were crossed by Ostrogoths, Visigoths, and Burgundians, not to mention the smaller contingents of other peoples that probably took part in the conflict². After defeating his rival, Theoderic gradually consolidated his power through military and political initiatives aimed at securing the support of the senatorial aristocracy and of the Italian population³. One of the pillars of Theoderic's political programme was the defence of Italy from the peoples living beyond the Alps who, in recent decades, had represented a factor of increasing insecurity, especially for the inhabitants of Northern Italy. The military dimension of the defence of the Italian borders was soon complemented by a careful political communication strategy, which made use of traditional concepts such as the savage barbarian or the soldiers considered as the shield of Italy, and by a set of administrative measures, which enabled Theoderic's troops effectively to guard the main strongholds of the Alpine border. This paper will examine the borders of the Ostrogothic Kingdom in the light of these three perspectives (i.e. from a military, administrative, and ideological point of view) by focusing on a few letters taken from Cassiodorus' *Variarum*. Before proceeding further, however, a brief contextualisation of this work is in order. The *Variarum* is a collection of 468 letters, edicts and formulas written by Cassiodorus on behalf of the Ostrogothic rulers between 507 and 537/538, when he left the Court. Cassiodorus had probably already started collecting the letters that he considered most significant during the last years of his public activity and circulated his collection

¹ This article is part of the research carried out for the 2017 PRIN project: *Ruling in Hard times: Patterns of Power and Practices of Government in the Making of Carolingian Italy* (PI Giuseppe Albertoni); it was written within the research unit hosted by Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, and coordinated by Fabrizio Oppedisano. The support of all institutions involved in the project is gratefully acknowledged.

² On the war between Odoacer and Theoderic, see Caliri, *Praecellentissimus rex*, pp. 151-160; Wiemer, *Theoderich*, pp. 180-192.

³ On the relationship between Theoderic and the senatorial aristocracy, see most recently La Rocca – Oppedisano, *Il senato*; Eich, *Quod prosperum*; Salzman, *The Falls*, pp. 248-258.

before the conquest of Ravenna by Belisarius (540). Recently, there has been a lively debate on the circumstances leading to the publication of the *Variae*. It has been suggested that Cassiodorus worked on his collection of letters while living in Constantinople after 540 and that he edited several documents to facilitate his return to the political fray in either Italy or Byzantium⁴. However, these conjectures do not take into due consideration both Cassiodorus' will to devote himself entirely to the writing of religious works after leaving the Court of Ravenna, and the preface of the *Variae*, from which it can be deduced that Cassiodorus' main intention was to stress the fundamental political importance assumed by the rhetoric and style in the Ostrogothic Kingdom, as argued by Giardina⁵. It is highly unlikely that Cassiodorus made major revisions of several letters by altering official documents with the aim of obtaining personal advantages, which are incompatible with what all of his works written after 538 unanimously state, namely that he regarded his public career as something shameful and only desired to seek salvation by turning to Christ⁶. Therefore, it is conceivable that the letters included within the *Variae* are mostly a faithful transcription of the royal correspondence, and Cassiodorus' revisions concern almost only the exclusion of those formulaic expressions that opened and closed each document, as well as (in some cases) the names of the persons mentioned in the letters.

2. *The military dimension of Ostrogothic frontiers*

The frontiers of the Ostrogothic Kingdom played a role of paramount importance in the defence of Italy. The military and logistical challenges that Theoderic faced in securing the borders of his kingdom are well summarised in *Variae* II, 5, a letter sent to the Praetorian Prefect Faustus between 507 and 511. In this document, the king orders foodstuffs (the *annona*) to be delivered without delay to the sixty soldiers guarding the Clusurae Augustanae, probably in the Aosta Valley⁷. These were strategic places to prevent an invading army (in all likelihood the Burgundians) from reaching Northern Italy, yet only sixty soldiers were assigned to guard this stronghold⁸. Such a small num-

⁴ Bjornlie, *Politics*. Bjornlie's reconstruction has been met with considerable scepticism, see for instance the reviews by Wiemer and Heather.

⁵ Giardina, *Cassiodoro*, p. 39: «quello di porre in risalto (...) il fondamentale rilievo politico assunto dalla forma – patrimonio di immagini, di concetti e di espressioni persuasive – nel regno ostrogoto».

⁶ Cristini, *Oblivio*.

