

# The Seven Liberal Arts

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*In this essay, Andrew West traces the origin of the seven liberal arts that comprised the three arts of the trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and the quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music) and describes their evolution and consolidation up to the time of Alcuin (c. AD 740–804), the educational reformer under Charlemagne. West pays special attention to those thinkers who shaped the development of the liberal arts, such as Augustine, Martianus Capella, Boethius, Cassiodorus, and Isidore of Seville. This essay will present the reader with a fundamental understanding of the seven liberal arts that formed the foundation for classical education then and now.*

## Origin in Greece

The seven liberal arts, which embraced the studies constituting the curriculum of school education in the Middle Ages, were an inheritance from classical antiquity. Their origin is to be sought in Greek education. Thus Aristotle in his *Politics* defines “the liberal sciences”<sup>1</sup> as the proper subjects of instruction for free men who aspire not after what is immediately practical or useful, but after intellectual and moral excellence in general, and mentions several of these studies separately. By his time the educational doctrine of the Greeks had become highly developed and exhibited the ideals towards which the best Greek minds endeavored to direct their educational practice. We are not to suppose that by the terms “liberal arts,” “liberal studies” and “liberal sciences” they meant either the whole of human knowledge or even the whole of liberal culture, for although the terms are not always employed in a uniform sense, yet they have a proper sense which must be held clearly in mind, if we would avoid confusion. Their proper meaning is this: the circle of disciplinary school studies which minister to the general education of youth, preparatory to the higher liberal studies, which are compendiously called philosophy. The distinction between the liberal arts and philosophy thus contains in germ the distinction between what we now mean by gymnasial<sup>2</sup> and university education. It is of course true that the liberal arts were not always spoken of consistently, and that the practice of Greek writers may be compared in general with the varying modern use of the word “education,” but it is no less true that to the Greeks the liberal arts primarily meant the circle of school studies. In fact they are often identical with school education itself, so that the saying of Pythagoras, “Education must come before philosophy,”<sup>3</sup> meant to the Greeks that training in the liberal arts must precede the higher culture. Philosophy also, as the goal of the earlier studies, is not infrequently styled a liberal art, sometimes the only truly liberal art. Thus Aristotle affirms, “It alone of the sciences is liberal, because it exists solely for its own sake and is not to be pursued for any extraneous advantage.”<sup>4</sup> The studies which came to be regarded as liberal arts were grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. It is not clearly known when each of these began to be considered as a school study, or how many of them were commonly so pursued, or that they were the only liberal arts. The Greeks did not formulate an unalterably fixed body of studies, seven in number. No list of seven arts nor any mention of seven as the number of liberal arts is to be found in the Greek writers. However there was an order which they



were pursued, and the first three, grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics, were preparatory studies which were generally pursued in the order stated. The other four disciplines usually came later, and it is probable that only a portion of those who had completed their grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics passed on to the music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, and that only a portion of those who so passed onward studied all the four latter arts. It is clear, however, that the Greeks came to consider acquaintance with the liberal arts as a general education, and the only general education.

### Continuation in Rome

By the time of Cicero (106–43 BC) the *artes liberales* had passed over to Rome and become the groundwork of the education of the Roman *liber homo*, or gentleman. Cicero's references to the arts are abundant and instructive, furnishing as they do ample evidence of the familiarity of educated Romans of the late Republic with the studies of the Greeks. But it was not the writings of Cicero that saved the liberal arts for the Middle Ages. For this we must look to the monumental work, now lost, of his learned contemporary Varro (116–27 BC). It is fortunate indeed that such a writer, in his *Libri Novem Disciplinarum*, gave a full account of the arts which had passed over from Greek into Roman education. His list of "disciplines," as worked out by Ritschl, is the following: grammar, dialectics, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology, music, medicine, architecture. Astrology of course answers to astronomy, and the first seven studies in his list are consequently the well-known arts of the Greeks, but medicine and architecture are added. It is very plain that Varro had not in mind any limitation of the arts to seven, and yet it would not be safe to assert he meant that all his "nine disciplines" were liberal arts. Perhaps he did, but more likely all he meant to represent by the "nine disciplines" was the studies generally, whether liberal or professional, which the Romans had inherited from the Greeks.

