

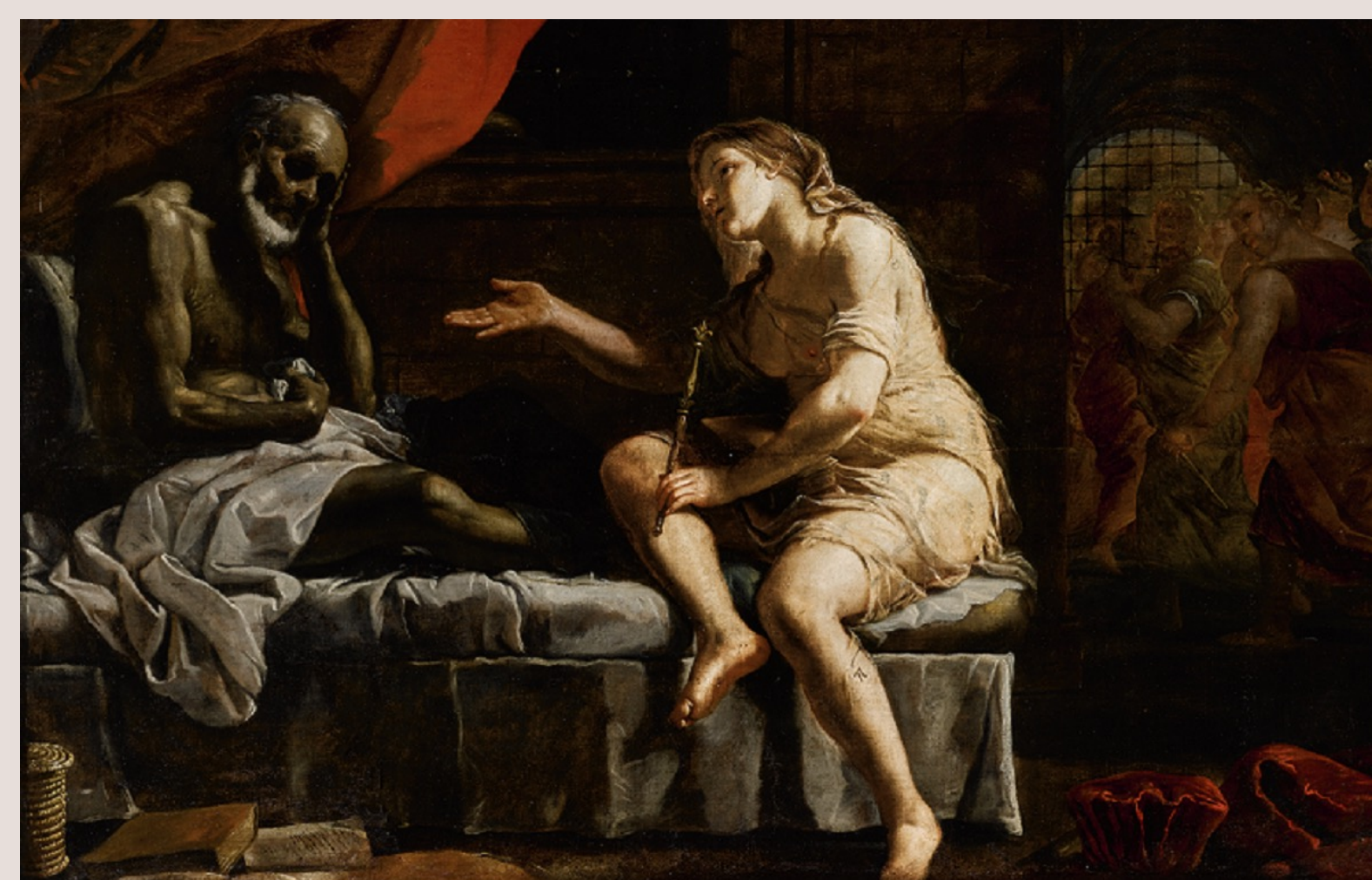
Christology and Conspiracy: Boethius' Fall from Grace

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Introduction: The Guilt of Boethius

In 523 CE, the Ostrogothic king Theoderic deposed and arrested a senior court official, the Roman philosopher Boethius, on charges of conspiracy with the Byzantine empire. Awaiting execution in prison, he composed the influential *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which he portrays himself as a falsely accused victim of a wicked and tyrannical regime. To this day, modern scholarship has tended to consider his claim to innocence as credible. This research project challenges such an assumption, contending that the historical and textual evidence point to Boethius' guilt as the most probable cause of his downfall. I further argue that he engaged in conspiracy as a result of a deep commitment to Christian orthodoxy, wherein he preferred the prospect of an Italy unified with the orthodox Byzantines than the dominion of the Arian Christian Theoderic, whose theological convictions were considered heretical by the Roman Church. By following Boethius' engagement with the theological controversy of his day, we see that the evidence pointing towards his guilt begins to accumulate into a coherent narrative of his downfall.



