

The Visigoths as the «other». Barbarians, heretics, martyrs

Los visigodos como el «otro». Bárbaros, herejes, mártires

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RESUMEN

Se pretenden analizar los contactos romano-visigodos fuera de las líneas convencionales que enmarcan estas relaciones en un entramado religioso-militar. Recurriendo al estructuralismo histórico podemos mostrar cómo las necesidades concretas de Roma determinan la percepción de los visigodos así como su representación en las fuentes.

ABSTRACT

An analysis of Roman-Visigothic relations in different terms than the usual presupposition of constant military and confessional/Christian antagonism. Structuralist methodology demonstrates how Roman needs at precise historical moments determine how Visigoths were perceived and, therefore, portrayed in our sources.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Estructuralismo, Imperio romano, godos, cristianismo, siglos IV-V d.C..

KEYWORDS:

Structuralism, Roman Empire, Goths, Christianity, 4th-5th century AD.

According to structuralist thinking, for any self-consciousness to exist or develop there needs to be an 'other', an externalised image of what oneself is not —or thinks one is not—. A multitude of such 'others' exists for everyone, covering a number of physical or social dichotomies. Categories include male-female, free-slave, rich-poor, powerful-helpless, young-old, citizen-foreigner and so on: they represent 'us vs. them' from a variety of different points of view.

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One striking dichotomy of the ancient world was civilised-barbarian, the divide between Greeks and Romans on the one hand, and everybody else on the other. This article will deal with this divide, taking a special case from the late fourth/early fifth century AD as example. Traditionally, the Visigoths are only regarded as the enemies of Rome, as the adversaries of its army and people. According to our exclusively Greek and Roman sources, two separate but interrelated traits are responsible for that antagonism: they are barbarians and adherents of the Arian heresy, worse than pagans. By drawing attention to some other forms of interaction between Empire and Tervingi or Visigoths, I will try to arrive at a more differentiated picture.

1. EXCURSUS

Any discussion of the Visigoths as an 'other' necessarily takes a Roman point of view. But to begin with, I would like to undertake a change of perspective: one instance of an *interpretatio barbarica* has survived, a medallion of Valentinian I and Valens (Figura 1)¹. The *fratres concordissimi* look slightly out of shape compared to their regular coinage, but are recognisable enough. The inscription, R-ES-IS ROMA-NO-RUM, is genuinely un-Roman: spelling errors apart —RESIS ROMANORUM is most likely meant to say REGES ROMANORUM—, there had been no Roman kings for 850 years in the fourth century. The Roman emperors were at pains not to be called kings.

So what is REGES ROMANORUM supposed to mean? In my opinion it expresses the Tervingian view that the Roman emperors ruled their empire in a way analogous to the way the Gothic *reiks* ruled their tribes —*reiks* is Bible-Gothic for *basileús*—. In contrast to the famous Visigothic 'judges', who held an elected office limited by sacred rules, the *reiks* inherited their position as leaders of tribal sub-groups and were *domini rerum* there, in much the same way as the Roman emperor was². Alternatively, the medallion might merely express the wish of these *reiks* to rule their tribal groups as absolutely as they perceived the emperor's rule to be. In any case, the underlying barbaric interpretation of the Roman emperor as a *reiks* remains the same.

Back to the civilised Roman perspective, the most prominent examples for Roman-Gothic confrontations are the battle of Adrianople (August 378) and the sacking of Rome a generation after (410). The victorious Visigoths after Adrianople epitomise the migration period *gentes*: to the provincial Roman citizens, they were aliens, strangers. Simply by virtue of not being settled, by their mobility, they were necessarily dependent on taking supplies from the resident population. Therefore the empire as a political entity and citizens as groups and individuals opposed them whenever possible but were overpowered. This article attempts to draw attention to several different perspectives.

¹ Found in Szilágysomlyó, present-day Romania. Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photograph taken by Lutz-Jürgen Lübke, object number 18200868, <http://www.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18200868>.

² For a longer and more detailed discussion on the subject of Visigothic concepts of rulership, cf. Faber (forthcoming).