Passing on to the time of the early Empire, we may trace the course of the liberal arts in the writings of the younger Seneca (8 BC–AD 65) and Quintilian (AD 35–96), both of whom were well acquainted with the writings of Varro and refer to him as their authority. In Seneca's famous *Epistle to Lucilius* on liberal studies, five of the arts are enumerated and described in the following order: grammar, and then music, geometry, arithmetic, and astronomy. This, though incomplete, yet corresponds, as far as it goes, with Varro and the Greeks. It is also true that he recognizes in his very next letter the distinction between rhetoric and dialectics; but it would be a mistake to suppose from this that he recognized these seven as all the liberal arts, or that he consciously recognized any unalterably fixed list. Indeed he speaks in another letter of medicine as a liberal art, and may have followed Varro in doing so. Shortly after Seneca comes Quintilian, in whose writings the arts are more strictly coordinated as a complete course of school instruction. He speaks in his *Institutes of Oratory* of the departments of study which need to be pursued "in order that the circle of instruction, which the Greeks call *enkuklios paideia*,<sup>5</sup> may be completed."<sup>6</sup> He also mentions as such studies grammar, rhetoric, music, and geometry, making the geometry include arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. These six might perhaps be regarded as really seven if we suppose that Quintilian combined dialectics with rhetoric, as was sometimes done; but in any event it is clear that he, like Seneca, had not formulated an exclusive list of seven or any other number. Yet it is also clear that as with the Greeks, so with the Romans, grammar remained the inevitable first study, with rhetoric and probably dialectics immediately following, and that the fourfold division into arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy held its own as a natural distribution for the succeeding studies.

### The Response of the Church to the Liberal Arts

The Roman civilization, and with it the education established in the imperial schools, passed on to its decline, partly from interior moral decay, partly by external barbarian assault, and even more irrevocably through the supplanting power of the new ideals introduced by Christianity. We are chiefly concerned with the last of these, and more particularly here with the twofold attitude assumed by the early Church of the West towards the arts. The first position was one of antagonism. Thus Tertullian proscribes pagan learning as both ineffectual and immoral—apparently a most harsh and indefensible judgment. But if we keep in view the utter vileness of a great number of the so-called professors or teachers of the arts in the time of the Empire, a fact easily proven from the writings of Seneca and Quintilian, and the gross immoralities of pagan religion which were a natural development of so much of the mythology that tainted their literature, it will be seen that an antagonistic attitude to certain phases of pagan culture was inevitable from the first on the part of the Church, and this might easily pass into a proscription of the liberal arts. "The patriarchs of philosophy," says Tertullian, "are the patriarchs of heresy." He also describes them as "hucksters of philosophy and rhetoric." Lactantius says, "They do not edify but destroy our lives," and even Augustine

calls them “croaking frogs.” “Refrain from all the writings of the heathen,” is the language of the Apostolical Constitutions, “for what hast thou to do with strange discourses, laws, or false prophets, which in truth turn aside from the faith those who are weak in understanding? For if thou wilt explore history, thou hast the Books of the Kings; or seekest thou for words of wisdom and eloquence, thou hast the Prophets, Job, and the Book of Proverbs, wherein thou shalt find a more perfect knowledge of all eloquence and wisdom, for they are the voice of the Lord, the only wise God. Or dost thou long for tuneful strains, thou hast the Psalms; or to explore the origin of things, thou hast the Book of Genesis; or for customs and observances, thou hast the excellent law of the Lord God. Wherefore abstain scrupulously from all strange and devilish books.” Such is an authoritative utterance of the early church, so that we need feel no surprise at finding it echoed by her great doctors. Was it not Augustine who made famous the saying, *Indocti caelum rapiunt*, “It is the ignorant who take the kingdom of heaven”; and did not Gregory the Great assert that he would blush to have Holy Scripture subjected to the rules of grammar?

