

## THE ORIGIN OF THE GOTHS

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Witold Mańczak has argued that Gothic is closer to Upper German than to Middle German, closer to High German than to Low German, closer to German than to Scandinavian, closer to Danish than to Swedish, and that the original homeland of the Goths must therefore be located in the southernmost part of the Germanic territories, not in Scandinavia (1982, 1984, 1987a, 1987b, 1992). I think that his argument is correct and that it is time to abandon Iordanes' classic view that the Goths came from Scandinavia. We must therefore reconsider the grounds for adopting the latter position and the reasons why it always has remained popular.

The reconstruction of Gothic history and the historical value of Iordanes' *Getica* have been analyzed in detail by Peter Heather (1991: 3-67). As he points out about this prime literary source (p. 5): "Two features have made it central to modern historical reconstructions. First, it covers the entire sweep of Gothic history. [...] Second, there is a Gothic origin to some of the *Getica*'s material, which makes it unique among surviving sources." Iordanes' work draws heavily on the lost Gothic histories of Ablabius and Cassiodorus, who "would seem to have been in the employ of Gothic dynasts and had to produce Gothic histories of a kind that their employers wished to hear" (Heather 1991: 67). As to the origin of the Goths and their neighbors, the Gothic migrations and the great kings of the past, oral history is the most likely source of the stories. This material must therefore be handled with particular care: "Oral history is not unalterable, but reflects current social configurations; as these change, so must collective memory" (Heather 1991: 62). It appears that Iordanes knew of several alternative accounts of early Gothic history, and Heather concludes (1991: 66): "There was thus more than one version of Gothic origins current in the sixth century. Jordanes, as we have seen, made his choice because he found written confirmation of it, but this is hardly authoritative: the Scandinavian origin of the Goths would seem to have been one sixth-century guess among several. It is also striking that Jordanes' variants all contained islands: Scandinavia, Britain, 'or some other island'. In one strand of Graeco-Roman ethnographic and geographic tradition, Britain, Thule, and Scandinavia are all mysterious northern islands rather than geographical localities. 'Britain' and 'Scandinavia' may well represent interpretative deductions on the part of whoever it was that recorded the myths. The myths themselves perhaps referred only to an unnamed, mysterious island, which the recorder had then to identify. The Scandinavian origin-tale would thus

be similar to much else in the *Getica*, depending upon a complex mixture of material from Gothic oral and Graeco-Roman literary sources.”

If we are to maintain continuity between the Baltic *Gutones* of the 1st and 2nd centuries and the Pontic Goths of the 3rd and 4th centuries, this only reflects the tradition of the ruling clans (cf. Wolfram 1979: 6-7). The historical evidence suggests that the Scandinavian Goths came from the south across the Baltic Sea rather than the other way round (cf. Hachmann 1970: 454-457 and 465). The Lithuanian name *Gudai* ‘Byelorussians’ < \*-dh- has nothing to do with the Goths < \*-t- but must be derived from Prussian *gudde* ‘woods’, like the Polish place-names *Gdańsk* and *Gdynia* (cf. Fraenkel 1950: 64). There is no archaeological evidence for a large-scale migration of Goths from the Baltic to the Black Sea (cf. Heather 1991: 6 and Hachmann 1970: 467). In fact, there are several reasons why such a migration is highly unlikely. First of all, there is a clear discontinuity between the Przeworsk culture in Poland and the Černjahov culture in the Ukraine which are identified with the Goths before and after the migration, respectively (see the map of Green 1998: xiv). The only reason to assume that the Goths followed the rivers Bug or San and Dniestr is that “the terrain did not offer many alternatives between a common starting-point and a shared goal” (Green 1998: 166). Secondly, the territory between these two areas north of the Carpathian mountains is precisely the homeland of the Slavs, who do not appear to have stirred before the arrival of the Huns in the fourth century. This can hardly be reconciled with a major migration of Goths through their territory. Thirdly, the periodic exposure to severe stress in the fragile borderland communities of the steppe prompted westward population movements toward areas of more stable climatic conditions. An eastward migration of Goths from the richer upland forest into the poorer lowland steppe was both unmotivated and difficult to realize against the natural forces to be encountered. Fourthly, the expected direction of a migration is toward more developed areas where life seems to be better, which in the present context means toward the nearest border of the Roman Empire. We would therefore expect the Goths to move to the south through the Moravian Gate toward the Danube, as did the Slavs a few centuries later. Fifthly, there is little reason to assume that the Goths behaved differently from the Burgundians, the Vandals, the Marcomanns and the Langobards, all of whom crossed the upper Danube at some stage. It therefore seems probable to me that the historical Goths followed the course of the Danube downstream and entered the Ukraine from the southwest. The Gepids may have lagged behind on this journey, which accounts for Iordanes’ etymology of their name (cf. Heather 1991: 5).

