



Malta  
Classics  
Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. 7  
2021

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. 7  
2021

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing by the publisher.

**Melita Classica**

Vol. 7, 2021

Text © Malta Classics Association  
Design and layout © Book Distributors Limited

ISBN: 978-9918-21-138-8

**Malta Classics Association,**

The Department of Classics and Archaeology,  
Archaeology Farmhouse, Car park 6,  
University of Malta, Msida

[info@classicsmalta.org](mailto:info@classicsmalta.org)

[www.classicsmalta.org](http://www.classicsmalta.org)

## The Christians and their social status in Gothia in 4th century

*Mirón Jurík*<sup>1</sup>

The Christians first appeared among the Goths in the 3rd century as a result of the capture of Christian slaves from the plundering of Anatolian provinces.<sup>2</sup> Their presence is confirmed in several sources and particularly by the letter of Gregorius Thaumaturgus to the Pontic bishop, answering his questions on how he should deal with Christians who had transgressed against the faith and their co-believers (PG.10.1020–48). The Christian slaves in Gothia, despite their new reduced status of life, not only maintained their Christianity, but seem rather to have also started to influence their new masters. In this respect the missionary aspect of Christianity as a belief system, according to which it was an imperative for the believers to spread the “Good News” to all the creatures (MK 16,15), should not be underestimated.<sup>3</sup> These slaves gradually merged with the Gothic community and became an integral part of Gothic society.

The most famous case of this is Wulfila, whose ancestors from the maternal side were probably from Cappadocia.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, in the 4th century, Christianity had become the preferred religion in the Roman Empire, and we recognize several groups of Christians in Gothia. It is said that they used to be exclusively from the lower stratum of Gothic society, and that the chieftains (*reiks*, *thiudans* or *μεγιστᾶνες*) were not much influenced by the new religion before the Hunnic expansion or until they crossed the Danube in 376, and then they then accepted the Christianity en masse under the conditions of Emperor Valens (364–378. C.E.). According to some, this conversion occurred even later in 80s of the 5th century C.E.<sup>5</sup>

---

1 Mirón Jurík is postgraduate student and researcher at the Department of Classical Studies of Masaryk University.

2 Bednaříková (2013) 73; Doležal (2008) 256.

3 Jurík (2018) 84.

4 But from the paternal side he was a Goth. Philost. HE, 2.5; Wolfram (1988) 76.

5 Thompson (2008) 96; Heather (1986) 315; Heather (1991) 104–105; In Gothia there were three groups of Christians (Arians, Nicene, Audians) in 4th century. We recognize at least 4 bishops there. Theophilus, the Nicene Christian, who attended the Nicene council in 325 C.E. *Analecta Niceana*, 27; Wulfila, Arian bishop, who administered his office in Gothia for 7 years Philost. HE. 2.5; Aux. Epist. 59., 75; Audius, eponym of those known as the Audians, who developed church organization and

However, there are some aspects and allusions in sources which strengthen the position that several *reiks*<sup>6</sup> could have venerated Christ, or been “Crypto-Christians” before 376. This would make sense in the context of the development of the relations between Goths and Romans in the 4th century, and by the testimony of *Passio Sancti Sabae*, which provides glimpses about the state of Christianisation in the times of the second persecution of Christians in Gothia.<sup>7</sup>

The supposition that Christianity among the Goths was for a long time held mainly by the lower stratum of tribal society used to be supported by allusions in *Passio Sancti Sabae* and Ammianus Marcellinus. Saba is described in his martyrology as person who owns nothing (*Passio*. 218, 12–15).<sup>8</sup> Later in the other case the Christian envoy and his companions, who were sent to Valens on the eve of the battle of Hadrianopolis, are described by Ammianus as *humiles* (Amm. 31.12.8). On the other hand, the famous persecution of Christians in Gothia was ordered by the *iudex* of Goths and performed by leaders who represented the stratum of gothic *μειστοῦνες*, or *reiks*.<sup>9</sup>

Thompson, in his extraordinary examination of Gothic tribal society, stressed the fact that the Christians among the Goths were of humble origin and that the higher stratum of Gothic society with its subordinates adopted the new religion later, even in between the 80s and 90s of the 4th century, when a significant part of the Gothic Tervingi was already settled on Roman territory.<sup>10</sup>

---

founded monasteries there Epiphanius. Panar. Haeres. 230.4; Theod. HE. 4.9.; concerning bishop Goddas, affiliation is not clearly determined Delahaye (1912) 215; some scholars consider him Orthodox; Thompson (2008) 161–5; Nigro (2012) 140; others deny that; Heather & Matthews (2004) 123 n. 70; Parvis (2014) 70–71; for Gothic conversion to Christianity in 376 see Heather (1986); for 80s of 4th century see Thompson (1962) 516–517; however, there are other concepts of conversion of the Goths, see Schäferdiek (1979a) 90–97; Rubín (1981) 53; Lenski (1995) 85–86; Bednaříková (2013) 79.