## Augustine and The Liberal Arts

But though antagonism was the first position of the Church, and a necessary position in her first encounter with paganism, there were influential voices raised on the other side, and this harsh opinion was gradually modified, so that by the fourth and fifth centuries it was superseded by a better view. The liberal arts and their sequel, the ancient philosophy, came to be regarded with qualified approval, and despite his other utterances which embody the earlier attitude of the Church, it was again the great Augustine (AD 354–430), the literary as well as the theological leader of Western Christendom in his time, who was most influential in committing the Church to a recognition of the arts and philosophy as suitable studies for the Christian. This was accomplished on the ground that they were useful—nay, even necessary, for the understanding of the Scriptures. His views are best set forth in his treatise, *On Christian Instruction*, which was completed in his seventy-second year, and may therefore be assumed to represent his final judgment. Nothing freer or more comprehensive has been said even under the light of later Christianity than the maxim he has there recorded, *Quisquis bonus verusque Christianus est, Domini suae est intelligat, ubicumque invenerit veritatem*, “Let every good and true Christian know that truth is the truth of his Lord and Master, where ever it is found.”<sup>7</sup> Such words foreshadow the whole revolution in the ideals of education introduced by Christianity. In the same treatise he draws a beautiful, though fanciful, parallel between Israel and the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus, and the similar situation of the Christians of his time, emerging from the spiritual bondage of paganism. “As the land of Egypt,” he writes, “contained idols for Israel to abominate and grievous burdens for them to flee, yet there were also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, which Israel going out of Egypt took with them to devote to a better use, not of their own right, but at the command of God, the Egyptians themselves unwittingly furnishing what they themselves had been putting to an evil use. So all the teaching of the heathen contain vain and idolatrous inventions and grievous burdens of unnecessary labor, and every one of us as we go out from heathendom, under Christ our Moses, ought to abominate the one and flee the other. Yet there are likewise the liberal disciplines, well suited to the service of the truth, and containing, moreover, very useful moral precepts and truths regarding the worship of the one true God. This is their gold and silver, which they have not created themselves but have extracted from certain ores, as it were, of precious metal, wherever they found them scattered by the hand of divine providence. So, also, they have raiment, the human institutions and customs wherewith they are clothed. These we need for our life here below, and should appropriate and turn them to a better use. For what else than this have many of the good and faithful done? Behold how that most persuasive doctor and blessed martyr Cyprian came out of Egypt, laden with what great spoil of their gold and silver and raiment! How much did not Lactantius take! and Victorinus, and Optatus, and Hilary, not to speak of those now living or of the innumerable Greek fathers. Moses also, that most faithful servant of God, did so long ago, for is it not written that he was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians?”<sup>8</sup> Spoil the Egyptians! Take their gold and silver and raiment. Take all the truths of the pagan schools and use them in the service of Christ. Henceforth the Christian is not shut up to rejecting or taking secular culture as a whole, but he is to select the best. A middle course, which is not a mere compromise, is thus opened up, avoiding the extreme of Tertullian in proscribing secular learning and the other later extreme of the Renaissance in taking all, whether base or excellent.

Let us not be misled into supposing that Augustine thought the arts or philosophy were to be studied purely for their own sake. Not so—for he reasons that if the spoil of Egypt taken by Israel was great, yet the treasures of Solomon in Jerusalem were far greater. Accordingly he writes: “As was the amount of gold and silver and raiment taken by Israel out of Egypt when compared with the treasures they amassed afterwards in Jerusalem, treasures at their greatest when Solomon was king, such