⁷ See Cassiodorus, *Variae* I, 9, a letter sent to the bishop of Aosta, who had been charged with treason («proditio patriae»). See also Schwarcz, *Die Restitutio*, p. 790. For other conjectures concerning the localization, see Christie, *Ostrogothic Italy*, p. 146 (Chiusa di Pesio near Cuneo, or Chiusa di San Michele, located in Val di Susa).

⁸ For a comparison, see e.g. Procopius of Caesarea, *Bellum Gothicum* II, 11, 1–3: during the Gothic War, Vitiges left a garrison of 1,000 men at Chiusi, 400 at Todi and Petra Pertusa, 4,000 at Osimo, 2,000 at Urbino, and 500 at Cesena and Monteferetra.

ber was primarily due to the numerical weakness of the Ostrogothic army during the first two decades of Theoderic's reign. In 489, the king arrived in Italy at the head of about 40,000 people, so he could count on less than 10,000 warriors, a number which dropped considerably after the bloody battles with Odoacer's troops⁹. After gaining full control of Italy, Theoderic found himself having to garrison the whole peninsula and the Alps with a much reduced army. The strength of his forces certainly grew following both the natural demographic increase of the Gothic population and the arrival in Italy of mercenaries and other groups of warriors from other parts of Europe, but it is likely that, even a decade later, Theoderic could not realistically count on more than 15,000 soldiers¹⁰. It was also for this reason that he decided to concentrate his troops in strategic locations, close to the main centres of his kingdom, and deployed only a limited number of warriors to the strongholds located along the borders.

Moreover, it should be taken into consideration that large-scale incursions by populations coming from beyond the Alps were rare during the reign of Theoderic and his immediate successors, and always occurred during periods of political instability, so it is unsurprising that the Ostrogoths opted for a defence in depth, the same strategy that had been adopted by the western emperors from the first decades of the fifth century¹¹. The garrisons placed along the frontiers of the kingdom could intervene effectively only in the case of low-intensity conflicts, which were often difficult to distinguish from the episodes of banditry that were endemic in the peripheral territories of the ancient world¹². In the face of larger incursions, it is likely that the main task of the border garrisons was immediately to warn Ravenna and slow down the enemy, while allowing the Ostrogothic army to gather enough forces to repel the attack¹³.

In addition to providing valuable information on the numerical strength of the garrison of an Alpine fortress, *Variarum* II, 5, also sheds light on the victualling of the outposts. As is well known, Theoderic redistributed one third of the land or, less likely, of the tax revenue deriving from it among his follow-

⁹ Usually, the Ostrogoths who came to Italy have been estimated to number c.100,000 (thus, 20-25,000 warriors); see already Schmidt, *Geschichte der deutschen Stämme*, p. 152; more recently Heather, *The Goths*, p. 236; Wolfram, *Die Goten*, p. 279; Wiemer, *Theoderich*, p. 180. However, these estimates are often based upon Procopius of Caesarea, *Bellum Vandalicum* I, 8, 12, a passage which is not trustworthy, see Cristini, *Il seguito*; a more likely estimate is that offered by Burns, *Calculating* (40,000 people), who takes into consideration the evidence about the number of warriors who fought under Theoderic and the other Gothic chieftains before 488.

¹⁰ See Schäfer, *Theoderic*, p. 248. For other estimates of the strength of the Ostrogothic army, see Hannestad, *Les forces*; Kaegi, *The Capability*, p. 89. More generally on the Ostrogothic army, see Halsall, *The Ostrogothic Military*.

¹¹ See e.g. Christie, *From Constantine*, pp. 331-348.

¹² Shaw, *Bandits*.

¹³ Settia, *Le fortificazioni*, p. 130; Grundmann, *The Ostrogothic Defence*, pp. 215-218.

ers after his arrival in Italy¹⁴, thus providing the Ostrogoths with a constant and secure source of income. This system was conceived for the Ostrogoths stationed around Ravenna, in the Po Valley or in Central Italy, whereas the troops who guarded the Alpine borders had to resort to a more traditional way of obtaining supplies, as the letter on the Clusurae Augustanae clearly indicates. The border garrisons were often located in remote places, thus the system of the *tertiarum deputatio* was unsuitable to meet the needs of the soldiers quartered there, who may have owned estates nearby, but were unable to obtain from them sufficient food for their subsistence. Therefore, the task of providing them with supplies fell to the praetorian prefect, who had to take charge of the needs of the entire Alpine defence system¹⁵. Evidently, it was common practice, especially after the War of Provence, to send food supplies to the border garrisons, which also housed the soldiers' families, as reported by Procopius of Caesarea¹⁶.