6 The Gothic term *reiks* always stands for the ἄρχων (and princes) of the gospels. This Greek word can be freely used for any ruler, commander, and chief Doležal (2010) 46.

7 The second persecution of Christians in Gothia used to be dated to the years 369–372 C.E., but from the correspondence of Basil the Great it appears that proper dating is for the years 369–373 C.E. see Jurík (2018), 91–92.

8 According to Heather and Matthews (2004), 106, n. 24, it can mean that Saba as a part of humiles was a Gothic monk.

9 The first known persecution, which led to the expulsion of Wulfila and his followers was ordered by “ab inreligioso et sacrilego iudice Gothorum” Aux. 58.21–22. 1 (1899), 75.; Athanaric as a leader/*iudex*/ rex who ordered the persecution of Christians is testified in several sources Sozom. HE. 6.37; Hieron. Chronicon. 287. 20–23: „Haitanaricus rex Gothorum in Christianos persecutione commata plurimos interfecit et de propriis sedibus in Romanum solum expellit.”; the persecutions were performed by *reiks* as is known in the cases of Atharid, son of Rothesteus or Winguric *Passio*. 219, 2–3; Delaheye; Anallecta Bolandiana 31. Paris: 1912, 279

10 Thompson (2008) 75, 96, 106–107; Thompson (1962) 507.

It can certainly not be denied that Christianity had the most successful extension among the lower stratum of society. It is only natural that Christian ideology with its accent towards the humble, idealisation of poverty and reprieve towards the rich was mostly popular in these groups. However, the assumption that Christianity was adopted only by the humble in the first stage of its spreading in the new social environment should not limit and misguide us, at least not in the case of the Goths in the 4th century, who were neighbours of the Roman Empire, in which Christianity had become ever more preferred, and then the only one accepted religion in Roman State, from the rule of Theodosius onwards. Generally, despite the Christian rhetoric of identification with the humble and oppressed, the Christian communities had never been socially monolithic. They were open to both extremes of wealth and power, whether considerably poor or considerably rich and distinguished.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that some of the *reiks*, μεγιστᾶνες<sup>12</sup> and people of higher stratum of the Gothic society were close to their Christian fellows, or reluctant to persecute them was already highlighted by Zeev Rubin.<sup>13</sup> In this paper I will seek to support and complete Zeev's view. In this respect, it is necessary to deal with the aforementioned fact that Christianity among the Goths in the 4th century was developed in the context of the new religion being more and more professed in the powerful neighbour State by its elite communities, emperors not excluded.

### **The context of the economic, political, and religious Gothic-Roman relations in 4th century**

It is well recognised that the turbulent relationship between Romans and Goths could have resulted in the persecution of Christians in Gothia because of their affiliation to the religion of the Roman Emperor (Epiph. *Adv. Haeres.* 248.20). It used to be said that these persecutions had three reasons. Firstly, that they were political, and that Gothic Christians could have been seen as the servants of the Empire and leverage of the imperial court, which was trying to influence the inner matters of Gothic society, because of their religion. Secondly, that the persecutions were purely religious, and that the reluctance of the Christians to participate in the pagan sacrifices could have attracted the wrath of the Gothic gods and invite disasters onto the people who were dependent on their divine will. Thirdly,

11 Brown (2012) 45.

12 The term μεγιστᾶνες is used for the persecutors in the Saba's village *Passio*. 217, 27; in Gothic language it stands for *maists* in Mk 6.21 and could, therefore, be equated with "lord" or "noble" Doležal (2010) 47.

13 Rubin (1981) 38–40.

that the persecutions were due to an intersection of both political and religious reasons, and that the conservative party within Gothic society, represented by *reiks*, could have felt threatened by the gradual process of the dissolution of tribal society, which was strongly bonded to the veneration of the tribal gods. These are the main reasons why the representatives of the ruling Gothic class could have been more resistant to adopting a new faith, of which the political reasons were seemingly the most important.