The Visigoths as the «other». Barbarians, heretics, martyrs



Fig. 1. Gothic/Gepid copy of Roman imperial medallion. Valentinian I and Valens as REGES ROMANORUM. Found in Szilágysomlyó, present-day Romania. Münzkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photograph taken by Lutz-Jürgen Lübke, object number 18200868, <http://www.smb.museum/ikmk/object.php?id=18200868>.

2. MILITARY MEN

Obviously there is much truth in a tale of military antagonism between Rome and the Goths. Still, interspersed in the tales of fighting are examples which point to another story and provide some contrast. The long-standing tradition of Gothic military service in the Roman Army has to be mentioned. By the time of the *Völkerwanderung*, Germanic tribesmen had been drafted into auxiliary units and the army proper for centuries³. Goths are specifically mentioned fighting for Rome for the first time in 297⁴. The *foedus* of 332 laid the foundation for further service⁵, most

³ Cf. Caes. *BG* 8.13.1 and *SHA* 21.7 for Caesar and Marcus Aurelius respectively.

⁴ On the Parthian campaign of Galerius, cf. *Jord. Get.* 110: *Post haec a Maximiano imperatore rediguntur in auxilio Romanorum contra Parthos rogat, ubi omnino datis auxiliariis fideliter decertari sunt*—«After these events, the Goths had already returned home when they were summoned at the request of the Emperor Maximian to aid the Romans against the Parthians. They fought for him faithfully, serving as auxiliaries»—. Cf. also *Aur. Vict.* 39.34; *Eutrop.* 8.25; *Fest.* 25 and *Oros.* 7,25,10.

⁵ Cf. *Anon. Val.* 31; *Jord. Get.* 21.112; *Eutrop.* 10.7.1; *Iul. Or.* 1.7.9d; *Amm.* 27.5.1. Cf. Barceló (1981: 113-4).

notably when 3.000 Goths supported the usurper Procopius against the emperor Valens —the Goths honoured the *foedus* when a distant relative of the dynasty of Constantine called on them in 366. Theodosius the Great is well known by his epithet *amator pacis generisque Gothorum* (Jord. *Get.* 146). At the battle of the Frigidus late in 394 Goths fought in his army against Eugenius, the puppet-emperor of Arbogast. Orosius comments with obvious content on the disproportionately large number of losses the Gothic troops suffered in this battle⁶. In sum, a history of loyal service can easily be established.

In contrast to that, reactions immediately after Adrianople prove that a distinct and strong undercurrent of mistrust existed in the Roman military: when news of the lost battle reached him, Iulius, *magister equitum et peditum per Orientis*⁷, decided that the proper response was to have each and every Gothic soldier within his reach killed as a preventative measure (Amm. 31.16.8). The affair was organised in secrecy. Lured to fields outside the garrison towns by the promise of payment, all the Gothic soldiers were murdered on the same day, in a single co-ordinated coup⁸. Zosimus adds that after the event Iulius asked the senate of Constantinople for authorisation of his measure⁹.

This account gives us the autumn of 378 as a reasonably precise date: Theodosius cannot possibly have been emperor yet¹⁰, or Iulius surely would have had to ask him. In the limbo of an empire without *augustus*, anything was possible. Furthermore, we get a glimpse into the mindset of the Roman functional elite¹¹: they distrusted and disliked foreign soldiers, whom they evidently regarded as expendable. Yet they recognised their value for the emperors, sizeable parts of whose armies were made up of foreign recruits¹². Decimating the imperial army on the

⁶ Cf. Oros. 7.35.19: *ita et hic duorum sanguine bellum civile restinctum est, absque illis decem milibus Gothorum, quos praemissos a Theodosio Arbogastes delesse funditus fertur: quos utique perdidisse lucrum et uinci uincere fuit*. See also Aug. *Civ.Dei* 5.26; Rufin. h.e. 2.33.

⁷ Cf. PLRE 1.480.