What did these Alpine fortresses look like? The *Variae* includes a suggestive description of an Ostrogothic border stronghold, namely the *castellum* of Verruca, which has been commonly identified with Doss Trento, although the fortress mentioned in the letter might have been located closer to the Raetian border, perhaps at Fragsburg in Merano¹⁷. Cassiodorus writes that:

Est enim in mediis campis tumulus saxeus in rotunditate consurgens, qui proceris lateribus, silvis erasus, totus mons quasi una turris efficitur, cuius ima graciliora sunt quam cacumina et in mollissimi fungi modo supernus extenditur, cum in inferiore parte tenuetur¹⁸.

The letter goes on to report that Verruca holds the *claustra provinciae*, an expression that can be translated either as “the bulwark of the province” or “the lock of the province”. The frontiers of the kingdom are compared to a door and the Ostrogothic garrisons to a bolt, in language that highlights the contrast between what is within Theoderic's kingdom and what is outside it.

The structure and location of a few Ostrogothic frontier fortresses can also be studied relying on archaeological evidence. In fact, excavations car-

¹⁴ Porena, *L'insediamento*. There is an ongoing debate about the so-called “techniques of accommodation”, since some scholars argue that tax proceeds and not landed property were sometimes awarded to individual barbarians in the West. See Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans*, and Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*, pp. 119-186. Goffart's hypothesis has been much debated during the last few decades; for a summary of the criticism, see Halsall, *The Technique*.

¹⁵ See Cassiodorus, *Variae* II, 5, 1: it is suggested by the sentence «sicut aliis quoque decretae sunt».

¹⁶ Procopius of Caesarea, *Bellum Gothicum* II, 28, 29. For the receipt of the *annona* by soldiers see also Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 42; V, 11; V, 13; V, 23; XI, 16.

¹⁷ See the commentary of Marcone in *Varie* II, p. 290, who mostly follows Settia, *Le fortificazioni*, pp. 112-114.

¹⁸ Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 48; «In the middle of the plain there is a rising rocky hill with a rounded top and steep slopes, devoid of woods, which makes the whole relief look like a sort of tower. At the base, it is narrower than at the top and the top widens like that of a very soft mushroom, while it shrinks in the lower part».

ried out in recent decades in several Alpine localities have revealed traces of fortifications dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries. It is often impossible to ascertain the actual occupation of the sites during the Ostrogothic period but, for some settlements, scholars agree that they were used during the reign of Theoderic or his immediate successors¹⁹. A case study is represented by Monte Barro, a site that sheds light on the frontier garrisons of the Ostrogothic Kingdom.

Monte Barro is a hill about 900 metres high south of Lecco. A fortified complex of about six hectares defended by a wall has been excavated on the southern slopes of the mountain²⁰. During the excavations, several late antique coins were found, none of which seems to have been struck after the reign of Vitiges (536–540). There are also the remains of a residential building destroyed by fire. In the absence of literary sources, it is difficult to reconstruct the function of these structures. According to Settia, the settlement served as a refuge and was not directly linked to the defence of the roads leading north of the Alps²¹, whereas Martínez Jiménez considers it the residence of an Ostrogothic official in charge of the defence of the Alpine *limes*²². However, it seems difficult to imagine that such an imposing fortification was erected only to accommodate an Ostrogothic official and his entourage, or to offer shelter to the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, who could easily have sought safety in the nearby mountains. As argued by Brogiolo, it seems more likely that Monte Barro served as the centre of a complex system of strongholds, which included outposts located at some distance, and at the same time was part of a network of fortifications that protected Milan and its countryside from the raids of peoples such as the Alamans or Burgundians²³. The relatively large size of the site was due to the necessity to host the Ostrogothic warriors of the garrison and their families, as well as to accommodate the soldiers guarding the peripheral outposts, who withdrew from the less defensible places to the main fortress in the case of large-scale raids. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that the local population might have taken refuge in the *castrum* of Monte Barro, or that a high-ranking Ostrogothic official might have lived there, but it is conceivable that the main function of the settlement was a military one, as indicated by its violent destruction during the Gothic War, which was not followed by any reconstruction.