Lady Philosophy consoles Boethius.



The Council of Chalcedon.

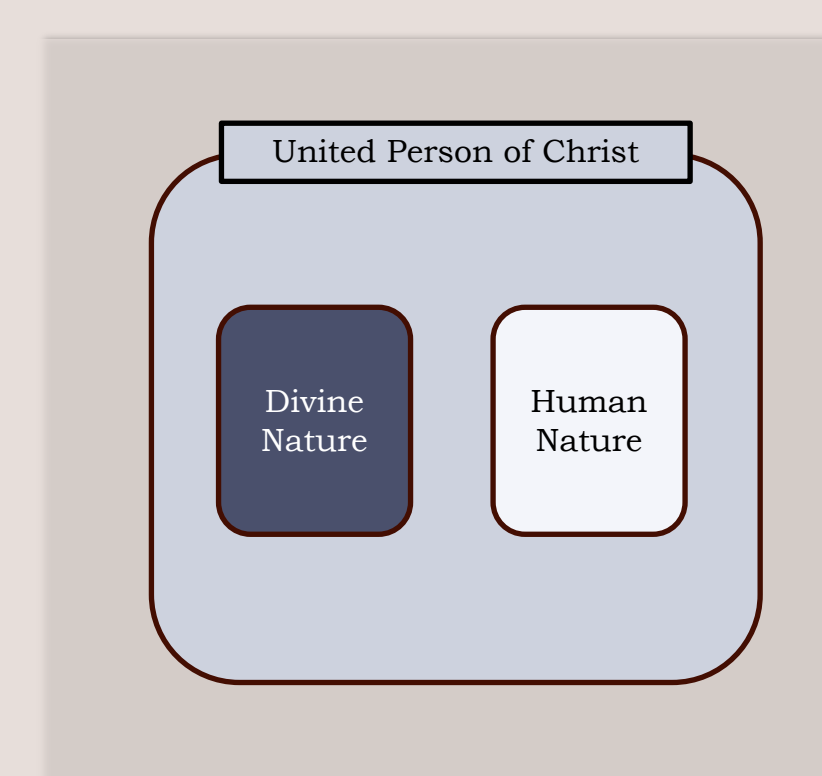
A Schism within a Schism: The Two Popes

The definition of Christ's nature proclaimed at Chalcedon in 451 CE (consisting of two natures, fully divine and fully human, unified in the singular personhood of Jesus) fueled division in the fifth century Church, contradicting the sensibilities of the *miaphysite* Christians of the East, who also believed Christ to be fully human and fully divine, but in a single nature and person. Zeno's attempt to resolve this tension with the *Henotikon* antagonized the Chalcedonian Roman Church and provoked the Acacian Schism (484-519 CE). Italians were divided on how to approach the East, and these divisions manifested in the Laurentian Schism (498-508 CE), wherein rival papal candidates, Laurentius and Symmachus, both sought the papacy. Symmachus found support among the Italian bishops, whereas Laurentius was promoted by a pro-Byzantine faction of senators and mid-level clergy, and several of his partisans were associates of Boethius. Nevertheless, despite the Laurentians' eastward aspirations, these schisms gave security to Theoderic's regime, insofar as political reunification between Italy and the Byzantine Empire was unthinkable prior to ecclesiastical reunion.