⁸ Amm. 31.16.8: *His diebus efficacia Iulii, magistri militiae trans Taurum enituit salutaris et velox. Comperta enim fatorum sorte per Thracias, Gothos antea susceptos, dispersosque per varias civitates et castra, datis tectioribus litteris ad eorum rectores, Romanos omnes (quod his temporibus raro contingit), universos tamquam vexillo erecto uno eodemque die mandavit occidi, expectatione promissi stipendi securos, ad suburbana productos. Quo consilio prudenti sine strepitu vel mora completo, orientales provinciae discriminibus ereptae sunt magnis* —«At that time the salutary and swift efficiency of Iulius, commander-in-chief of the troops beyond the Taurus, was conspicuous. For on learning of the ill-fated events in Thrace, by secret letters, who were all Roman (a rare case in these times) he gave orders that the Goths who had been admitted before and were scattered through the various cities and camps, should be enticed to come without suspicion into the suburbs in the hope of receiving the pay that had been promised them, and there, as if on the raising of a banner, should all be slain on one and the same day. This prudent plan was carried out without confusion or delay, and thus the Eastern provinces were saved from great dangers».

⁹ Cf. Zos. 4.26.2-9.

¹⁰ *Dies imperii* 19 January 379.

¹¹ I use the term in the loosest possible sense.

¹² A case in point are the Germanic/Gothic units involved in the infamous massacre of Thessalonica (April 390): Theodosius is evidently not willing or able to tolerate the lynching of one of his officers. What is more, he surely regrets the death of thousands of tax-paying citizens, but as far as we know does not act accordingly and orders the army unit responsible to be punished —which I read as a knowledge of his dependence on the army. The literature on the ensuing dispute on the matter with Ambrose is legion, cf. the most recent treatment by Groß-Albenhausen (1999: 113-9) and Just (2003: 124-31).

The Visigoths as the «other». Barbarians, heretics, martyrs

Parthian frontier was a risky thing to do when the main Eastern field army had just been wiped out in Europe. It is for this strategic consideration, which seems to have come as an afterthought, that Iulius appealed to the senate of Constantinople, not for any regret in the action itself or its victims.

3. HOW CIRCUMSTANCES MAKE A GOOD BARBARIAN

An opponent in war is never idealised, nor is there much justification for their position. Valens depicted Athanaricus, the so-called judge of the Tervingi, in the worst possible manner prior to his first Gothic war (367-9). Athanaricus was not involved in the Danube crossing of 376, nor was he present at Adrianople in 378. But early in 381 he makes a rather grandiose re-appearance in our sources: beaten by the Huns and driven out of his territory, he finally did make a journey into the Roman empire, applied for asylum in Constantinople and was exceedingly well received. In order to portray Athanaricus as the «head of the whole Scythian royal clan»¹³ (Zos. 4.34.3), Theodosius personally advanced to a place far outside of Constantinople to greet him. He was honourably escorted to the imperial capital (Zos. 4.34.4)¹⁴ and took part in celebrating the anniversary of the second *dies imperii* of Theodosius¹⁵. When Athanaricus unexpectedly died soon after his arrival¹⁶, he was given a royal burial in Constantinople¹⁷. Jordanes stresses the good relations between Theodosius and Athanaricus, the dutiful submission of the Goth, who had come to realize that against the great Theodosius resistance was futile. The result was a heartfelt accord between Romans and Goths, which lasted long after the death of Athanaricus. Jordanes says that Athanaricus had been treated more nobly in death than in life: «The Emperor had such affection for him that he honored Athanaricus even more when he was dead than during his lifetime, for he not only gave him a worthy burial, but himself walked before the bier at the funeral» (Jord. *Get.* 144)¹⁸.

The underlying change of attitude which can be detected in the treatment of Athanaricus is explained by the context¹⁹. After Adrianople, Theodosius had

¹³ Αθανάρικόν τε παντός τοῦ βασιλείου τῶν Σκυθῶν ἄρχοντα γένους.

¹⁴ The date was 11 January 381. What follows draws on the accounts of the historians which are more verbose. The chronicles are more matter of fact, cf. Con. Const. s.a. 381 (= *Chron.Min.* 1.243, cf. 2.15, 61, 153, 272): *ingressus est Aithanaricus rex Gothorum Constantinopolim*.

¹⁵ Cf. Them. *Or.* 15, a speech delivered on the occasion in the presence of Athanaricus.

¹⁶ On 25 January 381, cf. Con. Const. s.a. 381 (= *Chron.Min.* 1.243, cf. 2.15, 61, 153, 272).

¹⁷ Ammian narrates the burial, which strictly speaking does not concern him because it happened outside of the chronological scope of his work, in the paragraph immediately following the signing of the 369 foedus with Valens. Seen in this close connection and given the wording of Ammianus, the whole affair is used to denigrate Athanaricus as someone once mighty and conceited and later in life humbled by Rome, cf. Amm. 27.5.8-10.