Turning from a specific fortress to the overall geographical distribution of the garrisons defending the northern border of Italy, Settia has convincingly argued that there are considerable differences between the western and central Alps on the one hand, and the eastern Alps on the other²⁴. In fact, several

¹⁹ See: Christie, *Ostrogothic Italy*.

²⁰ *Archeologia*; more recently: Martínez Jiménez, *Monte Barro*.

²¹ Settia, *Le fortificazioni*, pp. 118–122.

²² Martínez Jiménez, *Monte Barro*.

²³ *Archeologia*, vol. 1, pp. 56–57.

²⁴ Settia, *Le fortificazioni*, p. 109.

garrisons are attested near the borders with the Franks and the Burgundians, and they are almost always located in the foothills, at the entrance of valleys leading to the Alpine passes. On the other hand, there are fewer fortresses in the eastern Alps, and they are located farther from the Po Valley, as in the case of Verruca, for the Ostrogoths controlled a large part of Raetia, Noricum, and Dalmatia, and could therefore set up a more advanced line of defence²⁵.

3. *The administrative dimension of Ostrogothic frontiers*

The borders of the Ostrogothic Kingdom should be examined from an administrative point of view as well. Under Theoderic and his successors, provinces were ruled by both civil governors, often of Roman origin, and *comites* or *duces*, who were above all entrusted with border areas. There is no need to dwell on the competences of each of these officials, which often overlapped. Suffice it to say that *comites* and *duces* performed both judicial and military functions²⁶.

Around 510, a border province like Dalmatia was governed by a *comes* of illustrious rank named Osuin, who was appointed by Theoderic to procure the necessary weapons for the soldiers stationed at Salona²⁷. Colosseus, another *comes*, was in charge of Pannonia Sirmiensis. The *Variae* includes the letter with which Theoderic instructed him to take charge of the province, as well as the letter sent to the inhabitants of Pannonia to inform them of Colosseus' arrival. He was instructed to «*commissam tibi provinciam armis protege, iure compone*»²⁸. Once again, the military duties of the governor of a border region are placed in the foreground and precede his judicial duties, which represented the most important part of the activity of those governors who had been charged with the administration of the Italian provinces. Cassiodorus offers a lively portrait of Pannonia Sirmiensis, which takes on the aspect of a sort of late antique Far West. Its inhabitants were seemingly used to settle their disputes with arms, so that losing a case was often equivalent to losing their life. Cassiodorus urges the new governor to take measures to ensure that «*litigation in the courts does not cause more deaths than wars*»²⁹ and concludes with an unflattering reference to the wild minds and violent souls of the Pannonian provincials³⁰.

²⁵ See also: Gatto, *Le frontiere*.

²⁶ See the commentary by G.A. Cecconi in *Varie* III, pp. 181-182, as well as Maier, *Amtsträger*, pp. 218-222 and 235-237, and Arnold, *Ostrogothic Provinces*.

²⁷ Cassiodorus, *Variae* I, 40.

²⁸ Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 23, 2: «*protect the province entrusted to you with arms and govern it with laws*». See the commentary by G. Zecchini, in *Varie* II, pp. 243-245.

²⁹ Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 23, 3.

³⁰ Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 23, 4: «*consuetudo nostra feris mentibus inseratur, donec truculentus animus belle vivere consuescat*». See also *Variae* III, 24, 3-4. On the provincial society of Pannonia, see Gračanin, *Late Antique Dalmatia*, pp. 256-262.

On the other hand, Raetia was governed by a *dux*, as can be seen from the *formula ducatus Raetiarum*, a model to be used to draft official letters announcing the appointment of a new governor of the two provinces into which Raetia had been divided after the reforms of Diocletian. Cassiodorus praises the newly appointed official, writing that:

Multum his creditum videtur quibus confinales populi deputantur, quia non est tale pacatis regionibus ius dicere, quale suspectis gentibus assidere, ubi non tantum vitia quantum bella suspecta sunt nec solum vox praeconis insonat, sed tubarum crepitus frequenter insultat³¹.

Here too, the governor's judicial tasks are mentioned only to emphasise his military duties. The contrast between *vitia* and *bella*, as well as that between the voice of the public herald and the trumpets of the army, suggests that the *dux Raetiarum* had to take care above all of the security of the territories entrusted to him³². With an effective metaphor, Cassiodorus writes that «gentilis impetus vestra venatio est»³³ and exhorts the *dux* to patrol the borders of the province with his soldiers³⁴. Other officials were asked to check the tax-collection process or the observance of the law, but the governor of Raetia was first and foremost required to watch the borders of the kingdom.