Yet, in the times of peace and good relationships between the Romans and Goths we do not hear about such persecutions, although the Empire played an active role in Christianization efforts among them. The Church Historians, in the context of the peace which was made after the war between Constantine I (306–337 C.E.) and the Danube Goths in 332, mentioned the first conversion of barbarians (Socr. HE. 1.18; Sozom. HE. 2.6.).<sup>14</sup> Of course, this record could be an exaggeration, but Wulfila and his consecration as bishop proved that some conversion had taken place, regardless of it happening in the time of Constantine I or his son Constantius II (337–361 C.E.), whose foreign and religious policy would be only meant as a continuation of the tendencies determined by his father.<sup>15</sup> One of the terms of the treaty was the taking of the hostages to the imperial court, especially from the higher stratum, as is testified by the fact that the “*Ariarici regis filium*” was among them (Origo 6, 30–31). This boy would have been the same man whom Constantine I honoured with a portrait statue placed behind the Senate House of Constantinople (Them. Or. 15.191a).<sup>16</sup> The Goths also had to pay a tribute and provide a military force for the needs of the Empire as well.<sup>17</sup>

However, it appears that until 367 Constantine I and his followers sought to pursue a balanced policy with the Goths. Thanks to the peace, the barbarians were able to make trans-Danubian trade with Empire and sate their desire for luxury goods. This commerce was also possible thanks to the bridge in Oescus, which was built in 328 in the context of Constantine I's wars against the barbarians on the other banks of the Danube (Aur. Vict. *Epit.* 41.13; *Chron. Pasc. Ad.* 328). After the peace in 332 the trade interaction between Empire and Gothia was intensified, as is testified by archaeology findings in present day Romania (such as amphorae, glass and jewelry), and especially thanks to the findings of Roman coins dated between

14 Regarding the treaty in 332, the Goths are mentioned in the text of Constantine's biography as Σκύθαι, towards whose Constantine brought the civilized way of life Euseb. Vit. Const. 4.5.2., which can entail the Christianization as well.

15 Schäferdiek (1979b) 254ff and Barnes (1990) 541–545, preferred for the consecration the year 336, Wolfram (1988) 88, the year 341, see also Heather & Matthews (2004) 133; Schwarz (1999) 453.

16 Lenski (2002), 123.

17 For the treaty in 332 see Lenski (2002) 122–127; Claus (2005) 59.

the 20s and 60s of the 4th century C.E.<sup>18</sup> It is also known that the barbarians then gratefully remembered the peace which they made with Constantine I (Eutr. 10.7).<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the fourth-century translation of the Bible into Gothic often employs Latin vocabulary to render trade related words. Even architecture in the Síntana de Mureş-Tcherniakov territory near the Danube seems to have been influenced by contact with Rome.<sup>20</sup> Despite their defeat in 332, the Goth's respect towards Constantine and his memory is also shown in Ammianus' account, according to which they sided with the usurper Procopius in war because they thought that he was legitimate ruler and descendant of Constantine himself (Amm. 27.5.1).<sup>21</sup> Trans-Danubian trade was in high demand mainly for the benefit of the higher stratum of Gothic society, while the maintenance and management of this trade was largely in their hands. Trade and diplomatic interactions were even held with the imperial centre at Constantinople; Wulfila was a part of such an embassy at least once (Eunap. *fr.* 59; Philost. *HE.* 2.5).

Additionally, a military force provided to the Empire was probably not levied from the poorest parts of Gothic society. Heather included 1/5 of military warriors or men of the Ostrogoths among the elite Goths in the case of later Ostrogothic kingdom, who are addressed as λόγιμος (“worth mentioning” or “remarkable”), δόκιμος (“esteemed” or “notable”) and ἄριστος (“the best”), terms which can be considered as synonyms (Procop. *Wars.* 5.4.13; 6.1.36; 6.20.14; 7.1.46; 7.18.26; 8.26.4).<sup>22</sup> We can therefore reasonably assume that the same category of “remarkable” or “esteemed” people were present earlier in Tervingian tribal society under the leadership of *reiks*, for whom these men constituted the closest and most obedient group of warriors, i.e. their retinue. They can be equated with the servants of Atharid (or maybe with *maists*/μεγιστᾶνες?), who performed his will during the persecution (*Passio*, 219–221). Interestingly, according to *Passio*, these servants they were not willing to kill Saba but desired to release him. Admittedly, however, this tale could be a made-up story, which served to underline Saba's desire to die for Christ (*Passio*, 220, 31–33).

18 Lenski (2002) 118; Doležal (2020) 374; Themistius testifies that Romans also paid some kind of a fee to the Goths in gold and silver, which probably helped to maintain the peace Them. Or. 10, 205.

19 According to Ammianus, later during the war with Valens they were due to the banishment of trade even exposed by great shortage of living needs: “dein quod commercis vetitis ultima necessariorum inopia barbari stringebantur” Amm. 27.5.7

20 Lenski (2002), 118–119.

21 The Gothic Arians even venerated Constantine as a saint (or his son) for the 3th of Nov., in their calendar: Kustanteinus piudanis Delahaye, H. *Anallacta Bolandiana* 31. Paris: 1912, s. 276; probably it was in fact Constantius II. see Heather & Matthews (2004), 122, n.63.