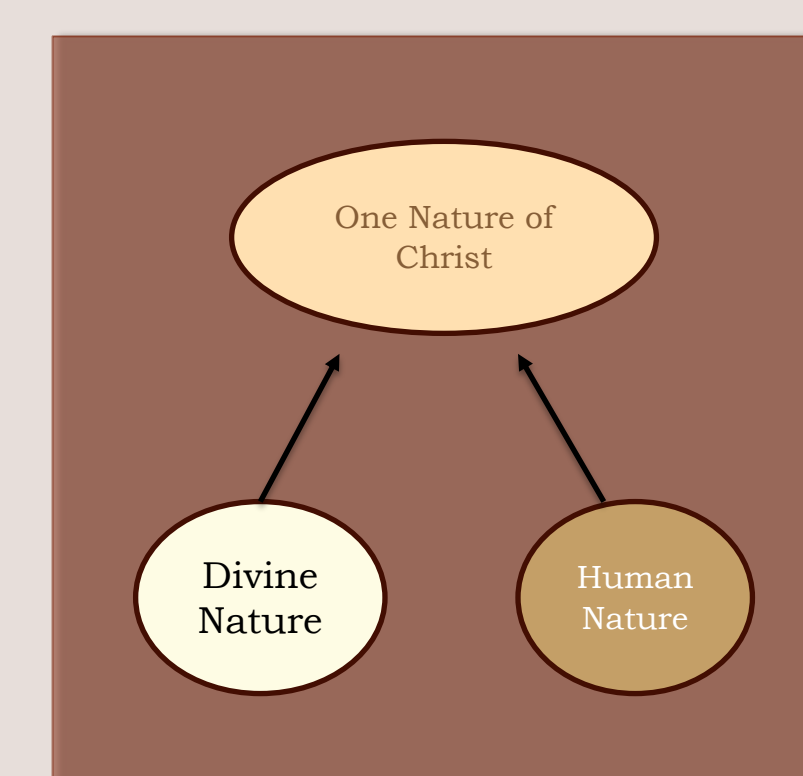
"One Suffered in the Flesh": Boethius and the Theopaschite Formula

During the Acacian Schism, Boethius' exhibited a profound interest in its central theological controversies. His treatise *Against Eutyches and Nestorius* (512 CE) demonstrates this interest succinctly. By repudiating both Eutyches (a radical miaphysite) and Nestorius (who held Christ to consist of two separate persons and natures), Boethius condemned the radical fringe of either side in order to center his approach around the conciliatory middle ground of orthodoxy. The theological content of this tractate seems to prefigure the more developed "Theopaschite" formula of the so-called Scythian monks, that "one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh." The Scythian monks were allies to Justinian's theological program and traveled to Rome in 519 CE with letters of imperial recommendation, quickly sparking controversy. During their stay in Rome, Boethius' wrote three more tractates addressing the points of contention, and his associate Albinus (who was staunchly pro-Byzantine) sent letters to the papacy, seemingly concerned that the monks were being perceived as anti-Chalcedonian. With his conciliatory treatises and pro-Byzantine connections, the weight of the evidence suggests that Boethius had at least some role to play in Justinian's broader project.

Chalcedonian Christology



Miaphysite Christology



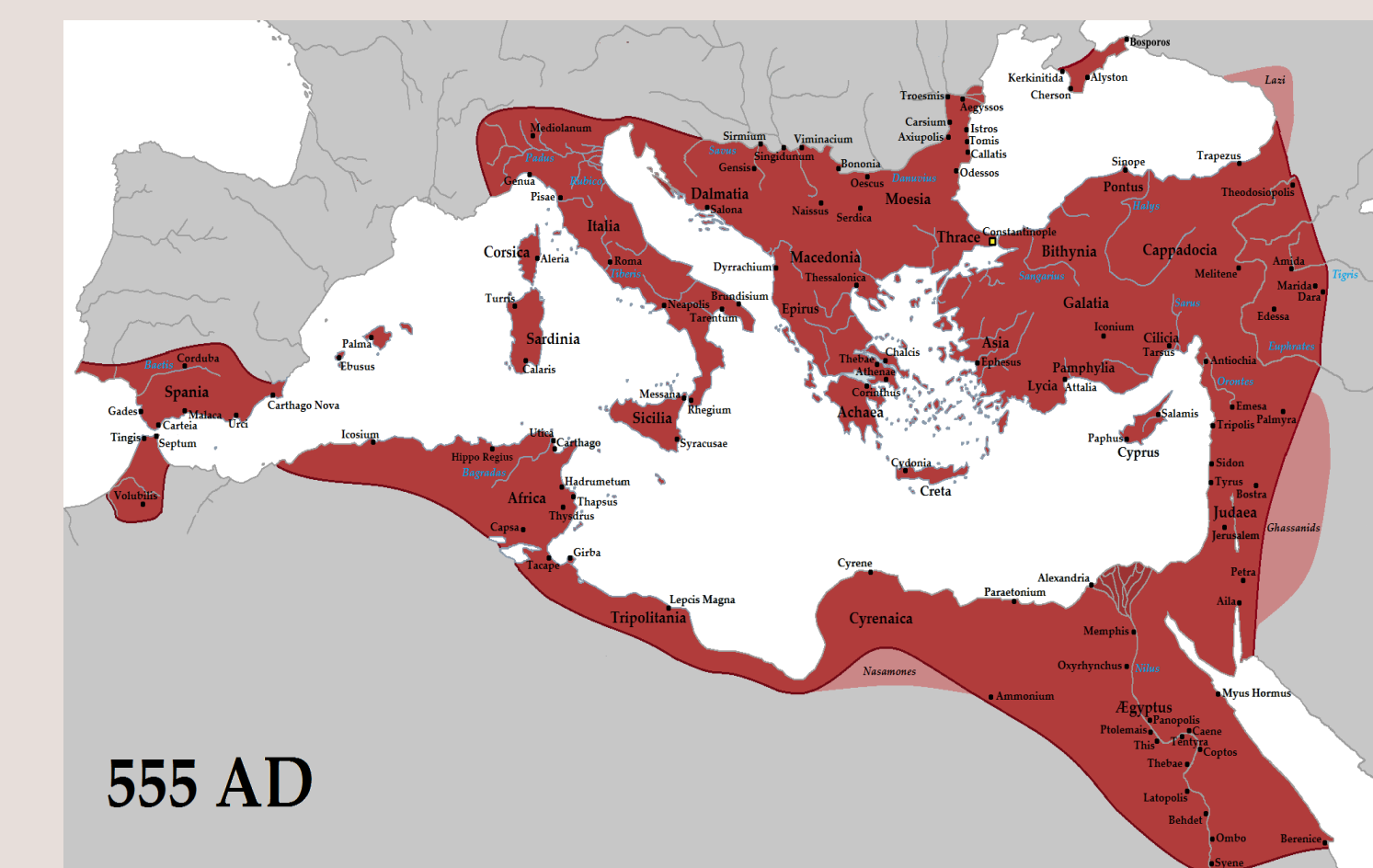
A medallion of Theoderic.