is all knowledge, useful though it be, which is gathered from the books of the heathen, when compared with the knowledge of the divine Scriptures. For whatever man has spoken elsewhere, if it be harmful, it is here condemned; if it be useful, it is herein contained.”<sup>9</sup> The Scriptures are the final test of the “harmful” and the “useful.” They are even more, for they embrace whatever of human learning is useful. Inconsistent indeed is this position with Augustine’s other statements and with his injunction to study the good things in the liberal arts, if it be true that these things are already in the Scriptures. It sounds like a late echo of Tertullian. But let it be remembered that Augustine represents in himself the history of the differing successive attitudes of the Church towards pagan culture, and that the general tenor of his writings is decidedly in favor of studying the arts and philosophy, though not solely or principally for themselves, but as ancillary to the supreme teachings of the Bible. Augustine’s connections with the liberal arts are even more definite. He had himself been a teacher of rhetoric before his conversion, and a writer on seven of the arts. The record of this, in his *Retractationes*, which was written shortly before AD 427, is of distinct importance, particularly from the fact that he was well acquainted with the writings of Varro, to whom he frequently refers as his greatest authority. He states that while at Milan awaiting baptism, he endeavored to write *Disciplinarum Libri* (almost the title of Varro’s old work), and that he finished only a book on grammar and part of another on music.<sup>10</sup> After his baptism he returned to Africa and continued what he had begun at Milan. Besides the two treatises mentioned, he says that he wrote *de aliis vero quinque disciplinis similiter inchoatis*, that is, finished books he had begun upon five other disciplines, in addition to grammar and music. It has been held by many with Ritschl<sup>11</sup> that this means “on the other five disciplines,” and that Augustine consequently recognizes seven as the total number of the liberal arts. But such cannot be proved from this passage, because it is possible that *de aliis quinque disciplinis* means “on five other disciplines.” It is clear, however, that Augustine enumerates seven arts which he recognizes as liberal, and that he nowhere else recognizes more.<sup>12</sup> His list is as follows: Grammar and music, as above stated, and besides them the following “five other disciplines”: dialectics, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, and philosophy. Elsewhere<sup>13</sup> he speaks of pursuing *memoratum disciplinarum ordinem*, a previously cited “order of the disciplines,” and in still another passage<sup>14</sup> of having studied in his youth *omnes libros artium quas liberales vocant*, “all the books of the so-called liberal arts.” Taking all his statements in one view it becomes plain that Augustine listed only seven liberal arts, and that he refers to a fixed order among them and to his acquaintance with each one. His list is remarkable in one respect, for astronomy is lacking and in its place we find philosophy, a substitution apparently due to Augustine’s deep abhorrence of astrology as an impious art and his love for philosophy, which he puts in its place as the last and presumably the highest study.

But why should Augustine have only seven arts in his list? Certainly not by accident. He exercised some choice in the matter, as appears from his substituting philosophy for astronomy. Varro had written on nine disciplines, and though Augustine refers to him repeatedly as an authority, he does not adhere to Varro’s number. The point is obscure. It may be Augustine knew of the seven arts in Martianus Capella’s book, or that, though the arts were settling down to a body of seven by his time,<sup>15</sup> the limitation to seven was not definitely before the mind. The important point, however, in connection with Augustine, is not the number of the arts.

His position and influence may now be summarized with clearness. His settled view, attained after long meditation, was one of favorable regard toward the arts, principally because they ministered to the better understanding of distinctly Christian truths. Expressions of a different tenor are indeed to be found here and there in his writings. At one time he seems to go back to the idea that secular studies are useless, though not to be proscribed, and at another to advance fearlessly to the position that all truth everywhere is to be revered, in or out of the Scriptures, thus mirroring in his own experience the early rigid attitude of the Church at the one extreme as well as the enlightened attitude of the distant future Reformation at the other, but finally resting midway between them. His influence was so commanding that from his time onward the Church was decisively committed to toleration and even the encouragement of secular studies.

## Martianus Capella

And yet Augustine does not stand alone in accrediting the liberal arts to the Christian Middle Ages. Another influence, potent, though at first reluctantly acknowledged by Christian writers, came from Martianus Capella of Carthage, who was either contemporary with Augustine or else somewhat earlier.<sup>16</sup> He wrote an allegorical treatise entitled *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, in a turgid, fantastical manner which had been fastened on the Latinity of North Africa by Apuleius. The book is consequently not only tiresome in its rhetorical luxuriance, but is often so involved and obscure that we are puzzled to determine whether the author’s peculiarities in any given instance are due to his affected style or to an intention