22 Heather (1996), 322–326; according to him the bearer of the Gothic identity was rather this broader group of elites than the only Balth or Amal dynasty families in the concept of “Traditionskern” (169).



However, if it was based on a true story which was transferred to a hagiographer by word of mouth (maybe through Sansalâs) it would mean that persecution of Christians was not happily accepted by some better situated Gothic warriors. A part of these warriors with their humbler companions had been provided to the Empire as a military force since the middle of the 3rd century and in many other cases after the year 332 C.E.<sup>23</sup> From the examples of other barbarians who served as auxiliary forces, it is testified that some of them were proud of their service in the Roman army and even put information about that on their tombstones.<sup>24</sup> It seems that, for these barbarians, serving in the Roman army was an opportunity and positive experience (for warriors) rather than a very unwanted obligation determined by peace treaties with the Empire.

It is very likely that these warriors and the aforementioned youth, or more precisely the hostages, were not only exposed to what it meant to be a Roman in the Roman territory, but also what it meant to be a Christian as well. Of course, being Roman and Christian in the 4th century still did not represent the same thing, but the process of amalgamation of the terms *Romanitas* and *Christianitas* was already well on its way, and through Imperial policy Christianity was en route to become the only state Imperial religion. In short, Christianity had become the everyday reality of Roman life and of its material and spiritual culture. These noble men as hostages and the Gothic warriors in the service of Roman Empire came, therefore, into stronger contact with Christianity in Roman territory than their tribe fellows who continued to live entirely in Gothia. At the same time, it would be strange if the representatives of the Church and Imperial court did not try to acquaint the Gothic noble men with the religion which contains the imperative *euntes in mundum universum praedicate evangelium omni creature* (MK 16,15).

Of course, the occurrence of this would not necessarily mean the success of such efforts. In the case of Ariaric's son, who is probably the father of Athanaric, the great persecutor of Christians in 369–373, it evidently did not take place.<sup>25</sup> An unsuccessful effort to convert or raise the barbarian noble hostages in the way of the "right" confession can be demonstrated later by the case of Theodoric the

23 See: Mathisen (2020) 269 ff.

24 Mathisen (2020) 266.

25 For Ariaric son, probably Aoric, as Athanaric father see Wolfram (1975) 11; Athanaric swore to his father, that he never put his foot on the Roman soil. Amm. 27.5.9; the archenemy position of the institution of *iudex* of Goths towards the Christians, which seems to be descended through a single family see Heather (1991) 99, could be very specific, different and much static, as in the cases of other representants of the Gothic elite.

Great (ruler 493–526 C.E.) who, after returning to his father in 470 was certainly a worshiper of Arianism, not orthodoxy.<sup>26</sup>

However, the reaction of Gothic nobles and elite people to Christianity could be twofold. Part of them, because of their inner enmity towards Rome, saw the Christian God as dangerous, because his believers were of the same religious affiliation as the Roman Emperor (Epiph. *Adv. Haeres.* 248.20). On the other hand, there was a positive reaction of a former pagan and noble Gothic man in the case of Moduorios, who evidently became Christian during his service in Roman Empire (Greg. Naz. *Ep.* 136.; Zos. 4.25.). We also know about Arintheus, a Christian Goth, who served in Roman army as *magister militum*.<sup>27</sup> It can therefore be reasonably assumed that some of the hostages and warriors were positively influenced during their stay in the Roman Empire and that they could at least respect or even venerate Christ as the part of their pantheon in their cult.<sup>28</sup> In the context of the Germanic pagan religion, Christ could have been seen as a god of a rich, powerful, and wealthy Empire, a god who could secure the needs and prosperity not only for Romans but for the Gothic community as well. This would make sense from the perspective of the Sacral Rule of the barbarian leaders.<sup>29</sup>

The Christianization of Danubian Goths should not be seen as an exclusively bottom-up process, but as one which is occurring in the opposite direction as well. At least from the times of the Constantine I, a part of the noble barbarians and “middle class” (tradesmen, warriors) was exposed to Christianity, maybe even more so than poor people in Gothia. Although we do not exactly know if the ruler who sent Wulfila as part of the embassy to the Imperial court intended his consecration as bishop of Christians in Gothia, it is obvious from another source that he let him administer his office for 7 years (Philost. *HE.* 2.5; Aux. *Epist.* 59. p. 75).<sup>30</sup> The subsequent expulsion of Wulfila and his followers could have been caused by a change within the ruling class or a temporary increase of tension between Goths and Romans in 40s of the 4th century C.E. which is however not well documented in any sources.<sup>31</sup> Afterwards, Wulfila and his followers were

---

26 Even Ereleuva, the mother of Theodoric the Great was an Orthodox Christian, for all these reasons we can assume that his Arianism comes from his father Theodemir; Bednaříková (2013) 118.