Theoderic: Barbarian Heretic or Roman King?

The Consolation portrays Theoderic's regime as antithetical to Roman liberty and plagued by rampant corruption. Yet this directly contradicts the image of the king which we receive from the primary sources; in fact, his regime was seen by many as a sort of "golden age." A former Eastern Consul sent by the Emperor Zeno to annex Italy, he was intimately familiar with the world of Roman politics. Literary figures such as Cassiodorus and Ennodius (who sat on opposite sides of the Laurentian Schism) equally praised him for his justice, and he was even afforded the title *Princeps*, hearkening back to Rome's early imperial history in a manner that was attractive to the proud senatorial class. Though his Arian beliefs were explicitly heretical, the Roman Church still sought his arbitration during the Laurentian Schism, and he permitted his subjects to seek reconciliation with the Eastern Church despite the danger this posed to his regime. Something drastic must have shifted for Theoderic to deal with Boethius and his associates as he did, and the discovery of a real conspiracy is the explanation most consistent with the king's prior reputation.

An Orthodox Emperor: The Schism Resolved

When Theoderic took the throne in 493 CE, the Acacian Schism had been ongoing for nearly a decade. The staunchly orthodox Justin I became emperor in 518 CE and, influenced by his nephew (the future emperor Justinian), he immediately set about reconciling the Roman Church. The Ostrogothic king was put in an unfamiliar position: his orthodox Christian subjects were now in full communion with the East, and the prospect of living under a unified, Catholic empire was now conceivable to the pro-Byzantine sect at Rome. While Boethius was engaging with the Theopaschite controversy alongside Albinus in Italy, his father-in-law Symmachus (the senator, not the pope) took part in an ecclesiastical embassy to Constantinople. I contend that such involvement indicates that these men were acting as agents in Justinian's project of reconciliation, with the ultimate goal of Italy's reunification with the Byzantine Empire. Theoderic made Boethius his *Master of Offices* in 519 CE, the same year that the Acacian Schism formally ended, perhaps wishing to appropriate the loyalty of an influential figure who would have been theologically inclined to support a Catholic imperial restoration.



555 AD

Justinian's empire at its height.



Justinian and his court in Constantinople.

A Conspiracy of Christology

We have seen that Boethius was interested and involved in the theological disputes which divided the Eastern and Western Churches, that his tractates likely influenced the Theopaschite formula by which Justinian attempted reunification, and that his co-accused, Albinus and Symmachus, defended the Theopaschite formula and negotiated with the Eastern court. Prior to this idiosyncratic incident Theoderic had regularly shown himself to be a moderate ruler in matters of theology and foreign affairs, even when it undermined his regime's stability. Boethius was officially accused of suppressing evidence that implicated the Senate in treason, and it is telling that he does not deny this charge in *The Consolation*. Incriminating the entire Senate would have been preposterous, and thus Boethius must be referring to accusations against its pro-Byzantine faction, to which he belonged. By deliberately suppressing evidence of treason amongst his associates, Boethius implicates himself in their crime. Accordingly, the evidence suggests that Theoderic faced a real threat to his rule in Boethius, a loyalist to a state that would orchestrate the demise of Ostrogothic Italy in the following decade.