to be enigmatic. The object of the treatise, however, is quite clear. It was to describe in a fanciful way the liberal disciplines of Varro. Martianus himself appears to have been a self-taught man. He set before him the writing of a book as a task for winter nights, and adopted the medley of prose and verse which had gained a place in literature through the influence of Varro's medleys, constructed in this fashion and known as *Saturae*, as a proper literary receptacle for his rambling but copious account of the liberal arts. So he tells us figuratively at the end of his book that he has exhibited his literary goddess *Satura*, "prattling away as she heaps things learned and unlearned together, mingling things sacred with things profane, huddling together both the muses and the gods, and representing the cyclic disciplines babbling unlearnedly in an unpolished tale."<sup>17</sup> The "cyclic disciplines" are the liberal arts, the *encycliis disciplina* (ενκυκλιος παιδεια) of classical antiquity, and they become interlocutors in his allegory. The subject of his treatise, consisting of nine books, is the marriage of Mercury with Philology, the daughter of Wisdom. Mercury, as the inventor of letters, symbolizes the arts of Greece of heaven-born origin, while his bride, Philology, is an earth-born maiden representing school learning. After the consent of Jupiter has been given to this union of god and mortal, the nuptials are celebrated in the shining Milky Way with the liberal arts as the seven bridesmaids. The first two books are occupied with the wedding and the other seven treat, each in turn, of the seven liberal arts in the persons of the bridesmaids. Grammar thus occupies the third book, dialectics the fourth, rhetoric the fifth, geometry the sixth, arithmetic the seventh, astronomy the eighth and music the ninth. The list is significant, for it tallies with that of Augustine, except so far as concerns astronomy—a discrepancy of no importance—and it differs from Varro in expressly omitting medicine and architecture, which had completed his "nine disciplines." As there is no evidence of any connection between the writings of Augustine and Martianus Capella, and good reason to believe that Augustine would not regard his purely pagan account with respect, especially as it contained contemptuous, though concealed flings at Christian doctrines, their agreement in keeping to seven liberal arts is remarkable and goes far toward proving that the arts were commonly supposed to be seven by or before the time of Augustine. Oddly enough, Martianus Capella never thinks of attaching any importance to the fact that they were seven, though he enlarges on the mystical character of the *Heptas* or septenary number<sup>18</sup> in other connections. Yet his limitation is nonetheless intentional, for medicine and architecture, which were very probably, if not certainly, two of Varro's nine, are expressly rejected as bridesmaids. After six of the bridesmaids have appeared before Jupiter and discoursed at length, the Father of the Gods turns and asks Apollo how many more of these excellent maidens are yet in waiting. Apollo tells him that both medicine and architecture are at hand, but adds, "Inasmuch as they are concerned with perishable earthly things, and have nothing in common with what is ethereal and divine, it will be quite fitting that they be rejected with disdain." Accordingly they are refused entrance, and music, the seventh bridesmaid and "the only remaining" heaven-born art, is given audience.<sup>19</sup>

The meaning is plain. Medicine and architecture are excluded because they are not purely liberal studies. They do not elevate the mind to the contemplation of abstract truth, but are of the earth, earthly, and consequently unfit for the company of the celestials. They are of the useful and professional arts. This limitation of the arts by Martianus is therefore based on their character as liberal studies, though the limitation to seven was not due to reverence for that number. His arts in the eyes of Christian writers were unbaptized pagans, but the fact that they were seven did much towards securing them a Christian standing.

## Boethius

After Martianus Capella, whose book was very slow in getting in with the company of Christian writings and consequently of exercising its strong influence which came much later, the next name of importance in the fortunes of the liberal arts is that of the philosopher Boethius (AD 481-525). His is the last name in the history of ancient philosophy, and apart from a few expressions and terms which bear a Christian aspect, he must be accounted a pagan in his culture. His importance for the history of education is due to his translations of Greek works which became textbooks to a large degree for the whole of the Middle Ages. He composed versions or adaptations of treatises on arithmetic, geometry, the logic of Aristotle, besides other writings of Aristotle and of Porphyry, and several commentaries of his own, principally on Aristotle and Cicero. This slender equipment was a chief part of what was saved to the early schools of the Middle Ages from Greek antiquity. Boethius has left no general account of the seven arts, nor is there to be found in his writings any indication that he thought the number noteworthy in this connection. His significance lies in the fact that his writings served as textbooks and as a source for other writers on the arts to draw from. It is perhaps worth noticing, however, that he is apparently the first to employ the term *quadrivium*

as the name for the combined study of music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. It is also possible that the word *trivium*, as a formal designation for grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics, goes back to this time. At any rate, the substantial distinction between the *trivium* as an elementary course of study in language and discourse as opposed to the *quadrivium*, the later study of the sciences, emerges in his writings.