¹⁸ Jord. *Get.* 144: *Quem Princeps, affectionis gratia, paene plus mortuum quam vivum honorans dignae tradidit sepulturae, ipse quoque in exsequiis feretro eius praeiens.*

¹⁹ Jord. *Get.* 142-5: [...] *Aithanaricoque rege, qui tunc Fritigerno successerat, datis sibi muneribus sociavit moribusque suis benignissimis ad se eum in Constantinopolim accedere invitavit. (143) Qui omnino libenter adquiescens regia urbe ingressus est miransque: 'En, inquit, cerno, quod saepe incredulus*

been appointed as Eastern emperor on the assumption that he could solve the Gothic problem. In reality, he was bordering on failure and by 381 desperately needed good news. An opportunity such as the voluntary submission of a formerly influential Goth with his retinue in the capital city of the East was an opportunity too good to be missed: with only a bit of exaggeration, Athanaricus was styled as king of all the Goths and Scythians, whose submission was duly received. Both sides benefited from the arrangement, Athanaricus gained safety and material comfort, and Theodosius had achieved a tangible success, which helped him legitimise his rule. What is more, Themistios could rightfully stress how effortless Theodosius had achieved that particular success²⁰.

By the same logic which in war dictated that the enemy had to be «bad» in any sense of the word, the partner in peace had to be noble, responsible and powerful. By implication these qualities applied to both partners in the contract and thus helped to improve one's own rank. Therefore, by observing that in 381 Athanaricus was treated very well, given all material comforts and, most importantly, a fittingly royal burial, we can conclude that at least the portrayal of barbarian identity was influenced by political necessity and depended to a large extent on circumstances²¹.

audiebam', famam videlicet tantae urbis; [...] sic quoque milite ordinato aspiciens: 'Deus, inquit, sine dubio terrenus est imperator et quisquis adversus eum manu moverit, ipse sui sanguinis reus existit'. (144) In tali ergo admiratione maioreque a Principe honore suffultus, paucis mensibus interiectis, ab hac luce migravit. [...] (145) Defuncto ergo Aithanarico cunctus eius exercitus in servitio Theodosii imperatoris perdurans Romano se imperio subdens cum milite velut unum corpus effecit militiaque illa dudum sub Constantino principe foederatorum renovata et ipsi dicti sunt foederati. E quibus imperator contra Eugenium tyrannum, qui occiso Gratiano Gallias occupasset plus quam viginti milia armatorum fideles sibi et amicos intellegens secum duxit victoriaque de praedicto tyranno potitus ultionem exegit —«[...] He gave gifts to King Athanaricus, who had succeeded Fritigern, made an alliance with him and in the most gracious manner invited him to visit him in Constantinople. (143) Athanaricus very gladly consented and as he entered the royal city exclaimed in wonder 'Lo, now I see what I have often heard of with unbelieving ears', meaning the great and famous city. [...] Thus when he saw the army in array also, he said 'Truly the Emperor is a god on earth, and whoever raises a hand against him is guilty of his own blood'. (144) In the midst of his admiration and the enjoyment of even greater honours at the hand of the Emperor, he departed this life after the space of a few months. [...] (145) Now when Athanaricus was dead, his whole army continued in the service of the Emperor Theodosius and submitted to the Roman rule, forming as it were one body with the imperial soldiery. The former service of the Allies under the Emperor Constantine was now renewed and they were again called Allies. And since the Emperor knew that they were faithful to him and his friends, he took from their number more than twenty thousand warriors to serve against the tyrant Eugenius who, having slain Gratian, had seized Gaul. After winning the victory over this usurper, he wrought his vengeance upon him».

²⁰ Themistios *Or.* 15.190d-191a (381 n.Chr.): καὶ ὡσπερ ἡ μαγνητικὸς λίθος ἡσυχῇ ἐφέλκεται τὰ σιδήρια, οὕτω καὶ αὐτὸς ἀκονιτὶ ἐφειλκίσω τὸν Γέτην δυνάστην, καὶ ἦκει σοι ἐθειλοντὴς ὁ πάλαι σεμνὸς καὶ ὑψηλογνώμων (191.a.1) ἰκέτης εἰς τὴν πόλιν τὴν βασιλίδα —«[...] as the magnetic stone gently draws iron to itself, so you drew on the Getic chieftain without effort and he comes to the royal city as a willing suppliant to you, he who was once proud and of haughty spirit».