27 Schwarcz, (1999) 454.

28 It is also pointed out by D. H. Green in discussion of Schwarcz’s paper; Schwarcz (1991) 461.

29 For the barbaric Sacral rule see Bednaříková (2015) 23–34.

30 It is not known if the ruler who sent the embassy was from the ranks of *reiks* or if he was iudice Gothorum as the ruler in Auxentius account, who after the 7 years of Wulfila’s administration started the persecution of Christians Aux. *Epist.* 58. p. 75.

31 The formation of the prefecture of Illyria in 345 could have been caused by increasing tension between Goths and Romans; Harries (2012), 191, see also Vogler (1979), 112–123; Libanius’ panegyric also suggests some tension on the borders with Goths in years 348/349, which was afterwards ended by diplomatic ways Doležal (2008), 104–5; Lib. Or. 59.90; some military success over the Goths by

settled at Nicopolis near the Haemus Mountains, and this group of Goths is recognized in later sources as *Gothi minores*. Wulfila was not only their bishop but their *primas* – a secular leader – as well.<sup>32</sup> His role as a secular leader was secured not only by his connection with the Roman Empire, but thanks to his origin and the social position in which he had held before Gothic society.

### Wulfila and the elite worshippers of Christ in Gothia

The fact that Wulfila belonged to the socially better situated people was already stressed by Herwig Wolfram.<sup>33</sup> One of Wolfram's arguments is that the Goths would not have sent him to Emperor as part of the delegation if he was of humble origin; otherwise, the Emperor would have been insulted.<sup>34</sup> Such an argument is dismissed by the comparison with the aforementioned Christian *humiles* who were sent to Valens as envoys before the battle of Hadrianopolis. However, unlike Saint Saba, who was poor (*Passio*. 218, 12–15), Wulfila's career was only possible because he already had certain financial resources. He certainly was no *reiks* but he must have belonged to the economically strongest stratum of the "curly-haired".<sup>35</sup> Despite his Cappadocian origin (Philost. *HE*. 2.5) he had a strong Gothic identity thanks to his ties with other non-Roman family members in Gothia. His name only underlines this fact. Another matter is relevant in the case of Wulfila. Auxentius mentions that he fluently spoke and preached in Greek, Latin and Gothic, and even wrote tractates about the subordinate trinitary theology (Aux. 46. 40, 1 (1899), 73–74). A knowledge of Gothic and Greek language was admittedly the result of his social and family environment, but in the case of Latin this would not have been necessarily so. It is possible therefore to think that Wulfila might have received some form of formal education in languages and rhetoric as well.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, for such an intellectual deed as the translation of the Bible from Greek to the Gothic language, the required innate knowledge of the Greek language with its specific grammar, morphological and syntactic aspects would not have been gained without this formal education. This kind of education was definitely

---

Constantius II. is indicated by an inscription dated to the year 356 C.E., in which the emperor is called "Constantius Gothicus Maximus" *CIL*. 3.3705.

32 Jord. *Get*. 267: "cum suo pontifice ipsoque primate Vulfila"; Aux. *Epis*. 58–60; the Goths who still lived and used the Gothic language in the 9th century in the Balkan provinces were probably descendants of *Gothi minores*, see Wolfram (2013), 26; PL 114.927.

33 Wolfram (1988) 76–77.

34 Wolfram (1988) 76.

35 Wolfram (1988) 77.

36 Wolfram (1988) 76.

not the case for the poorest part of Gothic and Roman society, which inhabited the lands of what was known as Gothia.

With Wulfila's status ascertained, let us now turn once more to Saba. Saba used to be mentioned as one of the examples that Christianity was the domain only of poor people. Paradoxically, a section of the text which points out his poverty implicitly says the opposite. After recognising that Saba owns nothing, the persecutor commented that he "neither harm[ed] nor help[ed] anybody" and then expelled him (*Passio*. 218, 12–15). Except for Saba's evident poverty, it testifies that the greatest danger for the pagan leaders in the first waves of the second persecution represented mainly richer and maybe even politically more influential people.<sup>37</sup> These dangerous people were probably richer warriors (former servants of Roman Empire), leaders of the villages (see below), and probably some *reiks* who even started to form a political opposition which finally resulted in the famous split between the Goths of Athanaric and Goths of Alaviv and Fritigern. Chieftains such as Fritigern could have perhaps sympathized with the Christian community, and during the persecution in 369–373 CE they might not have really persecuted them. They might have even been Crypto-Christians by conviction, although unbaptized.<sup>38</sup>