Putting the pieces together, I think that the most likely chain of events is the following. The *Gutones*, like their East Germanic brethren, moved south toward Italy and the riches of the Roman Empire until they reached the river Danube. They may have adopted the speech of Alemannic tribes which had arrived there

from the west, where these had been in close contact with the Romans for a longer period of time. It is possible that Gothic ethnogenesis actually took place in Lower Austria when East Germanic tribes from the north met with West Germanic tribes from the west and, having been prevented from entering the Roman Empire in large numbers, joined forces in their quest for a place to cross the lower Danube. This scenario is well-motivated in terms of pressures and attractions. It renders the southern origin of the Gothic language compatible with the northern origin of the name. The ‘Gothicization’ of large numbers of non-Goths was not brought about by “the predominance of ‘true Goths’” (Heather 1991: 327) but by the absence of major linguistic differences between the Germanic tribes of the 2nd century. It is only to be expected that the most prestigious Germanic dialect was spoken close to the border of the Roman Empire and largely taken over by the newcomers. The Gothic majority did not exist at the outset but came into being as a result of the process of assimilation as the groups adapted to one another.

The scenario outlined here has the additional advantage of accounting for a number of peculiar characteristics of the Gothic language in comparison with its closest relatives. Gothic phonology resembles that of Latin and Romance more than that of the other Germanic languages (cf. Kortlandt 1988: 8-9 and 1996: 54). Though Gothic is more archaic than its sisters, its morphology appears to have been regularized to a large extent. The Latin suffix *-ārius* was evidently productive in Gothic *bokareis* ‘scribe’, *laisareis* ‘teacher’, *liuþareis* ‘singer’, *motareis* ‘toll-taker’, *sokareis* ‘disputer’. The Gothic words *siponeis* ‘disciple’, *kelikn* ‘tower’, *alew* ‘oil’, *lukarn* ‘lamp’ were probably borrowed from the Celts in Moravia (cf. Green 1998: 156-158), which explains their limited distribution in Germanic. The word for ‘vinegar’ is of particular interest because it has seven different variants in Germanic (cf. Wollmann 1990: 526-542):

1. Gothic *aket*, *akeit*;
2. Swiss German (Wallis) *achiss*;
3. Old High German *ezzih*;
4. Middle Low German *etik*;
5. Middle Dutch *edic*;
6. Old English *eced*, Old Saxon *ekid*;

7. Icelandic *edic*, Swedish *ättika*, which were apparently borrowed from Low German. It is clear that the Gothic word came from Alemannic in the 1st century before viticulture spread to the Palatinate and the middle Rhine in the 2nd century (cf. Wollmann 1990: 540). The words *Kreks* ‘Greek’ and dat. pl. *marikreitungum* ‘pearls’ also betray the influence of an Upper German dialect without voiced obstruents (cf. Kortlandt 1988: 9).

Furthermore, Greek words usually appear in their Latin form in Gothic (cf. especially Jellinek 1926: 179-183 and 188-194), which points to a western origin

of the Goths, e.g. *aipistula* ‘letter’ (but *aipistaule* ‘Pauline epistle’), *drakma* ‘drachma’, *paurpura* ‘purple’, gen. sg. *sinapis* ‘mustard’, dat. pl. *Rumonim* ‘Romans’, *Saurim* ‘Syrians’, also *aikklesjo* ‘congregation’, *aiwaggeljo* ‘gospel’, *aiwaggelista* ‘evangelist’, *diabulus* ‘devil’ (but *diabaulus* in St. John), *Marja* ‘Mary’ (but *Maria* in St. Luke), and *Iesus Xristus*. It seems to me that gen. pl. *skaurpjonon* ‘scorpions’ almost suffices to show that the Goths entered the Balkans from the west, not from the north. Most important is that Greek *o*-stems are inflected as *u*-stems in Gothic, e.g. *Iudaius* ‘Jew’, gen. sg. *-aus*, dat. pl. *-um*, acc. pl. *-uns*, but as *i*-stems in nom. pl. *Iudaeis*, gen. pl. *-e* (Jellinek 1926: 108), which can only be explained by Latin transmission. Other pieces of evidence are cultural loans such as *aurali* ‘napkin’ and *kubitus* ‘reclining (company) at a meal’ and loan translations, e.g. *armahairtei* ‘mercy’, which were taken from Latin *orarium*, *cubitus*, *misericordia*, not from their Greek equivalents. A final point to be noted is that Baltic loanwords from Gothic were transmitted through Slavic (cf. Stender-Petersen 1927: 134 and Green 1998: 172-174), which suggests that the Balts never had direct contact with the Goths but were separated from them by the Slavs.

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