## Cassiodorus

A contemporary and friend of Boethius, and like him, of noble family, was the Roman senator Cassiodorus (AD 468–569), who retired in his old age from the turmoil of public life and the increasing barbarism of Italy under its Gothic rulers, taking shelter in his monastery in Calabria, where he spent his remaining years in the service of Christian learning. He attempted to stimulate the monks to unflagging study, particularly to the copying of manuscripts, and was in this way influential in extending the practice into most of the monastic orders of Latin Christendom. Besides rendering this important service to learning, he wrote assiduously both on Christian and secular subjects. One of his books is entitled *On the Arts and Disciplines of Liberal Letters*. He had previously written his book *On the Institutes of Sacred Letters* in thirty-three chapters, one chapter for each year of our Lord's earthly life. He thinks it fit, therefore, that his book on the liberal arts should also be divided into parts according to a suitable number. Seven is, of course, the one number that will match. Accordingly he opens his preface by saying: "It is now time that we should hasten through the text of the book we have in hand under seven other titles suitable to secular letters. Let us understand plainly that whenever the Holy Scriptures mean to set forth anything as entire and complete, as they frequently do, it is comprehended under that number, even as David says, 'Seven times in the day I have spoken praises unto thee,' and Solomon, 'Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars.'"<sup>20</sup> Here is a new reinforcement coming from Scripture itself. The old plea of Augustine on their behalf was that the arts helped towards understanding the Scriptures, and although the fact they were seven might naturally give them favor in his eyes, yet he had not thought to build an argument thereon. Cassiodorus uses this consideration as though it were a new one in connection with the arts, and however slight it may seem to us, it became forcible enough to the mystical number worshippers of medieval times. The arts are seven and only seven. But this is the scriptural number for what is complete and perfect, and therefore the Christian must hold them in due honor.

His list of the art is that found in Martianus Capella, to whom he is under evident obligations. But they are unacknowledged, and Martianus himself is only referred to in a contemptuous manner as a *Satura Doctor*, or undignified medley-writer. This much, however, may be assumed, that Cassiodorus adhered to the list of the arts he found in Martianus Capella, much as he must have abominated his undisguised paganism and pretentiously swollen style, and then proceeded to write a compendium suitable for Christian use. His account is short and in no way original or forcible. The chapter on grammar is an abridgement of Donatus, the greatest of all the Roman grammarians. His rhetoric is based to a considerable extent on Cicero. His dialectics come in part from Varro but principally from Boethius. It is really Boethius made easy for beginners. These three, grammar, rhetoric and dialectics, he calls arts, and the next four are called disciplines. Of his four disciplines, his arithmetic comes from Nicomachus and Boethius, his music from various sources, his geometry mainly from Varro and from the little of Euclid that was translated by Boethius, and lastly his astronomy from Boethius. Rudimentary and brief as his book is, it is not to be despised, for it was not so much the content as the spirit of his labor which had value. It helped to fasten the tradition of learning on the monastery and school life of centuries.

## Isidore of Seville

Thus far the liberal arts have been saved either in treatises or compendiums, but the next writer who gives them shelter accords them a small corner in what was the first encyclopedia. This work is the so-called *Etymologies* of Isidore, bishop of Seville in Spain (died AD 636). By his time barbarism had nearly extinguished learning, and it is to his labors that we owe the vast collection of excerpts, gathered from patristic and classical writers, which served as a thesaurus of all knowledge for centuries. Though his huge book is of course utterly without original value and so full of absurdities and puerilities that it may be considered as an index of the retrogression in learning that had set in, it is still true that Isidore was the most widely informed man of his time. Braulio, bishop of Saragossa, by whose persistent entreaty he was induced to write the *Etymologies*, was next to him the most learned man in Spain, and testifies that Isidore was "distinguished in his knowledge of the *trivium*<sup>21</sup> and perfectly acquainted with the *quadrivium*," and that God had raised him up in "these last times" to save the world from

utter “rusticity.” The liberal arts are briefly described in his book and their proper number is expressly recognized as seven: “*Disciplinae liberalium artium septem sunt.*”<sup>22</sup> His account of them is copied bodily from Cassiodorus. A century and a half later Alcuin admiringly regarded him as the *lumen Hispaniae* (“light of Spain”) and as the one *cui nihil Hispania clarius habuit* (“by whom Spain had nothing brighter”),<sup>23</sup> expressions which reveal only too plainly how great must have been the darkness in which an Isidore could seem brilliant.