The fact that we know more about low-class converts might stem as much from the more active role they played in both missionary activity and in martyrdom as from their significantly greater numbers.<sup>39</sup> The only case in which the direct involvement of high-class person of the Gothic society is known is that of Gaatha, the "queen" of the race of the Goths.<sup>40</sup> With help of the layman Wellas, she collected and transferred the remains of 26 martyrs to Roman territory. Then, she informed her son, Arimênios, who had meanwhile stayed in Gothia, to join her. Afterwards she went back to Gothia and her daughter transported the remains of martyrs to Cyzicus. The travel of Gaatha to the Empire had to happen between the years 383–392.<sup>41</sup> Despite the fact that evidence about Gaatha's Christianity is chronologically proven after the conversion of other Goths who entered the Empire in 376 CE, she still lived in Gothia, among the remnants of the conservative pagan party, while she, together with the people around her, openly manifested

37 This fact has already been pointed out by Rubin (1981) 39.

38 Even some Roman Emperors used to baptize themselves at end of their life (e.g. Constatine I.) because of the remission of all sins, which for the political leaders sometimes was necessary to do. See n.48. This aspect of baptizing, in the case of Goths, allowed to the future aspirants of Christian faith, still participated at pagan services, and provide them disguise when *iudex* of Goths ordered the persecution of Christians.

39 Rubin (1981) 39.

40 Delahaye (1912) 279: Γάαθα ἡ βασίλισσα τοῦ ἔθνους τῶν Γόθων".

41 Delahaye (1912) 279; for dating see Heather & Matthews (2004), 118.

their Christianity. However, the religious tensions still sometimes led to the violence as is proven by the stoning of her Christian companion Wellas.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, as has been already mentioned, it is possible that some of the *reiks* in Gothia who later formed a part of the Goths entering the Empire in 376 were already Christians or rather Crypto-Christians. This can be proven by Saba's Passio again. When Athanaric as *iudex* of the Goths ordered the persecution of Christians after the lost war with Valens (367–369 C.E.) it was performed on the local tribal level by the *reiks* (ἄρχοντες = βασιλίσκοι)<sup>43</sup> or *maists* (μεγιστᾶνες) themselves, as is testified in the Passio and the story of the 26 martyrs.<sup>44</sup> In both sources, the father of Atharidus, Rothesteus, and Inguorichos/Winguorichos are mentioned as βᾶσιλεύς (or βασιλίσκοι), which can be equated with *reiks*, while the μεγιστᾶνες could represent the rulers generally or some noble ranks under the *reiks*, such as the members of their house. Every *reiks* exercised his power over his own territory (*kuni*, *kunja*) independently.<sup>45</sup>

From the comparison of the conduct of Atharidus (in the name of his father) and with that Wingurichos, a number of differences emerge. On the one hand, Rubin pointed out that the persecutors in Saba's case were not eager to kill him.<sup>46</sup> They beat him, mocked him, pressured him to sacrifice, but it is clear that Saba himself was very thirsty for martyrdom and offended Atharidus intentionally (Passio. 219, 30–36; 220, 1–16). On the other hand, the people who were burnt alive in church in the territory of Wingurichos are proof of the radicalism of their ruler. In this case it would be very unlikely to think that all Christians burned had the same welcoming approach to death as Saba.

A probably completely different approach of an unnamed *reiks* can be seen in another part of Saba's martyrdom. It is indicated by the story of Saba going to the presbyter Gouththikās to celebrate Easter in another place (πόλις),<sup>47</sup> because Sansalās, presbyter of Saba's church community, had fled to the Roman territory due to persecution (Passio. 218, 16–28). Evidently the climate in the Gouththikās

42 Delahaye (1912) 279.

43 The term βασιλίσκοι, means princelet and can be also equivalent with Gothic word *reiks*, compare: Schäferdiek (1996) 177.

44 Delahaye (1912) 279; Passio. 217, 27; 218, 10; 219, 2–3.

45 For the structure of the Danubian Gothic Confederation see Wolfram (1988) 91–104.

46 Rubin (1981) 3.

47 πόλις here is definitely not a city. According to Heather & Matthews (2004) 106, n.26 it means a village or small township, but we should not rule it out that πόλις could mean the other political-administrative unit, or, what the term *kuni* presents in the Gothic context. *Kuni* or *kunja* originally designated kin-groups, but Saba's Passio suggests that the social unit controlled by Atharid was larger than the extended family and in the Gothic Bible the term would be used of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Heather (1991) 97.

congregation was different and Saba knew it. Generally, it can be assumed that persecution was aimed, as in other cases, mainly towards the Christian priests, who were backbone of the unwanted religion. It is quite interesting that the Gouththikâs church community, unlike that of Sansalâs, had in this respect a different experience during the times of persecution. If the village of Gouththikâs community was in the jurisdiction of another *reiks* who did not want to persecute his subjects and even maybe venerated Christ as Crypto-Christian, it would explain the relatively safe position of the Gouththikâs congregation during Easter.