One of his tasks was to control cross-border movements. Cassiodorus admonishes him not to welcome groups of barbarians (*gentiles*) without proper controls and, at the same time, not to allow Ostrogothic subjects to move to neighbouring peoples because of his neglect (*incuriositas*)³⁵. This statement is ambiguous at first sight, but should be properly contextualized. In peripheral regions such as Raetia, the process of ethnogenesis that led to the emergence of coherent groups and stable political entities was still in its infancy in the early sixth century. It was not uncommon for bands of barbarians (and in all likelihood for Roman provincials as well) to cast in their lot with a charismatic leader and then possibly serve as mercenaries or *foederati* under a Germanic sovereign or even the emperor³⁶. These warrior companies could cover

³¹ Cassiodorus, *Variae* VII, 4, 1; «Much confidence is given to those to whom populations of border areas are assigned, since administering justice in peaceful regions is not the same as guarding fearsome peoples in places where one must fear not so much vice as war and where not only the voice of the herald resounds, but frequently the thunderous signal of battle trumpets breaks out». See the commentary by G.A. Cecconi, in *Varie* III, pp. 196-199. More generally on Ostrogothic Raetia, see Heuberger, *Das ostgotische Rätien*.

³² On the *dux Raetiarum* during the Ostrogothic period, see Zerjadtke, *Das Amt*, pp. 132-143.

³³ Cassiodorus, *Variae* VII, 4, 2: «the incursions of the barbarians are your quarry».

³⁴ Cassiodorus, *Variae* VII, 4, 3: «milites et in pace regas et cum eis fines nostros sollempni alacritate circueas».

³⁵ Cassiodorus, *Variae* VII, 4, 4: «Quapropter responde nostro iudicio, fide nobis et industria placiturus, ut nec gentiles sine discussione suscipias nec nostros ad gentes sub incuriositate transmittas».

³⁶ For an overview on the Alpine regions and their peoples during late antiquity, see Steinacher, *Rom und die Barbaren*.

considerable distances, sometimes moving from Sweden to Italy, as recently pointed out by Fischer³⁷.

Of course, such migrations entailed risks, as warriors from other ethnic groups could easily turn into raiders or spies in the pay of neighbouring populations, so the *dux Raetiarum* had to exercise the utmost caution. There was also the opposing risk, namely that the *incuriositas* of the Ostrogothic governor would spur some provincials to move outside the territories controlled by Theoderic, thus depriving him of valuable soldiers. It is not perfectly clear what Cassiodorus meant by the term *incuriositas*, but it should probably be interpreted in the sense of “carelessness, lack of initiative”³⁸. Warriors had to be motivated by offering them the chance to acquire glory and booty, hence the references to hunting barbarians. A *dux* with little inclination towards martial activities risked losing several soldiers, especially those enlisted locally, who might prefer to cross the border and follow a more enterprising leader. In addition to the traditional judicial and military tasks, a governor of a border area was thus required to have a certain amount of experience in managing “human resources”.

4. *The ideological dimension of Ostrogothic frontiers*

The third, and last, dimension of the borders of the Ostrogothic Kingdom is ideological. Theoderic’s political communication focused mainly on two aspects of borders, namely the defence of the provinces and the contrast between civilisation and barbarism.

Cassiodorus often describes the border regions as the bulwark of Italy. For example, the aforementioned *formula ducatus Raetiarum* posits that «Raetiae namque munimina sunt Italiae et claustra provinciae»³⁹. The latter expression is also present in the letter concerning Verruca, once again defined as «claustra provinciae»⁴⁰, while the Clusurae Augustanae are called «porta provinciae»⁴¹. The language used by the Court of Ravenna conveys a static image of the frontiers, which are perceived as a barrier interrupted only by a few well-guarded strongholds, acting as access points to the Ostrogothic Kingdom.

³⁷ Fischer, *From Italy*.