²¹ It is possible, though unlikely in my opinion, that the perception of Athanaricus' qualities had remained unchanged and still was contemptuous even after his death.

4. GOOD COP-BAD COP

In several decisive events of Roman-Gothic relations, a pair of antagonising figures on the Gothic side are involved²². It is, of course, entirely possible that there is no more to it than two historical figures in a struggle over who will become the leader. I believe, however, that the structural parallels in our sources indicate that having two leaders embodying rival political options was also a means of presentation, a tool to depict political decision making. Consequently, our sources construct not only one, but two Visigothic ‘others’, a pro-Roman and an anti-Roman one.

The following example is drawn from the reign of Theodosius I²³. Eunapius (fr. 59 Blockley) stresses the many favours which Theodosius grants to the Goths collectively and some individuals especially. Nevertheless the Goths were debating whether or not to stick to a secret vow of rebellion they had undertaken prior to coming into the Roman empire and imperial service. Exponents of both positions were high-ranking enough to dine with the emperor personally. In the heat of a quarrel —there was drinking involved— the head of the pro-Roman faction killed his opponent right there, at the imperial dining table and in the presence of the emperor. It is revealing how the historian Eunapius characterises both Goths: «The leader of the virtuous and god-fearing party was Fravitta, a man young in years but the most remarkable of all on his virtue and honesty. He openly declared that he worshipped the gods after the ancient fashion and he had no inclination towards deceit and evasion, but in his way of life revealed a soul that was pure, [...] He straightaway asked for a Roman wife [...] The Emperor permitted the marriage, and the father of the girl was delighted at the match and thought himself lucky to have such a son in law»²⁴. And again: «The larger and more powerful faction [of the Goths], however [...] were striving furiously to bring their plot to fruition. Their leader was Eriulf²⁵, a half-madman who raged more wildly than the rest»²⁶. Fravitta goes on to have a successful career²⁷. As *magister militum praesentalis* in 400 AD he suppresses the revolt of yet another Goth in imperial service, Gainas. For this success and his proven loyalty Fravitta becomes *consul posterior* in 401 AD²⁸.

²² E.g. Hermanaricus – Athanaricus; Athanaricus – Fritigern; Fravitta – Eriulph; Tribigild – Gainas; Fravitta – Gainas; Alaricus – Sarus.

²³ Kaspers (2008: 96-7), places the episode in the run-up to Theodosius’ campaign against Eugenius.

²⁴ Eunap. frg. 59 [Blockley]: ἦν δὲ ἡγεμῶν τῆς μὲν θεοφιλοῦς καὶ θείας μερίδος Φράβιθος, ἀνὴρ νέος μὲν κατὰ τὴν ἡλικίαν, γεγονῶς δὲ ἐς ἀρετὴν καὶ ἀλήθειαν ἀπάντων ἀνθρώπων κάλλιστος, θεοῦς τε γὰρ ὠμολόγει θεραπεύειν κατὰ τὸν ἀρχαῖον τρόπον καὶ οὐδεμίαν ὑπέστη πλάσιν ἐς ἀπάτην καὶ διάκρουσιν, ἀλλὰ γυμνὴν καὶ καθαρὰν διέφαινε τὴν ψυχὴν ἐπὶ τοῦ βίου [...] γυναῖκα οὖν ἤτησε Ῥωμαῖαν εὐθὺς, ἵνα μὴδὲν ὑβρίζῃ διὰ σώματος ἀνάγκην. καὶ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐπέτρεψε τὸν γάμον, καὶ ὁ πατὴρ τῆς κόρης, ἐτρέφετο γὰρ ὑπὸ πατρὶ, καὶ τὸ πρᾶγμα ἐθαύμασε, μακάριον ἑαυτὸν ὑπολαμβάνων, εἰ τοιοῦτον ἔξει γαμβρὸν.

²⁵ Cf. PLRE 1.283. Eriulfus is otherwise unknown.