### The local elites and their relationship with Christians in Gothia

Among the lower ranks of the Gothic elite, it is possible, I think, to include the leaders of the inner structures of the gothic villages (*haims*) who are called οἱ κόμητες (Passio, 218, 9), the plural form being clearly derived from the Latin word comes, which in this context means political leaders rather than companions. When the “persecutor” (διώκτης) had come, they concealed the presence of Christians in their village except for one, Saba, who revealed himself as Christian.

It is possible to assume that this persecutor and his people, who represented the Gothic elite of higher rank, spoke, and dealt with this matter with local leaders – elite people of Saba’s *haims*. We do not know how many Christians these leaders concealed, but Saba’s village had its own Christian priest and Saba himself was cantor there (Passio, 217, 17–18). From another source, we know that such a congregation could have had approximately 26 people, as it can be assumed from the above mentioned martyrology of the 26 people who were burned in their church. For a small village this could represent a rather significant part of the population.

The behaviour of local elites in Saba’s village is intriguing. They were not Christians, but they felt no grudge towards their Christian fellows. Rather the opposite: they were very protective. They even swore that there were no other Christians, and, in another case, they provided meat that had not been sacrificed yet for Christians of the village, so the Christians could eat it before the persecutors as if it were sacrificial meat. (Passio, 217, 29–32). They did not only deceive the persecutors, but they also deceived their own gods! It can be interpreted that the social ties of local community and feelings for one’s neighbours were stronger than the orders of the tribal rulers, and I agree with this, but I think there must be something more.<sup>48</sup>

In the religious context, the pagans and leaders of Saba’s community seem to be committing sacrilege towards their own gods. However, there is a possible

---

48 Thompson (2008) 74.

explanation. The pagans could have considered Christ to be one of the gods, which they included in their polytheistic pantheon and they could have perceived him as a very strong god (the god of the Roman Empire), maybe even stronger than their oldest tribal gods, and who could help them when it was necessary. They were well-informed about their new God (one must not forget about the imperative to spread the “Good News”) to the point that they understood why their Christian fellows could not eat the sacrificed meat. At the same time, they knew followers of Christ, whom they evidently did not consider to be dangerous. Additionally, they probably could see in the new God a new opportunity rather than a danger. They were halfway there to becoming Christians. Saba’s *Passio* is only a glimpse at the relationship between Gothic pagans and Christians in one village, but we can consider it as a probe of the villages which were more influenced by Christianity. There are possibilities that some of the local leaders were Christians too, but they were forced to conceal this in the times of persecutions.

## Conclusion

For all these reasons it is possible to think that among the higher-class Goths there were Christians too, although in the minority. The interpretation that Christianity was spreading only or mainly in the poor stratum of Gothic society is misleading. While it is true that this occurred mainly in the poor stratum, this is only because the poor people were the widest group of society. However, Christianity definitely influenced the middle class, as well as the highly situated people of Gothic society who, in some cases, were even more exposed to influence of the Roman Empire, its culture, and its religion with its strengthening Christianity than the poorest members of their society.

The new religion could have gained open support from several *reiks*, which support may have been made rather secret in times of persecution, even though these noble Goths would not have been baptized and so they were not official Christians yet.<sup>49</sup>

Besides the incursions of the Huns, the war with Valens in 367–369 CE and the following persecutions were probably the most significant factors in the internal splits and the fall of the Danube Tervingian confederation. Apart from the political and economic reasons, there could also have been a religious one. After the war with Valens, Gothia went into isolation, trade was cut off and the people of *iudex* Athanaric probably struggled for life because of war, barren years and shortage of living necessities (Amm. 27.5.7). In this respect, Athanaric as the Sacral ruler

---

49 Schwarcz (1999) 41; the examples are even among the Emperors. Constantine I. had been baptized before his death in 337 C.E.; Valentinianus II. even died unexpectedly as unbaptized Christian. Babic (2009) 80.

lost. He needed to establish his broken position through the persecution of Christians, believers in the same god as the Emperor. However, the minor part of the pro-Roman and pro-Christian *reiks* were reluctant to do it. At the same time the discontent of the elite was increasing due to the isolation, because the *reiks* lost their opportunities to gain luxury goods and income by the stopping of trans-Danubian trade. One of these pro-Roman and pro-Christian leaders was Fritigern, who later revolted with Alaviv against Athanaric.

On the other front, Athanaric was not able to avert the incursion of Huns and disintegration of the confederation unity. He lost again, and his gods were not able to protect him and his people. The pro-Roman and pro-Christian fraction strengthened its position and began to look for the new solutions for existence, which resulted in asylum inside the Roman Empire. In the year 376 CE on the shore of Danube, groups of Goths were prepared to adopt the new faith of the Emperor. Crucial in this context was the position of their leaders, who were willing to do it. Several of them had made this decision a long time before and in the case of crossing of the Danube it was only formal confirmation of their states of mind about the new God and new religion.