³⁸ There are only two occurrences of *incuriositas* in classical and late antique Latin literature. Besides the passage from the *Variae*, see Salvianus, *De gubernatione Dei* I, 1, with the comments of *ThLL* 7.1, 1081, ll. 81–84. The adjective *incuriosus* is attested in *Variae* VII, 44 («incuriosa vetustate»), and has a similar meaning, see the commentary by G.A. Cecconi in *Varie* III, p. 286.

³⁹ Cassiodorus, *Variae* VII, 4, 2: «Raetiae are the bastions of Italy and the bolts of the province».

⁴⁰ Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 48, 2.

⁴¹ Cassiodorus, *Variae* II, 5, 2: «the gate of the province».

The ultimate purpose of the border garrisons was to ensure the peace and security of Italy. Cassiodorus refers to the welfare of the state and the tranquility of Theoderic's subjects in his letter on the Clusurae Augustanae⁴², while in the *formula ducatus Raetiarum* he alludes to their freedom, a concept of paramount importance in the Ostrogothic Kingdom⁴³. The soldiers stationed in Raetia are described as the shield of Italy, as those who allow the inhabitants of the peninsula a happy and free life⁴⁴. The image of the shield is perhaps the best summary of the role of the garrisons placed along the borders, in places like Monte Barro or Verruca. Beyond their actual military role, they served to substantiate the representation of Theoderic as the defender of Italy.

The surveillance of borders is often connected with the virtues of caution and prudence, which were indispensable for a good sovereign, who must provide for the security of the state even in the absence of obvious threats⁴⁵. Cassiodorus dwells on this aspect in his letter to Verruca, writing that «munitio tractanda semper in otio est, quia tunc male quaeritur, quando necessaria iudicatur»⁴⁶. We find similar advice in *Variae* I, 40, written to an official entrusted with the procurement of arms for the soldiers stationed in Dalmatia: «discat miles in otio, quod perficere possit in bello»⁴⁷. Troops garrisoning border fortresses had to be ready for the outbreak of a conflict, since the peoples who lived beyond the frontiers could attack them at any time.

These letters indicate that Theoderic and his successors fully adhered to the traditional representation of the *limes* as a barrier between barbarism and civilisation. They did not hesitate to use the repertoire of stereotypes and prejudices about barbarians that had also been employed when dealing with the Goths during previous centuries. Notably, the very term “barbarian” (*barbarus*) was carefully avoided by Cassiodorus when addressing Theoderic's people⁴⁸, but he used it, for instance, to refer to the enemies that the garrison of the Clusurae Augustanae was supposed to keep at bay. The letter argues that for such populations loyalty (*fides*), a virtue of capital importance in the Roman world, does not count; only fear (*metus*) is able to stop their incursions⁴⁹. This document most likely refers to the Burgundians, who are compared to animals in another letter of the *Variae*⁵⁰.

⁴² Cassiodorus, *Variae* II, 5: «utilitas rei publicae, generalis quies».

⁴³ See Moorhead, *Libertas*; Cristini, *La libertas*.

⁴⁴ Cassiodorus, *Variae* VII, 4, 3.

⁴⁵ Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 48, 1-3. See also *Variae* III, 23, 3 (the Ostrogoths adopted the prudence of the Romans while possessing the courage of *gentes*), with the comments by Arnold, *Theoderic*, pp. 127-129.

⁴⁶ Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 48, 4: «defences should always be prepared in time of peace, because one acts badly when in a state of necessity».

⁴⁷ Cassiodorus, *Variae* I, 40: «a soldier should learn in peace what he will perform in war». See La Rocca, *Cassiodorus*, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁸ Viscido, *Sull'uso*.

⁴⁹ Cassiodorus, *Variae* II, 5, 2.

⁵⁰ Cassiodorus, *Variae* I, 46, 3: «beluarum quippe ritus est ex ventris esurie horas sentire et non habere certum, quod constat humanis usibus contributum».

Similar concepts can be found in the document concerning the *castellum* of Verruca. Here the enemies are called «ferae gentes»⁵¹, while the *formula ducatus Raetiarum* depicts the neighbouring populations as «ferae et agres-tissimae gentes»⁵². As already mentioned, this letter once again compares the barbarians to wild beasts, since their attacks should be treated as hunts according to Cassiodorus. This comparison had enjoyed a lasting success during the imperial age, as is indicated for instance by the anonymous treatise *De rebus bellicis*, which mentions the peoples who howl around the dominions of Rome («nationes circumlatrantes»), and by Prudentius, according to whom a Roman and a Barbarian are as different from each other as the four-footed creature and the two-footed⁵³.