²⁶ Eunap frg 59 [Blockley]: οἱ δὲ πολλοὶ καὶ δυνατώτεροι τῶν δεδογμένων ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἀπρὶξ εἶχοντο, καὶ πρὸς τὴν ὠδῖνα τῆς ἐπιβουλῆς σφαδάζοντες ἐμεμήνησαν· ὦν ἦρχεν Ἐριούλφος, ἀνὴρ ἡμίμανης καὶ τῶν ἄλλων λυττωδέστερος.

²⁷ Zosimos tells us the end of this episode (4.56.3): the imperial guard has to save Fravitta from Eriulf’s bodyguard.

²⁸ I concede that the argument is considerably weakened by the death warrant issued and executed against Fravitta in 402 AD. Still the most relevant treatment on relations between the eastern Roman empire and the Goths is Albert (1984). For information on Fravitta cf. PLRE 1.372-3.

Given all this praise for his personal virtues and the rewards he gained from it, can Fravitta be analysed in terms of an 'other'? He can, with the caveat that he is an 'other' to several groups. He is clearly described as a role model for any young man; he stands in marked contrast to the majority of his fellow tribesmen; and he is socially superior to practically every Roman except for the innermost court circles. He is, therefore, an 'other' for aspiring Romans and Goths alike, in the sense of a positive role model career-wise; he probably is an 'other' for very many Goths, in the sense of someone alienated from 'tribal' structures and values, someone completely romanised. From the perspective of ancient historiography, Fravitta is an 'other' in the sense that while he is an ethnic barbarian, clearly one cannot blame on him the downfall of the Roman empire because of his true dedication to Rome.

5. GOTTA HAVE FAITH

The subject of Visigothic Christianity will be treated briefly by mentioning two testimonies on Gothic heresy before turning to Catholicism among the Goths north of the Danube.

In his *De fide*, written between 378 and 380 AD, Ambrose of Milan likens the Goths to Gog, a menace to the people of Israel in the Old Testament, whose downfall is certain (Ez 38-39). Ambrose acknowledges the defeat already suffered by the Roman Empire —i.e. Adrianople— but assures Gratian of eventual victory (Ambrose *De Fide* 2.16.136-9)²⁹. In the style of an executive briefing, the Goths are identified with Gog, the present troubles of the empire are blamed on heresy, of which Arianism is the most pressing and the Goths are the most prominent example, and salvation lies in staunch Catholicism. The Goths are an 'other' of the worst possible sort to any Catholic emperor. Even in its own time, Ambrose's simplification has been criticised, Hieronymus did not think it was valid and did not hesitate to say so³⁰.

The automatic identification of the Goths with Arianism, however, stuck. Proof for this can be found in a letter of Augustine to Boniface³¹, Roman governor of northern Africa, who had remarried, taking a Gothic woman as his second wife (ep. 220.4, of 427 or 428 AD). Augustine does not hesitate to reprimand him even though he knows that the lady in question had already converted to Catholicism. Evidently, there was an unquestioning fear which equated the two most hated 'others': the Arian heretics were considered barbaric regardless of their ethnicity and Goths were considered Arian heretics regardless of their actual faith.

²⁹ The key phrases are *Gog iste Gothus est*, «that Gog is the Goth» (*De Fide* 2.16.138) and *Nec ambiguum, sancte imperator, quod, qui perfidae alienae poeneam excipimus, fidei catholicae in te vigentis habituri sumus auxilium* —«Nor, furthermore, may we doubt, your sacred Majesty, that we, who have undertaken the contest with alien unbelief, shall enjoy the aid of the Catholic Faith that is strong in you» (*De Fide* 2.16.139).

³⁰ Cf. Hieronymus *Hebraicae Quaestiones in Genesisim* 10.2.

³¹ Cf. PLRE 2.237-40.

The Visigoths as the «other». Barbarians, heretics, martyrs

Now to the Catholic Christians among the Tervingi. There had been Catholics while the Goths settled north of the Danube, and Augustine had heard about them!: «Perhaps, however, it was not to be reckoned a persecution when the king of the Goths, in Gothia itself, persecuted the Christians with wonderful cruelty, when there were none but Catholics there, of whom very many were crowned with martyrdom, as we have heard from certain brethren who had been there at that time as boys, and unhesitatingly called to mind that they had seen these things?» (Augustine *Civ.Dei* 18.52)³².

