

THE HISTORY OF CARTOGRAPHY PROJECT  
NO. 15. THE SURVEYOR AS "MADMAN"

Commentary

This year's broadsheet features the oldest literary selection used so far in the series. It is part of a letter that demonstrates the antiquity of the land surveyor's fundamental task of relocating old markers and reestablishing property boundaries. Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator (c. 485–c. 585) wrote the letter between 507 and 511, when he served as *quaestor* — the magistrate responsible for fiscal administration — for Theodoric the Great, the Ostrogothic king of Italy (r. 492–526). Cassiodorus came from a long line of wealthy Calabrian landowners who had held various civil and military posts in Italy during the last century of the Western Roman Empire (to 476) and then in the Ostrogothic kingdom.<sup>1</sup> He is known mostly through his writings, both secular and religious, including a large collection of letters from which our text is taken.<sup>2</sup>

The particular occasion for the letter was a boundary dispute that threatened to become violent. Cassiodorus took the opportunity to show off his learning. He reviewed the history of property surveying, its origins in ancient Egypt (where field boundaries had to be reestablished annually, after each flood of the Nile), and its perfection as a tool of state by the Romans. For Cassiodorus, surveying ultimately depended on the skills and experience of the surveyor who had to retrace ancient boundaries and relocate old monuments in an arcane process that for the uninitiated seemed to defy all reason.

The letter's rhetorical force stems from Cassiodorus's mockery of the four mathematical arts of the *quadrivium*, as codified by Boethius (480–524): arithmetic, theoretical geometry, astronomy, and music. It was practical geometry, less rarified and more applied than the academic arts, that had true meaning for both officials and the populace. Like the great Latin orators and writers before him, Cassiodorus self-consciously preserved his letters to display his erudition. His remarks about the *quadrivium*, which might be read as an early form of anti-intellectualism, may have been more personal than is apparent. Cassiodorus succeeded Boethius in 523 as Theodoric's *magister officiorum* (chief minister) and seems to have had a hand in Boethius's political downfall and subsequent execution.<sup>3</sup>

The broadsheet's design — its trim size, margins, and scattered icons — mimics a document from a ninth-century copy of the *corpus agrimensorum*.<sup>4</sup> The *corpus* is a collection of Roman treatises on land surveying and property law. Historians know it particularly for its insights about the division of public lands into rectilinear grids of properties.<sup>5</sup> But it also contains much information about the Roman use of boundary markers and metes-and-bounds descriptions to map out and record existing properties. The document imitated here, "De terminibus" ("About boundary stones"), was written by one Latinus in the fourth or fifth century CE. It explained the boundary monuments and other markers used in one district. In the ninth-century

manuscript, small iconic images of boundary markers were run into the text and were followed by brief explanations. A marker with an eagle's head, for example, indicated a boundary that "heads straight across a mountain"; a hollow square marker indicated a water-tank or cistern, with the boundary running up the stream that feeds it, all the way to the stream's source. Specially planted trees, trees inlaid with metal strips, and small hills were also used to mark key points along a boundary. We have reproduced some of these icons on the broadsheet, placing them within the text in the manner in which they appear in the original manuscript.

Broadsheet typeset and designed by Tracy Honn, with the assistance of Sarah Noreen, and hand printed on BFK Rives Cream paper using a Vandercook 4T press at the Silver Buckle Press, University of Wisconsin—Madison. The type is 16pt Bembo roman and narrow condensed italic and was cast by Michael and Winifred Bixler, Skaneateles, New York. Blocks for the images were prepared by Owosso Graphics Inc., Owosso, Michigan. Two hundred and fifty copies have been initialed and numbered. The commentary was written by Matthew H. Edney.

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<sup>1</sup> James J. O'Donnell, *Cassiodorus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). Available online: [ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/cassbook/toc.html](http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/cassbook/toc.html).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hodgkin, *The Letters of Cassiodorus, Being a Condensed Translation of the Variae epistolae of Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator* (London: H. Frowde, 1886), 3.52 (pp. 231–33), quoted in part by Arthur R. Hinks, *Maps and Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), opp. 1, and available online: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/18590>. Hodgkin heavily edited Cassiodorus's "lavish expenditure of words" (p. vi), but this portion of his letter to "the Illustrious Consularis" has not been significantly edited, judging from a comparison with the complete, if less felicitous, translation by S. J. B. Barnish, *The Variae of Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992), 71–73. O. A. W. Dilke, *The Roman Land Surveyors: An Introduction to the 'Agrimensores'* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), 45–46, provides a further translation of this letter.

<sup>3</sup> O'Donnell, *Cassiodorus*, 28–29.

<sup>4</sup> O. A. W. Dilke, "Illustrations from Roman Surveyors' Manuals," *Imago Mundi* 21 (1976): 9–29, reproduction (fig. 3c) and translation (p. 20) from Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. Vat. Lat. 1564. Brian Campbell, *The Writings of the Roman Land Surveyors: Introduction, Text, Translation and Commentary* (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 2000), 227, gives an alternative translation; the cover to Gérard Chouquer and François Favory, with Anne Roth Congès, *L'Arpentage romain: Histoire des textes, droit, techniques* (Paris: Errance, 2001), reproduces part of the page in color.

<sup>5</sup> O. A. W. Dilke, "Roman Large-Scale Mapping in the Early Empire," in *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, ed. J. B. Harley and David Woodward, vol. 1 of *The History of Cartography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 212–33, esp. 220–25.