The border between civilisation and barbarism is seemingly clear: Theoderic's kingdom is inhabited by Ostrogoths and Romans, who are the heirs of classical culture, whereas savage peoples resembling animals live in the lands beyond the borders⁵⁴. However, the frontier provinces were an intermediate space, since their inhabitants did not fully master the norms regulating a Roman, or rather Post-Roman lifestyle. The provincials of Pannonia tended to settle their disputes by force of arms, while there were «suspect peoples» in Raetia, and Theoderic felt obliged to admonish the provincials living in the Gallic provinces occupied by the Ostrogoths after 510 to follow again «customs clad in a toga» and put aside barbarism and cruelty⁵⁵. The rhetoric of the clear-cut otherness of the barbarians who lived beyond the Ostrogothic borders was useful to legitimate Theoderic's power, but it often clashed with a reality that was difficult to fit into such rigid patterns. Border provinces such as Raetia and Pannonia undoubtedly included a significant component of inhabitants of non-Roman origin, who were often linked by ties of linguistic or ethnic affinity to the populations living on the other side of the border⁵⁶. What Cassiodorus presents as exceptional situations were actually the norm in border areas, where the political frontier rarely coincided with the thin red line that the Court of Ravenna had drawn to separate Roman civilization from barbarism.

⁵¹ Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 48, 2: «ferocious peoples».

⁵² Cassiodorus, *Variae* VII, 4, 2: «most ferocious and primitive peoples».

⁵³ *De rebus bellicis* VI, 1: «imperium Romanum circumlatrantium ubique nationum perstringat insania»; Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* II, 816-817: «Sed tantum distant Romana et barbara, quantum / Quadrupes abiuncta est bipedi, vel muta loquenti». On late antique prejudices against the Barbarians, see e.g. Gillett, *The Mirror*.

⁵⁴ On the political communication strategy of Theoderic, see Giardina, *Cassiodoro*, and Arnold, *Theoderic*.

⁵⁵ Cassiodorus, *Variae* III, 23, 3; VII, 4, 1; III, 17, 1 («vestimini moribus togatis, exuite barbariem, abicite mentium crudelitatem, quia sub aequitate nostri temporis non vos decet vivere moribus alienis»).

⁵⁶ See Gračanin, *Late Antique Dalmatia*, pp. 264-265.

5. Conclusion

Borders were an essential component of the Ostrogothic Kingdom from a military, administrative, and ideological perspective. Theoderic had come to Italy by crossing the Alps and was undoubtedly aware that another people might follow in his footsteps, so he paid particular attention to reinforcing the borders of his kingdom with a network of strongholds. Although the garrisons manning these fortresses were small in number, they were still able to guarantee the security of Italy under normal circumstances. During late antiquity, there was endemic conflict in frontier areas, often resulting in raids or acts of banditry unrelated to a specific war. The task of the Ostrogothic garrisons was to prevent such incursions from endangering the northern regions of the peninsula, where many of Theoderic's followers had settled, and from which a significant part of the kingdom's tax revenue came.

Cassiodorus' letters concerning the border provinces show that the governors' military duties outweighed their judicial tasks. The *comites* and *duces* who were entrusted with the defence of these regions had to look after their soldiers in the first place, dealing not only with the distribution of foodstuffs and arms, but also with their morale, since disaffected warriors could easily have crossed the borders and cast in their lot with "barbarian" warlords, if they had not been adequately motivated. This concern indicates that the clear-cut separation between Romans and Goths on the one hand, and the barbarian tribes living north of the Alps on the other, was an ideological construction that often did not correspond to reality, since the border populations possessed many of the traits of the "ferocious peoples" who inhabited the lands beyond the frontiers of the kingdom.

The threat posed by groups of hostile barbarians ready to invade Italy was one of the main justifications for Theoderic's rule over the peninsula, and required a careful strategy of political communication, aimed at emphasising the Romanness of the Ostrogoths and, at the same time, at depicting the peoples living beyond the Alps with all the attributes that were typical of the barbarians in the traditional world-view of late antique authors. To contribute to ensure the stability of the Ostrogothic Kingdom, it was helpful to focus the fears of the population, and especially of the senatorial aristocracy, on a credible threat, which only the Ostrogoths were seemingly able to overcome. To borrow a famous line by Kavafis, the barbarians represented a good solution.

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