This persecution began immediately after Valens' first Gothic war, and is best attested in the Passion of Saint Sabas the Goth, who became a martyr on 12 April 372, shortly after Easter that year³³. The *passio* implies a sizeable number of believers because it mentions a priest named Sansalās. Proof for their Catholicism comes from external evidence, namely the correspondence of Basil of Caesarea³⁴. He writes to Iulius Soranus, Cappadocian by descent and *dux Scythiae*, thanking him for his efforts in locating, rescuing and shipping to Cappadocia the remains of a martyr from «beyond the Danube»: «Then we Christians had peace among ourselves (i.e. the persecution of Christians had ended in the Roman empire) [...] when a letter came from far away, blossoming with the beauty of charity, and a witness had arrived among us from the barbarians beyond the Danube, proclaiming in person the strictness of the faith which is practised in that region. Who could describe the joy our souls felt at this?»³⁵.

For once, a Goth functions as an 'other' to Roman citizens in a positive way —the strength of Sabas' faith is an example and an inspiration for Basilus and his congregation. They can strive after such an achievement, they hope that their own faith may prove as strong as his.

6. CONCLUSION

In analysing a few selected episodes from the complicated and violent history of Rome and the Goths, I have attempted to demonstrate that the Visigoths were an 'other' to Romans in more subtle ways than just as a barbarian and heretic. At

³² Aug. *Civ.Dei* 18.52: *Nisi forte non est persecutio computanda, quando rex Gothorum in ipsa Gothia persecutus est Christianos crudelitate mirabili, cum ibi non essent nisi catholici, quorum plurimi martyrio coronati sunt, sicut a quibusdam fratribus, qui tunc illic pieri fuerant et se ista vidisse incunctanter redordabantur, audivimus?* —«Perhaps, however, it was not to be reckoned a persecution when the king of the Goths, in Gothia itself, persecuted the Christians with wonderful cruelty, when there were none but Catholics there, of whom very many were crowned with martyrdom, as we have heard from certain brethren who had been there at that time as boys, and unhesitatingly called to mind that they had seen these things?».

³³ Edited in Delehay (1912: 161-300), English translation in Heather and Matthews (1991: 111-7), recent German translation of the larger part in (Kampers 2008: 53-5).

³⁴ Basil. *Ep.* 155 (to Iulius Soranus); *Ep.* 164 (to bishop Betranio of Tomi); *Ep.* 165 (to an anonymous, most likely a member of the presbyterion mentioned in *Passio Sabae* 8.2: τοῦ πρεσβυτερίου).

³⁵ *Ep.* 164: Τότε Χριστιανοὶ μὲν πρὸς ἀλλήλους εἰρήνην ἤγομεν [...] ἐπειδὴ γράμματα μὲν ἦλθεν ἐκ γῆς μακρόθεν ἀνθοῦντα τῷ τῆς ἀγάπης κάλλει, μάρτυς δὲ ἡμῖν ἐπεδήμησεν ἐκ τῶν ἐπέκεινα ἡστροῦ βαρβάρων δι' ἐαυτοῦ κηρύσσων τῆς ἐκεῖ πολιτευομένης πίστεως τὴν ἀκρίβειαν.

times, they were simply loyal *foederati*, or role models as career generals or even martyrs for the Nicene faith.

The direct connection to the interest of whichever Roman constructed a particular Visigoth as an 'other' for a Roman audience is perhaps best embodied in Athanaricus: For Valens, he had been the insolent enemy leader, involved in an usurpation. Years later the same Athanaricus came to Constantinople as a god-sent gift for the public relations needs of Theodosius – the wise king of all the Goths and Scythians voluntarily submits to the new emperor, who has effortlessly pacified the frightening horde which had earlier defeated the whole Eastern army.

The difference between these two views has more to do with changes in Rome (or rather Constantinople, to be precise) than with any change in Athanaricus or his retinue. Romans constructed the Visigoths as an 'other' depending on their current needs in a particular set of circumstances – therefore analysing Visigoths in terms of an 'other', a mirror to the Romans teaches us more about late antique civilisation than about its barbarian neighbours.

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