## Bibliography

- Babic M. (2009) *Od antiky k stredoveku* (Brno: CDK)
- Barnes T. (1990) 'The Consecration of Ulfila', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 41(2) (New Series) 541–545.
- Bednaříková J. (2013) *Stěhování národů*. (4th. ed.) (Praha: Vyšehrad). Bednaříková J. (2015) 'Contribution to the Basic Methodological questions (Ancient States and the States in the Transitional Period between Antiquity and Middle Ages)' in Bednaříková J. Meško M. & Žáková A. (eds) *On Research Methodology in Ancient and Byzantine History* (Brno: Masaryk University) 9–38.
- Brown P. (2012). *Through the Eye of a Needle* (Princeton, Woodstock: Princeton University Press).
- Clauss M. & Drbal V. (2005) *Konstantin Veliký: římský císař mezi pohanstvím a křesťanstvím* (Praha: Vyšehrad)
- Doležal S. (2008) *Interakce Gótů a římského impéria* (Praha: Karolinum).
- Doležal S. (2010) 'Who, if anyone, was a *reiks* in fourth-century Gothia?' *Byzantinoslavica (Revue internationale des Études Byzantines)* 68, 41–48.
- Doležal S. (2020) *Konstantin: Cesta k moci* (České Budějovice: Jihočeská univerzita v Českých Budějovicích).
- Harries J. (2012) *Imperial Rome AD 284 to 363* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Heather P. (1986) 'The crossing of the Danube and the Gothic Conversion', *GRBS* 27, 289–318.
- Heather P. (1991) *Goths and Romans 332–489* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Heather P. & Matthews J. (1991) *The Goths in the Fourth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press).
- Jurík M. (2018) 'Christianizácia Gótov a Kapadócia' in Balegová J. Brodňanská E. & Šimon F. (eds.) *Hortus Graeco-Latinus Cassoviensis II* (Košice: UPJŠ) 83–101.
- Lenski N. (1995) 'The Gothic Civil War and Date of the Gothic Conversion', *GRBS* 36, 51–87.
- Lenski N. (2002) *Failure of Empire. Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century A. D.* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press).
- Mathisen R. (2020) 'Barbarian Invasions or Civil Wars? Goths as Auxiliary Forces in the Roman Army' in Mitthof F. Martin G. & Grusková J. (eds.) *TYCHE 12: Empire in Crisis: Gothic Invasions and Roman Historiography* (Wien: Verlag Holzhausen GmbH) 263–286.
- Nigro G. A. (2012) 'Niceta, Inna, e altri martiri goti', *ASE* 29.1, 140
- Parvis P. (2014) 'Sabas: Orthodox or Arian?' in Berndt G.M. & Steinacher R. (eds) *Arianism: Romans Heresy and Barbarian Creed* (London, New York: Routledge) 70–71.
- Rubin Z. (1981) 'The Conversion of the Visigoths to Christianity,' *Museum Helveticum* 38(1), 34–54

- Schäferdiek K. (1979a) 'Zeit und Umstände des westgotischen Übergangs zum Christentum', *Historia* 28, 90–97.
- Schäferdiek K. (1979b) 'Wulfila. Vom Bischof von Gotien zum Gotenbischof', *ZKG* 90, 253–292.
- Schäferdiek K. (1996) 'Martyrerüberlieferungen aus der gotischen Kirche des vierten Jahrhunderts' in: Löhr W. A. & Brennecke H. Ch. (eds.) *Schwellexzeit: Beiträge zur Geschichte des Christentums in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter) 169–202.
- Schwarz A. (1999) 'Cult and religion among the Tervingi and the Visigoths and their Conversion to Christianity (with discussion)' in Heather P. (ed.) *The Visigoths from the migration period to the seventh century* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press) 447–472.
- Thompson E. A. (2008) *The Visigoths in the Time of Ulfila*. (2th. ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Thompson E. A. (1962) 'Early Visigothic Christianity', *Latomus* 21(3), 505–519.
- Vogler C. (1979) *Constance II et l'administration impériale* (Strasbourg: University of Strasbourg) 112–123.
- Wolfram H. (1975) 'Gotische Studien I', *MIÖG* 83, 1–32.
- Wolfram H. (2013) 'Wulfila pontifex ipseque primas Gothorum minorum', *ACTA BIBL UPSAL* 48, 25–32.
- Wolfram H. & Dunlap T. J. (1988) *History of the Goths* (Los Angeles: University of California Press).