Such is the genealogy of the patriarchs of the liberal arts, and of these Boethius, Cassiodorus and Isidore became the acknowledged authorities in the schools, while Martianus Capella, though at first unacknowledged, was also influential. The learning they handed over did not attain to the dignity of a systematic exhibit of the learning of the ancients, but contained at best a general outline of its school studies imperfectly filled in and often faultily modified. It cannot be too plainly insisted on that what they gave to the Middle Ages was enclosed in a very few books and that this scanty store constituted practically the whole substance of instruction up to the eighth century, not being completely displaced until the Renaissance. Isidore stands last in the list, closing the development of Christian school learning in the midst of a barbarism that was extinguishing not only learning but civilized society in Western Europe. The darkness that followed his time for over a century was profound and almost universal. Rome itself had become barbarian, and only in distant Britain and Ireland was the lamp of learning kept lighted, not to shine again on the Continent, until brought thither by the hand of Alcuin.

## Footnotes

1. The “liberal sciences” in Greek is ελε νθερια επιστημαι. Aristotle, *Politics*, VIII, 1.
2. By “gymnasial,” West is referring to the secondary education that evolved in Europe designed to prepare one for university. It is roughly equivalent to American preparatory schools of the last century that emphasized training in the liberal arts.
3. In Greek, προ φιλοσοφιας παιδεια . Stobaeus, *Sermon*. XLL
4. *Metaphysics*, I, 2.
5. *Enkuklios paideia* (εγκυκλιος παιδεια) in Greek means “cycle or circle of disciplinary school studies.” We get our word “encyclopedia” from this phrase.
6. *Institutio Oratio*, I, cap. 10, 1. Ritschl, *Opuscula*, III, 354.
7. *De Doctrina Christiana*, II, cap. 17.
8. *De Doctrina Christiana*, II, cap. 40.
9. *De Doctrina Christiana*, II, cap. 42
10. *Retractationes*, I, cap. 6.
11. *Opuscula Philologica*, III, 354.
12. Nor does he seem to recognize less than seven in any general account of the arts. It is true that in another work (*De Ordine*, lib. II), when giving a general description though not making out a formal list, he names only six—grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, music, geometry, astronomy. But he describes seven, for he treats of arithmetic, or “numbers,” under the geometry. Thus in this account he deals with the same disciplines as in the *Retractationes*, except that his favorite philosophy is replaced by the traditional geometry.
13. *De Ordine*, II, 16.
14. *Confessiones*, IV, cap. 16, 30.
15. Possibly through and Alexandrian influence, which we are unable to trace at present.

16. The date of Martianus Capella was commonly supposed to be either in the 5th or 6th century of our era, until the appearance of Eyssenhardt's edition of 1866. He proves that Martianus Capella's book must have been written before the destruction of Carthage by the Vandals in AD 439, but is unable to show how long before. Parker argues that the book was written before Byzantium was called Constantinople, that is before the year AD 330. (*English Historical Review*, July 1890, pp. 444–446).
17. *Loquax docta indoctis adgerans / Fandis tacenda farcinat, immiscuit / Musas deosque, disciplinas cyclicas / Garrire agresti cruda finxit plasmate* (Book ix, closing lines).
18. pp. 262 and 265, Eyssenhardt's edition, 1866.
19. "Super pater . . . qui probandarum (=atrium) numerus superesset . . . exquirat. Cui Delius Medicinam suggerit Architectonicamque in praeparatis adsistere, 'sed quoniam his mortalium rerum cura terrenorumque sollertia est nec cum aethere quicquam habent superisque confine, non incongrue, si fastidio respuuntur'" (p. 332). After further talk Jupiter answers "Nunc igitur praecellentissimam feminarum Harmonicam (= Musicam) que Mercurialium sola superses audiamus" (p. 336, Eyssenhardt's edition).
20. "Nunc tempus est ut aliis septem titulis saeculorum litterarum praesentis libri (textum) percurrere debeamus . . . Sciendum est plane quoniam frequenter quidquid continuum atque perpetuum Scirptura Sancta vult intelligi, sub isto numero comprehendit; sicut dicit David: 'Septies in die laudem dixi tibi' . . . Et Solomon: 'Sapientiae aedificavit sibi domum excidit columnas septem'" (Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, LXX, 1150).
21. The earliest instance I can find of *trivium* as a name or the first three liberal arts.
22. *Etymologies*, I, 2.
23. *Alcuin*, Ep. 115, p. 477, Jaffe.