

LECTIO III: BOETHII DE INSTITUTIONE MUSICA

et

DE ARITHMETICA

(sixth century, ca. 500–510)

ANICIVS MANLIVS SEVERINVS BOETHIVS, born into an elite Roman family, evidently lost his parents (or his father) early on and was adopted by Q. Aurelius Memmius Symmachus (cos. 485). Boethius' date of birth is unknown, but ca. 475–80 is an accepted conjecture. Evidence from Cassiodorus and Ennodius indicates that Boethius had gained a reputation for his scientific and philosophical scholarship by ca. 507, when he appears already to have received the title of Patrician. He climbed quickly the ranks and in September of 522 was named *Magister Officiorum*, thereby becoming the highest ranking official in the court of the Ostrogothic king Theoderic. At the apex of his career, however, things began rapidly to spin out of control. Numerous political forces in both church and state contributed to the events that led to Boethius' downfall, but at issue ultimately was a breakdown in the pattern of tolerance and cooperation that had previously obtained between Romans and Ostrogoths under Theoderic. The aged king, feeling increasingly threatened, focused his growing paranoia on the perceived threat from the Roman Senate. Boethius' untimely defense (in the fall of 523) of a senatorial colleague and, by extension, of the Senate as an institution quickly rebounded upon him. His tragic fate was sealed. After confinement first in Verona then in Pavia, during which he composed his most famous work, the *Consolatio philosophiae*, Boethius was tortured to death. While the precise date of his demise is unknown, Theoderic's death in August of 526 provides the obvious *terminus ante quem*.

Boethius' oeuvre is divisible into the three broad categories of mathematical, theological, and philosophical writings. Our concern here is only with the mathematical works. These seem to have been Boethius' first efforts, assuming that, in the dedicatory preface to *De arithmetica*, reference to a 'first harvest' (*laboris mei primitias*) is meant to signal a first publication. Cassiodorus, who records Theoderic's praise of Boethius for having brought Nicomachus, Pythagoras, Euclid, and Ptolemy to the West (*Variarum*, XLV.4: *Translationibus enim tuis Pythagoras musicus, Ptolemaeus astronomus leguntur Itali: Nicomachus arithmeticus, geometricus Euclides audiuntur Ausonii*), provides the strongest evidence for an initial suite of four mathematical works, only two of which have survived. Cassiodorus' reference to the 'fourfold gates of learning' (XLV.5: *quadripartita mathesis ianuas*) clearly echoes Boethius' own neologism coined in the first sentence of the *De arithmetica*, the *quadruvium* (later *quadrivium*), the four-fold path (*via*) of the mathematical sciences: arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy. The treatise on astronomy (a translation of Ptolemy) is lost, while of the geometry (a translation of Euclid) only dubious fragments survive. The treatises on arithmetic (Nicomachus) and music (Nicomachus and Ptolemy) are extant, although the latter lacks (at least) the last eleven chapters of its fifth book. Soon after their Carolingian 'rediscovery', both the *De arithmetica* and the *De institutione musica* quickly became required reading in the medieval classroom. The proemium to the *De arithmetica* is a largely self-contained disquisition on the subject matter, method and purpose of the quadrivial arts, and the proemium to the *De institutione musica* is a non-technical introduction to music's power and pervasiveness. They both remained foundational texts in the liberal arts for nearly a millennium.